

# THE UNFORGIVING MOUNTAIN

## Memories of a tragic week on Mt Taranaki (Egmont) that left eight young people dead.

**T**wo lives were lost on Mt. Taranaki (Egmont) on Labour Day Weekend 2013 when two of a group of eight experienced climbers from the New Zealand Alpine Club were caught in deteriorating weather. Four climbers made it down the mountain to raise the alert and two more made it down the next day however as search teams tried to reach the two remaining climbers throughout the weekend, bad weather hampered their efforts to reach the pair who had taken shelter in a snow cave but were not equipped to spend a night on the mountain. Sadly they died before they could be rescued. On Tuesday morning October 29<sup>th</sup> a search and rescue team were winched down from a helicopter to recover the bodies. The dead were Hiroki Ogawa, 31 and Nicole Sutton, 29 of Auckland.

Two months previous in August 2013 saw the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the blackest week in Taranaki's history of alpine tragedies. A history that goes back to the first recorded fatality when in 1891, Mr. William Southward fell over a bluff at the summit and died. Other tragedies followed. There is a cairn on the North Egmont side of the mountain that is a memorial to Arthur Hamilton Ambury who lost his life on June 3, 1918 attempting to save a fellow climber, William Edwin Gourlay. Sadly both were killed when they fell over a bluff and the memorial cairn was unveiled on Good Friday 1919. In October that same year, Arthur Ambury's widow accepted the Albert Medal that had been awarded posthumously to her husband in recognition of his selfless act. The bluff where they lost their lives is now known as Ambury Bluff.

But what of the history leading up to that fateful week? The first European to climb the mountain was geologist and naturalist Ernst Dieffenbach and James Heberley on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1839. Their Maori climbing companions would not go past the vegetation line as the Mountain was tapu and the home to an ancient ancestor in the form of a giant lizard. Deaths on the mountain were often attributed to the breaking of the tapu. Up until the time of the tragedy, 18 lives, including that of Arthur Ambury and William Gourlay, had been reported; the first in April 1891 when Mr. William Southward fell over a bluff at the summit until in 1947 when Dr. A G Adams fell on an ice slope on the Stratford side. Since the tragedy, a further 62 climbers have given up their lives to the mountain but none of these events were as devastating as the calamity that claimed 8 lives during that tragic week in 1953.

I was in my early teens on that fateful week when one of the worst six days in the history of the mountain occurred. In two separate incidents, eight lives were lost on the upper slopes of the mountain. In recalling what happened that fateful week I could only rely on memories that were sixty years old. Were my memories accurate? In researching this article, I discovered that the facts were almost exactly as I had remembered them.

Egmont is considered an easy climb in the summer but during the winter, because of the conical shape and the exposed position of the mountain, what is soft, crystalline snow when exposed to the sun, rapidly freezes over to become a hard, often impenetrable crust when the shadows or inclement weather reaches their shadowy tendrils over the surface. Consequently, climbers are advised to be equipped with ropes, crampons and ice axes as well as extra clothing to allow them to negotiate the tricky slopes.

The disastrous week that shook all Taranaki residents started on the afternoon of Sunday, July 26 1953 when a party of nurses from the Taranaki Base Hospital in New Plymouth and their guides were descending from a day's climbing to the mountain's summit on the North Egmont side. The party consisted of about 30 nurses who were all members of the Nurses Tramping Club and they were being guided by Taranaki Alpine Club members. The day commenced at 10am with the climbers leaving the North Egmont Hostel heading to the Tahurangi Hut some 1800 feet higher before starting for the summit at 11 am. The party then climbed 3300 feet higher to reach the summit at 3.15 pm. At about 3.30pm, the party was broken into several groups of about six climbers each, then after being roped together, and with an experienced anchor bringing up the rear, began the descent. The slopes had been icy during the climb and the guides had had to cut steps into the ice. It was this activity that had slowed the climbers' uphill progress. Some concern was felt at the late start of the descent, however their return was observed by the club's captain Mr. T Herbert, who had remained at the hut watching their progress through binoculars. He saw the climbers at about 4.10pm descending the Lizard towards Snow Valley and felt sure that they would be safe; but soon darkness overtook them.

