

Symphony on ski

The first one-day ski traverse from Godley Valley to the Fox Glacier was undertaken last September. The distance covered was 46.7 kilometres. The party of three was: **GOTTLIEB BRAUN-ELWERT**, mountain ski guide, founder of Alpine Recreation Canterbury, Ltd, Lake Tekapo, who wrote the following description of the traverse; **FRANZ WAIBL**, an optical technician from Governors Bay; and **DANIEL FREY**, a visitor from Switzerland. The traverse was completed without support parties, food-drops, or mechanical transport.



Franz Waibl and Daniel Frey climbing Murchison Glacier, towards Tasman Saddle.

A ski traverse is like a well composed piece of music. It flows with harmony, surprises with the unexpected. It engages all your emotions and the melody lingers in your mind afterwards. Good music needs players who are masters of their instruments.

Andante

"See you tomorrow." "Best of luck." Quickly the starlit night absorbs us three after leaving the comforts of Rankin Hut. The beams of our headlamps bounce over the rocks of the Godley Valley riverbed, leading the way for our feet. "Slow down, find a rhythm, and maintain it." Franz was going a little too fast. We have plenty of time until daylight. We must conserve our energy.

The challenge was immense: 4000 vertical metres climb and 47 kilometres distance, linking the major glaciers and snowfields of the Mount Cook Region into one long traverse — and to complete it within a single day, entirely self-sufficient, without support parties, food-drops, or the use of aircraft. There were four major passes to cross, five of New Zealand's largest glaciers to traverse. We would need all our skills and strength to complete the journey with daylight. So, don't burn yourself out now. Slow down.

The gusty wind from the north is more than the thermal down-draft expected during the night. Will the weather hold? Iced up rocks, failing headlamps, numerous bluffs, several metres high avalanche debris in the Rutherford, and cramp in my right leg make for slow and tedious progress, interrupted by frequent

stops.

The Godley Ghost appears to have strewn all these obstacles in our way: "You crazy creatures, what are you doing here in the middle of the night, disturbing my peace? Clear out!" Instead we put our skis on, but progress is still like patchwork.

A climbing skin comes off and needs to be replaced. A waterfall, an icy traverse. Skis off and skis on again. At last we reach smooth snow where skinning becomes the familiar tune, allowing our bodies to swing at a steady rhythm.

For a while we turn our headlamps off. Soon our eyes

adapt to the darkness, searching far ahead for landmarks on the skyline while our legs gauge the terrain underfoot. Twice more we have to take our skis off, use crampons in the end for the final approach to Armadillo Saddle, our first pass. Slowly we have gained this height. Unnoticed, the dark has given way to the first glimpses of the oncoming day. "Godley Ghost, good-bye."

Scherzo

Sharp cold wind greets us from the north, the Main Divide is in clouds. Will Huey do what the

Godley Ghost could not? Warm clothes on, a drink, skins off, bindings secured, boots buckled up, poles shortened, a photograph taken. These are the few restful moments that mark our break between climb and descent.

The sun begins anew its daily play around the highest mountain tops. The lower slopes begin to show contours and texture. That's the light we need. Let's go. Our skis make contact with the ripples of the windblown snow. Down they run with ease and speed, barely scratching the surface. The Harper gets steeper and steeper. Its north-facing

slopes have been turned into solid ice by the heat of yesterday's sun and the freeze of the night.

Execute sharp turns. Edge hard. Ski with precision and control. Rocks are below. At the bottom of the couloir piled up avalanche debris awaits. A couple of careful turns through the bumps, across some crust, and how we welcome the powder on the shady valley floor. We let our skis dance joyfully turn by turn.

One final steep ride down the moraine wall and it is time for breakfast on the Murchison Glacier. A mouthful of tea with honey and half a sandwich; our timetable does not allow for more.

