

TAC Snow course – The Result

Winter Summit of Mount Taranaki

You may recall that I undertook the Taranaki Alpine Club's snow course last year and, under the expert tutelage of Glenys and Greg, threw myself down snowy inclines and used my ice axe to self arrest, cut snow steps and generally played in the snow without killing myself or anyone else. I (supposedly) learnt some new skills and was effectively sent away to practise them at my leisure...

When I have met Glenys since she always asks if I have been up (Mount Taranaki) playing and to be honest, I haven't been as often as I should – but I still remembered what to do and (roughly) how to do it, so when a friend, Steve, asked me to go up a short while ago I thought I'd give it a go. Freezing point was 2 600 metres, snow was down to 900 metres and the avalanche risk was low. We were a bit wary of the weather as the forecast said Saturday would be fine with weather closing in in the afternoon and Sunday would be monsoon-like, but we left Inglewood at 6 and the mountain had a light covering of cloud.

By the time we set off from the car park at North Egmont, the cloud had cleared and Taranaki looked beautiful in the half light between the setting of the moon and the start of sunrise. It was a bit cold, but the steps up to the razorback soon cured that and we had a fantastic view of some light clouds rolling below us and Ruapehu in the distance, with the sun glimpsing over the top. It's at times like that you have to stop and just marvel. Behind us, the weather was still behaving itself and Taranaki beckoned us as the snow became ever closer.



The snow beckons...

The trip to behind Humphries Castle was fairly uneventful, although tramping through the undergrowth was wet and cold. The soft snow lay just below the Castle and we managed to kick ice steps for part of the way. It soon became time to use those crampons again and I fitted them for the first time in probably too long. The grip on the snow returned and the snow was pleasant to walk on and our time had been good – an hour so far. I looked up at Humphries Castle and then up at the summit. It all seemed so peaceful (we were the first ones up the mountain that day) and it looked so much *easier* than those blasted steps, the scree and the Lizard. A beautiful white covering and gentle angles were all above me – it was A Good Day.



The top doesn't seem too far away!

As the sun rose the clouds bubbled up behind us but seemed to stay a few hundred meters beneath us. Every now and then a single cloud would billow across us and I felt ever so slightly disappointed that we might not get a clear summit, but each time the sun burned it off and we were back into pristine whiteness. The sun also softened the snow and so it was quite heavy going as each footstep sunk deeper than you really wanted it to, or gave way and slid a bit. I was a bit concerned about a whole load of snow suddenly dragging me down and I remembered Greg saying that the ice axe is like a third leg – you always have 2 points on/in the snow while the third is moving. My confidence in my snow skills was getting stronger and although my pace was probably slower than many people, it was steady.

As we ascended, the snow hardened a bit and as we approached the scree section it was a pleasure to walk on what seemed to be the perfect consistency of snow for crampons – all 12 points sunk in nicely, without too much effort, and the ice axe dug in efficiently. Actually in truth we were just walking on the snow and the ice axe was being used less than it should have been because the footing was so secure – and all the while the cloud below us stayed put and the mountain above us glistened in the

sun. However the familiar feelings of calf burn and ankle burn were reminding me that my legs were working and we had a short stop, cutting out a little ledge for ourselves to sit in. I'd forgotten that when you're on an ice incline, just stopping for a rest means not sliding back down the hill you've just climbed! You can't just stop and relax because you're still using muscles to fight gravity, and a frictionless surface.

Behind us four other climbers came and went as they dipped in and out of clouds. They appeared to be faster than us and I wanted to be the first to climb over the crater and make the first steps.



Makes you feel small, doesn't it?!

