

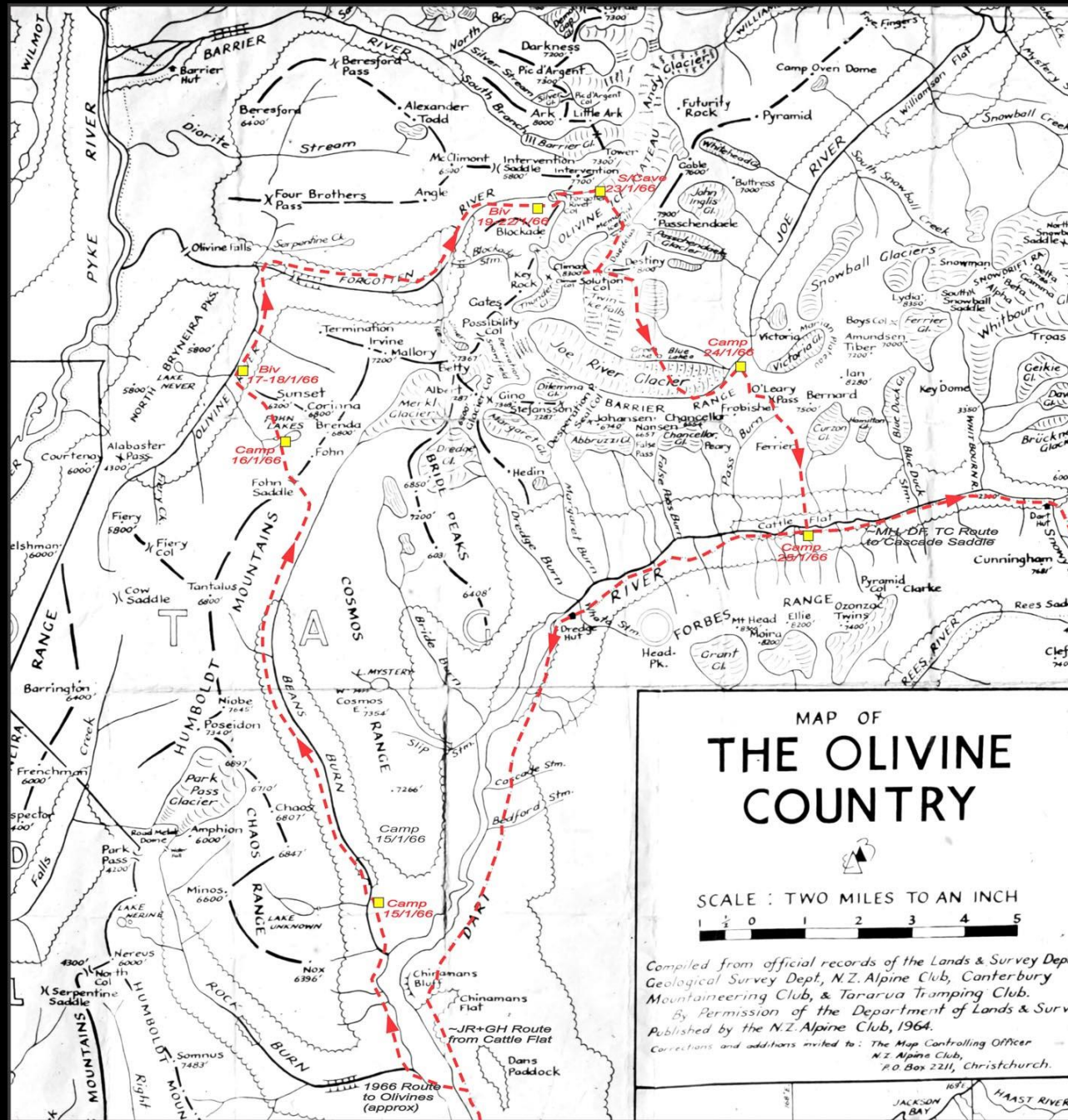
Olivine Ice Plateau

January 1966

Tom Clarkson, Don Fraser, Graham Hancox,
Mike Heenan & John Rhodes

VUWTC





The Rhodesian crisis

Although it seemed important at the time, hitch-hiking from Christchurch to Queenstown was the least exciting part of this trip. Graham was first to arrive (by motor-bike). after dark, Mike and Don hit the town. A few minutes later, Tom arrived in the crowded Oasis milk-bar with an enormously self-conscious clatter and we were nearly all there. The plan was to catch the Earnslaw next morning, but unfortunately Rhodes did not appear at all that night. Early in the morning, we wandered through Queenstown's deserted streets, bleating the lost one's name, but since he didn't respond, we had to watch sadly as the steamer set off up the lake without us—the crisis had wrecked our first plan.

