

Day 1 in the Darrans – Easter Saturday.

For me the build up to climbing in the almighty Darrans was huge. I had my guide, brand new but well thumbed since the book launch. I had sat on the edge of my seat listening to all of the stories told at the launch, all the tales from seasoned climbers, I couldn't wait. So now, after only one day in the Darrans I have my own tale to tell.

I knew the weather could be temperamental at best I saved up my leave, I had a good 10 days up my sleeve, there had to be at least a couple of climbing days to be had. I planned several trips to the Darrans but mishaps and injury forced me into postponing the trip till this Easter. I was finally here, in the Darrans about to embark on a *real* climbing trip!

Sam and I set off at 6:45am from Holmer Hut up towards Gertrude Saddle. We reached the saddle after precariously crossing some dicey wet slabs at 8:30am. The weather was cold and misty so we pressed on conscious of time and the weather. The mist lifted later in the day to reveal the majestic beauty of the sounds.

We crossed a hard packed snow field using crampons and ice axes and climbed up through loose rock to reach the summit of Barrier knob in good time at about 11:00 am. We sunbathed and ate lunch in the glorious sunshine. The angry Darrans weather I had been warned about, I never did see, it was just perfect, I can see how the weather can lull one into a false sense of security. Around 1:00 in the afternoon we headed down towards Adelaide Saddle.

We missed Gulliver's crack by cutting down to soon and ended up descending some slippery grassy bluffs. Not hard climbing but made a little harder by the ill-fitting heavy pack that constantly tried to kill me by throwing me off balance. I had been struggling with the pack all day, an old pack borrowed from someone who was a completely different shape from me, I had filled it to the brim with a full rack, a rope and all sorts of cooking and camping equipment I didn't *really* need. In hindsight *less* is definitely *more* in this case. I had all of the straps cranked, but the pack still did not sit on my back and when I moved around it caused me to wobble and sway and stagger in order to keep my balance.

Evidence of slings and tat suggested to us that others had made a similar decent down into the shores of Lake Adelaide, Pete's bivy. So we followed suit, Sam was about 10 meters below me on a ledge with a sling on it where others had rappelled down. We were about 60m off the Valley Floor, 2 people ahead of us were already down and they watched us from below then they moved off towards the bivy and out of sight.

Although taking care neither Sam nor I were particularly threatened by the terrain. I had just bought a brand new helmet specifically for this trip; it was more than just a lid, designed for both impact and rock-fall. I only put it on because I thought it would get wrecked swinging on the back of my pack. It took along time to find a helmet that fitted properly, and I ended up spending twice as much on it than I planned. The best \$180 I have ever spent!

Sam had abseiled down off a rock bollard without his pack, I sent his pack down the rope after him. I tried to work my way down the slope before waiting the rope. I

placed my feet solidly on the slope and tried to weight the rope slowly underneath the rock it was looped over as Sam had done before me. At that moment my huge pack swung outwards into space pulling me off balance pulling with me the loop of rope over the bollard. After wearing my helmet for only ten minutes I was falling head first.



**The terrain in the foreground on the right was the incorrect path we took that got steeper and steeper I fell just lower than the view of this photograph.**

The ground came racing up at me. Then “whack!” My first thoughts were “I’ll stop here” but I didn’t I somersaulted over that little ledge hitting various hard things on either side of me. I then landed facing down towards the ground wedged on the ledge Sam was standing on. My first thought was “...well I thought it would hurt a lot more, but it doesn’t seem too... I have just gone blind that all. Its all black...”. In fact I just had my eyes tightly shut and all I needed to do was open them. When I did my right eye filled with blood from my nose. My mouth was full of blood, my teeth had gone through my lower lip, one of the first things I said was “I think I have broken all my teeth... but I am ok”.

At about the same time Sam arrived at my side the pain arrived.

Something blunt was stabbing out of my shoulder and I tried to get up. I reached for it as Sam shouted “DON’T TOUCH IT!” you have broken your collar bone.

Well *that* hurt. And so did moving. The rest of me hurt too. Both my knees and my good hand (my right) hurt, my left collar bone was broken. There were bruises and scratches all over me that I didn’t even know about yet. My nose dripped blood from everywhere, it soaked my hat and hair but my teeth were ok.

Both Sam and I were in shock, it must have been terrifying to watch someone fall not knowing if they were going to stop or not. A few minutes would have passed while we both gathered ourselves together and let the nausea we both felt subside. A decision had to be made, taking into account my ability to move, and the daylight left. No one was around us we had to sort this out ourselves. At 4:30 we had two hours of daylight. Sam was going to lead up and give me an assisted belay over the grassy slopes we had come down, to easier ground.

I let out a couple of screams in these first few moves. I was climbing sideways with my painful right hand, my butt (I discovered later that I had torn the layers of my pants and taken a chunk of flesh with it) and both my painful knees. Everything hurt it was however far better to be moving rather than staying still. So moving is what I did. I took off for Barrier Knob Sam following with as much of our gear as he could carry. He later returned to the place I fell to retrieve the rest.

