



GUIDING PRINCIPAL

Jane Morris is the first female president of the New Zealand Mountain Guides' Association. The road has sometimes been rocky for this humble mountaineer, but Morris is quietly blazing a trail for a new generation of "girl guides". Poppie Johnson reports.

The rock came silently in the night, hurtling close to the face of the mountain in the early hours of 4 December 2016. The guided party were climbing New Zealand's second highest peak, the technical and challenging Mt Tasman. They were already well under way by 2am, an "alpine start" to avoid just such an incident; everything should have still been frozen.

The hurtling rock shattered mountain guide Jane Morris' upper arm and knocked her to the ground, where she would remain for more than four hours until daylight arrived and a rescue could begin. The X-ray would later show countless pieces of what had once been her humerus.

"There was no chance of seeing it," Morris recalls. "Wallop, out of nowhere. It was like a bullet. I thought it had ripped my whole arm off, but I looked around and there it was, flapping around with the bone sticking out through my jacket."

Fellow guide Whitney Thurlow abandoned his climb of nearby Mt Dixon to bring warm clothing, a sleeping bag and hot drinks. Along with Morris' client, Julie Wagner, they supported her through the night. The rescue was planned in three stages: firstly by helicopter to nearby Plateau Hut, hanging by a strop with the same Search and Rescue team Morris used to be on. From there, she could be "packaged" and transferred to the Aoraki-Mt Cook

Poppie Johnson is a *North & South* contributing writer.

JANE MORRIS COLLECTION



Jane Morris on the summit of Aoraki-Mt Cook, with Lake Pukaki in the background.

rescue centre to be fully stabilised for transport to Christchurch Hospital on the Westpac Rescue helicopter with paramedics – and painkillers.

A doctor on a climbing trip who was staying at Plateau Hut misunderstood the rescue chain: thinking Morris would be transported directly from the hut to Christchurch, she insisted on trying to avoid infection by getting the bone back inside the arm. Thurlow, an experienced guide trained in emergency first aid, saw there was still blood flow to the extremities and advocated for leaving it alone. The doctor was adamant. That decision caused pain, and more damage.

Morris is calm when she talks about the incident now. For anyone who knows her – and her pain threshold – the image conjured by her words is horrifying. “That [manoeuvre] involved yarding on it [pulling very hard] with four other folks holding me down,” she says. “I then realised it would be possible to pass out from pain. Everything after that paled in comparison on the pain scale.”

It was still morning when the helicopter arrived, but an inversion layer of cloud made the rescue very difficult, and it took three passes to get in. Transported back to the same Search and Rescue base she had deployed from many times before, Morris was transferred, dosed up on ketamine, and flown directly to Christchurch. She was in surgery for more than four hours, two of which comprised a hunting mission for pieces of debris that were strewn throughout Morris’ wayward limb. It took 10 screws and a metal plate to put it back together.

A couple of months after her near-death experience on Mt Tasman, while still completing her rehab, Morris headed to the United States to visit her sister and family. There, she had another accident. “That time it was bike versus car and the arm got another shake-up.”

Morris was cautiously riding a bike, towing her niece behind her in a chariot on the way to the playground. At an intersection, the car hit her side-on with similar force to the rock. She was rushed to hospital and into surgery. Fortunately, she had travel insurance.

While the surgeon was operating, he came across several pieces of the original rock still embedded in Morris’ arm; they had been forcing their way out of their hiding places as her body healed. Slowly festering, they’d been causing pain that Morris had overlooked, put-



Tackling the final crevasse onto the Ngapunatoru Ice Plateau near Milford Sound.

GEOFF SPEARPOINT

ting it down to the recovery process. If she hadn’t been hit by the truck and had her arm opened up, it’s very likely she would have ended up seriously ill. As it was, screws and plates were placed in her ankle and fibula, and a bone graft was performed from her hip to her re-traumatised arm.

I saw Morris, who I met ski patrolling at Mt Hutt, a month after the Mt Tasman accident when she was recuperating at home. Moving gingerly, cradling the injured arm with the other, she was nonetheless mobile, and already planning her gentle return. Her trademark beaming grin was a little wan and her dark hair was flowing free; her customary pigtailed were hard to do with one arm. Yet her spirit was upbeat and she was doing low-key exercises. She asked

me to bring her a green juice and some flaxseed oil to help with the healing. Mentally, she was recovering. Physically, she knew she was in for the long haul. When your livelihood involves being active, a serious injury means more than just physical recuperation; there are financial pressures, not to mention future employment prospects.

