

By Phillip Melchior

Soon after 1am we are crunching down onto the Grand Plateau, the night alive with stars and the vast, intimidating bulk of the mountain gleaming above us.

So this is it. The next few hours will show if my goal of climbing Aoraki/Mt Cook as a celebration of reaching 60 is really going to happen.

The mountain had come to dominate my year.

A seed planted by the late Rob Hall in the mid-eighties had lain dormant for more than 20 years until I started climbing with leading mountain guide Gary Dickson at the age of 55.

How difficult was New Zealand's highest mountain?, I had asked. Would I be up for it?

The answer was a blunt "no". Too little crampon time, too much useless weight around the middle.

Boutique guiding company Alpinism and Ski, which Gary runs with his wife Iris Abaecherli, is not one of those companies that allows clients to tackle challenges clearly beyond their capabilities. One of the things I like about Gary is that he tells it straight.

Two years later, two years of climbing in Switzerland and the odd trip closer to home, and we're sipping a New Year's glass of wine in my home in Wanaka.

"If you still want to do it, and you put in the work, we can have a crack at Cook in December," he said.

And so it began.

I was fit, but not fit enough. I was light(er), but not light enough.

I wanted to shed 12 kilos, and I wanted to feel confident I had the strength to not let anyone down. Not me, and not my friend and climbing mentor who would be putting himself at risk on my behalf.

Out went the chocolate, the toast, the odd burger and chips. By May, my much-loved and habitual few glasses of wine each evening were reduced to 'special occasions only'.

The work at the gym kept ratcheting up. More combinations of aerobic and strength, more repetitions, more time on the mountain bike, more hills. More, more exercise. Less, less 'bad' food.

In late June, a week after my 60th birthday, we met up in Switzerland, Gary's base for the northern climbing season. The north face of the Tete Blanche, the north face of the Grand Louis above the Trient Plateau on the border between Switzerland and France, and then off to the Bernese Oberland for a crack at the Jungfrau and her neighbour, the Monck. Some big, tiring days, with more hours on crampons.

I was getting there, but there was still work to do.

As November rolled around I was getting twitchy. Plans for some big trips in the hills in October had been foiled by weather and other commitments. Had I done enough? Had I left it too late?

Mid-November and I planned a big week. A thousand vertical metres on Monday, the same on Tuesday. On Wednesday evening I took off for the Fernburn Hut on the new Mototapu Track, planning two big days.

It was a good test. The Mototapu is, to put it bluntly, a bugger. Up and down, up and down, steep sidling on slippery snow grass, and a route that defies all logic. But when I heaved my pack into my truck at the carpark on Friday evening, having packed three days of the track into a single, 12-hour slog, I felt I was as ready as I was ever likely to be.

The body seemed in good shape, but what about the mind? Any big challenge like Aoraki/Mt Cook is a mind-game almost as much as a test of physical strength and stamina. Could I tough it out, or would I find a convenient excuse to cut it short?

Our window of opportunity started on December 1. Seven days out, and I'm looking at MetVUE and the Met Service rain-map several times a day, elated when a big high appears, despondent when it seems likely to be pushed south.

Bill Day - friend, neighbour and 'adventure playmate' who can't resist a challenge – is going through the same process. We consult every few hours. Gary's not playing this game – when it's time, he'll let us know.

But gradually, it all comes together. On December 2 we pack gear and food and head off for Mt Cook village where we will meet Sean Brooks – Gary's friend and fellow guide. The chances of getting up to Plateau Hut that evening seem at best 50/50 but Bill and I are keen to get started, and Gary is sick of being asked "when?".

At the village it's clagged in and wet. But the blessed high is coming. All the forecasts say so, and so do the pilots, guides and DoC staff who live there.

We chat to the locals about the challenge ahead. They're unanimous – Gary Dickson and Sean Brooks are as good as it gets in the guiding business. We'll be fine with them.

We know that, but it's nice to have it reinforced.

By morning, it hasn't cleared yet but it's coming. The cloud is thinning, bits of blue sky and white mountain appear. We head off for Glentanner heliport where chief pilot Tony Delaney puts us on hold while he uses a routine scenic flight to check the conditions.

The word comes back – we're good to go. The Tasman Valley is still choked with cloud but the Grand Plateau is clear and New Zealand's highest mountain sparkles in the sun.

Food and sleeping bags stowed at the spacious Plateau Hut and we rope up for a 'reccy' at the Linda Glacier. The weather has become spectacular, the snow conditions are good, and the crevasses all seem passable.

Early dinner and by seven o'clock we're tucked up in sleeping bags, trying to get some sleep.

For me it's a vain hope. I toss, I turn. My pulse races, I ponder what I know of the route, I think about the pain, the effort, the willpower that lies ahead.

At midnight, we get up, and force down some muesli and peaches, a slice of toast with honey, and a cup of coffee.

Outside, we rope up, check harnesses, strap on crampons, and we're off down onto the Grand Plateau in brilliant moonlight.

It's perfect - just what we had hoped for.

