

HEDGEHOG HOUSE / GRANT DIXON

Death In The Mountains

It should have been a New Year's Eve to remember. Three fit successful professional men, an American, an Australian and a Kiwi, out to climb one of New Zealand's trickiest mountains in the care of three experienced professional guides. It should have been a celebration of living life to the full in 2004. It ended in broken bodies and disaster with one client and three guides dead and a climbing fraternity rocked to its boots. AMANDA CROPP asks how did it go so wrong?

AMANDA CROPP IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER.



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Three tents are pitched just below Marcel Col on the West Coast side of the Southern Alps: one red, one blue, one grey. At 4 am the flimsy nylon shells glow like beacons as, inside, three pairs of climbers breakfast by torchlight on porridge and hot sweet tea, eating in their sleeping bags, then struggling out of the warm cocoons to prepare for an ascent of Mount Tasman.

At 3489 metres it's New Zealand's second highest peak after Mount Cook, just five kilometres distant. Regarded as the country's premier ice climb, Tasman has a reputation as a "mountaineer's mountain" and no place for novices. Each year

only about 30 climbers summit compared with the 130-plus who conquer Mount Cook.

The climbers stow extra clothes and plenty of high-energy snack food like chocolate, muesli bars and foil pouches of tuna in backpacks. Each takes a bivvy sack, a light waterproof sleeping bag, in case of bad weather and one guide packs a tent.

Most of these men have climbed together before on harder routes and the mood in camp is buoyant. After two nights in an Alpine Club hut at Fox Glacier waiting for clear weather, it's a relief to finally be on their way.

Six headlamps pierce the darkness as they set off in clear calm



Wellington venture capitalist Mark Dossor in mountain mode the day before the avalanche. Mount Tasman and the North Shoulder are to his left in the background.

conditions just before 5am. The silence is broken only by the scrunch of crampons on snow.

Paul Scaife and Dave Hiddleston are directors of Wanaka-based Aspiring Guides and have more than 40 years' mountaineering experience between them. Trainee guide Dave Gardner has moved from Tasmania to pursue a guiding career, and is looking forward to his girlfriend's arrival from Hobart in a few days.

Client Mark Dossor is a partner in a Wellington venture capital firm. He's left wife Sally and kids Rosie (three) and Fred (nine months) at his in-laws' Lawrence farm where they've all just celebrated Christmas with his American climbing buddy Gabriel Amador. It's the Californian bachelor's third New Zealand expedition and the challenge of snow and ice make a welcome change from weekend hikes in the tamer Sierra Nevada mountains back home.

The third client is another Tasmanian, cardiologist Andy Platts. A super-fit and adventurous bushwalker, he has difficulty finding companions who can keep up with him and took up climbing just last summer. This is his second trip with Aspiring Guides and he has plans to go to Peru with them later in the year.

Dossor remembers a sense of nervous anticipation that morning tempered by feelings of security because of the presence of the guides. "It's not every day you get to stand on top of a mountain. We knew there was hard work to come going up the North Shoulder and across the top ridge, but we were all pretty confident we were going to get there. It was going to be a special day."

They plan to eat lunch on the summit returning to Pioneer Hut to see in the New Year.

Instead, a small but deadly avalanche sweeps the party 500 metres down the mountain. By day's end, Dossor and Amador are in hospital and the bodies of Scaife, Hiddleston, Gardner and Platts lie in a makeshift mortuary in the DOC workshop at Mount Cook village. That night and in the first days of the New Year the

accident makes headlines here and in Australia, a major market for our burgeoning guiding industry.

When I meet Mark Dossor in late May he limps across his office foyer to shake hands, his uneven gait a legacy of the avalanche. That he survived at all seems almost miraculous. He broke ribs, punctured a lung, cracked his sternum and fractured his ankle.

The 36-year-old is a partner in Endeavour Capital, a firm specialising in finding venture capital for new science and technology companies. These days the only climbing he does is up Wellington's Mount Kaukau with daughter Rosie. After her father's dramatic slide down the mountain she advised him to "take the steps next time".

Talking about the accident is not something he does readily as we look at pictures of his last steps into the high alpine world of snow, ice and crevasses. He pulls up a photo of Mount Tasman on his laptop taken from a helicopter shortly after the accident. Footprints of the three guides are clearly visible in the snow. They end at the crown wall of the avalanche, a slash across the slope like an open wound. It marks the point where a slab of hard snow collapsed, unleashing debris down the 45 degree slope.

Clearly visible too are the skid marks left by the guides as they were dragged down the slope when their clients, attached to them by ropes, were swept away.

Then there's a shot of Dossor with a coil of rope looped across his chest, unshaven and wearing dark glasses to ward off the glare from the snow. Mount Tasman is in the background.

This image is hard to equate with the quietly spoken man in a striped open necked business shirt. Yet according to market research on Kiwi climbers he's fairly typical — well educated males and those who are no longer students with significantly high personal incomes. He's typical too of those who hire

GABRIEL AMADOR

mountain guides — affluent goal-oriented professionals, many of them doctors, lawyers and engineers.

Fellow survivor Gabriel Amador also fits the urban professional profile. The 44-year-old works for a company administering superannuation schemes and lives with his sister and her family in Sacramento. He still has no memory of the fall. Emerging from a coma in Christchurch Hospital's intensive care unit a week after the avalanche he assumed he was back in the United States and had been in a car accident. His injuries were consistent with that kind of trauma. He broke three vertebrae, ribs, his collar bone, both femurs (which were also dislocated and his left wrist (he's left handed and it was in a cast for five months).

Surgeons took two hours to insert a titanium mesh plate over a fractured eye socket but thankfully his eyesight is unaffected. His fractured right femur did not heal properly and last month he underwent hip replacement surgery. He's been told the amount of cartilage lost from his left hip will likely lead to premature severe arthritis. After four months in a wheelchair he still walks with crutches.