However, John arrived by lunchtime, and we spent the day in civilised pleasures, putting on the miniature golf course, idling on the foreshore, and even rowing on the lake (Oh, shame!)

Hank had contacts in Queenstown, and we arranged for John McIntyre, a meat hunter, who was to fly in to the Forgotten Flats next day, to take 15 lb. each of our gear and food with him. Lightened by leaving this behind, we drove to Paradise in a van, hired after many arguments and discussions with local bus-drivers and taxi-men.



GTH 1 Lake Wakatipu - Mike, Don, John, van driver 15.1.1966



By midday on Saturday, we were on our way up the Dart in fine but gusty weather (although two had to return after 20 minutes to collect a watch carelessly abandoned before the first river crossing). These two then rushed so fast in pursuit that they passed the Rock Burn lunching place and had to be chased and retrieved by the fantastic Hank. Later in the afternoon we reached the mouth of the Beans Burn and began to push on up the river to the first open flats an hour later. This was our first campsite and we slept out under the clouding sky.

GTH 3 Mouth of Rock Burn, Tom
15.1.1966

**'It's not often you
get a chance to
camp in a place
like this'**

The next day we moved on up the Beans Burn on the true right, sometimes sidling quite high, and were at the top flats and bivvy for lunch. It began to rain gently as we ate, but we pushed on quickly to the foot of Fohn Saddle where a conference decided to continue into the encircling gloom.



GTH 5 Upper Beans Burn, Fohn Saddle centre & Fohn Peak right 16.1.1966



6TH 7 Upper Beans Burn Don, John,
Mike 16.1.1966



The climb onto the saddle was fairly easy—an hour on snowgrass lopes and a few minutes on snow and rock brought us to the rusty kerosene tin that marked our first pass.

GTH 8 Near Fohn Saddle
16.1.1966



GTH 9 View down Beans Burn
from near Fohn Saddle
16.1.1966



GTH 9 View down Beans Burn
from near Fohn Saddle
16.1.1966

Advancing and retreating mist allowed occasional views towards the West Coast and stout Hank was photographed on a rock staring silently back into the Beans Burn.



GTH 10 Graham, view down Beans Burn from near Fohn Saddle 16.1.1966



GTH 11 On Fohn Saddle John,
Mike, Tom, Don 16.1.1966



We sidled across at the level of the saddle to the beautiful Fohn Lakes at 5,000 ft. beneath Sunset Peak. These lakes were surrounded by mist but quite enchanting with their dark blue water and large snow-floes. As we approached them, Hank began to say, 'It's not often you get a chance to camp in a place like this'. This naturally became later an ironic catch-phrase, but since it was getting late and raining more and more heavily, we searched for a campsite by the upper lake and eventually settled on a sufficiently mossy place

Tents were pitched (for the only time on the trip) and rain continued to fall all night. Tom collected water for the morning's breakfast from a deep stone-hole inside the small tent, and we reluctantly packed our gear and left in cold rainy conditions.



GTH 13 Camp on Fohn Saddle
Don & Tom at R 16.1.1966

MH 14 Camp on Fohn
Saddle 16.1.1966



GTH 15 Fohn Lake
16.1.1966

King Trog

Occasional glimpses of the Olivine River showed us where it was, but not how to reach it. After the inevitable compass-based disagreements, we plunged down through the mist, always to find ourselves looking over sharp and steep ridges. Eventually one or two rocky guts brought us into the bush and we crashed down through it to the Olivine. By now it was raining heavily (of course, this was the famous West Coast) and we continued downstream on a ledge about two hundred feet above the river.