After Sam returned to the spot he estimated that I bounced down the cliff for about 10 meters and landed on a ledge 60 m above the valley floor. Sam had watched me fall and ran along the ledge in an attempt to catch me frightened I would bounce off that ledge and fall all the way to the ground below.

The goal was to reach Barrier knob and get over the snow fields before dark. There was another route around Barrier knob, we had seen it on our way down after reaching the summit (Sam used this route on his gear retrieval mission), however we did not 'know' this route and although tempting we could not risk coming across obstacles that I could not get around, it was better to go with what we knew. So we retraced our steps.

Climbing up to the top of Barrier knob was long and painful I put one foot in front of another, I had to really yank on my good right arm to get over large rocks, I knew we had to move fast and efficiently and that the pace had to be set by me as I was the only one who could really gauge how far I could go with the injuries I had. I was breathing heavily and sweat poured off me. Sam was carrying a lot of weight and was in similar shape. I had decided that although there was a lot of pain I was not going to die and that I really would be fine if I just kept going. As a result we really paced it up through the bluffs to the top.

Crossing the snow fields was the most frightening part of the entire journey. It was essential that I was lowered, if I slipped on the snow I would have slid all the way down, and it would have been extremely painful if I had slipped over, I would not have had the ability to roll to my front and use an ice axe in the snow. In retrospect my fear could have had something to do with being back on a rope, but also it was because I was being lowered at a pace I could not control. My weight was not quite enough to pull the rope through so I had to push-walk down the snowy slope and pull at the rope. The travel was unpredictably jerky jarring my collar bone. Sam lowered me from an anchor above. We repeated this three times on double lengths of rope, totalling a vertical drop of about 360 meters over snow. Between each pitch I sat stranded on a rock protruding out from the snow. Sitting there waiting for Sam to join me getting cold and the sun was setting I began to feel a little sorry for myself. I reflected on how close I had come to falling to my death.

By the time Sam joined me for the third and final time it was dark. At this stage we new we had to at least make our way far enough down to find warmer shelter for the night or decide to press on through the slippery slabs through to Homer Hut. I was quite worried about these slab's, they were a difficult accent in the daylight when I was fully able.

Walking down was a lot more painful than walking up. I could not hit the ground with any impact at all due to the pain that rattled through me when I did so. I had to lower myself very gently over the edge of the rock steps and when they got higher than about a foot Sam had to support me and lower me down to the lower level. It was pitch black and took a long time to descend a tricky steep track down towards Gertrude Saddle guided by our head lamps. I remember instead of wishing for a helicopter, or a car, or a bed, or to be back at home, I wished more than anything for the track to be smooth and flat, that's all I wanted. At some point Sam said he saw a light down on the saddle, I just thought he was imagining it. As we got further down the slope we saw that there was in fact a light, Sam yelled out as loud as he could but there was no answer.

Finally we reached the Saddle and found a tent with a couple camping there. Lucy and Steve had climbed up to get away from it all and spend a night alone. Little did they know that two dirty climbers (one being very bloody and in a lot of pain) were going to be spending the night in their tent with them.

After the introductions were made and our general situation was explained we were welcomed into Steve and Lucy's tent. I ate a huge bag of lollies (aka candies), just scooped them down with out even swallowing, they were the best lollies I have ever had. Sam said he was too buggered to go any further and it was decided that we would spend the night. For me this was not a fun experience, the pain truly hit home. I felt the least pain while standing. Moving and sitting and trying to lie was excruciating. I was helped in and helped to lie down, everyone carefully lowering me to the ground, I was made as comfortable as possible propped up by packs and clothing. No sooner had we all finally got me lying and still did I have to pee, badly. So we all had to go through the whole episode again!

After a very long night it started getting light. Sam rose and he and Steve set out for Homer hut and a phone. It was decided that this was safer than letting me walk out. I desperately wanted to walk out but new that the decision ultimately had to be left to the others. By this stage I was feeling considerably uncoordinated exhausted and in a lot of pain, having broken my collar bone over 16 hours earlier and having had no pain killers or sleep since.

Lucy stayed with me and fed me warm mushy Weet-Bix and a cup of hot chocolate which may just be the best cup of hot chocolate I have ever had. By 10 am a St Johns Ambulance helicopter arrived to fly me down to the clinic in Te Anau. Sam met me there and drove me to Invercargill hospital to be diagnosed.

Following this incident the usual frustrations of injury cropped up on me. No climbing, running, hiking, biking, no fun activity at all for what seemed like weeks and weeks. However in the grand scheme of things it really wasn't that long at all. I

am very lucky to take a fall in the mountains and walk away. Others have not been so lucky.

Accidents can happen to anyone anywhere make careful decisions and trust your instincts. Thank you to Sam, Steve, Lucy and St Johns.

Hopefully my next attempt at the Darrans will be more successful. Watch this space!



**This story was written immediately after the accident in 2007, the above photo was a self portrait taken several years later when I did a solo mission to retrace my steps.**