If his body allows, Amador hopes to rock climb again, but snow and ice have lost their appeal. "Before the accident I kind of felt I was invincible, that nothing bad would ever happen. Now I know different. I don't know if I want to take the risk again on being in a situation where I don't have much control of nature."

The Californian and the Kiwi met climbing Mount Aspiring in late 2001. They were both late starters, beginning mountaineering in their 30s.

Amador, a self-confessed "peak-bagger", has climbed about 100 American and Canadian mountains. He frequently travelled solo, but also hired guides to help him with more technical routes involving ice and snow. In 1999 he sold his Texas house, bought a new pick up truck and spent eight months roaming the western USA, scaling the highest peaks in seven states, all relatively easy one day hikes. The view from the top is only part of the attraction, he says. "I love the solitude. I'm a practising Catholic, so I go to church regularly. But being in the mountains I feel like I'm in one big church and have a spiritual feeling all the time, instead of one hour a week."

Amador heard about the Southern Alps from a Canadian guide and figured New Zealand would be a lot safer than Nepal, "a third world country where no one speaks English, the water you're drinking can be someone else's sewage upstream, and the scenery looks the same above the tree line — grey and dreary." New Zealand appealed as a developed English-speaking country where "you can climb a mountain one day, then have a beer and a pizza the next".

Dossor grew up in Wellington, attending St Patrick's College where a job retrieving balls from the school's roofs cured his fear of heights. After completing a BCom at Victoria University he worked for accountancy firm KPMG, then a small technology company before setting up Endeavour Capital with a partner in 1998.

His climbing conversion came on an annual hunting trip in the foothills of the Kaikouras in 1997. "I looked up at Mount Tapuae-o-Uenuku one morning and thought it would be more fun climbing up there than shooting things. Then I thought why climb that when I could climb Mount Cook?"

He started with a trek to Ball Pass with a Tekapo guiding company, then a guided climb of Mount Aspiring, where he met Amador, being taken up the mountain by Aspiring Guides' Paul

Scaife. With a shared outdoors passion Dossor and Amador hit it off immediately and excitedly planned to tackle Mount Cook together, booking the \$4000-a-head trip with Scaife's company for December 2002.

Climbing is a growth sport and the New Zealand Alpine Club has 2700 members, up from 1800 four years ago. For hard core recreational mountaineers reaching the top doesn't count unless you do it unassisted.

But for Dossor, climbing with a guide was a way of making up for his lack of experience and thus minimising the risk. "For me, that's the beauty of guiding. To climb Mount Cook would have taken decades of doing it by myself. Here I was doing it within a year of getting involved in the sport. You can climb more difficult routes, more safely, sooner. I didn't think of climbing as risky. I guess I have an appetite, a higher threshold for risk, than others. Where some people might see something as risky I wouldn't."

His preparation for Cook included a six-weekend New Zealand Alpine Club mountaineering course at Mount Ruapehu and Mount Taranaki and running the 67 km Kepler Challenge from Te Anau to Manapouri and back in eight and a half hours.

A couple of months before the trip wife Sally asked if he was



American Gabriel Amador soaks up the scenery en route to Marcel Col on what was to be his last snow and ice climb.



Aspiring Guides' director Paul Scaife at the beginning of his 50@50 challenge, an attempt to scale 50 peaks in his 50th year as a fundraiser for Save The Children Fund.

Lake Wanaka before driving to Fox Glacier. They talked about whether the group would wear avalanche transceivers, small electronic devices emitting a signal allowing rescuers to locate anyone buried in an avalanche. They'd worn them on Cook but were told transceivers wouldn't be necessary because there was no chance of an avalanche on Tasman.

At Fox Glacier the weather hadn't cleared sufficiently for a scheduled helicopter flight to Pioneer Hut, so they spent two nights in an Alpine Club hut where they met two other groups planning to climb Mount Tasman: Hiddleston and Platts; and Adventure Consultants guide Mike Roberts and Chicago orthopaedic trauma surgeon Greg Konrath, who were using the trip as training for a forthcoming Everest expedition.

Scaife, 51, was the trip's most senior guide with 28 years' experience. Highly competent and very confident he was infinitely patient with less fit clients and liked

prepared for the consequences — like losing his feet to frostbite as had happened to experienced mountaineers Mark Inglis and Phil Doole when caught on Cook in a 1982 storm. In response and as an insurance policy for his feet Dossor bought an expensive top line sleeping bag. (On summit day they travelled light and he left the sleeping bag behind.)

The summer 2002 assault on Mount Cook was a gruelling 26-hour round trip. At the bottom of a frozen waterfall, 50 vertical metres of solid ice just below the Hooker Face, he and Amador considered turning back before the guides persuaded them to continue. "They said this is the hardest part, the crux of the climb. Give it a go and when you get to the top [of the waterfall], make the call then."

The effort paid off. "There's no moment better than standing on top of a mountain. Afterwards I was on a high for four months. I'm pretty confident anyway but it made me more able to deal with situations, it made me more patient. Whenever you set out to do something and you achieve it, you feel good."

A framed montage of photographs taken on the trip hangs on his office wall and although Cook was "going to be it", Dossor didn't take much persuading when Amador suggested they climb Mount Tasman in December 2003, again booking with Aspiring Guides.

On December 10, three weeks out from the proposed trip, four experienced Latvian climbers died in falls on Mt Cook's Linda Glacier. Dossor admits the deaths rocked him but he never seriously considered pulling out.

to challenge the more capable ones. He retained a boyish enthusiasm for the mountains and was a mentor for many younger guides. (One of his early claims to fame was being first to climb the Sydney Opera house, a feat accomplished after several drinks and followed closely by police arrest.)