Although there was no track, we happened to come on a large bivvy, where we had lunch (still raining) and went on about twenty minutes to the Termination side-stream. Here it was soon obvious that even this tributary was uncrossable (not even with crazy tree-felling tactics) and the main Olivine River itself was flowing high too. We reluctantly turned back to our bivvy rock and settled in.

This was a noble trog, a deer's house, probably unused by trampers before, with a dirt floor and fully sheltered standing room in front where we lit a fire and dried some gear. There was no real view here, but for two days we sat and gazed out on the dripping Westland bush.

Engineering operations in the mud stopped the water from entering the sleeping quarters, and we passed the idyllic time eating, talking, reading, speculating about our air lift, and trying to solve stupid mathematical problems.

GTH 17 Biv in Olivine valley, Tom
c. 18.1.1966

The two party Jeremiahs were already talking of rationing the food (only three days' left) when the rain stopped, we left a note for the deer, and set off down river, easily crossing our side stream and arriving two hours later at the Olivine Flats.

We spent two very pleasant hours drying out in the sun on the shingle bank where the Forgotten River joins the Olivine, a pair of blue mountain ducks swam out from the forgotten gorge and floated sideways and backwards, but with great dignity and calmness, down the rapids into the main river.



GTH 18 Olivine flats Don,
Mike, John, Tom 19.1.1966



After lunch, and a consultation with the learned Doctor, we headed up the well blazed track that leads through steep bush to Forgotten Flats. This climbs high above the very steep gorge of the Forgotten and we reached the flats quite suddenly.

GTH 19 Tom looking back to Olivine Flats 19.1.1966

Forgotten?

To come out of the bush and see the golden tussock of the Forgotten spreading out, and the grey-blue the grey-blue river flowing through a miniature scalloped gorge before plunging into the bush, was an exciting experience, but romantics were soon forced to admit that we were not the first that ever burst into that lonely place, because a tiny air-strip and wind-sock were plainly visible. We hurried across the flats to the hut where our air-lifted gear should be but of course it wasn't there. The Jeremiahs didn't really enjoy their inevitable triumph, for we now had only two days' supply left. We cunningly broke into John's hut and wrote a note explaining that we had gone on up the valley but would return for our food.



GTH 20 Approaching
Forgotten R. flats 19.1.1966

The upper part of the Forgotten is fairly open, and easy going. We looked at Blockade and Angle, and as we rounded a bend the mass of Mt Intervention and the Forgotten River Col appeared before us. Time was divided between picking out a route through the bluffs to reach the Ice Plateau, and hunting for the bivvy which Moir speaks so glibly of.



6TH 21 Mike, Don, Tom in
the Forgotten 19.1.1966



After a while, we spied one 400 ft above the river, right at the head of the valley on the true left, and unwillingly staggered up to it in the now overcast dusk. This great jutting prow of rock had room for six or seven beneath it and gave a great view down the valley. We cut lots of snowgrass to soften the hard rock floor and this was our home for four days.

We cut lots of snowgrass to soften the hard rock floor and this was our home for four days. Thursday morning was drizzly and we knew the plane could not come, so we lay in our eagle's eyrie, venturing out in the afternoon to recce a route above the bluffs to the plateau. It rained. Hank made some chessmen and we all carved pawns out of candle-grease.



GTH 22 Pressure cooker,
Forgotten R. Biv.



On Friday it rained but we returned down the river to John McIntyre's hut, since we had run out of food. The plane was now six days overdue and prophecies and calculations were being made about possible escape routes and forced hunger marches. We made damper, ate some stale biscuits and ambled dispiritedly back to the bivvy with a supply of green onions, wizened potatoes and beef extract. Running out of Tararua biscuits also began to depress us.

GTH 26 Tom, John, Mike & Don,
Forgotten R. biv. 22.1.1966

Saturday morning was calm but drizzly. Don was getting pretty restive and the others agreed to humour him by going to climb something, anything, before the ignominious retreat, but more rain discouraged us and we just clambered 500 feet up a dirty snow couloir and sat under a dripping rock. Nobody could be bothered to have a look at Intervention Saddle. We went back down and chopped half heartedly at some old ice in the riverbed and returned to our pits in the aery trog. January was the cruellest month. John and Don gloomed about the jobs they had to return to.



