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## A High-altitude Study of Age-related Forgetfulness



A riddle inside an enigma. The summit of Carstensz Pyramid, also known as Puncak Jaya. (All images Victor Saunders)

It began in 2010 with an ancient copy of *New Scientist* magazine and a chance conversation in Sam's Bar in Kathmandu, a long-time Thamel favourite for climbers returning from the big mountains. Dr Rick had just got back from Everest where he had performed heroics in the rescue of Bonita Norris, bringing her down from the South Summit singlehandedly before he was joined at the Balcony by a team of Sherpas.

Slurping his Everest beer, Rick mentioned in passing that he wanted to climb the three highest peaks in West Papua, a province of Indonesia

previously known as Irian Jaya. The three also happen to be the highest peaks in Indonesia, Australasia, Oceania, the Western Pacific rim and doubtless other undefined regions too. Consequently, they are a part of the seven summits lists. I don't usually go in for lists, certainly not long ones, because the seemingly endless reiteration of the same thing quickly becomes boring, like pornography. Yet this short list offered a good reason to travel to an unusual and interesting place with little in the way of repetition.

The three highest peaks in West Papua are Carstensz Pyramid (4884m), Sumantri (4820m), and the unpronounceable Ngga Polu (4817m). This last one used to be number two as late as 1999 before its glacial snow dome began to melt. Sumantri and Ngga Polu now share the remains of the fast disappearing North Wall glacier, which confusingly lies on their south sides. In 2006 I had climbed Ngga Polu, the second highest, now the third. This time our target would be Sumantri now the second, previously the third.

There are three ways to access the Carstensz group. The simplest, in theory, would take a few hours, through the Grasberg mine west of the peak, 'Grasberg' being the Dutch for grass mountain. The mine, leased and operated by Freeport, is now a mile-wide hole in the ground easily seen from space and the biggest producer in the world of gold and the third largest of copper. The mine has a recent operating history as environmentally controversial as it is profitable. At the time of writing, June 2017, a major strike is underway and the Indonesian government are hovering in the wings with threats to take back control. To keep out curious visitors, Freeport has prohibited travel through the mine to reach the mountain. This is a great pity because relations with native Papuans make it difficult and dangerous to approach the mountain by passing close to the mine from the short access south side.

A second route, from the north, involves a six-day jungle trek from the jungle village of Sugapa. This has many disadvantages, not least of which is the jungle. This is now the normal approach. The third route and the one we chose this time, is by helicopter, arranged through our excellent agent, less of whom later. Though expensive it would allow us to complete the entire expedition in two weeks instead of four. Like battles, all expeditions have a starting line and for ours there was a choice: Bali or Jakarta. Although when I say 'choice', what I mean to say is, we started from Bali.

Old climbers have a very short attention span. So, while having every intention of looking up Carstensz expedition reports in the library, I found myself leafing through a worn copy of *New Scientist*. Nothing unusual there. But something in particular caught my attention: the summary of a paper on laboratory rats. They had been given a popular asthma drug and somehow this had reversed what researchers had dubbed Age-related Forgetfulness (ARF). After six weeks they were finding their way through the laboratory maze as well as the young ones, showing that old rats can learn new tricks. The magic ingredient was called Montelukast, a leukotriene receptor antagonist, and is a longstanding anti-asthma drug.

I decided it didn't really matter that six rat weeks might be the equivalent of several human years; I just wanted to join the lab rats and regain



Dr Rick and the Temple of Doom: on the rope bridge to the summit of Carstensz.

my memory. On top of which, of course, I am an asthmatic. So, after several false starts and wrong turns, I eventually remembered the way to my GP. In my head I had various elaborate explanations for my newfound desire to become an experimental animal. I needn't have bothered. Dr Natalie is very talkative and long before I could get round to rambling on about why I wanted to try the new regimen, she had prescribed Montelukast for my asthma.

A week later I was on my way to Bali. The Qatar cabin crew were delightfully patient, serving endless rounds of drinks and cheered us with smiles when the children across the aisle refused to sleep. The man next to me snored. I can never sleep on planes, so I drank the weak beer and watched the screen. The best film was *42*. Not the Douglas Adams '42', but the true story of the first black player to break the baseball colour barrier. The film gave a rather ageing Harrison Ford and his lopsided grin a supporting role. It was great feel-good fare, but the reason I found it arresting is that my climbing partner, Dr Rick, can from a certain angle and in the right light appear almost the doppelganger of Ford, the doctor's lopsided grin sometimes giving me the curious sensation that I'm actually climbing with the Hollywood actor himself.