Morris is a professional mountain guide, making her living taking people on trips in the hills. Since 2016, she’s also been president of the New Zealand Mountain Guides’ Association (NZMGA) – the first woman elected to the role. With such pressure on her ability to climb, and a lot riding on her recovery, it would have been easy to become overwhelmed. But instead, she channeled philosophical acceptance.



An afternoon stroll atop the Remarkables.

GEOFF SPEARPOINT

MORRIS IS CALM WHEN SHE TALKS ABOUT THE INCIDENT NOW. FOR ANYONE WHO KNOWS HER – AND HER PAIN THRESHOLD – THE IMAGE CONJURED BY HER WORDS IS HORRIFYING.

“I didn’t know what the future would bring, but I was happy to carry on the path to wherever I got to with rehab. I didn’t ever feel like that would be it with the mountains and climbing – just that the level of engagement would maybe shift. I slowly progressed to scrambling around, and a year later I was walking up the Hooker Valley to climb the north ridge of Aoraki. It felt surreal.”

The physical effects of the accident are mostly behind her now. Morris is back working as a guide and as she monitors herself, she looks for signs of change in her mental outlook.

“Initially I didn’t think there were any. But I’ve found I’m often on high alert for rocks, and have very little tolerance for an area where I see rocks rolling down... It’s hard to go into the

mountains and avoid them these days. Even in winter.”

Morris grew up in Queenstown, a middle child with two younger brothers and an older sister. Her mum, Sheila, was a nurse and her dad, Bruce, was an accountant. “They sound like an Aussie comedy duo,” jokes Morris.

In the 80s, they moved to Dalefield, then a country suburb well out of Queenstown and on a dirt road. The house sat at the base of Coronet Peak, a mountain soon to become both witness and guardian for Morris’ burgeoning love affair with the outdoors. “We were encouraged to pursue whatever drew us in, but they didn’t ever push us.”

The love of the mountains sowed its seed early. There were two school

camp Morris vividly remembers. The first was a Year 8 trip to Deep Cove in Doubtful Sound. “I remember walking up a hill that opened my mind to the possibilities of outdoor places.”

The second was Wakatipu High School’s Branches Camp in Queenstown. It’s the country’s longest-running school camp still operating under canvas; meals are cooked on an open fire and the entire Year 10 cohort spends 10 days on this unique rite of passage. As she walked to a remote hanging lake called Lochnagar, a young Morris knew she was experiencing something special.

“I was in awe that such places even existed, and loved every moment of being there. I filled my water bottle from the lake water, took it home and kept it in the fridge and let myself have



GEOFF SPEARPOINT

Morris in her beloved Darran Mountains, deep in the heart of Fiordland.



GEOFF SPEARPOINT

Morris in a dress – a tribute to Freda Du Faur, the first woman to climb Mt Cook – while surveying an alpine tarn near Adams Col in the remote Garden of Allah, Canterbury.

MORRIS FOUND AN EQUILIBRIUM, WORKING WINTERS ON SKI PATROL AND SUMMERS AS A RANGER AND MEMBER OF THE SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM AT AORAKI-MT COOK.

a little sip each day as a reminder of that place and time.”

It was the Otago University Tramping Club that took this keen skier and outdoorswoman and set her on the path to becoming one of New Zealand’s foremost mountaineers. She began heading out every weekend, teaming up with a hard-core crew of budding alpinists and expanding both her skills and her comfort levels in the outdoors with every excursion.

After completing a Bachelor of Commerce in marketing – and her apprenticeship in the outdoors – Morris knew where she wanted to be. Work and travel followed, including time instructing at Outward Bound, ski patrolling, working for the Department of Conservation, climbing in the US and Europe, and exploring new and different corners of her beloved Southern Alps. She considered guiding, but wanted to keep work and recreational climbing separate in

her early years; it was only later she decided to begin professional guiding.

Becoming a fully qualified member of the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) is no easy task. It takes approximately five years, a substantial log of personal climbing to very difficult levels in both summer and winter, and at least four two-week long assessment courses where every move is watched. In layman terms, it’s the doctorate of mountain guiding; there’s no higher qualification. To be an IFMGA guide is to be an expert practitioner in all aspects of alpine travel and terrain.