GTH 32 Forgotten R. Biv.
22.1.1966



GTH 27 Tom & Don,
Forgotten R. Biv. 22.1.1966



GTH 33 Stream near
Forgotten R. biv. 22.1.1966

Suddenly six shots from down valley roused us—the plane must have come, the food (ah!) would be there. This time we rushed down to John's hut and found him dragging in a carcass and a set of antlers in velvet. He'd been held up by bad weather in Queenstown for six days and only managed to fly in that morning after three previous tries. We were so glad to see him that we helped him eat lots of his food, and John and Hank even carried in a whole deer each over a mile (and they weighed over 100 lb) to try out the life of a hunter. That night there was a minor celebration in the trog, since the plateau trip was 'on' again.



GTH 25B John & Graham with deer (85 and 110 lb. respectively). Hunter John McIntyre behind. 22.1.1966

Climax

On Sunday morning, after some impatient stampings in the trog, we paddled upwards into the misty rain under full packs again. As we climbed through wet snowgrass and then above bluffs in scree and boulder piles, the rain grew heavier and colder.





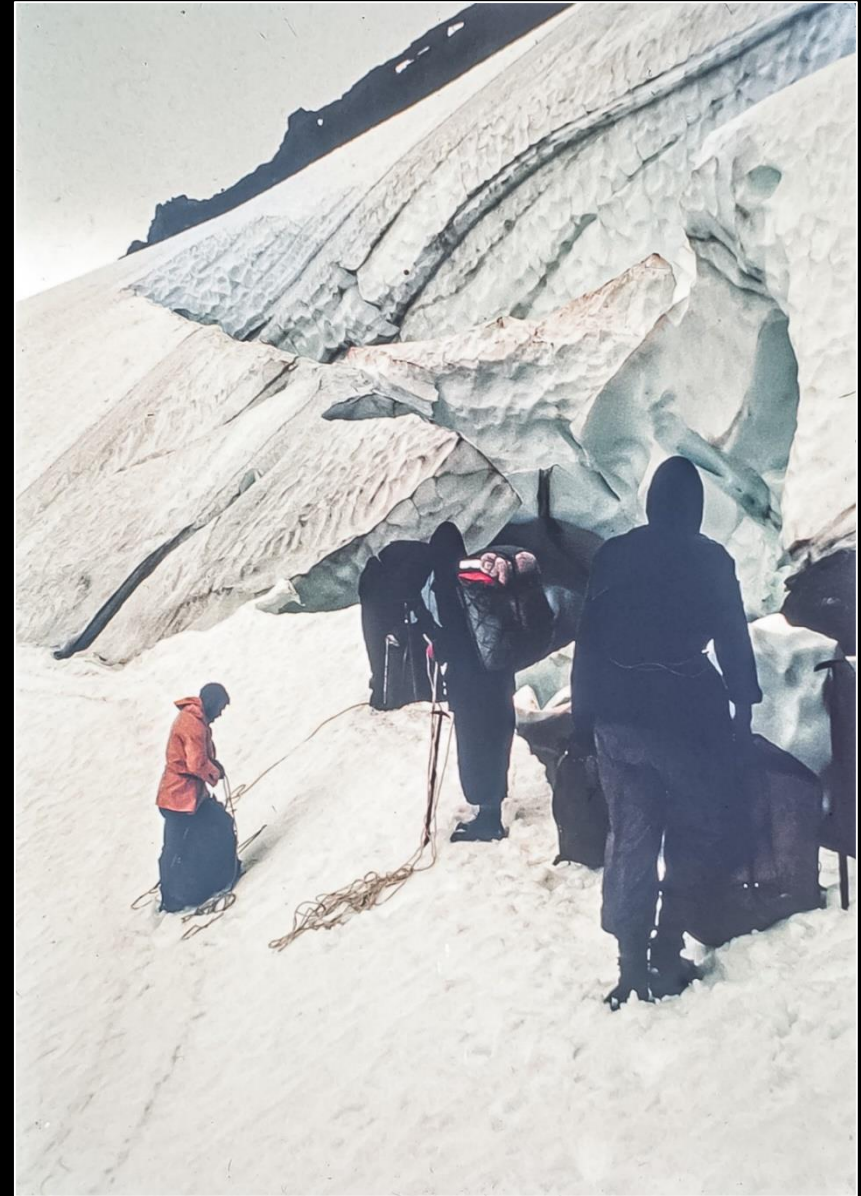
Nobody dared to make turning-back noises so we plugged across a snow slope to the foot of the schrunds beneath the Forgotten River Col. As we stopped here, the mist cleared and the sun shone warmly.