Scaife was an early mountain tourism pioneer, setting up Harris Mountains Heliskiing in the 1970s, which went on to become the country's largest heliskiing operation. The staff, sometimes infuriated by his constant stream of brilliant new ideas, dubbed him "Captain Chaos". He survived two helicopter crashes, one of which left him with a serious and painful back injury.

As a sideline to provide work in the ski off-season he set up Aspiring Guides in 1990 with guides Nick Cradock and Guy Cotter. In 1997, keen to cut free from management and get back into the mountains, he sold out of the heliski business to focus on guiding here and in Canada and Europe.

Scaife made 50 ascents of Mount Aspiring, and 39 of Mt Cook and had almost finished a traverse of 50 peaks in the Mount Cook region, raising \$40,000 for Save the Children Fund, when he died.

Dave Hiddleston (34) joined Aspiring Guides two years earlier as a director and lead guide. A top rock climber and skier, his extensive climbing and guiding CV included 17 Himalayan and South American expeditions, and in 2002 he was the 15th New Zealander to summit Mt Everest.

For Dave Gardner (40) the Tasman climb was his second trip with the company as a trainee guide. A former geologist and Australian Antarctic Division field training officer, he'd moved to New Zealand from Tasmania in May 2003 to develop his mountain guiding experience. A climbing instructor since 1995, he'd scaled peaks in at least eight countries. Dossor and Amador felt they had every reason to be confident they were in good hands.

On December 28 Dossor and Amador met up with guides Paul Scaife and Dave Gardner at the Aspiring Guides Wanaka office. Weather on the West Coast was foul so they filled the day rock climbing near

Scaife had a reputation as fanatically safety conscious. He refused to take clients up the Linda Glacier, the easiest and most common route up Mount Cook, believing the heavily crevassed terrain and unstable ice cliffs were dangers beyond any guide's control.

When Dossor and Amador climbed Cook Scaife had decided they'd ascend via the Hooker Face because avalanche danger on their intended route, Zurbriggen's Ridge, was too great. Just days

later two Japanese climbers were pumelled by an avalanche on Zurbriggen's. One died and the rescue team had a near miss when a second avalanche hit the accident site.

Dossor says Scaife's sense of ease in the mountains was palpable. On the summit of Mount Aspiring, he remembers "all the clients were ringing people on their cell phones saying it's wonderful, I'm calling you from the top of Mount Aspiring. Paul Scaife rang his mother and asked her to water the roses."

Going Up With A Guide

Mountain guiding has become a significant slice of our adventure tourism market, with an \$8 million to \$10 million annual turnover split evenly between heli-skiing and climbing.

In 1882, Swiss guide Ulrich Kaufman guided his client the Reverend William Green on the first attempted Mount Cook ascent. Kaufman and Green were unsuccessful – a fierce storm drove them back just below the summit.

These days a guided climb to the top of Cook comes as a neatly packaged week-trip with a \$4000 price tag.

Around a dozen guiding companies operate here, mostly in the South Island. The big players are Aspiring Guides, established by the late Paul Scaife; Adventure Consultants, headed by Guy Cotter (after founder Rob Hall died on Mount Everest); and Mount Cook-based Alpine Guides, the country's oldest and largest guiding concern.

A few, like Adventure Consultants, offer overseas expeditions to South America, Antarctica and Tibet. Since 1992 it's put 72 clients on top of Everest and currently charges \$55,000 a head for that privilege. But most of our internal alpine guiding happens in the Aoraki Mount Cook National Park.

DOC statistics reveal 1180 people staying overnight in the park last year were guided, and most were overseas visitors.

Alpine Guides' managing director Bryan Carter says the guiding industry has grown 20 per cent in five years and estimates more than half of all climbing done in the Mount Cook National Park involves guides, compared with just five per cent when he started in 1973.

He says today's busy clients would rather pay a guide to help get them up a peak than spend years gaining skills to do it on their own. "There's more of a trend for people to do it as a one off experience – next year

they might go scuba diving in Indonesia."

Following extensive Australian media coverage of the Tasman accident some guiding companies saw a drop-off in custom, but Carter says it's a short-term blip and his bookings for next summer are back to normal.

Cotter is also confident about the future: "There was quite a knee jerk reaction. That's

protection against the might of the mountains.

Since the mid '70s the New Zealand Mountain Guides Association has provided training programmes and internationally recognised qualifications for ski, mountain and glacier guides. Many of the association's 120-members work in the northern hemisphere during our off-season.

Our alpine guides earn between \$180 and \$300 a day, not a lot for tackling icy slopes roped to green-horn clients. As one guide put it: "The assumption to work from is that the clients are all out there trying to kill you."

In Europe guiding is strictly policed and guiding without a licence is an offence. Here legislation to license mountain guides was passed in 1931 but never implemented, and was repealed in 1963.

Since then the guiding industry has pretty much been left to its own devices, with DOC issuing concessions to those wanting to guide on its estate. Legally DOC is obliged to ensure reasonable safety of concessionaires and their clients.

The Mountain Guides Association wants DOC to officially recognise its qualifications and complains DOC has given guiding concessions to people not fully qualified, a situation

it likens to allowing apprentices to go out and set up in business on their own.

The department doesn't specify what qualifications guides should have. Instead, prospective concessionaires must provide a safety plan assessed by an independent safety auditor.

DOC's Andy Thompson argues that it's up to the guiding industry as a whole to come up with national standards. "The problem is that the industry isn't very cohesive across the country. If they could agree it would be bloody good, but they can't."





Left: Aspiring Guides' chief guide David Hiddleston descending Mount Everest after successfully reaching the summit in May 2002. Right: Guide Dave Gardner leads client Mark Dossor (rear) up Mount Lendenfeld at dawn on December 31.

It's the guide's role in life to constantly evaluate clients' physical state, inspire them when the going gets tough and if necessary pull back when something is clearly beyond their capabilities. Amador says Scaife was simply the best he'd ever worked with.

