

RETURN TO
LUCIFER CREEK

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GARY JOLL

NEWS BRIEF EXCLUSIVE EMBARGO LIFTED

After twenty-five years of silence imposed by a Government embargo, Herald readers will tomorrow receive a special lift-out section detailing an exclusive true story.

For more than two decades senior members of our reporting staff have, from time to time, picked up vague rumours of a highly unusual event that occurred years ago in the Lake Tekapo area. This was reputed to be an event of international significance.

Rumour suggested a Government involvement, yet over the years the Herald's efforts to secure information under the Official Information Act 1982 drew continual blanks.

We persisted and slowly began to build a file of sufficient bulk. This allowed us to fill gaps and make some educated assumptions.

Last week we emailed a request to Wellington, having carefully selected a few key words. Yesterday a courier pack was delivered to the desk of our senior chief reporter. Within was a sealed Government file. Stamped cross it were these words: **Embargoed until midnight 7th June 2010.**

Today is 7th June 2010. Read tomorrow's special section.

Memo to Editor

Dear sir,

As requested here's a copy of the manuscript we obtained under the Official Information Act. We'll be running excerpts from it over the next month (obviously some of the private sections will be held back.) We'll lead Saturday's paper with an interview with the author, Barry Morton, who returned recently with his wife to live in New Zealand.

Charles

*Charles Goodwin,
Chief Reporter
The Timaru Herald.*

Chapter One

The sound of the rotor blades forewarned me. I forced myself backwards between two tall tussocks and yanked my rifle and pack close in beside me. Here I was, illegally hunting in the South Island high country, and someone had sent a helicopter out. Maybe they wouldn't see me in my camouflage clothing, wedged between the grasses. I pulled my gauze face mask over my face and lay still.

The helicopter slowly drifted into view. My mask and the partial screen of cascading alpine grass blurred my vision. I'd been expecting a small Hughes 500, or the like, but this was a giant of a chopper, painted various shades of dull grey; a camouflage pattern the same colours as the greywacke rock cliffs and gravel slides of the basin. It slowly lumbered from left to right across the basin, just thirty meters below my hiding place.

Was this ugly grey giant searching for me? I had a fleeting second or two to note pilot and co-pilot. Double sliding doors behind the cockpit indicated the machine was designed to carry passengers and cargo. As the helicopter increased its distance from me, I saw it carried no identification markings. I knew all helicopters in New Zealand are required to display a three-letter ID beginning with the letter 'H'. This ugly brute did not. Why?

At the far southern rim of the basin, perhaps 500m from my hiding place, the chopper made a slow 180-degree turn downhill to repeat a further search of the basin. As it turned, I felt a chillness in my spine. If this chopper was after me, I was in big trouble. The double doors on the right side of the machine were wide open, revealing a long-barreled,

tripod mounted machine gun. A gunner stood behind it. Beside him, a second person held an ammo belt.

I dared not blink. With the monster immediately below me, I noted the two gunners were wearing a uniform. It was a modern camouflage pattern, many shades of grey, the same shades of the helicopter.

Still hidden, not moving, I continued to watch until the chopper made a turn and began to fly directly away. I pulled binoculars from my shirt front, flicked my face mask and the tussock grass aside, and followed the progress of the intruder as it increased speed. The helicopter finally settled on a westerly course across the wide riverbed of the Godley Valley.

As the chopper rapidly increased the distance, losing altitude all the time, its camouflage blended with the grey gravel of the broad riverbed; a smudged and blurred diminishing image in my x10 binoculars. Discarding the binoculars, I set up the spotting scope on its tripod and, with it cranked up to its maximum x40 magnification, soon had the departing helicopter in full sharp focus.

When the chopper reached the far side of the valley it began a slow searching circle of the tussock and matagauri flats below the moraine wall of the Classen Glacier. The Eade Hut was there, and I knew it was occupied; I'd seen lights there for the past two nights. Clearly the occupants were still there for parked beside the hut was an older model Toyota Landcruiser.