GTH 34 Forgotten R.
from approach to col
23.1.1966



GTH 35 Graham near
Forgotten R. Col 23.1.1966

Encouraged, we roped to pass the schrund ...



GTH 36B Roping up for final climb to
Forgotten R. Col 23.1.1966



GTH 37 & 49 Forgotten R. Col
23.1.1966

... and at last walked up the smooth lip of the Olivine Ice Plateau. The mist blew gently back and forth so we stopped in the middle of the flat snow for lunch, and after a final look down the Forgotten we moved round into the basin to prospect for a cave site.



There was some slightly scratchy discussion before a site was agreed upon by Hank, who immediately started digging the entry tunnel on the slopes of Mt Intervention at 6,300 ft. We began building at 1 p.m. and for most of the afternoon it rained and sometimes blew. We took turns in the narrow tunnel but only two could work at a time. Later we began the chamber and hauled out great blocks of solid crystallised snow on plastic groundsheets. After two and a half hours of shift work, all the aluminium plates had their rims bent off and the (ex coal) shovel broke off at the handle. Digging continued. By 6 p.m. the chamber was just big enough to hold five, and dinner was cooked outside in another tunnel. Mike and Don had climbed a steep slope to collect water dripping from the overhanging cliffs of Mt Intervention, and did manage to bring home three quarters of a billy after attempting to glissade with two full ones. Fortunately, the rain stopped as we unpacked, blew up Li-los and got dressed for the night.



GTH 38 Graham on the Plateau
23.1.1966



GTH 39 Tom on the
Plateau 23.1.1966

The cave was crowded but comfortable. Mike proved his much abused foam rubber was successful insulation and everyone slept well. The morning dawned and at last it was proverbially crisp and clear. Don was first out and his excited cries soon brought out the rest. This was it.



GTH 47 Graham, snow cave under
Intervention 24.1.1966

All the peaks were clear, the dark rock of Gable, the tiny snow dome of Climax and we could see across the flat plateau to the edge of the Memorial Icefall. We laboured up softening snow to a point where we could see south of Mt Tutoko, and then picked our way through small crevasses of the neve, which brought us to the foot of the col.



GTH 44 John & Memorial Icefall 24.1.1966



GTH 46 Tom on the plateau;
Memorial Icefall 24.1.1966

GTH 45 Don, John, Tom on
the plateau 24.1.1966





The final climb was less hard than hot and we easily passed the final schrund to reach the col by 1 p.m.

GTH 40 Mike & John on climb to Solution Col 24.1.1966

Hardly stopping, except to
dump packs on the pass, the
party set out for Mt Climax,
8,300 ft, highest point in the
Olivine area.



GTH 50 John, Don, Mike
ascending Climax 24.1.1966

This was a straightforward climb up snow slopes avoiding some slots, and we soon came to a rocky ridge, a few more thumps of the feet into soft snow and we were on the top.



GTH 42 Looking north from ridge to Climax, Arawhata in distance 24.1.1966



Although some cloud was drifting across the plateau, we had a fairly clear view. Forgotten Valley was green below us in the west, and the tiny black dot of our cave was visible beneath Mt Intervention. To the north we could see right out to the Arawhata flats ...