From Bali, Harrison Ford and I flew to West Papua where torrential rain delayed our flight to base camp by two days. Then, rather abruptly on the third morning, we found ourselves dumped by helicopter under the

north face of Carstensz. The idea was to start with Sumantri, via Ngga Polu, and the move on to Carstensz itself. A pile of bags and boxes needed to be transformed into base camp, and we needed to get going on the first objective as soon as possible. The rain was threatening to return in force. Our cook, and sometime engineering student, Arleen made tea. Armed with a bar of chocolate, Rick and I, carrying umbrellas, hurried north for Ngga Polu. It was six years since I had last climbed Ngga Polu. First we climbed out of the Yellow valley, traversing the small ridge separating it from the Dabu Dabu. Splitting a pair of copper blue lakes – Dabu means lake, so Dabu Dabu is two of them – the path rose eastwards before turning north, then continued east for an hour or so, reaching a high col before following easy slabs back north to the summit. I had forgotten all of this so when a new trail led enticingly up into the mists I had a blinding moment of reverse ARF: reverse Age Related Forgetfulness being the condition of remembering things that have not yet happened. So it was that I recognised this path. And when features I didn't recall turned up, for example the lines of burly cliffs barring all upward progress, I assumed I was sinking back into normal ARF and had simply forgotten something I had never seen before.

The path continued to thread its way through large-scale karst scenery, deep intersecting canyons of limestone that were, in essence, a giant maze, one that I was going to find hard to learn. From the confusing central canyons, a deep yellow ravine led to the snout of a tropical glacier. In the mist we could not determine from which summit it flowed and it didn't seem at all familiar. Instinct led us to a scree slope to the west, our left, where we discovered a slightly smaller but equally confusing maze of limestone canyons, then a second glacial tongue. The glacier above us would lead to something, we were sure, but exactly what was hidden in the mists.

Crampons on, and staggering upwards in the fog, calf deep in wet snow, we passed over heat-weakened snow bridges, all the while marvelling at this equatorial glacier. And as we plodded uphill we became increasingly sure that we were nowhere near our target mountain.

Then, out of the clouds, rose a tower of rock.

'This isn't Ngga Polu,' I said miserably. 'Neither is it Sumantri.'

We poked round the back of the tower to see if there was likely looking route to the top. A moat-like canyon surrounded the tower like a castle, filled with clouds and doom, impassable with the small amount of equipment we had brought. We headed back down, following our tracks, hoping for better weather the next day, arriving back at base exhausted from the altitude. We had been to almost 5,000m from sea level without any prior acclimatisation. A less forgetful team would have prepared themselves with a little pre-acclimatising or Diamox. We were dehydrated and hungry, but Arleen fed us well, tea, rice and curry, and next day we left at dawn.

Being a good experimental rat I had taken my asthma drugs in the hope I would remember a bit more about the Carstensz climb than I had the one up Ngga Polu. And it went well: when dawn arrived we were already

halfway up the big long slabs and fixed ropes that lead to the summit ridge. The Grasberg mine was now less than three miles away; we could hear the grinding machinery, with the occasional loud rumble, which, in other mountains, might have signified avalanches. It was turning into a blue-sky day. The limestone was dry and someone had replaced the frayed fixed lines with new static rope. It all felt very good.

The Carstensz summit ridge is a straightforward scramble with one awkward notch that used to involve a short rappel and stiff little climb up the other side. Then a few years ago the notch became a Tyrolean traverse. This year someone had set up a three-strand rope bridge. This was just as terrifying as the Tyrolean but much easier and quicker. We were on the summit of Carstensz in perfect weather in just four hours from base camp. Looking south the coast was concealed behind low-lying fog, the huge Grasberg mine was churning noisily to the west, in other directions the vastness of New Guinea's highlands and jungle stretched away to the blue horizon.

To the north were the peaks of Sumantri and Ngga Polu, with their glacial apron. The weather was so clear we could spot yesterday's tracks in the snow. And then it dawned on me. While looking for Ngga Polu, we had turned back just under the summit of our second objective, Sumantri. I felt sheepish.

'Rick,' I said, as if there was anyone else to speak to. 'You know how people are often mistaken about mountains?' I was thinking of the Cheshire cat; Alice says she has often seen a cat without a smile, but never a smile without a cat.

'Yes?'

