

# Kiandra to Kosciusko

by Paul Reader

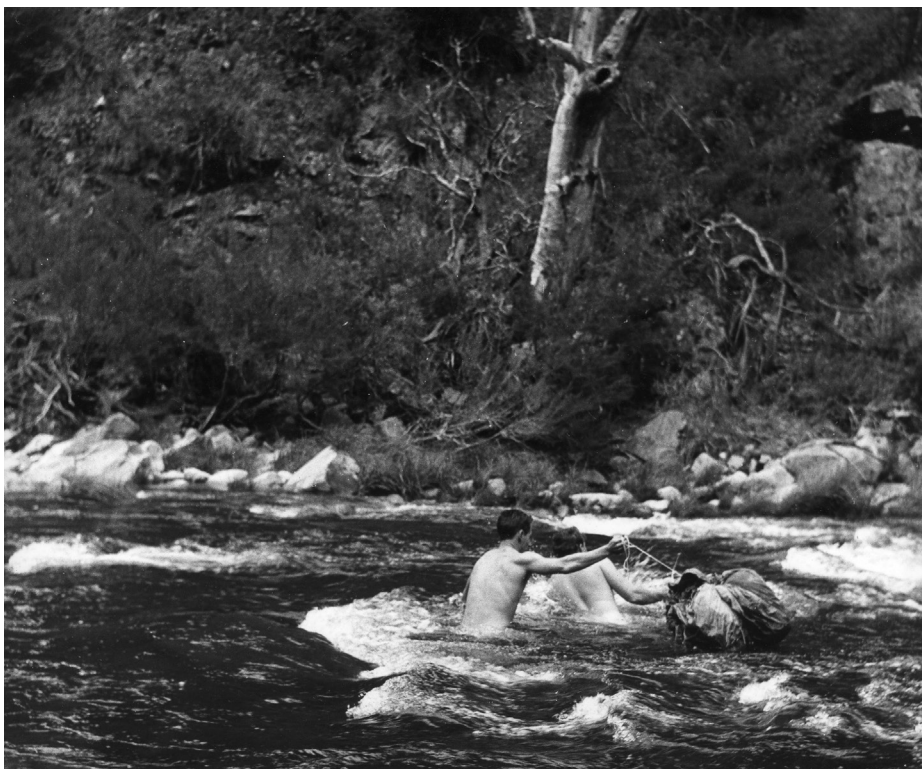
*A group led by Sir Herbert Schlink in 1927 took three days to make the first crossing between Kiandra and Kosciusko. In 1954, Paul Reader, Keith Field and Douglass Baglin attempted to replicate the trip. Through misadventure their journey took eight days and could easily have ended in tragedy. Their story was first published in the KAC Bulletin in August, 1954.*

The first party to make this crossing was led by Sir Herbert Schlink in 1927. The members of our party were Keith Field, Douglass Baglin and Paul Reader and we set out from Kiandra on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1954, departing from Kiandra Chalet at 9 am. After some very rough going we arrived at our camp No. 1 at 5.30 pm. This was the north side of Happy Jacks River, on a rock measuring 6 ft by 6 ft, the only suitable site. We were unable to erect our tent and spent our first night under the stars. The final approach to this spot was down a rock slide 1,000 ft in length and of a 70 degree angle. This was the first of a series of hazards we were to encounter. We all took nasty falls coming down, as there was no snow covering the rocks and they were balanced on one another like marbles. Doug broke his stock jumping out of the way of a minor avalanche I started 100 ft above him. Both he and Keith lost the seat out of their pants before we had negotiated half of the slide. Keith took a nasty toss at one stage and it was only that I happened

to be in front by about 20 ft and was able to grab him as he flew past that prevented what may have been a nasty fall of 100 ft or so. The evening was pleasantly fine but cold. We had no fires, and our meal was cooked by means of a small primus stove. Our packs weighed an average of 57 pounds.

