

## The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2001

### CENTURION SOLO ON TWO CHEESEBURGERS

By Alan Mullin

Two cheeseburgers for 99 pence! What a bargain! This was my fuel for the hill. The Macdonalds in Fort William was a cheap but effective way of fuelling up for the walk up to Carn Dearg. I arrived at Torlundy Car Park around 11pm and no sooner had I got ready than the police arrived at the car park. 'Hello,' said the officer, 'Have you seen two American climbers up there by any chance?' he asked. 'Sorry, but I am just going up the hill.' This guy seemed genuinely interested in me and asked what made me want to go up there alone and solo. 'Well,' I replied, tongue in cheek. 'I have no friends and no one wants to climb with me so soloing is the only way.' 'Judging by your objective I am not surprised you have no friends!' Replied the officer, but this was friendly. He laughed before asking me to keep an eye out for them and wished me the best of luck.

I had the mother of all sacks and this time it felt no easier than the last walk in seven days before, in fact I could swear it was heavier! 'Probably the Bivi bag that did it.' I said to myself, and struggled on upwards. It was around 1.30 in the morning when I saw the lights of the head torches. 'Petzl Tikkas.' I said to myself remembering a joke about Indian food and the exotic names for head torches these days that I had with some climbers that I had met in Chamonix a few weeks before. The American twang was unmistakable. 'Are you the two American guys?' I asked when we met 'Yeah dude, that's us.' They replied. 'The police are looking for you, your landlady has reported you overdue.' 'Thanks,' they said and told me they would notify the police when they got down. 'Well, see you later' and off I went, thankful for the excuse to stop and rest my aching shoulders.

It was a windless night and for that I was grateful. During my first visit to 'Centurion' just after New Year I had battled up here, compass in hand, and in full mountain clothing trying to find the C.I.C hut in a horrendous Blizzard. On that first occasion poor planning and a crap Bivi below the start of the route saw me fail at the top of pitch two the following night. A failed head torch and no spare Batteries saw me 10 feet above my last gear trying desperately to light my lighter and sort out the 'soloist'. Panic had almost taken over! Stood on a hold 3cm big with aching arms and no way to see my gear. "Never mind, put some in." I resolved that situation by praying as I jumped off, only to go about 25 foot past my last gear and rappel leaving about four runners that I had gone past. "Ah well", I thought. "At least you won't have to put them in again" and home I went, but with a different strategy in mind for my next attempt!

Well, here I was again my third and no doubt final attempt as the route was just wearing me down mentally and physically. I arrived at the foot of the route to find my rope still intact on the cliff. During my second attempt a week previously I had done much better! A good sleep and food under the boulder below Sassenach, plus my new head torch with batteries for three days, meant I was fit and mentally ready for this attempt, or so I thought! Having managed to free climb the first and second pitch with the help of my in situ gear I got ready for the third pitch. Having not used any pegs on the first attempt I assumed you did not really need any for the entire route. That was my first mistake, my second was thinking that the 4c traverse out

from pitch two would be easy. Well there I was at full extension on this 4c wall with no gear and committed half way across. A hammered in specter hook was all I could manage in this position and finally two hours later I had done it. This was when the lack of pegs kicked in, above were easy grooves but the compact rock meant pegs were crucial as soloing leaves no room for mistakes and falling even on to the best gear should be avoided. Here I was 30 foot above gear and no prospect of it, a copperhead went in and poor it was, but it was that or nothing. I calmed down and focused, I looked above at pitch four. "No way is it up there!" I thought. All I could see was a horrendous overhanging crack and blank wall, or so I thought! A quick look at the barometer, shit the pressure is dropping and the wind is picking up, no pegs and the onset of grim weather. 'Bugger that.' I thought. It's almost dark and I am knackered. So it was with great fear I lowered from the copperhead. Halfway down the third pitch the head ripped, luckily my axe was in turf and down climbing was now the only way. I reach better gear clip in and pull the rope down, re clip to the good stuff and go down to the top of pitch two. This is when my third and final mistake almost cost me my life! I pulled the rope down and the free end went into a tangle and got stuck in a crack 30 meters down the second pitch, "Shit!" This is not my lucky day. At the top of pitch two I had the worst belay anchors imaginable! A crap rusty small leeper peg, a double 00 Friend, and a very small-lost arrow in poor rock! I laughed to myself and thought they would at least take my body weight.

