



## A CONVERSATION WITH THE PRESIDENT

West Coast-based mountain guide GAVIN LANG catches up with Phil Doole—NZAC President, mountaineer and double amputee.

**Phil Doole sits next to me on his pack. Cloud continues to engulf us from the south-west and occasionally we catch glimpses of Mt Tasman, our objective. Summer has produced some continuously disturbed westerlies—meaning access has remained good until late in the season, but this week we've been denied and now we're attempting to escape before the worst of the weather sets in. During our retreat we've managed to climb Mt Haidinger as a consolation. Phil looks content, but it's obvious that he has some unfinished business.**

**Phil has sat out some famously bad weather in New Zealand's highest bivvy, nicknamed 'Middle Peak Hotel', on the summit ridge of Aoraki Mount Cook. For nearly two weeks in 1982 he and Mark Inglis struggled to survive through an epic storm. The cold damage suffered by both men cost them their feet.**

**So what motivates a man who has lived most of his adult life without feet to climb? As we wait at the heli pad near Pioneer Hut I see an opportunity to ask the man in the NZAC hot seat a few questions.**

**Let's go back to the beginning. Where did you develop your taste for mountaineering?**

*My early days were spent stomping around in the Tararuas, and I found it great in winter when snow covered the tops. While studying in Dunedin I got heavily involved in the OUTC and that led me on to snowcraft courses at Arthur's Pass which I eventually instructed on.*

**Did you have a good role model for climbing?**

*Not really. That would have been nice. I moved around the country a lot so I never had a strong climbing mentor, unfortunately.*

**What are some of your most memorable climbs?**

*The traverse of Black Tower in the Hopkins in 1981 or 1982. I was never a fantastic rock climber but that climb was a thrill. And obviously Mt Aspiring/Tititea and Aoraki Mt Cook after losing my feet. Another notable climb, if you could call it that, was Mt Somers in 2002.*

**Mt Somers?**

*Yeah. Since the Sydney Para-olympics in 2000 when the technology for prosthetic limbs developed further and carbon fibre became the material of choice I've felt that I've been set free. Carbon fibre designs have given us 'bounce' in the heels—before that I just got on with it and persevered despite the awkwardness on descents. Mt Somers was my first serious test of my carbon fibre feet. It's not like tramping and climbing are completely free of discomfort or pain now, but with the extra shock absorbency I can carry on for much longer before my stumps give me grief. And with less pain I can concentrate on balance, saving a lot of mental energy!*

**Why are you still climbing?**

*Why not? I don't see what I do as remarkable or amazing. Some people like to think so, but I've only lost my feet. Someone who has had an amputation above the knee is far worse off than me. I can't even begin to contemplate how hard things could have been without my knees. I hear it said quite often that Mark Inglis and I have got no legs. That's not true, we've got no feet, but we've got our legs. There is a huge difference.*

**So you don't give in easily?**

*No. There was a vague plan for a climbing trip to Peru after the summer (1982–83) that I was supposed to spend working at Mt Cook on the SAR team. I think I got the record for doing the shortest period of work, while having the longest sick leave. Anyway, I had my feet amputated, but went on the trip to Peru in the role of 'hanger-on' staying at the base camps. I somehow managed to get around while my stumps were still settling down after the operation. I'll be forever grateful to the team that agreed to take me with them—I'm sure it boosted my confidence and got me moving much sooner than if I'd stayed at home in NZ.*

**Do you have any regrets?**

*Not turning around earlier on Mt Cook back in 1982. We*

**ABOVE** Simon Howells and NZAC President Phil Doole on the Main Divide. Approaching bad weather signs begin to congregate around Aoraki Mt Cook and Mt Tasman in the distance.

**BELOW** Phil on the west face of Mt Haidinger. BOTH PHOTOS: GAVIN LANG COLLECTION

*could see the weather was getting worse, but climbing the East Ridge we were quite sheltered from the elements, until we topped out on the Summit Ridge. And I think because we were handling the actual climbing conditions okay that we were reluctant to pull the pin. We thought we could escape down Porter Col to Empress Hut even with the bad weather closing in.*

**Where do you draw inspiration from?**

*Things that spring to mind are reading of early explorations of the unknown territories, like Alaska, or looking for the North West passage. Scott, however, didn't really turn me on; it was more Amundsen who impressed me. He came in and got the job done.*

**Why did you choose Marty Beare to guide you on this occasion?**

*I did a short refresher with Marty at Centennial Hut in '94, which was supposed to be a prelude to something more adventurous that didn't come off because it was too late in the season. He was pretty enthusiastic about making it happen this time.*

**Finally, what kind of things do you get up to as President?**

*Keeping an overview of the Club's affairs at national*

*level as well as keeping in touch with what's happening in the sections. And there always seems to be a building project that needs funding. The Home of Mountaineering was a major venture that Dave Bamford steered while he was President. Currently there are expensive renovations happening at Unwin Hut, and we need to pull together a funding plan for rebuilding the bunkrooms. Last time Unwin was renovated was in the 1960s when Ed Hillary was President. He was much better at fundraising than me. ☺*