July 5<sup>th</sup>. At 9.30 am we commenced our swim across Happy Jacks River. There was nothing happy about the crossing. By 9.45 am a snow storm had commenced with the temperature at 29 degrees, or 3 degrees below freezing point. We had removed our clothes for the crossing, hoping to keep them dry, as it turned out this was all to no avail. By the time we had floated all our gear across this 55 ft river, which was

running a banker, three and one half hours had passed – all this time without clothes except for a sweater between swims. At the first attempt Doug and I together, with a pack strapped between, were swept off our feet. Doug was carried 100 yds downstream before he was able to scramble out, whilst I managed to grip a rock after only being swept about 10 ft. Fortunately I had been able to keep hold of the pack and perhaps saved us from yet another nasty incident, as this pack held most of our food and fire equipment. The cold was intense and it was at this stage we all became victims of frost-bite. The balance of the day was spent erecting camp No. 2 and endeavouring to thaw out our frozen bodies by means of a meagre fire. The camp site was under an overhanging rock face of decomposing granite on a



sandy spit a foot from the river's edge. All we had, including our sleeping bags, was sodden despite our earlier efforts to keep them dry on the crossing. The cameras were the only items not wet. We spent a very cold and miserable night with snow falling throughout.

July 6<sup>th</sup>. Despite the rigorous night the sight we beheld on emerging from our tent was breathtaking. The frightening rock slide we had descended the day before was now blanketed with 18 inches of beautiful powder snow and the trees simply groaned under the weight of snow on their branches, whilst the river gurgled its silvery length through this crystal paradise with a foot of ice at its edges. It was not long afterwards our awe turned to frustration as we lashed and floundered up the side of the steepest mountain I have ever climbed. It rose from the river like a pyramid, and one only had to lean slightly back to plunge down the face. This mountain turned out to be a freak, for when at last we reached the top we were dismayed to find another joining it twice as high again. The unusual point about this first mountain was that it was joined to the second by what I was later to find out a ridge called a fishback. This freak ridge left a drop of 800 ft on either side, and was so narrow that Keith was forced to negotiate it by sitting down and passing it between his legs as one would a pole. We continued our climb, with snow still falling, till 4 pm, and then we were still a day's climb from the top. At this stage we chose a site for camp No. 3. This was

to be a foxhole between two granite rocks, perched on such an angle that one only had to trip to fall hundreds of feet down. All our equipment was still sodden, as the heat generating from our bodies melted the snow falling on our backs. Even with our tent pitched over the opening we still had insufficient room for the three of us. This necessitated having to take turns about of hourly intervals during the night. One would crawl into the hole and try to sleep against the wet moss-covered rocks, another would stoke and choke over the fire, whilst the third would sit outside the tent in the falling snow. By this stage we were so exhausted that we even slept during part of the night.

July 7<sup>th</sup>. The scene confronting us the next morning still held some of its grandeur, but we were not really in the mood to appreciate the scene, and after a hasty breakfast we commenced climbing once again. The snow stopped falling that morning, but with the gums so laden one only had to brush them, or a slight ripple of wind disturb their branches, for one to be enveloped in a cascade of white. We climbed all day and over some really terrifying rock outcrops, where every step brought down rocks. By 3 o'clock we had reached the top and stood dwarfed in the middle of a forest of huge gums, here and there splintered and twisted like matchsticks by past storms and lightning. By four, we had picked a site for camp No. 4. This was by a hollowed gum on a small knoll. We made a bed out of gum leaves spread over the surface of snow, covered

them with our ground sheets and two sleeping bags (Keith had lost his the previous day, climbing the fishback ridge), and after pitching our tent we spent a very comfortable night. Keith tried getting into the same bag as myself, but after a few embarrassing hours we gave the idea away.

July 8<sup>th</sup> dawned a cloudless sunny day. Realising we were days behind schedule, it was decided to omit a search for Boobee Hut and make the most of the good weather. Our progress was laboriously slow, and I doubt if we progressed more than two miles, though it seemed like ten. The powder snow of previous days had turned to wet, heavy slush, and as our climbing skins were already wet, it clung in thick lumps. The undergrowth kept coming through the surface and catching our bindings, so that every step had to be watched, and with each ski seeming like a ton weight, we shuffled on. This was the first day we had been able to wear skins, and similar conditions were to prevail until Mt Jagungal was reached three days later. I might add that at this stage we were completely bushed and had been since our departure from Happy Jacks River. I put this down to four main factors: (1) The surrounding mountains were unfamiliar. (2) Due to the storm we had been unable to see for more than a quarter mile over the past three days. (3) We had been forced to ignore the compass on so many occasions due to changes of course forced on us by nature that it was impossible to make the necessary corrections. (4)