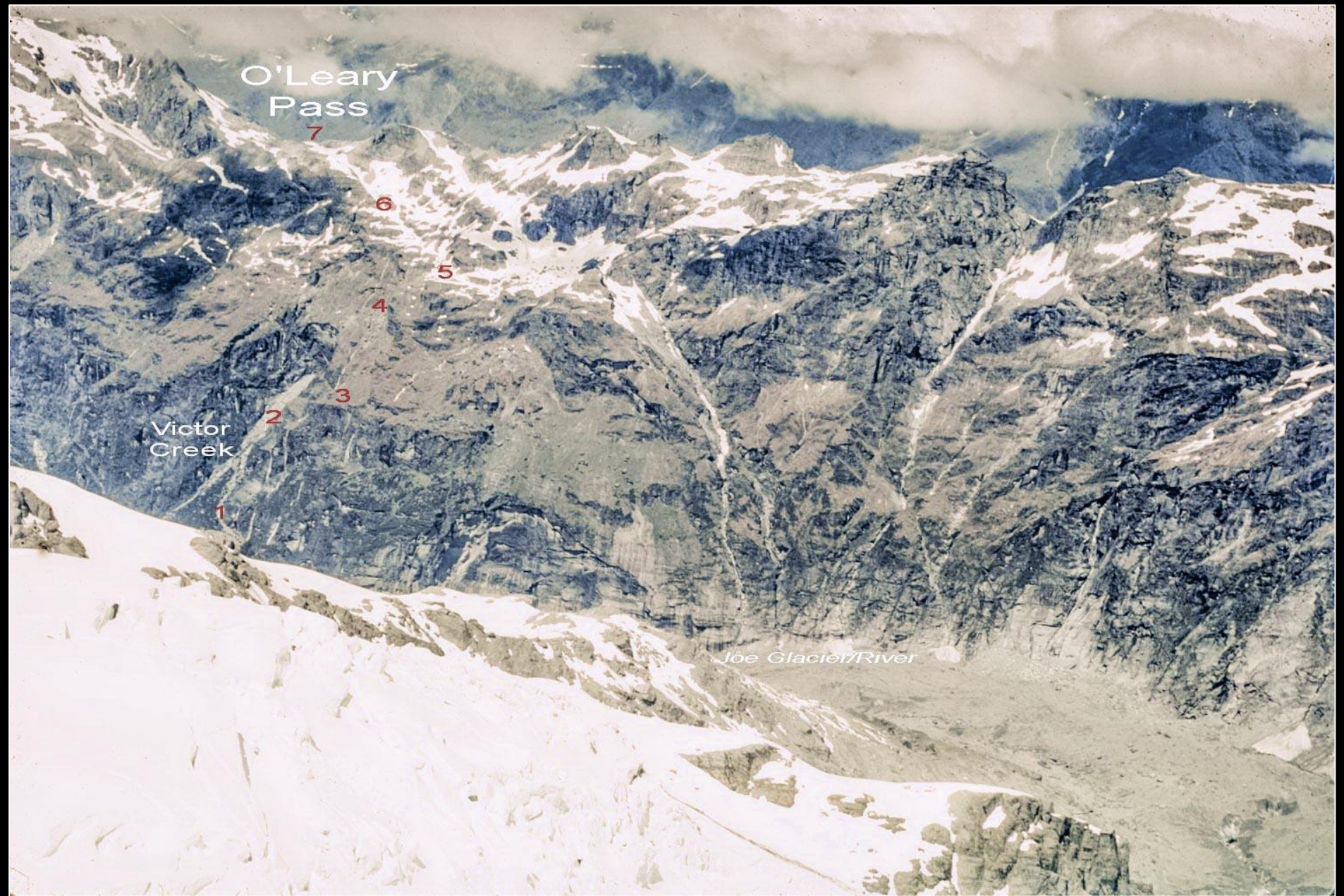
GTH 43 Tom on Climax, view SW to Forgotten flats 24.1.1966



... and we looked down five and a half thousand feet into the Joe and across to Earnslaw and the Dart. It was most enjoyable to be on top of one peak at least, and this was a genuine climax to the trip.

GTH 51B Tom & Graham on
Climax 24.1.1966

However, when we had argued about the crevasses down into the Joe we returned quickly to Solution Col, jumping the schrunds energetically, and ate a rapid meal in the cold wind on the rocky pass. It was after 2.30 when we left here ...



GTH 41 View from Solution Col with route to O'Leary Pass numbered 24.1.1966

and once again we had to cut
back and forth, up and down, to
find a way across not very
steep, but broken slopes to the
ridge off Destiny Peak that
leads down to the Joe.



GTH 52 John, descent from Solution
Col 24.1.1966



Several times we crossed tracks of a chamois who seemed to have been on his way to the plateau.