For the first couple of hours, we follow the track we laid yesterday. Gary leads, his head-torch beam probing the crevasses, checking the snow bridges. I follow, mostly just watching where my feet are going, dimly aware that just outside the range of my light are huge holes, 50 metres and more deep. Behind us, Bill follows guide Sean.

A steepish climb, then a little plateau. The Linda Glacier rises in bursts and we make the occasional detour to avoid crevasses; zigging and zagging, gaining height all the time.

The first couple of hours seem to have gone quickly in the dark before we have a drink stop. My chocolate-covered 'power bar' – tough to swallow at the best of times – is so hard in the cold air that it's an effort to chew it.

We seem to be making steady progress, but my hands are cold. At the Bowie Corner, away from the line of fire of the 'Gun Barrel' and below the Linda Shelf, we stash a couple of drink bottles for the journey home, discard trekking poles and put on our helmets. I add a pair of thin 'liner' gloves, hoping to avoid my effective but clumsy over-mittens.

From here it gets deadly serious. While the Linda Glacier route is the "easiest and most climbed route" it is also, according to the *Aoraki/Mt Cook Guide for Mountaineers*, "one of the most dangerous, being menaced by ice-cliffs. The lower glacier is heavily crevassed and there is considerable danger from ice avalanches off the right (Divide) slopes."

Sometimes we get the glow of the almost-full moon, at others we're in the shadow of Mt Tasman. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the light seeps in, until around 6am, five hours after we left Plateau Hut, the first red glow of the sun creeps above the distant ridge line and begins to paint the east face of Mt Tasman in pink and gold.

The climbing now is steep and relentless. We lean into the hill, driving our ice axe shafts into the snow, kicking small steps. I look up from time to time, but the small col at the top of the gully at the junction of the Zurbriggen Ridge remains stubbornly distant.

Finally, we cross the first rocky outliers and climb up to the base of the Summit Rocks. "There have been numerous falls on this part of the route," warns the *Guide for Mountaineers*.

The climbing traverse across the base of the rocks is straightforward enough until we pause precariously while Sean secures protection for the first vertical rock climb.

As the last to go, I have the advantage of being able to watch how the others do it. The first pitch is uneventful, but the next gives me trouble as my ice tools produce chunks of ice and snow but no firm grip. Below me is a vertical drop of unthinkable height, but while I can't see Gary, the rope is tight on my harness and I'm confident that I'm not going anywhere – even if I screw up.

On the third go I get a hold that I can work with. The tools bite into the hard snow, crampon points find good holds on the rock and suddenly I heave myself over the rim and there it is, stretching ahead - the summit ridge.

It's steeper than I had led myself to believe, and I know it's longer than it looks, but there's a feeling of elation. There's still the best part of a couple of hours to go, difficult patches to traverse and some calf-burning climbs.

But it really is going to happen. I really am going to reach the summit of our highest mountain, and look down on everything from my 3,754m vantage point.

It's just a case of keeping focused, putting one foot in front of the other, maintaining three points of contact at all times.

The *bergschrand* that surrounds the summit ice-cap is easily crossed and we press on up the final, steep 50 metres. My focus is all on the single metre in front of my eyes and hands but suddenly I realise that the snow in front of me is rounding off and there below me is the West Coast.

It's done. The climb is over. Ten hours after leaving the hut, we're on the summit, hugging one another and taking 'yahoo!' photographs.

It's a clear day, and you really can see forever.

The sharp outline of Mt Aspiring to the south. The West Coast looks close enough to touch. Mt Tasman seems insignificantly small, while the great ice river of the Tasman Glacier flows down from the Main Divide to Lake Pukaki. There's cloud over the north island.

The feeling of achievement is wonderful, but strongly tempered by a desire to get the hell out of here, to seize the moment on top, and to start heading down.

Underlying it is a sense of gratitude to my guide Gary Dickson, for having the patience to teach me, and the faith that I would learn.

The job of a mountain guide is not to get you to the summit, but to help you achieve as much as you are able, while helping to keep you safe. Gary had helped me achieve more than I had ever thought I was capable of.

Now the job was to get home. Back down the ridge, abseiling the summit rocks in giant backward steps, down the gully, then traversing and down-climbing onto the shelf and eventually back to the comparative safety of Bowie Corner.

We can relax.

The yawning crevasses that we couldn't see in the pre-dawn are still to be crossed and there's the ever-softening snow of the glacier to be waded through, sapping whatever energy is left. Finally there's a kilometre of Grand Plateau to cross with a 200m climb back up to the hut.

But we can take as long as we like; stop when we feel like it, drink and eat as we please. And our snowshoes are waiting at the Grand Plateau to make the last leg easier.

Twenty-four hours after standing on the summit, we're back at Glentanner looking up at the mountain dominating the Tasman Valley - enjoying the view with the rest of the tourists. The experience is surreal.

Australian author Kieran Kelly sub-titled his 2008 book on Mt Aspiring: "Mountain climbing is no cure for middle-age".

Well, middle-age is perhaps behind me, but it doesn't seem to have done much harm to the 'early-elderly'!

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