"On the Hooker Face Paul was hand feeding me and Mark — literally putting food in our mouths — like little babies. He was putting sun lotion on our faces, doing everything he could to make our lives easier so we could focus our energy on the climb. That's what I loved about Paul, he went out of his way to make sure we had the best chance of making it."

On December 30 the weather cleared enough for the party to fly in to Pioneer Hut on the Fox Glacier. En route the helicopter pilot detoured so the climbers could get a look at their proposed route, the Torres Tasman traverse.

Tasman's most commonly guided route is via Marcel Col, over Lendenfeld Peak and Engineer Col and up the North Shoulder to the summit. It's a long, serious climb rarely taking less than 12 to 15 hours return.

Scaife had planned to take a more technically challenging route via Mt Torres. But having seen it from the air, Amador says he and Dossor were "scared shitless. I'm sure Paul wouldn't have suggested we do it if he felt we weren't capable, but from the air it looked menacing — extremely steep, exposed to a big fall, and much too difficult for us to attempt."

Scaife didn't give up easily saying he was sure they were competent enough to tackle the route and it always looked more daunting from the air. But the two clients were adamant so the group opted to join Hiddleston and Platts on the North Shoulder route, a climb Scaife had done just the previous month.

To get a head start the six climbers ascended from Pioneer Hut to Marcel Col and pitched camp. It was a fine day and Dossor ended up sheltering in a tent nursing sunburn while Amador soaked up the scenery. "There were beautiful steep mountains all around and I took lots of photographs. We could see Mount Tasman the

whole time and there was snow blowing off the tops. Paul kept pointing out routes he'd done or wanted to do. When I look back at the pictures it seems like the calm before the storm."

After dinner Amador and Scaife talked about scaling the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc together the following summer. "He was so happy at the prospect of climbing in the Alps with me. He was just like a little kid opening a box of chocolates," recalls Amador

Mike Roberts had originally intended to bivvy and climb with the Scaife party but discovered, much to his embarrassment, he'd left his crampons back in Fox Glacier. He arranged for a helicopter to drop them off but it didn't arrive until late in the day, so he opted to overnight at Pioneer Hut.

Two Swedish climbers, Christian Edelstam and Jennie Wikstrom, also arrived at the hut that evening. Roberts was uncomfortable that next day there'd be 10 people climbing in the one area, so decided to delay his morning departure to let the others get ahead. "I didn't want to be involved in a bottle neck or overcrowding." It was a decision that probably saved his and Chicago surgeon Greg Konrath's lives.

The Aspiring Guides party made good time after leaving their camp and by 6am were watching the sunrise from the summit of Mount Lendenfeld. As they began climbing Engineers Col, Amador says a storm cloud over Mount Cook clamped down over Tasman as well. Blowing snow made conditions unpleasant and the group stopped to don goggles. When he asked Scaife if they should continue he was assured the weather would clear.

At the ice face heading to the top of the North Shoulder they began "pitching", a technique for climbing steeper slopes. The guide builds an anchor using a snow stake or ice screws, leaves the client attached to it then climbs on about 50 metres ahead, building another anchor and belaying the client up.

At about 8am at the bottom of the second pitch Amador and

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Dossor were attached to a T-slot anchor — a metal snow stake buried a metre deep in the snow with an ice axe placed vertically in front of it. They were idling, awaiting instructions to disassemble the anchor and begin climbing.

Amador, who'd been so anxious about the poor visibility, relaxed when the wind died and the weather cleared. "The next pitch seemed to have much more stable firm snow you could punch through with your boots, but not icy. I remember looking up at the guides and feeling a sense of comfort that the worst had passed and we were going to make it to the summit. I was completely content we were in the best of hands and all my worries went away."

He took a photograph capturing the four climbers above him silhouetted against a white backdrop of snow. The ridge is etched against the sky and three ropes snake down the slope, two in parallel looking incongruously like railway lines, and a third crossing over them.

Having installed a snow anchor Hiddleston was belaying Platts, who was half-way up the slope. Scaife and Gardner were at or near the top and hadn't yet built their anchors. Nothing seemed amiss but then all hell broke loose.

Dossor recalls the snow suddenly feeling unstable under his feet and seeing a crack appear on the slope above them. "I remember going backward and the anchor held and I thought, 'Good, it works.' As quick as I thought that the anchor gave way.

"We started falling backwards — I don't remember saying anything or looking for anyone. After a while I began to freefall then I landed on my back and I thought, 'Great I've broken my neck.' Then briefly I saw Sally and Rosie and thought, 'This is it'. Next thing I knew Gabriel was lying on top of me."

Dossor, who remained conscious most of the time, could see Amador and Hiddleston were badly injured and Scaife and Gardner were dead. He couldn't see Platts. "I realised I had my

cell phone in my pack so I untangled myself from Gabriel and all the ropes and tried to use my phone but it was out of range. Then I just tried talking to Gabriel and Dave. They didn't know I was talking to them but I was just hoping a voice would help them. I got up once to get Gabriel because he'd slipped down a bit and it hurt like hell."

Dossor could see people walking around Plateau Hut below him and waved the orange liner from his backpack to get their attention. He put on a polar fleece from his pack, drank some water, ate muesli bars and waited for help to arrive.

Meanwhile Mike Roberts and his client Greg Konrath had set off from Pioneer Hut at 2.45am, spotting the Aspiring Guides party three hours later about 10 minutes below the summit of Lendenfeld. Roberts heard an avalanche about 7.30am but says they couldn't see anything because of low cloud. "The most distinctive thing was that I heard the metallic sound of an ice axe falling and what sounded like objects in the debris of the avalanche."

