

From Superb to EPIRB

A driver, five lumps of blokes, five packs and one taxi from Hobart to Lune River made for a cosy start to our planned walk over Moonlight Ridge to Precipitous Bluff and on out to Melaleuca. The sun had risen on a perfect day by the time we got organised for the initial warm up along the Lune River railway cutting to the old limestone quarry and the heart starter onto the ridge. I had joined four friends from my long gone days as a mainlander in Victoria, unsure of how my fitness was going to hold with a group that I knew had walked together each of the last few years in March for a Tasmanian epic.

I need not have worried, as by the time we stopped for lunch and stunning views across Southport Lagoon, Bruny Island and parts of the South Coast Track, it was apparent that my early morning gym sessions were paying dividends and the group was both fit and well matched. The path along Moonlight Ridge was remarkably dry following the drought conditions of a long summer, although the Tarns along the way were full, reflecting the Hippo and Mt La Perouse in the distance, and supporting healthy populations of tadpoles.

The first views of Pigsty Ponds on a sunny day always give one pause to think what must have been the conditions that met its first visitors to gain such a lovely place that uncomplimentary name. I had been there the previous November when the wind was so fierce it was all you could do to fall over, and the water off the ponds was whipping into sheets of white spray. Even then the scene was picturesque. On this occasion, with clear skies and the late afternoon play of light and shadow, it was a uniquely Tasmanian idyll. Settling tired bodies not yet reaccustomed to backpacking it was interesting to reflect that Doug, Mike and I had shared similar moments a thousand (or was it thirty-five?) years ago with the Latrobe University Mountaineering Club in the Victorian Alps. My goodness but they had aged!

A light mist rose off the ponds the next morning and while the first of an unbroken menu of Muesli breakfasts was consumed, the early sunlight created a blood red backdrop of Maxwell Ridge. Once ascended, the ridge offered the first uninterrupted views of the route to Precipitous Bluff, a destination that had thwarted me on my two previous attempts due to my walking companions suffering minor injuries. The path beyond Pigsty Ponds was new territory for me. By the middle of a hot afternoon we had reached the saddle near Pindars Peak across Alpine meadows and looked down on ridge lines that were decidedly scrubbier, with thick Teatree and Scoparia promising a ripping time. The scrub was deferred briefly for a quick side trip up Pindars Peak. The vista across Precipitous Bluff and New River Lagoon rewarded the effort, enhanced to the North by the blue outline of the Western and Eastern Arthurs, and punctuated by the exclamation mark of Federation Peak. Smoke haze from recent forest fires hung across the valleys. We descended the ridge and dropped into the tree line where the track narrowed to a cut line through nagging tree snags and niggling Scoparia pricks. By the time we reached the camp site at Leaning Teatree Saddle we had earned a cup of tea and the accompanying orange and red sunset that the late cloud cover created.

Day three commenced with clear skies, but a Muesli fuelled climb up the first high ridge revealed the dark outline of a change in the distant west. Lunch was enjoyed in

light drizzle and the final ridge before ascending Precipitous Bluff was traversed in strong winds, fog and driving rain. Our formerly scenery-dominating target was completely obscured, so that we came upon the ascent quite suddenly. After scrambling up some gullies and rocky ascents it came as quite a surprise to light upon a flagstone path across the pineapple grass and tussocks of the high meadows. Parks Tasmania track workers had been busy and doing their usual sterling job. The rain had set in by the time we made camp and my hopes for panoramic views from the summit had to be shelved for an overly optimistic expectation of a clear morning. Retiring to my sleeping bag that night I conducted some minor repairs to scratches and to a small nick in my right thumb. Band-aid, antiseptic, she'll be right!

Next morning we awoke on our shelf just below the summit to find the rain had eased but the clouds were still low. Panoramas of New River Lagoon and the South Coast were off the menu. Muesli however, was not. I began to notice that my thumb was slightly sore and removing the band-aid revealed that the puncture was still quite red. Strange that the antiseptic hadn't dealt with it overnight as I expected, based on experience, to occur.

An hour into the descent I removed my over mittens to check on what had become a painful and quite debilitating throbbing in my thumb. What greeted me was not pretty, not that I had ever considered my thumb to be particularly pretty. But now it was an angry red and swollen to about half its thickness again. Graeme (Doc), our resident medico, of the Veterinarian persuasion, applied a variety of our available unguents to the recalcitrant member but apart from it now being greasy as well as sore and swollen, it made little difference.