Morris found an equilibrium, working winters on ski patrol and summers as a ranger and member of the Search and Rescue (SAR) team at Aoraki-Mt Cook. The SAR work was a curious mix of repetitive tasks while doing the ranger part of the job, and extreme and often

urgent rescues that required a high degree of alpine skill, medical knowledge and the ability to deal with very serious situations.

In 2013, Morris and her crew were called to an accident just metres from Tasman Saddle Hut. The hut is perched on a rocky outcrop, with sheer drops of 150m-plus on three sides. While it looks imposing, the location actually keeps the hut safe from thundering avalanches.

Climber Duncan Rait had just flown in for a climbing trip with his brother and was walking to the hut, carrying a box of food, when the surface below his feet changed and he fell, only a short distance from safety.

Morris vividly remembers the rescue. The team had scrambled quickly, fighting against the weather, and only just managed to make it in. The helicopter pilot had to shut down the machine and stay overnight. The crew decided to try to sled Rait out to medical help.

“When we got to him, he was alive, combative and showing signs of serious injuries,” she says. “Somewhere on the way to Darwin Corner, with four of us dragging the sled through unconsolidated spring snow, he passed away.

“Even if he’d landed on a hospital table, it would have been unlikely he’d have survived. It was a harsh reminder that something as simple as walking to the hut can be fatal. Every step has to count.”

Despite witnessing such incidents, and having been involved in a severe accident herself, Morris still thinks the level of resources and personnel training in mountain search and rescue are about right. “There’s a good balance with excellent resource throughout the country. We don’t have enough incidents to warrant any more dedicated teams.”

Morris’ stamina is legendary. One weekend in November 2008, she completed the 44km, 3000m-ascent Mt

Aoraki Grand Traverse. On her own. In a dress. “I decided if I ever did a grand traverse, then as an ode to Freda [Du Faur, the first woman to climb Aoraki-Mt Cook] I wanted to do it in some sort of ‘womanly attire’. And so the mountain dress was born.”

There are many, many stories of expeditions that Morris undertook solo on her days off. Her recharging had always come from being outdoors. So when she began to feel uncharacteristically tired, she did what she always did and continued climbing, going on “walks” and expeditions. By the time she finally realised she was more than just a bit worn out, it was too late. The diagnosis of chronic fatigue was to strike her down from the end of 2006 to early 2008.

“I ignored the early signs and symptoms, and kept pushing on... But then the issue was forced. I literally could not walk, talk or engage with the world. When we keep our foot flat on the

accelerator, we’re eventually going to run out of gas. I was out of gas, water, oil and my engine had blown. Life ground to a halt.”

As an active person who could no longer relax in her normal way, Morris had to do some serious rethinking. She went on a 10-day silent meditation retreat; she read books that challenged her thinking (Eckhart Tolle, Marianne Williamson, Deepak Chopra) and explored different philosophical outlooks on life. “I had no choice but to completely accept it in the end. I was not going to ‘push through this’, like my old mind would have driven me to do.” That acceptance helped Morris to get through.

“I called this period of my life ‘Darran’ [after the Darran Mountains] and I went and hid away at Homer Hut for a few weeks. It was December and much quieter than it is these days. I only had to interact with a handful of people. Otherwise I spent the days about 30 metres

from the hut, lying in the tussocks contemplating what had gotten me to that point. It was very humbling.”

The process of self-reflection helped Morris overcome what is normally a chronic condition. “I had the opportunity to hit the reset button, to reprogramme how I was doing things,” she says.

It’s been more than 10 years since Morris last saw “Darran” and she has never hit such a low ebb since.

Charlie Hobbs is one of New Zealand’s most experienced guides. He’s climbed Aoraki 29 times and has lived in the area for 40 years. As Aoraki-Mt Cook Village’s longest resident guide, and owner of his own guiding company, he’s seen many young and enthusiastic climbers come through on their way to guiding certification, and has observed significant changes over the years.

“In the late 70s and early 80s, it was very much a male-dominated society,” he says. “I remember one of the first women to qualify, Jos Lang. In Europe, they acknowledged her pass because they saw her name and thought she was a man. She was one of the first female guides and got a lot of stick... she was a tough woman.”

Morris sees no difference between men and women in the mountains. “If you simply treat everyone as you want to be treated, there is no issue. If we look for bias and discrepancies, then they can always be found. If we look for equality, then that is what we’ll find. Mountains don’t judge. They don’t care about gender or politics or religion or skills. They just are. As for women – they just are. There is no need to separate and censure either sex. In that environment, we are all one. Mountains are a total leveller. I love that about them.”

