

Memories of Robert Stephens and early days of the Eastern Province Mountain Club

- Peter Blignaut 21-02-2001

At the age of ten I had read and dreamt mountain adventure. So, on fortuitously meeting Robert Stephens as a 13 year old schoolboy, he soon became my hero, and eventually my mountain mentor. Looking back I can appreciate how he has influenced many of my actions and philosophies. On many occasions I climbed alone with Robert. We would say *totsiens* to his wife Kitty, and head off into the mountains.

Robert Stephens was a compulsive climber and explorer, who particularly enjoyed traversing mountain ranges. At that time most mountain ranges were only covered by 1:500 000 maps, and much terrain was unknown. As a resident engineer he moved around a lot and got to know and appreciate the mountain splendour, particularly the Cape Fold Mountains. He told me that he refused to take on civil operations in flat areas. In 1949 Robert had advertised in a PE newspaper for a climbing companion with a vehicle (for undertaking traverses when two vehicles were required). His only response was from someone trying to sell him a rucksack. Robert enjoyed the environment around him as well as the adventure. He knew the birds and fauna and the dominant botanical species. He could read the weather and constantly monitored temperature and pressure changes. I was quite a useful companion, as I had to open gates. For instance there were 12 gates that had to be opened on the gravel road to Graaf Reinett. Robert drove very fast and one night on the way back the Opel crashed through a closed gate at 70 mph. We got home with one light still functioning.

Robert was a man of action - he did not waste words. I remember being impressed with his reaction when in standard 9 at Grey High School, the principal Flash Gordon called me to his office. He told me I had to stop this stupid mountain stuff as at Grey you play Rugby. This messed up weekend climbing during the rugby season for a time. When I told Robert, he said - 'Fuck Them'. This has been my general attitude to authority ever since.

All the school years I climbed with Robert he would not permit drinking water until about noon - as this would weaken one. Thereafter the salt tablets came out and you could drink again. Some evenings I used to walk down Whites Road to Robert's flat. After coffee and mountaineering talk we would go to the bedroom, put a rope around the leg of the bed, and abseil out of the window 3 floors to the ground.

Robert was exhilarated by sunrises, which meant early starts. I recall sleeping on the summits of Manneljiesberg and Smutsberg to be able to view the sunrise.

Shortly after the EP Mountain Club became a section of the MCSA, a group headed out to climb Peak Formosa, under R S's direction. It was winter and snow was lying thickly on the Tsitsikamma range. Rain was pouring down as we drove out on a Friday night to our destination. Molly Griffiths and Robert were in the bakkie cabin and I was in the back under a tarpaulin with all the rucksacks (or most of them). I think there were two other vehicles.

At Karreedouw we stopped and everyone marched to the pub - except me who was not allowed in. I sat for a long time in the bakkie and every now and again someone would come out and give me a cooldrink. It was pretty late when everyone appeared and I climbed back under the tarpaulin in heavy rain. Robert started the bakkie and then stopped and told me to get in front with them. Off we went at high speed, straight for the bridge over the flooding river. Robert did not take any notice of the fact that the bridge was curved so we drove straight over the edge leaving parts of the bakkie and axle behind as we crashed over the concrete side bollards. We flew into the water in the dark. Luckily the vehicle remained upright. The water flowed in and we opened the door away from the current and managed to get ashore. We sustained a few cracks and bruises. I remember my dad saying what a shock he got as he saw the great display of sparks and light observed from the following vehicle. People quickly came to assist, rigging up a

spotlight and cable to drag the vehicle ashore - which destroyed most of what was remaining of the undercarriage. Most if not all of the rucksacks were thrown out and disappeared in the raging river, not to be found.

Then a policeman came out of the pub to arrest Robert for drunken driving. The policeman was so inebriated he could hardly walk, but he arrested Robert anyway - where he was kept for a couple of days under lock and key - I remember from the mutterings of the elderly that the new EP Section nearly collapsed because of this incident. Robert was contrite for a time after the event.

Robert was a man who showed concern for his companions and was always prepared to help, not that he would tolerate any lame ducks. We learned our rock climbing from him on the Lady's Slipper. My sleeping bag was a blanket closed with safety pins. After the fire in winter he would help me place hot rocks on either side of my nest - which would keep me warm most of the night. I recall Robert Stephen's enthusiasm for the new climbing group. Others who made an impression were Desmond Pollock, Denis Moore and Eric Sauer - the latter telling many dirty jokes around the mountain fire, which caused some controversy in the club, but which spiked my young ears. Robert used Betty Davis and myself in 1961 as guinea pigs to see whether it was possible to traverse from Waaihoek to the Hex River Valley climbing all the peaks en route and exiting Morraine Kloof - in a normal weekend. I abandoned food and gear along the way, and returned with bloody feet. He was a fast climber and was very upset when I beat him to the summit of Cockscomb - as a 15 year old.

Robert was a born navigator. He seldom if ever got lost in the mountains. I tried to emulate him and purchased an aircraft altimeter from the British ex army stock - which 1-kg instrument I used to drag up the mountains. He did lose his cool once climbing on the Witteberg in the Toitskloof area in 1960. He led Betty Davis, Elsie Esterhuysen and self in error onto the precipitous south face in stormy conditions. There we sat, lost in a howling wind and driving rain with waterfalls disappearing beneath us. This was not to Robert's liking - and when Elsie E, the scientist starting collecting grass specimens, he bellowed at her 'Woman stop this botanical nonsense, you are going to die here!' - turning to me he said 'You're a bloody surveyor, get us out of here'. That was quite a compliment coming from Robert Stephens.

Robert's wife Kitty was a wonderful person, she worked for the Red Cross in their Blood Transfusion department. She was understanding and long-suffering of Robert's needs and situation, which included being away a lot at work, compulsive mountaineering and a liking for the bottle. She eventually went to live with her relations in the Channel Islands where she died some 5 years ago.

In 1966, Robert, not finding a companion went off on his own on a traverse of the Du Toits - Goudini mountains. He did not return. For six days about 40 MCSA members and police searched for his without success. Two days after the search had been abandoned, an airforce helicopter on a training mission spotted a smoke signal and rescued Robert. He had been exploring a side gully, in this huge and rough area and broken his foot in the process. He had only managed to crawl a couple of hundred metres from the site of the accident.

Two things happened after that. He was severely reprimanded by the MCSA for climbing alone - and during the following year his mountaineering was severely hampered by the injury.

In November 1967 our second son was born and we sent Robert Stephens a card saying that we had now named our sons Robert and Stephen respectively, after him. In December 1967 he flew to England and on Xmas eve (I was told), shot himself.

He requested that his ashes be scattered by his five closest climbing friends - on Sentinal Peak summit, in the middle of the Hex River mountains which he loved and respected. Betty Davis, Elsie Esterhuysen, Syd Philby and myself scattered his ashes on the summit under a blood red sunset.