From eye witnesses it appears that the second line of roped up climbers, with 17 year old Andrew Lornie in the lead and anchored by Mr. Keith Russell, a 26 year old teacher from New Plymouth and the chief Taranaki Alpine Club guide, had already crossed the slope above Hongi's Bluff (at an altitude 6500 feet) when one of the party in front of Mr. Russell dropped her ski pole. While he was attempting to help recover the pole, another girl slipped dragging the line with her. Mr. Russell then threw himself flat on the snow to try to hold the line using his ice axe but was unsuccessful and all seven plunged over the 12 metre high Hongi's Bluff. After impacting the ice below the Bluff, the

seven then slid down the Maketawa Valley, a narrow rock strewn valley which at that time would have been covered with hard ice. The time of the accident is estimated to be around 6.30pm.

At about 6.35pm, the Police were notified, and within 10 minutes the Taranaki Alpine Club's search and rescue team had sprung into operation. By 8.30pm two carloads of rescuers were on the mountain and were at the scene of the accident by 9.30pm. At the height of the rescue there were 100 people taking part with between 40 and 50 being at the accident scene. Apart from the Taranaki Alpine Rescue team, the rescue party consisted of personnel from the Stratford Mountain Club, army personnel, fire men, Red Cross workers and local residents.

At about 10pm, a blizzard blew up, but rather than hampering the rescue operation it made it easier for the rescuers as soft snow then covered the icy slopes. The cold was intense and visibility was hampered for about three hours until the conditions improved and a full moon appeared. The first of the victims were brought back to the hut at about midnight where a fire had been lit and every comfort given to those still alive. Two of the nurses tended the injured until the arrival of a doctor from Inglewood. Stretcher parties started moving the two injured down to the Hostel at 5.30 am and they were taken by ambulance to New Plymouth at 8.00am. The last of the bodies were then brought down, arriving at 10am.

The list of victims were Keith Gladston Russell, 25, schoolteacher: Andrew Lornie, 17, apprentice carpenter: Miss Julia Guida Cassells, 18, nurse: Miss Janet Cameron, 20, nurse: and Mrs Judith Caldwell, 29, staff nurse. Mrs Caldwell had been married for only two months before the tragedy and she died later at the Tahurangi Hut. The injured were Cynthia Thomlinson and Ellen Beverly McBeath, both aged 19 and both nurses. They both suffered a broken leg each but sadly Ellen McBeath died of her injuries the next day, bringing the final toll to 6 dead and one injured. Cynthia Thomlinson made a full recovery.

Within a week, tragedy was again to strike climbers on the mountain. A party of members of the St Johns Bible Class youth group from Hawera, of which I was a member, made a trip up the Dawson Falls side of the mountain. While logging in at the Dawson Falls Hostel, we were asked to keep an eye out for two climbers who had started an ascent from the Stratford Mountain House side without logging their route and were understood to be poorly equipped for a climb. Our party made our way up the track, past the Hooker Shelter, and onto a plateau at 4600 feet where the Kapuni Lodge is located. From there it is a relatively easy climb to Symes Hut on Phantom Peak, a secondary cone on the southern side of the mountain.

Upon reaching the Kapuni Lodge our party stopped for lunch and we could see the two climbers about 800 feet higher up the slope. After unsuccessfully trying to attract their attention, three of us started to climb after them, all the time calling out for them to stop. From the direction they were taking we assumed that they were heading up the Curtis Ridge towards Symes Hut. We had reached about 300 feet up from the Kapuni Lodge when cloud started to swirl around us and conditions were becoming hazardous with the soft surface starting to freeze over. The leader of our group thought it prudent for us to get back down to the rest of our party, and, as it appeared that the two climbers were heading for shelter, we turned back. It soon became obvious that the best of the day was over and as the cloud was starting to get quite thick, hampering visibility, we packed up and headed back down to the Dawson Falls Hostel, arriving there about 4.00pm. While logging out, we reported on our inability to stop the two climbers but that it appeared that they were heading for Symes Hut. We then left the mountain and went back to Hawera.

That night, I went to the local cinema and during the programme, slides were flashed on the screen calling for the Alpine Rescue crews to assemble and by 10.15pm when it was obvious that the two were not coming down that night, the rescue operation was put into action. About 80 searchers assembled at the various huts on the mountain with two way radios and medical supplies awaiting daybreak when it would be safe to start the search. Three rescuers were dispatched at dawn from the Tahurangi Hut, the scene of the previous weekend's rescue, to climb to the summit and to watch for signals from searching aircraft. A Tiger Moth from the Hawera Aero Club and a Harvard from Ohakea circled the mountain while the trio toiled their way up the icy slopes under a clear sky. By 8.10am they were back at the Hut with the news that the bodies of the two had been located and the other rescue parties were recalled. Within two hours the bodies were at the Tahurangi Hut and a further two hours later the stretcher party had reached the North Egmont Mountain House.

