

Climbing With Steve Parr
Bob Milward, Vancouver, Canada February 2010

I met Steve in early 1974. He was nineteen and I twenty-five. We were both single and shared the same hopes and dreams of big difficult mountain climbs. For the next five years we climbed together in the Alps and Hindu-Kush.

It was a 'Golden age.' There was a free camping field for climbers at Chamonix, which led to great informal friendships and rivalry between climbers from all over the world. The air was electric with climbers coming and going, sharing their plans and narrow escape stories. It was a time when there were no radios, cell-phones and no long-line helicopter rescues. When you went into the mountains to climb you were totally self-reliant. You either came out under your own power or you disappeared (many did). Super-lightweight and super-fast had not yet been invented. The climbs took longer. You had to be happy on dangerous ground among the peaks. To climb the hard routes you needed brains and courage. Taking a good line in the pub did not get you up the big routes.

Steve was the best partner I ever had. People in Chamonix occasionally stopped us in the streets to congratulate us. After seven days on Sassolungo in winter a TV crew came to interview us!

The Scares were not trivial. One night, high on the Dru a close lightning strike gave us a huge electric shock. After that the electric storm continued for five hours with us both expecting to be fried at any moment. On the Grand Jorasses in winter we woke to find a bivouac cover bulging down under new snow, nearly touching our faces. I heard the sound of a snow slide starting and shot out of my sleeping bag as the cover's anchors gave way. I found myself standing with snow up to my waist. Steve was totally flattened under 3 foot of snow. If I had not reacted we would have been found in the spring. In the Hindu-Kush, the epic of our doctor's accident was a close shave stretched out for nine days, but at one of the camps a granite block the size of two semi-detached houses fell 1500 feet without warning landing about 200 yards from us. The dust cloud took 15 minutes to clear and deposited one quarter of an inch of sand over us. The earth moved for us. There were many more such incidents.

Steve was always an accomplished rock climber. When I met him he fell off following ice on Green Gully. Five years later I remember following him on an ice pitch screaming for a tight rope and thinking both, "how did you do it?" and "wow he is good."

In some ways the best times were the bivouacs (there were many). Long stretches of the night were spent telling stories of past climbs and future plans. Steve had an incredible memory for pop songs. We would sing them and change the words with hilarious results, to repeat the performance in the

campsite or bar later. He would recite Monty Python sketches and even the whole of Alice's Restaurant as the stars and moon past us by. The nights would grow cold, freezing the water trickles into silence, the ice cracking and popping and echoing off the rock-face.

You don't have to see 'Best friends.' It is enough to know they're there, somewhere in the world. You admire them, being with them added to your life. We shared many very real dangers and triumphs. For 20 years climbing was my life. Even if I never tie onto a rope again I will always be "just taking a break from climbing."

Life moves on, family, work and goals change. They did for Steve and me, but he will always live bright in the most intense memories of my life. He's been gone nearly 20 years and a week never passes without thinking of him. He left many people with memories of the best of times.

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