I decided I would have to rappel on this gear as there was nothing else to do. I pulled my sack on, stuffed the gear in it and put my belay plate through the single strand of rope. I started down and all was well until about 20m down I felt this sickening jerk and suddenly I was out of control. My prussic had melted off as I shot down the rope, the weight of the sack helping me on my way. I grabbed the rope! Burning through my gloves my hands are screaming with pain but I manage to stop! Heart pounding and burning hands I find a foothold and gather my thoughts. Why I did not put some more gear in and clip the rope into it I will never know. Once again I weighted the rope and rappelled very quickly, I free the tangled knot, and now I can reach the ground. Shit the pain is intense and I can't think, damn why did I not make a better belay? In truth I couldn't have as the gear needed was not with me so I had to make do, or did I? Anyway I am wasted and can only think of going home. I leave the rope there as I do not have the courage to jummar on it as I realise something up on the belay has failed and my hands are too wrecked even to deal with getting my crampons off. I tie the free end off to the bottom of the cliff. 'Bloody Hell Alan' you could have got chopped there big time. So once again it was the long walk out albeit a rope lighter.

So here I was again "3rd time lucky", I thought. The rope I left was covered in swathes of ice and looked like the kind of magic rope they use for the Indian rope trick, reaching straight up into the darkness above. My plan was different this time. Instead of sleeping there at the bottom I would bivi on the route. I had brought one super light 8mm rope, about 35m to cut down on weight, along with a shorter 20m rope. I would leap frog the two ropes meaning more distance and less hassle. And of course with me were my eight pegs, for comfort you see. I climbed the first pitch as it was familiar terrain and knowledge of all the gear meant that this was over fairly soon. I had to get pitch two out of the way again and no gear on it to help this time. My in situ rope arched away behind me as there was no way it could be trusted until the belay had been repaired safely. It took me about three hours for this pitch, having creamed off its secrets on my other attempts. The crux is the top 10 metres and I climb them calmly as I know the moves and the build up of snow ice is perfect for the mantle at the very top. I stand up to see that the 00 friend has ripped out

and the leeper peg is in a bad way too, luckily the side runner was looking more solid albeit in white rock. I sort out the belay with the addition of a Rockcentric and a knifeblade. I go through the usual procedure rappel down and back clip, occasionally tying the rope off to keep weight from the main anchors.

Sitting on the rock ledge at the top of pitch one, I make a brew. This was my other strategy keep fluids down and get physiological comfort from a hot drink. A friend I know from the climbing wall stops at the bottom to talk to me, he tells me he watched me leading the second pitch and perhaps I could start to think about paying rent for occupying my ledge, we have a laugh and I tell him it's my last attempt as I can't keep this motivation level much longer for such a hard route. I think of asking him where pitch four goes but do not want to embarrass myself, as here am I on the mighty 'Centurion' in winter and I don't know where the fourth pitch goes! I return to my brew and a cigarette and contemplate the rest of the climb.

I attach my jumar and start up, this is the quickest way to second, as I go up and down the rope a total of three times for every pitch it is necessary to conserve strength and minimize time. I reach the belay and attached myself to the rope for the third pitch, the hook is still in, as I could not get it out, at least that's solid I thought. I climb the wall and start on the upper grooves. I reach the top of pitch three and tie the rope off.

