

Doco celebrates an epic, forgotten Australian adventure

Garry Maddox

Almost exactly 60 years ago, an intrepid team set sail from Australia on an adventure that would take them more than 6000 kilometres to what has been called the world's loneliest island.

Led by celebrated adventurer Warwick Deacock, the team hoped to be the first expedition to climb Big Ben, a mountain on Heard Island, a remote Australian territory in the Indian Ocean between Australia, South Africa and Antarctica.

They could have died many times. However, they not only summited a peak more than 500 metres taller than Mount Kosciuszko, but they all returned home safely after four months away.

Adventure filmmaker Michael Dillon, who helped the crew prepare as a Sydney schoolboy, calls it "one of the least known, yet most audacious Australian adventures of the 20th century".

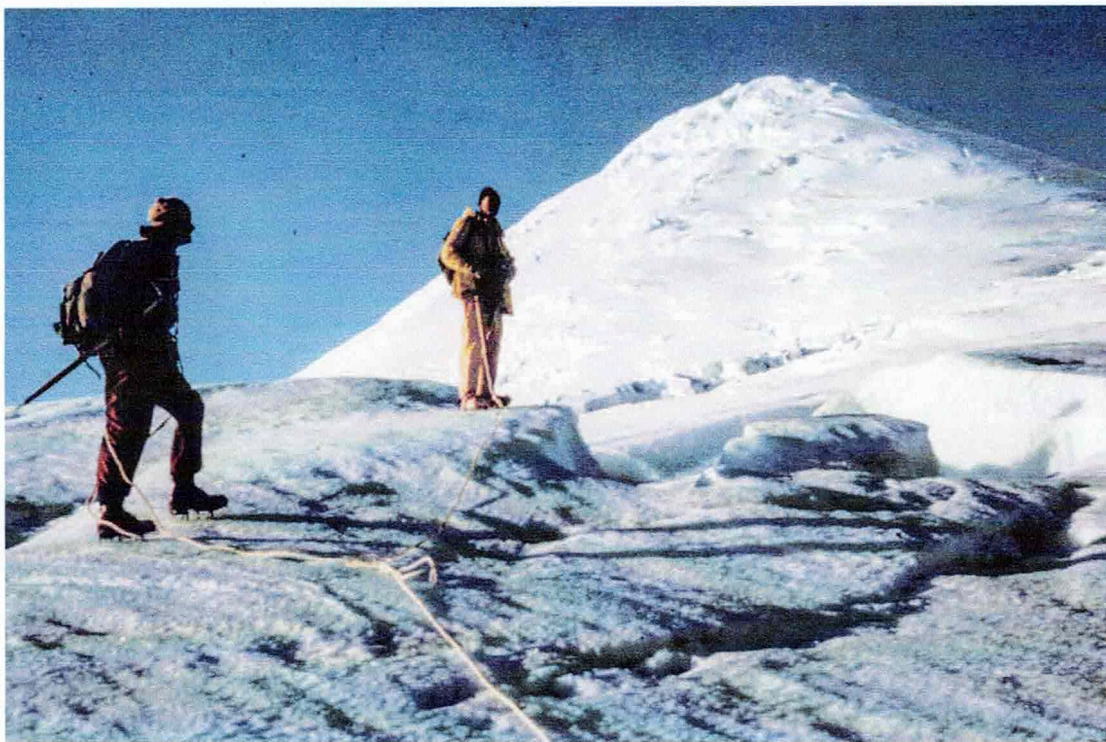
Dillon has drawn on a remarkable archive of 16 millimetre film shot during the expedition to make the documentary *The Great White Whale*, which was how they referred to their Captain Ahab-like obsession to climb the mountain after an earlier failed attempt.

It was an adventure from another era. The gentlemanly crew, including three doctors, a teacher and an engineer, chartered a 20-metre gaff-rigged schooner and recruited famous mountaineer-turned-sailor Major Bill Tilman as skipper.

"Most of them hadn't even sailed before," Dillon says. "The bravest of them all couldn't swim."

With polite letters, they convinced Kellogg's to supply enough breakfast cereal "to last 10 men four months", NZ pie makers Big Ben to send 2000 pies, CSR to provide two barrels of rum, Rolls-Royce to service the boat's engine and new newspaper *The Australian* to buy the rights to their story.

Even getting onto Heard Island



The film records the adventurers conquering "the world's loneliest island" and displaying flags during their triumph. Photos: Michael Dillon

before starting the climb was dangerous: two men almost drowned when they were trapped beneath their capsized rubber raft in the rough surf.

"As one of them said, it was the first expedition to start from below sea level," Dillon says.

His motivation for making the film was to pay tribute to Deacock, the late founder of the Australian Outward Bound School, who was also Dillon's filmmaking mentor.

"As the crew all got into their 80s, I realised they had this amazing story to tell, so I'd better sit them down in armchairs and get them to tell it before it was too late," he says.

Dillon, who also shot films on adventures led by Sir Edmund Hillary from 1977 to 2000 as well as the first Australian expedition to climb Mt Everest in 1984, says it was the type of expedition that would never be allowed now.

"They didn't have any harnesses on board so for four months, without a toilet on board, in the roughest of seas, they had to go over the side," he says.

Having self-funded the film, Dillon is travelling around the country showing it at Q&A screenings that will include Sydney's Cremorne Orpheum on October 15 and Melbourne's Cinema Nova on November 3.