Allegro

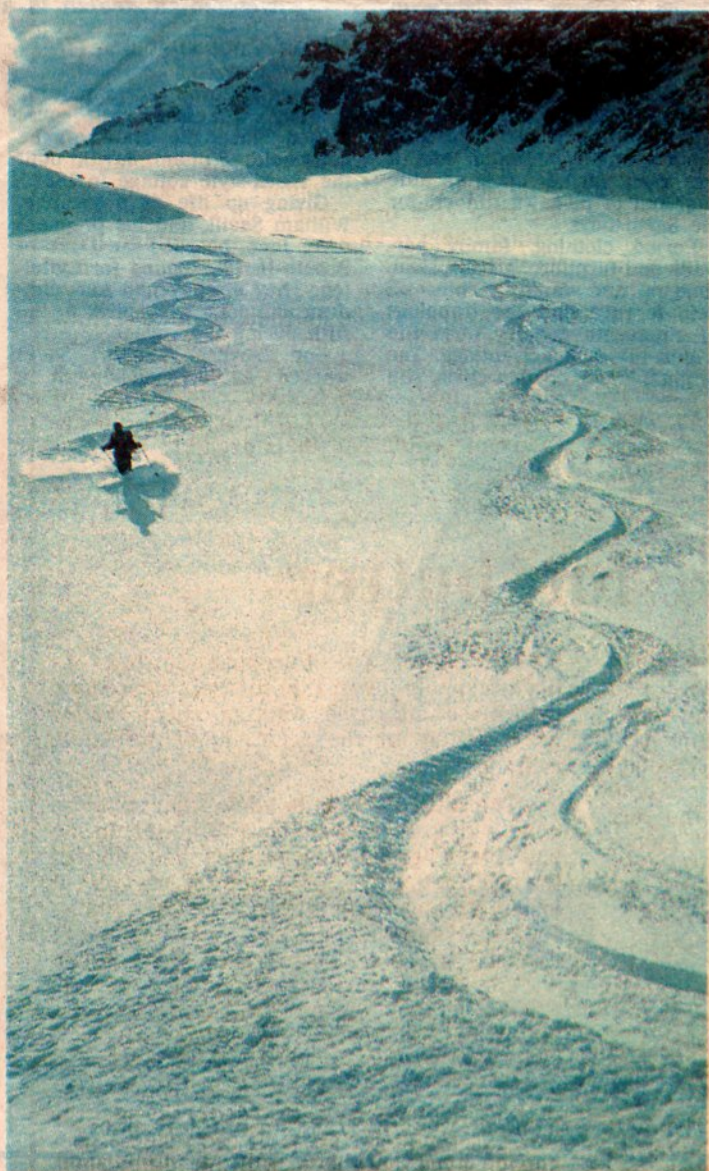
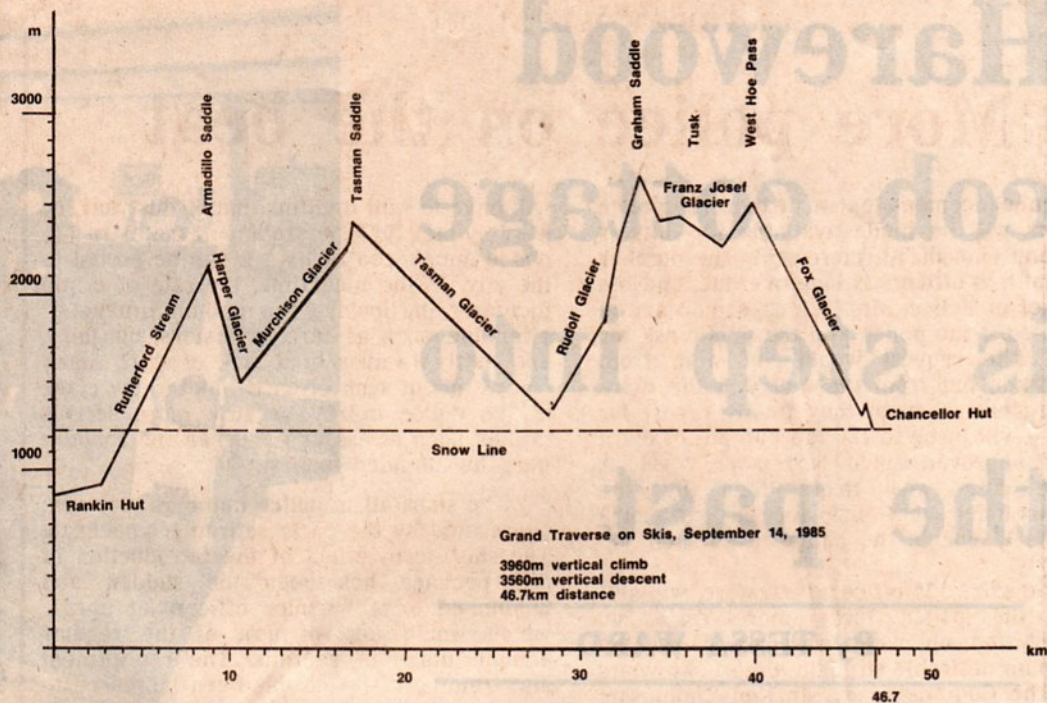
For a while Franz takes the lead, cutting the track. Drawing an elegant, efficient, and safe line up the gentle slopes of the Murchison Glacier is a creative piece of mountaineering. Long striding legs, far reaching arms, the entire body supports the flow up the mountain. After eight hours on our feet the art is to maintain a pace sufficiently fast to reach Chancellor Hut with daylight and to keep enough reserves for yet another 10 hours of fast moving.