Then they noticed the two Swedes ahead of them had fallen after being hit by a small avalanche. The force ripped out their ice screw but their rope had luckily snagged on the edge of a crevasse, arresting their fall. The pair had minor injuries and Roberts went to their assistance.

When the weather cleared he was scanning the avalanche debris and noticed six black objects in the snow 400 metres below. "At first they looked like rocks, but I quickly realised they were bodies. One of them stood up and I knew it was the Aspiring party."

Roberts called DOC at Mt Cook on his mountain radio and later borrowed his client's satellite phone to confirm a search and rescue team was on the way.

Over summer DOC employs eight full time Search And Rescue staff in two teams. The Tasman call-out was their ninth rescue in three and a half weeks — normally they'd have one or two call-outs over that period. They picked up 24 people. Ten unhurt, six injured, eight dead. In all the Tasman operation involved 31 search and rescue and medical staff and seven helicopters.

At 9.30 am the first rescue chopper located the Aspiring Guides party at 8600 feet. Initially the SAR team had prepared for a typical avalanche rescue assuming they may have to dig people out of the snow, but changed tactics when they discovered everyone was on the surface.

The six climbers had landed in an area about 15 metres across on a gentle slope, just above the Grande Plateau on the eastern

GABRIEL AMADOR

Below left: the Aspiring Guides' party approaching Marcel Col.

Below right: Gabriel Amador's final photograph, taken about a minute before the avalanche struck, shows how close together the climbers were when the slab of snow they were on collapsed.



side of the main divide. Ropes and equipment were scattered over the ground and snarled together like a huge tangled ball of knitting wool. Scaife still had an ice axe tucked under his arm. The accident site was too steep for a helicopter to land so rescuers, several of them fellow mountain guides, were ferried in on a strop. The injured were transported to Plateau Hut the same way, then flown to Mount Cook village where Hiddleston died.

Dossor says in other circumstances he might have enjoyed dangling beneath the chopper taking in the view but he remembers only the agonising pain.

He was transferred to Christchurch on a medivac flight and released from hospital five days later in time to attend the Scaife and Hiddleston funerals. Several hundred people attended the services, including dozens of fellow guides.

“Scaife” was farewelled outdoors at Wanaka Station Park. Martin Hawes, an Aspiring Guides director and long time friend, described him as a legend with a passion for the mountains. He talked of how they’d started climbing together after meeting at Waitaki Boys High School, on one expedition eating stew out of their safety helmets.

Hiddleston’s funeral in the Lake Wanaka community centre featured videos of his climbing exploits. A display of his climbing gear, snow and surfboards and a backyard cricket set reflected his unquenchable enthusiasm for the outdoors.

Standing among the mourners Dossor says it was extraordinary to see how many people’s lives the pair had touched, helping them to achieve things they could never have done alone, himself included.

On his way home from Wanaka, Dossor called in to Mount Cook to buy his rescuers a beer and less than a week later returned to work at his office on The Terrace. He had counselling to help come to terms with the accident and says facing his mortality on Tasman was a watershed.

“I think beforehand I would have said that if I was a tetraplegic or incapacitated in some way, I’d prefer not to be here. Now I’d say, no matter what the quality of your life, a minute alive is better than a minute dead, because for a split second I thought my life was coming to an end.”

The severely injured Amador spent 10 days in Christchurch Hospital’s intensive care unit. It was there two of his brothers, who’d flown in from the US, finally broke the news that four of his climbing companions had died. Having already had a visit from Dossor, Amador was devastated: “I’d [just] assumed he and I were the only ones hurt and that everyone else had gone on with their lives. It never occurred to me anyone else had been hurt since I had no memory of the accident.

“I don’t have a significant other, so there were several nights when I wished I’d died so that others might live, because I felt bad for their loved ones. I cried myself to sleep many of the early days thinking about these issues.”

The turning point was a visit from a pilot of one of the rescue helicopters after his transfer to the Burwood spinal unit. “He told me he’d been to several rescues where two guys had fallen the same distance on the same route. One walks away and the other dies. He said there’s no science or formula determining who lives and who doesn’t. He told me I should be thankful I’m alive and get on with my life.

“From that day forward I decided there was nothing I could do to change the past. I couldn’t bring people back to life no

matter how hard I tried. I just had to live my life and do whatever it took to get healthy again.”

In mid July he had a visit from Dossor who was in the US on business. Amador says it was great to catch up but he envies his friend’s quick recovery. “Whereas I’m still struggling day-to-day with my injuries and seem to be at a standstill.”

This month the pair had planned to climb 4418 metre Mount Whitney in the Sierra Nevadas, a relatively easy snow-free trek. Amador had also hoped to return to New Zealand in December to walk the Milford Track. His state of health has probably ruled out both expeditions until next year at the very earliest.

While the survivors battled to come to terms with their emotional and physical injuries, investigators began to tease out the cause. Police and SAR teams routinely prepare reports for the coroner after a climbing fatality, but this accident came under extra scrutiny because the involvement of a guiding company made it a workplace accident.

The New Zealand Mountain Guides Association commissioned guide and NZMGA member Bill Atkinson to investigate. Conscious that the guides were investigating one of their own, the police requested independent reports from Steve Schreiber, New Zealand Mountain Safety Council avalanche programme head, and Don Bogie, former head of search and rescue at Mt Cook.

Occupational Safety and Health had an independent safety auditor review the guides’ report, and decided there was no evidence Aspiring Guides had breached health and safety regulations.

Both Atkinson and Schreiber concluded that poor visibility and poor surface definition of the snow disguised the slab, so the guides weren’t able to see the danger they were in, or a safer alternative route. Atkinson also defended the strength of snow anchors used, saying no snow or ice anchor system currently in use is designed for, or expected to hold, the forces involved in a snow avalanche.

Bogie’s report focussed on climbing technique. It said all six climbers could simply have been swept away by the force of the avalanche.