I do all my stuff and re jumar to get back to the belay on top of pitch three. This time I continue up pitch four, the weather's cool, the pressure is stable, and I feel good. I stand under the overhanging crack described in the guide but cannot seem to see where to go. I climb the wall left of the overhang it is very strenuous but there are good hooks for my tools and I manage to put a super lost arrow in. Several falls later I stand below the wall despondent. I cannot seem to get this right. "Out left says the description" but I cannot get there! I am really pissed off, I look at the overhanging crack wide at the bottom but narrower at the top, "Ok that's it go for that, I climb back up the wall and make awkward moves up right, I get a shoulder jam and back and foot heel rest. No gear apart from my lost arrow way out to my left, and I am super extended. I put my tool on a large choke- stone at the top of the overhang and smile. I pull on it and it moves, calm and focus! Ok move the tool further right to a crack and crank hard on it, lock off, lift the left tool and thunk into turf, pull over and I'm there, stood on a sloping slab. I continue up a shallow corner before I can get some bomber gear and pull out left on to the top of the original pitch. That was dangerous but it does not scare me these days and I seem more focused than ever before.

I do all the shit again and now I am back to the belay at the top of pitch four. I am feeling tired now and my sack's hurting every time I jumar with it. I decide to wear my sack for this lead, as I am sure it is the last of the hardest pitches and the last pitch of 'Centurion' before joining 'Route II.' It is the scariest pitch yet. Not much gear and the cracks are full of ice but there is more turf and each time I reach it I know I am safe. I reach the end of the rope having used up a mere three runners on the entire 40m pitch. I tie the rope off to the belay and put on my other rope and carry on up to reach the bivi site. I decide I can get the rope from pitch five after my bivi, as I have on my other short rope to keep me tied in. I settle down and make my two hot chocolates. I feel content it's not a bad night and I go to sleep. I am aware of the patter of rain on the bivi bag. The rain does not seem too bad and there was no forecast for it so I am sure it's just a passing shower. I fall asleep again and

next time I wake up, I am going to panic. It is 1am and there's a rainstorm it's severe ferociousness pounding me into submission. My sleeping bag's soaking as I am directly under a run off for the rain, it is pissing down my rope into my bag and I can feel a pool of water forming inside it. I am absolutely freezing and can't stop shaking. I am aware of Voices and Music but also aware that this is impossible. I realise I have mild hypothermia and that these are the first warning signs of it. After six hours sitting here I am going to have to get moving and I know it is now or never. I cannot retreat as I have come too far and up seems the best way to safety, so I get up soaking wet from head to toe. I put my outer boots on with that horrible squelching noise and put my stuff away. I rappel to the belay at the top of pitch five. I decide to leave my rope on pitch five and don't even bother to get my best gear out as I am having trouble with my basic coordination and am beginning to forget how to climb altogether.

I move up the ledge system to the edge of the buttress, I can't see a bloody thing and am not sure where to go having never climbed on this cliff! I was wishing I had taken the advice of friends and checked the route out in summer but my stubbornness to on sight it had limited me to going up the line of least resistance .I know it's about 60m to easy ground and the finish of the route. I follow a steep but helpful snowy groove on the edge of the buttress, short fixing and soloing most of this section I reach what I believe is the end of the route but there is still a lot of scrambling/easy climbing to do. I am super wrecked and can barely move. I struggle upwards through the darkness and swirling mist and I am now not even tied in and parts here and there look like they have big drops either side of them, is it the mist or just me? I don't know. I finally reach the snowfield that leads around the top of the plateau. I collapse in a heap and start to slowly warm up. I feel nothing, no excitement, no elation. So here I am again so used to this feeling of nothing and I have just done something incredibly fierce. I reassure myself that that will come later and I start round, compass in hand, looking for No 5 gully .

I did this route and left my rope and a lot of gear on the fifth pitch. Some might say this is a disregard for the mountain, however when hypothermia sets in the only issue is not whether or not you leave the route nice and clean but can you safely extract yourself from the cliff without calling out the mountain rescue team, and in the process cost the taxpayer much more money than you could ever lose leaving a rope and some gear on the mountain. I had a mobile phone on this occasion but the overwhelming desire to rely on myself meant that only a truly horrific accident would warrant me calling them out. As I proved you can push yourself to the limit as long as you have the will and desire to rely on your own judgment and ability.