What actually took place that night has never been properly determined but it appears that the two men, when they realised that they couldn't get back down the way they had come, and with the oncoming darkness, decided to head across the slopes to North Egmont and try to get down by the easier northern route. Their bodies were discovered in Snow Valley some distance above where the party of nurses had met disaster six days before. A watch worn by one of the victims had stopped at 8.30pm. It appears that the two men had slipped on hard ice and had slid about 1400 feet down into the lower Snow Valley while still roped together. The dead men were Maurice Geoffrey Rogers, 21 of Stratford and Hector James Hickey, 28 of Auckland (previously of Opunaki). Both were single and worked for the Ruakura Animal Research Station in Hamilton.

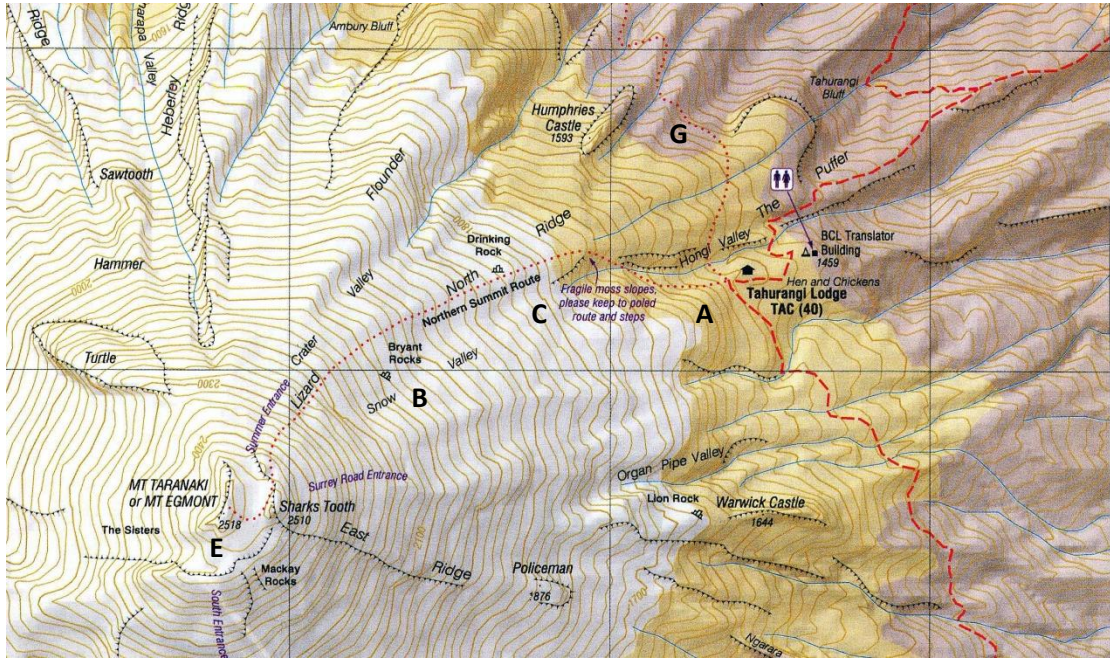
In May the following year, the mountain again claimed the lives of two more in separate accidents, one, a Doctor, after falling on ice and over a bluff near Kapuni Lodge, and the other a young woman, killed by a falling rock while climbing on the Lizard Route. Now, 60 years later, that week is still indelibly imprinted in my memory. I often think that had we been able to reach the two men that fateful afternoon, then perhaps both could have had a long and successful career. The fact remains though, that during that week, the lives of eight young people were cruelly snuffed out; eight young people who in their own particular field had so much to contribute to the community in which they lived and worked.

Speaking after the 2013 tragedy, New Zealand Alpine Club general manager Sam Newton said that Mt Taranaki is known for sudden deteriorations in weather and conditions."This is a tragic reminder that Mt Taranaki (Egmont) is New Zealand's deadliest mountain - achievable for day-trippers one minute and fatal to experienced mountaineers the next," he said.