However Amador’s final photograph showed three pairs of climbers close together and ropes crossed, raising the possibility of entanglement if someone fell.

Bogie said it was highly likely that when the bottom anchor gave way, Dossor and Amador dragged their unanchored guides off the mountainside. As the two pairs fell they became entangled with the third pair, causing the upper anchor to fail too.

He suggested the consequences could have been eliminated or largely mitigated by not climbing that day because of potential avalanche hazard, taking a different route or spreading the party out when in avalanche terrain and that the outcome may have been different if both anchors had been stronger, the bottom pair had not shared an anchor, and if the party had climbed in a way that avoided rope entanglement.

Bogie pointed out a similar “pile up” had occurred more than 10 years ago involving a dozen climbers and guides in the summit rocks area of Mt Cook, causing injuries but no deaths. He recommended guiding companies recognise the dangers of climbing multiple pairs of climbers close together and act to reduce this risk.

The reports came before Timaru coroner Edgar Bradley at a late June inquest, with copies having been circulated prior to



Australian cardiologist Andrew Platts on the summit of Mount Aspiring on his first New Zealand climbing expedition in 2002.

interested parties, including Andrew Platts' family.

Platts' older brother David, a Hobart cardiologist, says until then the family had no idea bad weather or climbing techniques might have contributed to the accident. "We were under the impression it was a good climbing day and it was just an act of God, a freak of nature."

Platts' parents, David and Sharon, a retired anaesthetist and an ex-nurse, live in the small town of Wynyard, north-western Tasmania. Andrew's death hit hard because they'd already lost their only daughter Alison, aged 12, from a brain haemorrhage.

David Platts junior says Aspiring Guides' poor communication and lack of support for the family following the accident only magnified their grief. He outlined his concerns in a 12-page letter to the coroner that called on police and guiding companies to institute proper disaster management plans to deal with grieving relatives.

The family also engaged Dunedin lawyer Mike Radford to represent them at the inquest. Radford claimed the decision to proceed in poor visibility was imprudent, and that the anchors and techniques used were unsuitable.

He gave witnesses a thorough grilling in a performance one guide present described as like watching something from a TV courtroom drama.

Under cross-examination, Guides' Association investigator Bill Atkinson agreed poor visibility prevented a full assessment of the snow, but said climbers often continued in such conditions, particularly if they thought weather would improve, and the Tasman route had no prior history of avalanches.

Under questioning Don Bogie said that crossing ropes was undesirable but it happened quite commonly.

Coroner Edgar Bradley's retirement after 40 years as coroner had been delayed for several months so he could preside over the high profile case and the Tasman inquest was his last as coroner (the 73-year-old still practises as a lawyer).

Because his patch covered the Aoraki Mount Cook National Park Bradley had handled dozens of climbing deaths during his tenure, and had never held back when he believed climbers were at fault. In the case of the four Latvian climbers killed just three weeks before the Tasman avalanche he found three of them might have survived had they worn climbing helmets.

No such criticisms were levelled at the Aspiring Guides party. Bradley found the guides' equipment was adequate and their decisions and procedures were appropriate for what they could observe. He noted that another experienced guide, Mike Roberts, was also satisfied conditions were safe to climb.

Bradley's written decision said the risks of mountaineering were part of its attraction and with that went an acceptance of possible injury or death. "As history shows, however experienced the party may be, nature at a particular time and place can deceive even the most cautious."

He didn't lay blame, simply urging climbers to be aware of the potential for summer avalanches, and to recognise the dangers of climbing multiple pairs of climbers in close proximity.

He recommended the Mountain Safety Council and Guides Association look into whether current snow anchor and running belay practices were adequate, and if not, undertake a programme to improve them.

He also forwarded copies of David Platts' letter to the police and Aspiring Guides, asking them to respond to the family with copies of their replies to him.

In an interview with *North & South* Bradley said most mountain deaths involved an element of carelessness but in the Tasman accident the guides were not negligent and there was no significant carelessness. "If I sound hesitant it's because so much of the evidence was based on supposition therefore it would be easy to say this or that should have been done, but it's not in that [negligent] category."

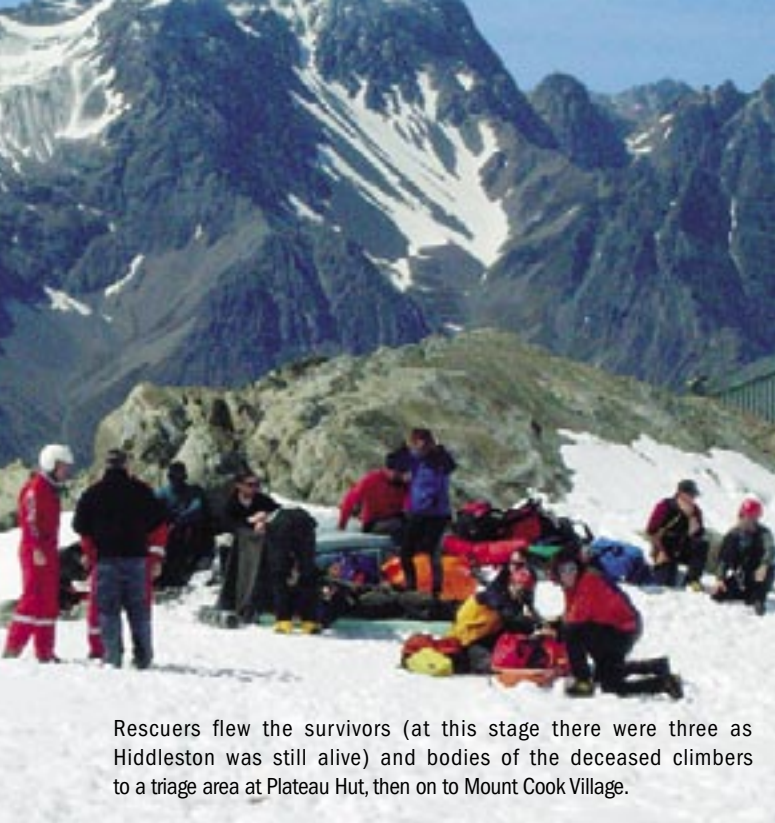
The coroner's finding was greeted with relief by the guiding community and the two survivors who feel no resentment about the accident. Dossor says he had complete confidence in the guides and agrees that no snow anchor could reasonably be expected to withstand an avalanche. Despite his severe injuries Amador also sees little point in looking back or laying blame. "It doesn't make me mad or anything."