'Well, I have often heard of people thinking they were on the right mountain when they were on the wrong one, but I have never heard of anyone thinking they were on the wrong mountain when they were on the right one.'

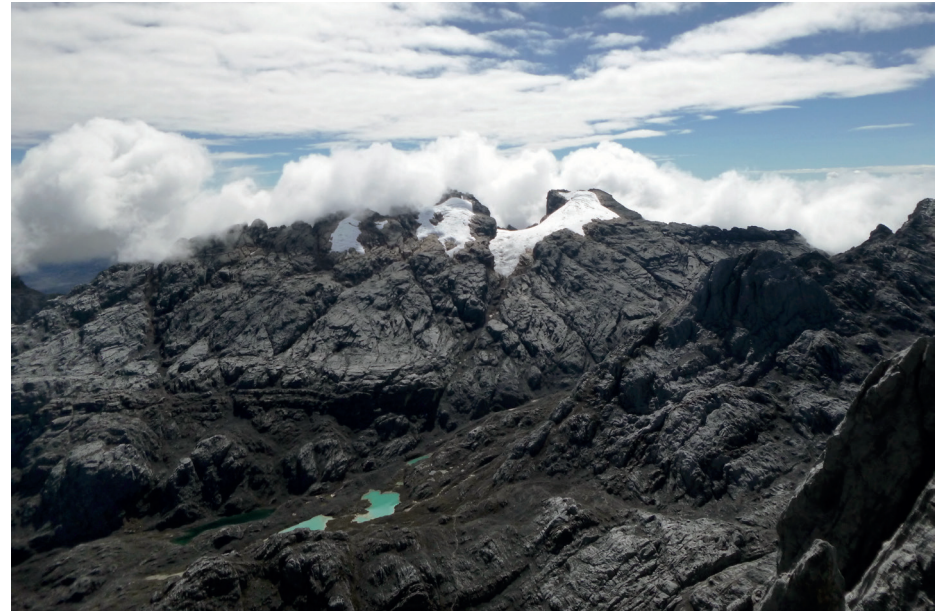
Nodding sadly, the good doctor took a last photograph of himself, posing heroically on the summit, and turned to descend. Hand rappelling the fixed lines, we were back in camp by midday. We had enjoyed perfect weather all day, a situation almost unheard of in New Guinea. Arleen had tea and soup waiting for us. We still needed to re-find the route to Sumantri, so next day, over breakfast tea, we agreed we would follow exactly the same route from two days earlier. Yet within an hour we had abandoned what little discipline we had after spotting a fine looking path that led off over some small bluffs and into a steep canyon in seemingly the right direction. When we joined the old path I failed to recognise the place we had been just 48 hours before. It took 20 minutes of abject confusion before I recognised where I was.

'Some bloody lab rat.'

'What did you say?' the doctor asked.

'Just talking to m'self,' I replied, feeling rather glum, and then plodded off up the next canyon. Rick produced one of his lopsided Hollywood smiles. I still could not work out what it meant. Was it amusement? Or pity?

With better weather it was easy to see the correct route through the rock tower. Easy scrambling soon brought us to the second-highest summit in



The limestone mazes of the Sudirman range and their fast-disappearing glaciers.

Australasia. A couple of kilometres to the east was the now rocky summit of Ngga Polu and north of us the jungle. Rick leant over the northern edge to photograph the steep north wall of Sumantri.

'First climbed solo, by Reinhold,' I said. And looking down into the abyss, we both shuddered at the thought.

Cumulus clouds were now billowing up the south side, our line of descent. Sliding down the glacier, the sky changed its mood. Hail, followed by thunder and then evil lightning, sent us scampering back to Arleen's cooking. Two days later we were in Bali sipping Mai Tais. A young Balinese on a bicycle stopped and stared at the doctor, then asked to be photographed with him.

'You are famous!' the youth said.

'Yes he is,' I told him, 'but please keep it quiet. We don't need to attract crowds right now.' I motioned a zip across the mouth and made him stand beside the good doctor. The youth took his selfie with Rick and went away happy, then we ordered another round of Mai Tais.

'I'm sorry,' I told him, 'it was the only way. He wasn't going to leave till he had his photograph.'

Rick relaxed back on his rattan chair and continued watching the tourists drift by. 'Still, I'm sure about one thing,' I added.

'Yeah?'

'The jury's still out on whether Montelukast works for Age Related Forgetfulness. In fact, on the evidence so far I'm sure it doesn't. But my asthma seems to have gone.'