Where we had crossed the river the formation of its course was so unusual over one and a half miles that it should have shown up very clearly on the map and allowed us to pinpoint our position. However, there was nothing shown which even slightly resembled its course. I am therefore forced to the reluctant conclusion that the map leaves much to be desired. (Now I really have let myself in for criticism). However, we did find many cases where trig stations were not marked. While I am dealing with this subject, I may as well bring up a rather sore point. Surely it is not asking too much of those people erecting these stations and who go to the trouble of painting them black and silver to also, with a few strokes of the brush, write either the name or at least the height of the mountain on the woodwork. This would at least assist the lost wanderer in pinpointing his position and may someday avert a tragedy, which may well occur for lack of a few seconds of extra work.

That night, rather than lose precious height by dropping into the valleys, we decided to camp on a plateau of snow. The fire we made at camp No. 5 was unusual to say the least. It started on the surface of the snow and was no larger than 18 inches in circumference. By morning it was resting on the ground three feet lower down and had melted a circle 26 ft in circumference. We were therefore able to sit in this hole with our backs against the wall with our legs stretched out to the fire. It was very pleasant, and another enjoyable evening was

experienced. From this plateau we had been able to observe Mt Jagungal for the first time, and it certainly boosted our morale.

July 9<sup>th</sup> dawned as had the 8<sup>th</sup> and we lost no time starting, determined to peel off the miles. Progress was reasonable and uneventful. We were still carrying about the same weight in our packs, as what we had lost in food consumed had been replaced by water absorbed by our sleeping bags, tent, clothes, etc., which we had been unable to dry out. We made camp No. 6 in a clump of gums, and after a hearty dinner, bedded down for the evening. We all felt anxious that the weather would not last: but others beside ourselves must have been saying a few prayers, for it continued to hold.

July 10<sup>th</sup>. Ever since Mt Jagungal had been sighted a new hope and determination to win through had sprung up, and this day we really burnt up the miles and before we fell exhausted at our next camp we must have covered close on 20 miles. During the day we passed close to both Farm Ridge Hut and O'Keefe's, but not wishing to waste time in searching for them, we pushed on. After all, we were becoming very used to sleeping in the open and rising every three hours to replenish the fire. Camp No. 7 was staked out on the western face of Jagungal. I shall always remember my mixed feelings when I first stepped onto the slope leading up to the crest. This jewel of a mountain, rising majestically out of the surrounding plain country, beckoning us on when our spirits

were low and yet never seeming to move closer. At times as distant as the Star of the East and at others the Helping Hand towards our ultimate goal. Who but those who attempt the unusual know the fear of the fight or the thrill of the conquest. Since time immemorial those who have sat back and said "What fools they are", have themselves never lived.

We were cutting timber for our fire when Nature stepped in with a paint brush and we were made witnesses to one of the most spectacular and beautiful pictures we have ever looked upon. The sun, sinking in the west, threw its reflection from the crystal snow on to the face of Jagungal, and in 20 minutes changed it to three distinct colours. First we saw a mountain bathed in a delicate pink, then blue and finally yellow. Fortunately Doug was able to catch each change in colour film. That night we slept the sleep of the contented. We were half way to Kosciusko with the hardest part over.

July 11<sup>th</sup>. Yet another perfect day. By 10.30 am we had climbed over the top and were skiing down the eastern slopes which, in my opinion, run into the finest skiing valley in New South Wales.

From Mt Jagungal we set a compass course for Alpine Hut but made a very stupid mistake by not allowing ten degrees allowance for magnetic north. Our mistake went unnoticed till it was too late and we were



in the hut area. We attempted to correct our error, but after tramping on for hours, ended at a hut which we thought was Kidmans, and lies north of Alpine. We had covered about nine miles that day. The reason progress had been so slow was because we had run out of food (except for powdered milk) and energy, and had been stopping for drinks of water far too much. On arrival at the hut it was necessary to dig ourselves in, as the snow was up to the windows. Unfortunately there was no food to be found, but we managed to find some sugar and tea, so for the first time for days we were able to have something sweet. There was a large quantity of snow in the hut which had come in through the chimney, so after clearing this out, we drew the beds up to the fire and, for the first time since we commenced the trip, we were able to sit in comfort and warmth. Doug and I puffed contentedly at pipes and it was so pleasant by the fire, each with his own thoughts, we stayed up till 1 am before turning in.