However the Platts are extremely angry their concerns were glossed over and are considering seeking a judicial review of the coroner's decision.

David Platts junior plans to ask the Minister of Justice for an inquiry into the circumstances of the accident and the conduct of the inquest, and will write to Prime Minister Helen Clark (who has herself employed mountain guides on climbing holidays).

"We're not seeking retribution we just want people to own up and admit mistakes were made to try to prevent this happening again. I understand conditions are never going to be absolutely perfect but if you're in a situation where the weather prevents you from evaluating the risk of an avalanche, why take the risk? I still can't understand why they employed climbing techniques that seemed to maximise the chance of damage if an avalanche occurred, and that's exactly what happened."

The Platts' determination to pursue the case is understandable when you consider their experience in New Zealand. David Platts says news of Andrew's death and the whereabouts of his body (in the Timaru hospital mortuary) was delivered in a telephone call



Rescuers flew the survivors (at this stage there were three as Hiddleston was still alive) and bodies of the deceased climbers to a triage area at Plateau Hut, then on to Mount Cook Village.

from a New Zealand police officer. “It would have taken no effort at all to call the local [Tasmanian] police and get them to come and tell us. That’s the way it should be done.”

Platts says the lack of support from Aspiring Guides was staggering. “My brother had paid a significant amount of money to this company and we assumed they’d help the family in telling us what to do, where to go and maybe meet us at the airport.”

They arrived in Christchurch just before midnight on December 31. Someone Platts had spoken to in New Zealand (he can’t remember who) advised him to fly on to Queenstown, and make the five-hour drive to Timaru. Through a chance conversation with an airport baggage handler he learned Timaru was only a two-hour drive from Christchurch, and changed plans accordingly.

Then there was confusion about the location of Andrew’s large red travel pack after conflicting information from police and Aspiring Guides. The family finally recovered the pack, but only after making two four-hour round trips to Twizel.

Platts is bitter Aspiring Guides has still never directly apologised to his parents as the official next of kin. While accepting the guiding company was in considerable disarray after the accident “that doesn’t prevent them from saying, ‘We’re sorry that Andrew died’.”

Aspiring Guides director Martin Hawes deeply regrets the Platts’ bad experience in New Zealand. In defence he says company directors and staff were in shock and “run ragged” dealing with police, OSH, the survivors, family members of other deceased, two parties still out in the field and a wave of media inquiries.

The company had discussed how it might handle a client fatality but never envisaged anything on the scale of the Tasman avalanche. And as it turned out chief guide Dave Hiddleston, who should have had a key role in implementing the disaster plan, was among the dead.

Hawes also regrets the breakdown in the company’s relationship with the Platts. “We were told emphatically by

Killer Avalanches

Since 1981 avalanches have killed almost 50 New Zealanders. Last year’s death toll was seven, the highest in more than a decade, and they were all climbers.

Dave Irwin, co-author of a book on New Zealand avalanche accidents, says assessing avalanche risk is tricky and even experienced mountaineers can miss subtle clues indicating an unstable snow pack. One problem is climbers tend to regard winter as avalanche season. “If you believe summer time avalanches are not as much of a problem, then you’re not going to be as vigilant.”

After a summer storm the snow can take several days to stabilise and whereas once climbers might have spent one or two days walking to the base of a climb, they can now be there in 10 minutes by helicopter. “People have less time for recreation and there’s probably more pressure to achieve [things] within a very tight time frame.”

Training in potential avalanche terrain is also risky and the Mountain Safety Council recommended tightening standards for alpine instructors after it found 19 per cent of avalanche deaths involved instruction programmes. The council’s annual avalanche summary reveals at least 40 people were caught in avalanches last year, down from about 60 in 2002. Irwin, who collates the data, believes many incidents go unreported so the true number is probably much higher. But he says statistics show those wearing avalanche transceivers have a much greater chance of surviving an avalanche burial because rescuers can locate them quickly.

One spin-off of the Tasman accident has been an extension of Infoex, the Mountain Safety Council’s on-line avalanche monitoring system (www.avalanche.net.nz). Previously only operated in winter, extra funding from DOC and the Mountain Safety Council means it will now provide avalanche warnings year round for Mount Cook National Park.

people [whom he declines to identify] that the Platts family didn’t want contact with us.” In hindsight he says the family’s insistence they did not want to discuss details of the accident may have been misinterpreted to mean they wanted no contact at all.

Seven months later, in July, Hawes finally wrote to David Platts junior expressing the company’s sorrow at Andrew’s death and offering to travel to Tasmania to meet the family. His offer was not taken up.

As for the family’s concerns about the accident itself, Hawes concedes the guides were wrong in their assessment of the avalanche risk. “The guides made an error, no question. Could they have reasonably been expected to make different decisions? Probably not.”

Last year’s deaths were a major wake-up call for the New Zealand guiding industry. As well as the three dead guides on Tasman, Will MacQueen, highly respected guide and co-author of a book on avalanche accidents, died on the Fox Glacier in August. He fell 60 metres into a crevasse when a snow bridge collapsed while ski touring with a client.