**The way to the summit from North Egmont showing the critical points pertaining to the disaster of July 25, 1953**

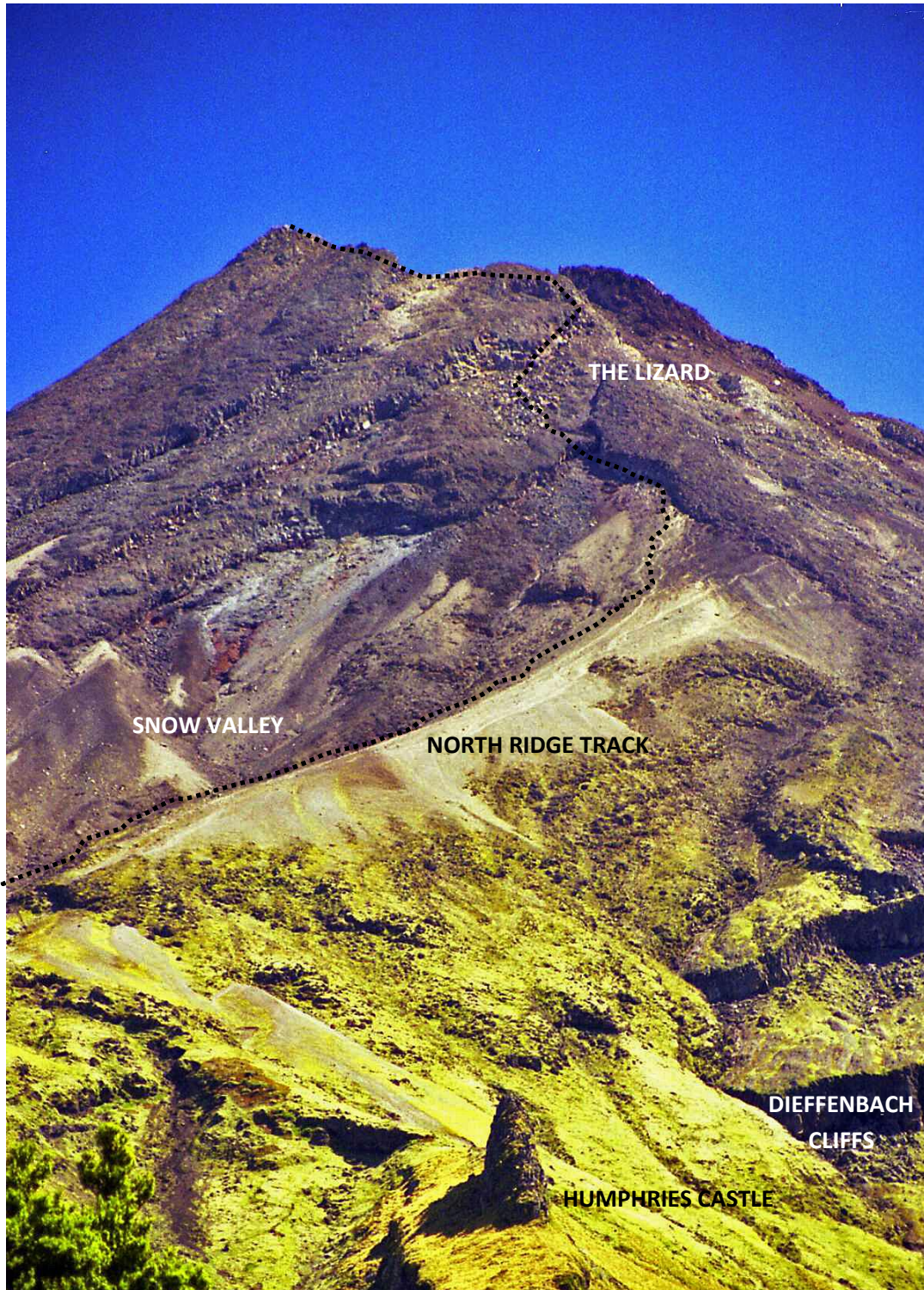
Note: Hongi's Bluff (C) is located near the foot of Snow Valley (B) and is obscured by the North Ridge (D). The party descended from the summit (E) and while crossing Snow Valley slipped on the icy slope above Hongi's Bluff and fell into the valley, sliding 400 feet towards the Tahurangi Hut (A). Other points of interest are The Lizard (F): Humphries Castle (G): and the North Egmont Camphouse (H). Some of these points are also located on the map below



**Topographical Map of the Summit of Mt Egmont from Egmont Sheet 273-09 published by Department of Conservation**

Map reproduced here with kind permission of DoC (NOTE: Permission yet to be confirmed)

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**A closer view of the route the climbers took leading up to the tragedy that followed.**

The black dotted line indicates the route the climbers should have followed. The upper section (the – Lizard) is where the Nurses Tramping Club Captain Mr. T Herbert observed the party descending.

**References:**

Press Association newspaper reports of 27<sup>th</sup> July and 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1953.

Egmont, The Story of a Mountain by A B Scanlan. Published by A H, & A W Reed, Wellington.

NZN, NZ City News 29 Oct. 2013