

Snakes in the Jungle, Special Operations in War & Business, Jim Truscott, Zeus Publications, Gold Coast, 2015

Review by Will Steffen

Jim Truscott's "Snakes in the Jungle" is one of the most unusual climbing books you'll ever read, and that's because it is far more than a climbing book. There are no doubt very few people who have succeeded – much less even tried -- to put together careers in mountaineering, the SAS (Special Air Service) branch of the Australian Defence Force, and big business. Jim's story is a remarkable one, and can only be described, literally, as a tour de force. It isn't often that one moves from the terrain of Sir Edmund Hillary to the domain of the Wolf of Wall Street.

Let's start with the climbing. Jim was an early leader in the formation of the Army Alpine Association (AAA), one of the key drivers in the early years of Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya. The Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition in 1988 was the most important of the AAA Himalayan expeditions. It was not so much that the expedition put three climbers on the summit, but the style in which they did it. It was then, and remains up to now, the only Western expedition on the South Col (standard) Everest route that has not used Sherpa support above base camp and has succeeded in putting climbers on the summit. This is no mere gimmick. Navigating the Khumbu icefall above Base Camp is both physically demanding and exceedingly dangerous. Just last year 16 Sherpas lost their lives in a massive avalanche that swept down across the icefall, ending the commercial expedition season before it even started. Jim Truscott did not get to the summit of Everest in 1988. But he made 21 trips through the Khumbu Icefall carrying loads of equipment to higher camps, arguably the most psychologically draining part of the expedition. Twenty-one trips must be close to a record, even by Sherpa standards. His description of the austere beauty yet ever present danger of the icefall is an excellent first-hand account of the demanding nature of high-altitude mountaineering.

"Snakes in the Jungle", by interweaving high altitude climbing and service as an officer in the SAS, brings to vivid life the point that then Colonel Peter Gration made in 1975 when he reconstituted the AAA. "In a peacetime army, to develop and hone the skills we believe we need in war, you need some sort of activity that will stretch people physically and psychologically. To me, climbing is, by definition, that sort of activity. It also brings out the qualities of teamwork and leadership." Jim's adventures in the mountains weren't confined to the Himalaya. He had an entertaining long day on the variable rock of the Darwin Buttress in New Zealand's Southern Alps, grappled with Ball's Pyramid in the Tasman Sea where just getting to the base of the climb is a life-threatening experience, and survived a fall and numerous epics on crags in all corners of the Australian continent. His exploits extended to the water, including sea kayaking in the Torres Strait and rafting down the Tasmania's Franklin River in 1982 during the days of anti-dam protests. Jim suffered the obligatory "bath" in the Franklin, but consoled himself with the fact that the legendary British explorer Bill Tilman, who was renowned for "three memorable bathes" throughout his life (probably the only three that he ever took), would have undoubtedly added a fourth had he rafted the Franklin.

There was no drop-off in the level of adventure when Jim turned to his life as an SAS officer, where the selection course would severely test even the hardest of the hard men of the mountains. As Jim noted, “It was not the hardest activity that I had attempted, but as a package deal it took its toll on my motivation, sapped my human resources and sure as hell made me look at life from a completely different perspective.” His SAS adventures were many and varied. They included demolishing the Onslow Jetty in Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia; service in Kuwait during the Gulf War, clandestine operations in East Timor under the codename “Taipan”, and counter-terrorism activities at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. In all of his military accounts, Jim adopts a characteristically no-holds-barred approach, taking aim at allies and foes alike.

The final three chapters of the book move on to Jim’s post-military experiences as a consultant on crisis management in the business world. Climbers and other outdoor enthusiasts reading this book might be tempted to stop reading here. That would be a mistake. Jim’s experiences and perspective offer fascinating insights into our way of life and how it is changing. These are often captured in quotes, one of the highlights of the book. For example, he takes aim at the trend towards our more risk-averse society, evident, for example, with the rise of indoor rockclimbing and sport climbing at the expense of traditional climbing. Jim captures this beautifully: “Remember when sex was safe and rockclimbing was dangerous?” And he has no qualms about blasting the ethics of the business world: “(The military)...is very reliant upon the integrity of its own staff to be responsible and accountable to each other. In the business world, people lie as a matter of course, and they are apparently unaware of their actions or oblivious to any sense of wrong within that.” He follows that up with an equally pointed quote from Carl Icahn: “In the takeover business, if you want a friend, you buy a dog”.

In summary, Jim Truscott is a breath of fresh air in an increasingly politically correct, bureaucratically tangled, risk-adverse world. He reminds me of Canberra climber Chris Larque, who once interjected, when he heard several young rockclimbers debating the most important quality of new, “sticky rubber” climbing boots, “... the bloke standing in them”. Whatever Jim Truscott tackles in life – Himalayan mountaineering, SAS operations in Timor Leste, or selling crisis leadership skills to big business around the world – it isn’t the climbing boots, the SAS camouflage gear, or the polished black shoes and suit of the consultant that matter the most, it is the bloke standing in them that makes the difference. If I could sum up this book in one sentence, I would go to another quote from Jim, “Life is not a rehearsal, and for me the speeding train is the only workable option”.