GTH 53 John & Tom,
descent from Solution Col
24.1.1966

Once we were on the rounded ridge it was fairly plain and soft going, with a fine view out to Williamsons Flats and Aspiring occasionally above distant clouds. A few roped glissades and slithers took us to the edge of crevasses, but by 4.30 we reached the snowline and sat happily looking across at the route up to O'Leary Pass. First, though, we had to get down through the fantastic jumble of moraine to the Joe Glacier snout.



GTH 56 Tom, view down Joe to
Williamson Flat 24.1.1966



Moving apart we came down to the filthy, dark Joe and spent several hours hunting for the 'prominent bivvy rock'. One of the day's great sights was of the leader crashing through thick West Coast scrub and moraine, pack on his back, and the infamous Moir trustingly clutched in one hand. This search was unsuccessful but since Hank had managed to cross (mostly by enforced swimming) the swift Joe, we all decided to cross over and camp on the other side. Most of us crossed on a taut rope, pendulum method, all stumbling and going half under, and we were glad to be across. (Of course, it hadn't really been necessary, but we wanted to psychologically complete the day.) We slept out on a lovely clearing ten minutes up the stream coming from the big slip, with a real feeling of achievement and fellowship. The night was perfectly clear and calm.

GTH 54 Joe R. after
crossing 24.1.1966



Arawhata Bill country

The upper Joe is overhung by beetling cliffs and it was a while before the sun reached our grassy flat. We breakfasted leisurely in the warmth and later began to climb up bouldery Victor Creek into a large slip which we had gazed at from the other side of the river yesterday. At its top, this slip has an absolutely vertical wall of 600 ft and so the route climbs out to the true left over rock shelves and steep snowgrass.

To get above the head of the slip we were forced to do some slightly hairy vegetable mountaineering in sheer little guts, but after an hour or so we sat looking over the edge at the waterfall which spread into nothing before reaching the bottom. It was at this impressive spot that Hank threw away his tattered shorts.



GTH 61 Victoria Glacier from route to O'Leary Pass
25.1.1966



GTH 62 View down Joe from
near O'Leary Pass
25.1.1966.dng



While we then sidled upwards along a naturally rising shelf, we talked of Arawhata Bill, whose pass this was, and whose cairns were probably the first to mark this route. We felt that it was really possible to sense the compulsion and excitement of gazing over a new range into a new river and wondering whether here perhaps, the golden nuggets might be sluiced and the colours fulfil their promise. We admired Bill tremendously for his tenacity in finding and following this way and it was another thrill (for romantics at least) to reach the divide and see the pass several hundred feet below (the route goes above the main saddle).

GTH 64 O'Leary Pass,
view to west 25.1.1966

There were photos of the large cairn and tarn on O'Leary Pass, and others towards Dredge Flat in the Dart.



GTH 63 Graham, view down Dart from O'Leary Pass 25.1.1968



After lunch we went over the edge into the Pass Burn having to negotiate some awkwardly steep rubbly rock shelves, still frozen, before coming to the snow and glissading into the stream. From here, the tussock on the true left is beautifully easy ...

GTH 66 O'Leary Pass,
slopes of Earnslaw at
left 25.1.1966



GTH 67 & 68 John on bridge, Cattle
Flat 25.1.1966

... and we soon descended
from the tops through open
bush to the Dart, and the
round trip was nearly done.

A new Forestry bridge took
us across the Dart, and we
camped at the bottom of
Cattle Flat, truly satisfied
with a fine trip. We ate lots
of food, and watched Jupiter
creep up in the bright night
sky behind the Barrier Range.





MH 69 Cascade Saddle
26.1.1966

After dinner coffee

Early on Wednesday morning, Graham and John rushed off to Paradise, arriving that evening, the rest of us pushed ourselves up the Dart in the heat, finally staggering onto Cascade Saddle late in the evening to be on our fourth pass in as many days.

Mt Aspiring was sharp in the sky as again we slept out, in Cascade Basin, the next day found our way slowly down Cascade Saddle to the Matukituki, and very reluctantly forced ourselves to hurry to the road end in late afternoon heat. Here we were lucky enough to pick up a night ride to Wanaka with some meat hunters and after a night picnicking in the lake front bushes, we separated to hitch hike home.



MH 71 Cascade
Saddle 26.1.1966

Photographs by Graham Hancox and Mike Heenan

Text by Donald Fraser