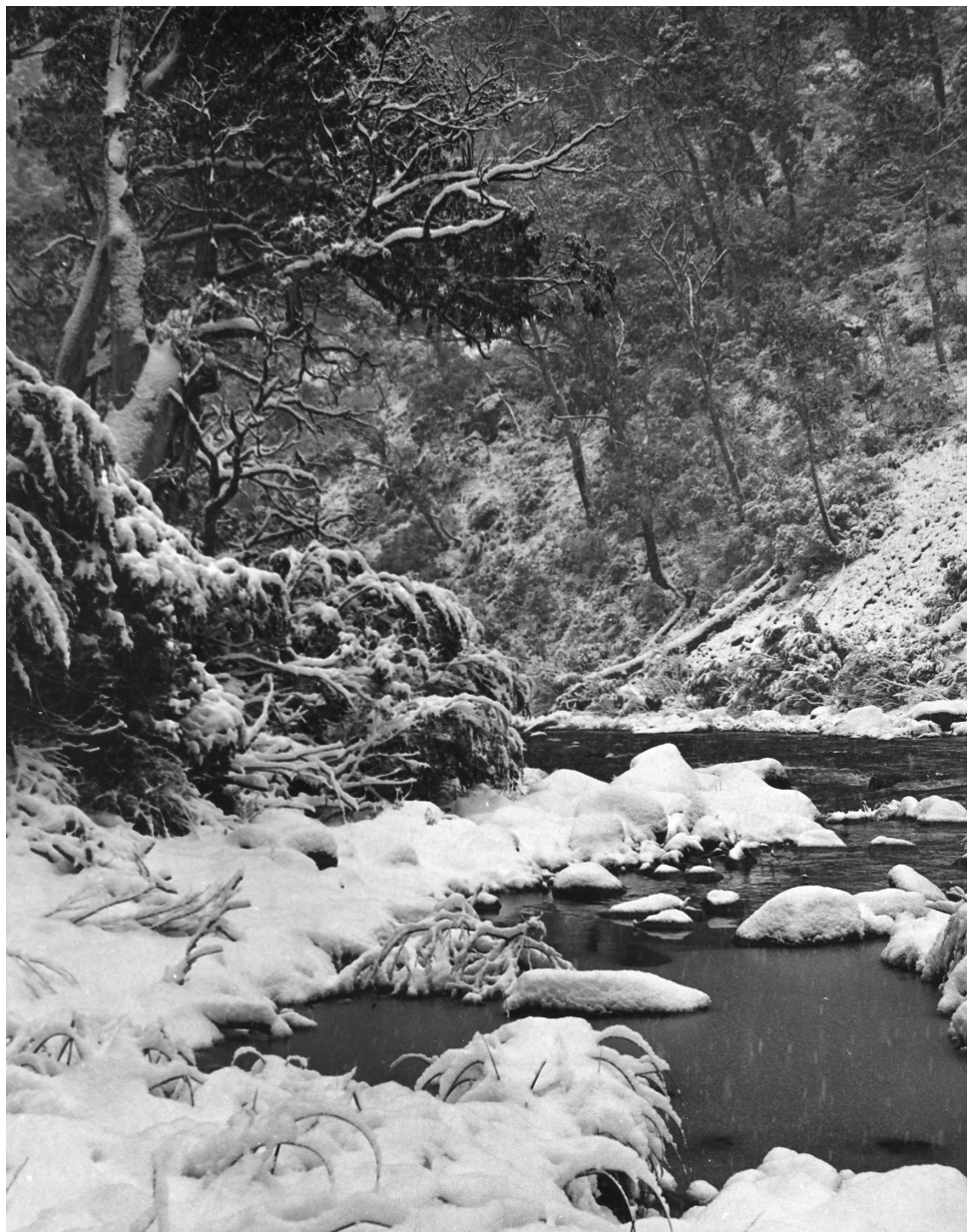
July 12<sup>th</sup>. And still the weather held. After cleaning the hut and replacing the wood used, we set a compass course for Alpine Hut. (Second sore point). Surely regular visitors to these huts could scratch the name somewhere on the building. As it turned out, instead of the hut being Kidmans, it was Tin Hut: therefore the other side of Alpine. Consequently the course we set just didn't exist and after many wasted hours searching we found Dicky Cooper Hut, which isn't the most habitable hut on the range as many "Main Range Rats" know. Had we struck a blizzard in our weakened condition we could well have perished. It is with a view to the future that I mention these points, as I said earlier, for a few seconds' work tragedies may be averted. We back-tracked from Dicky Cooper Hut (not knowing at the time that this was its name and therefore once again unable to pinpoint our position) till we came up Whites River Valley. All we could see of the hut from a distance was the radio mast.