The chopper completed what seemed to be a full search of the landscape surrounding the hut. It hovered briefly and landed on an open section of gravel close to the hut. As the skids touched the ground, the left side double doors opened. Within seconds, eight to ten camo-clad individuals, all carrying short weapons, fanned out into a skirmish half circle and advanced on the hut.

I kept my eye to the eye-piece of the scope, both chopper and hut in focus. Two hunters emerged from the door of the hut and began walking towards the chopper. The chopper occupants lifted their weapons. Both hunters stumbled and fell forward. Seconds later came the faint chatter of small arms automatic weapons.

My hand shook on the scope. The camo-clad group trotted up to the hunters. They checked them, then opened both doors of the Toyota and threw the bodies onto the front seats. Next they entered the hut and came out with the hunters' gear, including their rifles, all thrown into the back

of the old Toyota.

The distance and the fading light, combined with the camouflage uniforms, made it difficult for me to determine why they next spent a few minutes at each wheel of the Toyota. One person climbed via the bull bars to stand on the vehicle, his arms extended high above his head. Ah, then I understood. The chopper lifted from the ground, its motor increasing power. Slowly the chopper drifted towards the Toyota to hover immediately above. The strop man jumped off the vehicle, the engine increased in power, and the grey giant easily lifted the Landcruiser, the vehicle that contained proof of murder. The chopper rose slowly, effortlessly, and then turned up valley towards the Classen Glacier. I now knew with gut-wrenching certainty what they would do next.

Below the glacier, between it and an ancient terminal glacier moraine wall, is a deep, black and cold permanent lake, frozen over throughout winter and containing floating icebergs during the warmer months. Like watching a slow-motion movie, a movie one has seen before so knows what is about to happen, I watched as the chopper slowed its forward movement, then jumped upwards as the weight of the vehicle was released. The Toyota splashed into the black lake. Waves bounced the icebergs slowly up and down.

I knew with absolute certainty that the Toyota and its contents would never be found. Within weeks the lake would freeze over for the duration of the coming winter, hiding any oil slick that might occur. Had I just witnessed the murder of two kiwis by foreign terrorists who'd invaded our country? Surely not. Such things don't happen in New Zealand. One fact I was certain of, I'd witnessed murder, not some staged military maneuver, for even the military, during an exercise, would never pollute a pristine alpine lake with oil and diesel fuel.

The chopper returned to a matagouri-encircled flat near the old Eade Hut to land and shut-down. Someone passing nearby on foot would never notice the grey machine. The matagouri was as tall as the rotor blades. While I'd been absorbed by the chopper hiding the evidence of cold-blooded murder, the camo-clad assassins had disappeared.

Cold blooded murder! As the approaching chill of night invaded my clothing I shivered, and a bleak thought entered my mind. Would they have killed me and hidden my body had they located me high in the head

basin of Lucifer Creek?

I'd hidden because for the past two weeks I'd been unlawfully hunting on Lilybank Safari Lodge property, searching for a single particular and unique bull tahr. I'd hastily hidden because I'd thought the property owners had sighted me and sent a chopper to locate and apprehend me. I was dressed in camo appropriate for the environment. Had this clothing and the short forewarning noise of the chopper rotor blades saved my life? What on earth was happening in the Godley Valley?

I remained in my hiding place till well after dark. I kept the spotting scope focused on the area adjacent to the Eade Hut until the light failed and further surveillance was pointless. Sometime after full darkness, the monster chopper started its engine, warmed up for a period, and finally lifted off. By the noise I could judge that after gaining height, the chopper flew west over the 2000m pass at the head of the Classen Valley. But to where? Out there was nothing but alpine wilderness and the Tasman Ocean.

My planned destination that day had been the tiny tarn high in the south-east corner of the Lucifer Basin. Stumbling in the dark, not daring to use my torch, I cautiously worked my way down hill, angling across the gravel slides until the mirror-like surface of the tarn was finally visible in the moonless night.