New Zealand has only about 40 fully qualified mountain guides, so four deaths is pretty significant.

Since the 1980s 10 New Zealand guides have been killed on the job (four overseas), half in avalanches. In the last decade the Guides’ Association has investigated 24 accidents involving guides and clients, about a dozen of them fatalities. The most recent on

July 30 involved a young Australian who fell into a crevasse on a guided heliski tour in the Southern Alps.

Mountain Guides Association president Trevor Streat, a personal friend of Scaife's and one of the first rescuers to arrive at the Tasman accident scene, says guides are undoubtedly more cautious. "It would be crazy to put your head in the sand and say it was just bad luck."

The association is keen to get some scientific research done into the strengths of different types of snow anchors. A guides' training seminar about summer avalanches will be held in November and it will cover the risks of proximity climbing.

Streat says close climbing is almost inevitable on busy slopes because waiting around for others to get out of the way slows climbers down. Getting to the summit and back as fast as possible is important to avoid being caught by bad weather or having to descend in the dark. Having groups one above the other (rather than side by side) also carries a risk of those below being hit by dislodged rocks or ice.

On Tasman, Streat says there was probably room for the three pairs of climbers to be up to five metres apart, but because of their confidence in the snow pack, the guides were more relaxed about climbing close together. "In the light of this accident and others involving amateur climbers you'd have to think quite carefully about that practice."

Allowing ropes to cross while climbing is definitely not regarded as good practice. Streat says in reality it happens a lot and is less of an issue when guides are involved. "If I was on a hill leading alongside another guide I wouldn't be so concerned [if ropes crossed] because I'd be sure he was not going to fall off.

"Perhaps one of the things we should do now is build a bit more redundancy into what we do. If you think you're going to be right, take a step back and say, 'If I'm wrong, what then?' Perhaps we'll see people thinking twice about crossing ropes and so on. In the situation they were in it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. But when the unexpected happens it magnifies the end result."

In the wake of the Tasman fatalities a book by American author Maria Coffey has been a hot topic among climbers, guides and their families. Coffey's partner Joe Tasker died on Everest in 1982. *In The Shadow of the Mountain: the personal costs of climbing* is a hard-hitting look at the impact of climbing on mountaineers' nearest and dearest. One of the more poignant images is of a three-year-old boy playing at burying and digging up people in the kindergarten sandpit after his father died in an avalanche.

Alpine Club president Dave Bamford believes the book should be compulsory reading for those involved in high-risk adventure sports, and says it has forced climbers to do some soul searching about the risks they take. "It lays out, often in unpalatable terms, the grief you leave behind and the pain your kids or parents or loved ones may feel if you don't return from that big climb in the Himalayas or that hard route in the Southern Alps. Often it's not what you want to hear because many mountaineers are pretty single-minded. We're a pretty driven bunch."

The families of those who died on Tasman understood and respected that insatiable need to climb. They also battled niggling fears that something might go wrong, and on December 31 it finally did.

Paul Scaife left behind partner Jessica Stevenson, estranged

wife Jules and their two sons Simon (23) and Henry (21). Stevenson, herself a climber, found it almost inconceivable Scaife died where he did. "I'd worry about him when he was guiding in Canada and Europe during the northern hemisphere summer. I'd be horribly worried if the phone rang late at night. I never ever thought anything would happen to him in his own home territory."

Scaife was studying geology at Otago University with thoughts of establishing a new career, but Stevenson understood his need to keep climbing. "It's hard to explain to non-climbers. Sometimes you ask yourself what the hell am I doing here? When you finally reach the summit you're exhausted but exhilarated and you just want more. It's an amazing, unforgiving environment and being there is an honour. But it's almost as if you're forbidden to be there and every now and then the mountains take their sacrifices."

Patsy and John Hiddleston always worried about son Dave, but his cautious approach was some comfort. In 2000 he turned back 100 metres from Everest's summit after a misunderstanding left him short of vital gear. He eventually summited two years later, just six months after major knee surgery on old skiing injuries, and phoned his father from the top to say, 'Hi Dad, I made it.'"

John Hiddleston says his son knew climbing could kill him. "Fifteen of his friends died in the mountains and although that affected him deeply, it didn't stop him climbing. It's like a drug, it takes over and you go back and do it again."

In his will Dave Hiddleston left his climbing equipment to Mount Aspiring College, and asked his family to spread his ashes on Rocky Hill in the Matukituki Valley, with its superb views of Lake Wanaka and the mountains.

Dave Gardner's ashes were also spread in the mountains and he too accepted he might not make old bones. He and Alison Lane, his partner of two years, met in Antarctica where she was studying the effects of contamination on marine life. When Gardner came to New Zealand Lane remained in Hobart to finish her doctorate and was due to fly to over here to live with him five days after the avalanche. Despite his death, she made the move anyway and plans to stay.

Gardner realised it was impossible to completely eliminate the hazards of climbing, she says. "The mountains don't really care if you're an expert or not. He used to joke, 'I'm amazed I've made it to 40.' It's not like he didn't understand the risks. He climbed because he had to; it was something that was worth dying for."

Fellow Tasmanian Andrew Platts is buried in the Wynyard cemetery with sister Alison. His older brother, the sole surviving sibling, says words cannot describe the sense of loss he and his parents feel.

Andrew's girlfriend Sarah O'Loughlin, who was returning from London to join him in Adelaide where he had a new job, is also devastated. And the death of this promising young cardiologist was a serious loss to Tasmania where he intended returning to work. His specialist skills would have meant heart patients, currently sent to Melbourne for treatment at great expense, could have been treated at home.

After arriving home from their disastrous trip to New Zealand the Platt family received a postcard sent shortly before Andrew left on his last climb. He wrote excitedly that six of them were attempting the ascent of Tasman, and added "safety in numbers I presume".

Sadly that just wasn't the case. ■