Crossing from shade to bright sunlight recalls many happy memories of welcome warmth after frosty nights. At once the sleeping beauty of the snow covered country becomes alive with millions of sparkling crystals.

The Murchison headwall looks good. Five steep sweeping traverses let us climb to the height that separates the Murchison from the Tasman Glacier. We are jubilant: no clouds on the



The adventurous skiers at Rankin Hut, Godley Valley, at the starting point of their traverse: Daniel Frey, Gottlieb Braun-Elwert, Franz Waibl.



Daniel Frey gathering speed on one of the spectacular descents.

close, yet so far away.

The clouds have disappeared again, no more spindrift; the wind has dropped completely. Excitement pulls us up the never ending neve. One more large turn around the snow dome on the top of the Rudolf. At last we can look down to the spectacular West Coast and let our bodies soak up the warmth of the late afternoon sun. We have reached the highest point of our journey. We are very tired. Graham Saddle, Col Collapse; our point of no return.

Presto

Being three hours behind schedule puts a great pressure on us. Only three hours of daylight are left. There is no moonlight tonight. We are lucky, the snow on the Franz Josef Glacier is firm and fast, though wind-packed and corrugated. We are able to cover ground much faster than expected and can traverse high on the Chamberlain Snowfield, thus saving valuable metres and minutes.

Down it goes and up again, just enough to gain sufficient height for a sweep across to the Tusk and beyond on to the Davies Snowfield. One more climb, one more pass. We have to make it. Push yourself a little harder, but remain strong for the finale on the Fox. My right thigh starts troubling me again.

Immense joy overrides all tiredness, not much further now, 200, 100 metres more to go. We slow down. West Hoe Pass, the last hurdle of our cross-country race is reached. We have made up over two hours of our lost time.

Exhilaration of ski-ing fast

Main Divide south of Tasman Saddle. We will have a chance.

Half-time, half-way. Take a deep breath, a firm grip on the ski poles, three, two, one, go, race down. Now we can cover distance fast. While speeding downhill we relax the tired muscles of our beaten bodies, strained by the hard climb up the other side. Regardless of how tired you are, the exhilaration of ski-ing fast renews you physically and mentally.

We sail past groups of fancy skiers air-dropped on to the glacier from another world. Ski, push, pole, and skate, but mind the deep tracks left in the snow by these landing aircraft. A large rock at De la Beche corner provides us with a lunch table, another serves as drying rack for our damp clothes, skins, and my sleeping bag that unintentionally took a sip of the four litres of tea that I had kept warm inside it.

Vivace

Clouds reappear on the Main Divide, the westerly picks up. It is getting hot. Rocks start hur-

tling down the moraine walls and sprinkle the white of the Rudolf Glacier. Our pace is still unchanged, though striding out requires more effort now. My eyes travel far ahead and scan the terrain for suitable contours, so that my skis can lay a track with steady gradient, providing for comfortable footing, yet avoiding wasteful detours and areas of danger such as ice and rock fall, and crevasses.

As we lose the sun, wet snow changes to dry powder, our skins quickly clog up with snow and force us to a stop. We clean skins and dry them in the sun. The white pair needs replacing for white reflects the sun and skins do not dry.

Up the Rudolf is a long climb; it is tough in the afternoon, particularly the 600 metres high steep section where hard ice alternates with bottomless snow. One has to anticipate snow conditions in order to choose the line of least effort and fastest progress. The upper section of the Rudolf leans back and skinning becomes the well working routine again. Stride by stride, my eyes cling to the Main Divide, so

Finale

Our rest on this magnificent grandstand is of short duration, little more than the usual changing procedure. We wish we could stay a little longer to watch the sun plunge into the Tasman Sea illuminating the mountains with all the colours of the spectrum. However, with only a little daylight left there is no time for hanging around.

Now, it pays off to know where to pick the fastest line down the glacier. Without a single stop we ski, ski, and ski. Corrugations hammer our thighs until they scream. We give them a rest one at a time by ski-ing on one leg and then on the other.

For a moment childhood fantasies come true when I feel like diving from the sky into the softness of cottonwool clouds below. Victoria Gap flies past us, then the seracs of the Fox to our left. Down, ski, fast. Watch the holes. Turn, race, jump. Crampons on and up another 50 metres on to the bluff beside the glacier. Only a few minutes of daylight remain.

One last time we don our skis and point them downhill. Despite exhaustion the senses of each player are finely attuned to every movement, every effort to join together in achieving the final crescendo. We have made it; Chancellor Hut.

The symphony has ended.