I'm not sure how deep the snow was on Taranaki that day, but all of a sudden it started getting very steep and very hard. The consistency moved from a pleasant semi-hard crunch to a very hard ice layer (somewhere around the Lizard) with (what I thought were) huge sastrugi. These icy fingers kept snapping off and tinkling down behind me and I suddenly realised how far we'd climbed and how steep the incline was. Self arresting in semi-hard snow was OK, although I hadn't had to do it, but this stuff was very hard and I hoped that the ice axe would dig in to the ice rather than skitter off it with me flailing around on the end of it...I would fall a *long* way down and the stop at the end would hurt. All my confidence crept away and I concentrated on one foot step after another. Often the ice would fall away and sometimes the crampon didn't seem entirely engaged with the ice while my axe seemed to penetrate only a few millimetres. I wondered how many of the crampon points were actually doing any good...was I actually relying on only 2, or 3 points but not realizing it?

The angles were steep, the terrain hard and my mood was low. I didn't want to let Steve down but I knew that safety was the most important thing. I looked up at the Summer entrance, back across the snow and ice, then to my feet and then down

behind me. My muscles burned and I decided to keep moving one foot after the other, as slowly as was needed, and track across to what looked like smoother snow. It seemed to take ages and Steve was really patient and kept encouraging me, but I knew he could have been a lot quicker. He cut ledges for me to rest in and took us around the sastrugi to compacted snow again. I didn't feel very proud of myself, but I had got across it and the Winter entrance was about 100 meters above us. The incline was horrific, but the snow was much more useable and I knew that sheer determination and bloody mindedness would get me up there. Steve disappeared up and over into the crater and I just put one foot in front of the other. If I was going forwards, even 30 cm each step, I would get there. *Man*, I was tired.



Nearly there

As if to be spiteful, the snow seemed to get just a little bit steeper before I went over the lip of the crater. I looked behind me and wondered if I slipped now and fell back 50 metres, would I give up or would I re-climb that huge angle. I hope I would have done, but I didn't need to – the volcano crater opened up before me and I walked on the pristine surface with a huge grin on my face. The sun shone, the clouds were way below us and the ice and snow were perfect.



Made it!

The wind was bitter up there but we found some shelter and ate lunch. It had taken us four and a half hours from North Egmont and Steve seemed quite pleased with that. The other climbers arrived after half an hour or so and we chatted.



Lunch in the crater

We wandered about in the crater, saw Syme Hut ice-bound and lay in the sunshine – but soon it was time to descend. I was quite concerned about all that sastrugi on the way down, but we found another way round and that, combined with the extra hour or so of sunlight, had softened the surface to a dense compact snow that you could almost run down. The lower we went the softer it became and on a couple of occasions the snow became too soft to be comfortable and our legs went deep into it.



View to Syme Hut (somewhere under there!)

As we went down, we met someone coming up who recognised Steve and then I realised that he also recognised me...it was Greg! I hoped desperately that he hadn't watched my descent and noticed that my technique was all wrong, or that perhaps I was holding the ice axe incorrectly – but he was very encouraging and seemed genuinely pleased that we'd progressed from a year ago. It's because of Greg and Glenys that we were here in the first place!



Steve, me and the top of Taranaki

I got a bit to blasé and slid down about 3 metres of snow on my backside a couple of times, using the ice axe to stop myself. To be honest it seemed the easier option, given that my quadriceps were now hurting, as were my knees. We eventually met the cloud and it suddenly became impossible to see 2 metres ahead or distinguish cloud from ice. I became very aware of how dangerous Taranaki can be and was grateful that Steve knew where he was going!

We waited for a short time for one of the climbers who had descended shortly after us as we knew he had never climbed the mountain before and he was only here for the weekend so we thought he may need a guide in the poor visibility. He caught us and we walked down in the murk the until we met the Translator Track. It was odd knowing that we had walked several meters on top of the rocks, scree and steps that I knew I would climb again next Summer...



The steps are under there somewhere...

Coming down took us two and a quarter hours to the car and as we bundled our stuff into the Subaru and we started to ache and the muscles stiffened up, I looked back up at Taranaki – completely hidden in the cloud. I remembered the fantastic clear morning, the views to Ruapehu, and sitting in the untouched crater in the sun with the snow sculptures above the clouds.

I was one of only seven people *anywhere* in the World who had been part of the top of the mountain that day.

Awe inspiring.