New Zealand has only five IFMGA-certified female guides, which equates to about 5% of Kiwis working in the high mountains – a statistic that hasn’t shifted in recent years. In the outdoors industry, and in the less technical areas such as glacier guiding, women are close to 30% of the workforce.

In 2016, Morris was elected by her peers to become the first female president of the guides’ association. Hobbs doesn’t underestimate the impact of her role. “She’s a great mentor for women. She’s a role model for all those young people, especially young women who

are looking at being professionals in the outdoors. She has the highest of safety standards and she’s a good ambassador for mountaineering in general.”

Beyond being a good climber and guide, it’s Morris’ humility and approach to climbing that sets her apart. Hobbs remembers running into Morris in the village after she’d been climbing on her days off. He asked what she’d been up to and she spoke briefly about a nice walk in the hills with good scenery. As it turned out, she had just soloed the Caroline Face of Aoraki. Hobbs has done the climb and knows how challenging it is. “I’ve always been impressed with her fitness and drive,” he says. “I don’t think I could keep up with that. There are very few people I’ve met who have that physical ability to drive themselves beyond certain limits.”

Lydia Bradey is a fellow IFMGA guide and was the first woman to climb Mt Everest without supplemental oxygen. She sees Morris as one of her own role models, describing her as a strong, smart woman who lives her passion. Bradey published her autobiography in 2015 (*Lydia Bradey: Going Up Is Easy*, with Laurence Fearnley), and in the book was very open about being torn between climbing and having kids, about having a hysterectomy, then thinking of adoption, then veering away from it. For Morris, it was more about timing than a conscious decision.

“There was a time, some 15 years ago before I was a guide, that [having children] was an option, but then life took a different path and although I’m now with someone who could have shared that, the time has passed. I don’t harbour any regrets. I have four nephews and a niece who are my surrogate sprogs and bring all the joy and love little people are capable of. Being Auntie is just brilliant.”

Despite her intense drive, Morris has never been focused on “summit bagging”. For her, it’s about the spiritual connection with the mountains and the sense of peace she gains. As an experienced guide, Hobbs recognises this trait. “The mountains communicate to her, she has a real connection with them,” he says. “When she’s not guiding, she’s happy to connect with them on a personal basis, climbing peaks. It’s not just an achievement; it’s climbing, where you have to be focused in the moment.”

Dave McKinley, an IFMGA guide and

guiding director for Alpine Guides, has been involved in the NZMGA for many years, and has observed Morris’ influence. “One of the great strengths she brings to the NZMGA is she’s supportive both of her guests and of anyone in her sphere of influence. We’ve had a rise in the number of young people, male and female, who are coming into the framework and entertaining the concept that guiding is not an unachievable goal.

“[Jane] has always been into the holistic experience, the whole picture of the mountains. It’s not the ego, not about one person standing on the summit. It’s about the total mountain experience. Achieving is something she does incidentally as a part of experiencing the mountains.”

Morris’ experiences have changed her outlook, and recently she found her soulmate: outdoors writer, conservationist and photographer Geoff Spearpoint. She spends increasing amounts of her time off with him at Birdlings Flat in Canterbury and, on a recent trip to the Darrans with him, accepted his high-altitude marriage proposal.

She’s still driven, she still loves the mountains, but there’s now another element to her life. “The word soulmate seemed like some fanciful notion of idealism,” she says. “But I’ve been fortunate to experience a connection I can only describe as being at a soul level. Priorities shift. I don’t want to be away for long periods, or sticking my neck out with scary adventures. Life was fantastic beforehand, but it’s on a whole other level now... and it’s very, very good.”

A life lived on her own terms and exploring some of New Zealand’s most pristine wilderness has helped shape Morris’ philosophy. Even with all the hardship, she says she wouldn’t change “a bean”. Why not?

“I’ve long trusted that the universe has a bigger picture figured, and it will provide all the contentment we could ever want. It’s about not interfering and letting the opportunities freely come and go in our lives... And it does figure it out – eventually.

“I now know to hang in there and trust the tide will turn during those moments of hardship, pain and difficulty – mentally, emotionally, physically. For it’s these times that can provide us with our greatest insights, and ground us to who we are.” +