Over the course of the next couple of hours the pain spread through my right hand and I was relieved of most of the contents of, and finally, my entire pack. I retreated into a world of discomfort, jarring pain whenever I had to brace with my hand, and occasional helpful observations from my companions. Doc's observation was that he had never seen an infection spread so fast in man or beast. Frank offered this welcome gem of a factoid: similar afflictions used to be known as Gardener's Thumb and before antibiotics many sufferers ended up losing their thumb or indeed their entire hand. The things you learn eh?

As we dropped under the cloud cover the spectacular cliffs of the bluff and the waters of New River Lagoon came into view. I confess all that I could see was how terribly far away the lagoon appeared from within my private hell. When we finally reached New River Lagoon there was already agreement that the only order of the day was to evacuate me as soon as possible. Red streaks had started to appear up my wrist and Doc advised that this was not a positive sign, blood poisoning now being the incontrovertible diagnosis.

At 4.00 p.m. the EPIRB was set off and an orange space blanket deployed by the edge of the lagoon. I lay down to try and alleviate the pain. I stood up to alleviate the pain. I walked around cradling my arm to alleviate the pain. I swore to alleviate the pain. There being nothing to do to assist, my companions set up camp and made a cuppa. Practical souls these bushwalkers. At 6.15 p.m. the peace was disturbed by the distant Thwack! Thwack! of helicopter rotors, a sound I never expected to welcome in the bush with such relief and excitement.

The Westpac Search and Rescue helicopter had arrived and soon I was being winched up above the trees and assisted into the cabin by those fabulous Police Search and Rescue officers. We swept down New River Lagoon and then, just as I was expecting to swing east towards Hobart, we retraced our flight back to the camp site. The pilot was still receiving an EPIRB signal. We hovered above the shore and the officer signalled below to turn the EPIRB off. He did this by making cutting motions across his throat, to my mind signalling to those below that I had karked it. The messages were finally sorted out when the rescuers winched back down to discover that the EPIRB had indeed been turned off. To my embarrassment it was found that the second EPIRB in my pack had been triggered by the constant dropping over small cliffs. Really, you'd think your walking companions would be more careful with your belongings. The pilot had been tracking the second EPIRB signal from the cabin behind him.

I was able to enjoy the view of Precipitous Bluff from the helicopter as we swept south again. Although uppermost in my mind were the pain, and the disappointment that the paramedics hadn't dosed me to the eyeballs with pain killers then and there. The Police Search and Rescue deposited me at the Hobart Cenotaph for a short ambulance ride to the Royal Hobart Hospital Emergency Department. The diagnosis was of a Staphylococcal infection that had spread through my tendons and into my carpal tunnel. The news that this would mean opening and draining the carpal tunnel soon disavowed me of thoughts of the cure being a quick jab in the bum and a couple of days in bed.

Seven months later I have almost regained full use of my right hand and am making a return to overnight and extended bushwalking. I often contemplate the possible outcomes had I not been with walkers who were fit, well-prepared, carrying emergency beacons and had access to the first class services of the Tasmanian Police Search and Rescue, and the Ambulance and Hospital systems. At the best it would have been a 24 hour trek to get help by which time the speed with which the infection spread would indicate I would be very lucky to come out with any use of my hand, and at worst wouldn't be recounting this story at all.

I hear of many instances of the use of EPIRBs in circumstances where no serious threat exists to a person's wellbeing. It would be a tragedy, in fact several tragedies should we reach the point where the strain on resources, the unarguable risk to Search and Rescue staff, and the public patience reach a point where the emergency response system is diminished. For me the system worked and the officers who responded in all stages were professional, supportive and highly skilled. I am thankful to these men and women and to the public and corporate sponsors that enabled my rescue and recovery.

My walking companions continued down New River Lagoon and their rendezvous with a flight from Melaleuca. I was pleased to hear that at Hobart Airport they happened upon the Tasmania Police Westpac Search and Rescue Helicopter officers and were able to personally thank them for their efforts. This article is also dedicated to them and to the other men and women of the Police and Health systems who made it possible for me to be planning my next walk.