

One last trek for forester who loved life

Ralph Naylor 1923 - 2007

In 1950 a young Yorkshire man, Ralph Naylor, arrived in New Zealand. He held a Forestry degree from Edinburgh University, and although only 27, had been a Captain in the British Army, serving in France, Germany, and India. Climbing and skiing were passions, and he had climbed in Norway, France, and the Himalayas.

He was accepted into the N.Z. Forest Service, and briefly spent time as an appraisal officer at Mamaku before going to Rotorua for induction courses and specialist training. Following these, he was assigned to the National Forest survey with responsibility for it over a large area of Nelson, Marlborough, and North Westland.

It was a tough assignment, made tougher by the fact that many kiwi males of that period slightly resented English migrants. This was not made any easier by Ralph's clipped English accent, his precise and methodical way of doing things, and his reluctance of going to the pub with the boys. But Ralph was not only strong, he was very tough and resilient, and appeared not to notice the taunts. Ralph was in fact a natural leader, his defining feature being his enthusiasm for any task that he tackled.

His Nelson base for the Forest Survey work was Golden Downs, and he did some work on the State Forest too. In 1956 the N.Z. Institute of Forestry held its annual conference at Hanmer Springs, and most delegates arrived by car. But not Ralph - he walked through from Golden Downs!

In 1955 he had married Forest Service Draughting Officer Nancy Walls, and in 1960 the couple shifted to Napier to help set up the North Island branch of the Forest & Range Experiment Station. This gave him the opportunity to work in the mountains and he wasn't beyond a bit of amusement. On one occasion, doing an exploratory crossing of the southern Kaimanawas with a group of soil conservators, he secretly carried a light rifle in his pack. It was a Browning .22 of which the barrel could be separated from the stock. On the second evening he sneaked away and shot a deer, and cooked the back steaks for tea. He didn't show the rifle, and told his incredulous companions he had just run it down - "They get tired after a while". They were very impressed until (at the end of the trip) he produced the little rifle.

By this stage Ralph had wide experience of indigenous vegetation and had published a couple of useful papers, so in 1962 he was transferred to Rotorua to take charge of the training of Forest Rangers. He did this task with his usual enthusiasm, and graduating Forest Rangers had a range of skills that was respected by their professional forester colleagues. Of course he led each annual intake into various North Island ranges, and over a period of several years the trainees constructed the (now popular) track up the Mohaka River to Mangatainoka hot springs.

In 1970 Ralph went to Nepal with Ed Hillary and others. Ralph's job, under the Colombo Plan, was to ascertain what could be done about the rapidly diminishing forests in the Solo Khumbu region. The influx of Tibetan refugees and the popularity of climbing and trekking had taken a heavy toll of the local forests. He was the first of three New Zealand foresters who have now shaped a significant recovery of Nepal's most vulnerable forests.

But disaster struck in 1972 when Ralph and his family were involved in a serious car crash. The children were OK; Nancy lost an eye and suffered permanent leg injuries, and Ralph ended up with severe head and chest injuries, and lost his left leg below the knee. He was 6 months in hospital. The brain damage was pretty severe, and when he returned to work it was perforce a minor role - looking after the visitor centre at Whaka Forest's famous redwood grove. As usual, it was a job he tackled enthusiastically.

In retirement he made some beautiful items from wood, including a boat which he used to get access to several local lakes so that he could improve the tracks. But he always hankered after big challenges. I called at his house one evening and found him surrounded by maps of Nepal, Tibet, and Mongolia. "I want to go over this pass and walk up through Mongolia, but I don't know whether to turn left and go on to Europe, or to turn right and come down through China." He envisaged walking much of the way, although he had only one foot. He started the journey in 1983, walking from Mussoorie (near Dehra Dun) but broke his artificial leg, which shattered his dream shortly after starting. His wife posted a replacement leg to Athens and Ralph spent the following few months travelling Europe, visiting 18 countries.

His wife chose these lines of Shaun Barnett to mark his passing, and they are particularly apt:-

I HAVE LIVED

*I have trod the mountain path
Summit arising around me
Alpine blooms dazzling in the sun.
I have swum in icy rivers
My breath sucked from me
The purest liquid on earth.
I have stood in the forest
Their towering trunks above
Tall in their cloaks of moss.
I have watched the sun
Rise over distant mountains
And rejoice at the warmth.
I have lived.*

Ashley Cunningham