We were tempted to ski down but the climb out of Whites is long and, wishing to save as much energy as possible, we by-passed the hut. We held a meeting on Dicky Cooper Bogong and decided we would eat a little powdered milk we had left and then press on all through the night till we eventually reached the Chalet. By 8 pm we were enveloped in a thick mist and visibility was restricted to six ft. We were then running over the Granite Peaks approaching the Rolling Grounds. At 8.30 pm, as we climbed Consett Stephen Pass, the mist lifted and to our east we noted a glow in one of the valleys. I was leading at the time and was first to see this light. Not wishing to build up false hopes in case it turned out to be just a trick of the moon on low clouds, I kept silent. About 10 minutes later Doug spied it and let out a shout. Fortunately our luck was in, and a half-mile further on we were able to pat one another's backs. We had come upon the Norwegian Camp at Guthega. Considering we were then fairly exhausted we decided rather than push on the extra miles just for the glory of saying "we made it" and then probably spend the next week in hospital, to pocket our pride and ski down the two and a half miles to the camp.

None of us will ever forget the wonderful reception we received on our arrival. The first person we met as we staggered on to the road was one of the four Australians in the camp. Unfortunately, I have forgotten his name, all I know is he used to work at the Old Hotel. We all piled into his truck and,

after receiving permission, we were driven to the residential area. Here we met the medical officer, whose name I think was Kevin Graham. Kevin went out of his way to see we received food and accommodation for the night. There were so many other kind-hearted people that I would like to mention all their names, but unfortunately I have already made this story too long. However the staff and people concerned probably remember we three; they could hardly forget us, what with our torn and burnt clothes, dirt, whiskers and smell. So to those wonderful people of all nationalities we would like to say "Thank you for all you did for us, we shall never forget your hospitality". One good friend, a Norwegian in charge of the canteen, mistook a comment Doug made that "all we wanted was something sweet like sugar", and immediately rushed out and on his return presented us with six lb sugar. "What a man". We didn't have the heart to explain our real meaning, and suppressing laughs we gravely thanked him in the approved manner.

All the food, medical treatment, accommodation and transport we received at this camp and Munyang never cost us one penny. From Guthega a special car was sent and we were driven to Munyang, where their very capable medico took over our welfare. After a hot shower, the first wash for nine days, we were ushered into the sick bay for repair. Doug came off the best of the three with only a few scratches. Keith had some nasty cuts collected on his fall down the rock slide first



day out. These had turned septic and caused him a lot of inconvenience. Whilst I, the so-called experienced member of the party, was the cot case. My heels were badly blistered, my toes were frost-bitten, and together with various scratches there were two deep gashes on my hand from the axe, also picked up on our first day out from Kiandra. Both Keith and Doug have since become more seriously affected with swollen legs due to poor circulation caused by the intense cold, which has had a delayed action. It is now a month since we first arrived at Guthega and both of

the above are still having trouble whilst I have been informed I may still have to lose my big toe.

After a wonderful warm sleep that night and a following restful morning we left our good friends. We were driven to Smiggins by car from Munyang, where we hired Johnny Abbottsmith's snowmobile to take us to the Chalet for a fortnight's holiday with the Kosciusko Alpine Club.