I was afraid to light my small gas cooker for fear of the flame being seen. I simply ate the last of my two muesli bars and washed them down with icy cold water from the tarn. I didn't erect my one-man tent, but after sliding into my sleeping bag, I wrapped the tent around me. My pack was my pillow, the star filled heavens my ceiling.

Sleep was elusive. My mind chased all I'd witnessed around and around in ever confusing circles. But every whirling circle arrived at the same word – murder. I'd witnessed murder.

Under normal circumstances a person hearing an approaching helicopter would every time stand and watch it passing, no doubt would wave. My acting like a fugitive had saved my life. As sleep finally won I told myself, Tread carefully tomorrow, Barry Morton.

Chapter Two

It was a bath, not bull tahr that had brought me to Lucifer Creek. After ten days of hunting high alpine basins, towering cliffs, treacherous rock ridges, and thundering gorges, I was tired from the physical demands of my quest. Also, my nose told me it was time I sought hot water and plenty of soap.

Unbeknown to all but my family, and discovered by my dad many years ago, Lucifer Creek holds a unique secret. While working for the New Zealand Forest Service, as a shooter culling tahr, Dad had accidentally discovered a thermal pool hidden in a virtually inaccessible pothole deep in a narrow side gorge. In my early teenage years, my dad had introduced me to trophy hunting, and when we'd hunted the Godley Valley, Dad had shown me the secret of the Lucifer.

That's not all. To one side of the thermal pool, a steep rock shelf slopes sharply towards the water. Behind this rock buttress, screened by a robust matagouri bush, a narrow low cleft some three meters in length and not 40cm high, leads to a small cave with a sandy floor. Prior to my illegal hunting sortie, I had left a cache of supplies in the cave. A fresh cake of soap and soothing hot water awaited me, plus fresh provisions.

My short period of troubled sleep ended long before dawn. Woolly-headed, still in my sleeping bag, in total darkness, I dared to make a small billy of porridge. I sheltered the gas cooker by curling my body, as fully as possible, around the cooker's flame. A hot drink would have to wait for I'd used my last tea bag.

I was in a quandary. On the one hand, I was fearful that if I waited

until after daylight to seek the safety of the hot pool and cave, I could be discovered by the men from the giant lumbering grey chopper. On the other hand, I was equally fearful of hastening down a treacherous mountain in the pitch darkness. I knew the terrain intimately and was fully aware that a mishap would leave me seriously injured, unlikely to be rescued.

Commonsense prevailed. It would be unwise to attempt to race down a mountain in darkness. I'd heard the approaching chopper the previous evening and had had time to hide. Surely if it came looking for me this morning I'd also hear its approach and have time to hide.

Long before the first rays of the rising sun began to lighten the familiar skyline peaks and pinnacles of the Lucifer Basin, I was packed and ready to move.

My greatest danger of discovery would be during the traverse from the tarn down and across the wide gravel basin, for the basin was devoid of any form of cover. Having safely crossed the basin I would descend through an area of extremely steep and broken rock ridges, plenty of cover, but requiring slow and careful travel. This section would lead me directly to the bed of Lucifer Creek.

As soon as I could clearly see the gravel ten meters away I began my descent, wanting desperately to cross the open basin section and reach the rocky ridges long before full daylight. After ten days of hunting challenging mountains, I was fit, moving easily, fluid in my movements. But I wasn't relaxed. My heart wasn't pounding just from the exertion of descending the basin. My ears were strained for the first signal beat of those chopper rotor blades, hoping I'd hear it above the sound of my own footsteps.

Once within the safety of the tortured rock ridges I rested and listened. When I reached the creek itself, the chuckling and churned white waters would mask all hope of hearing an approaching helicopter.

During the long hour it took me to follow the cascading creek towards my goal, I stopped often and stood hidden by the tall matagouri thorn brush bordering the creek. I listened as best I could and searched the sky above. The only sound was that of the rushing water.

Finally, before me was a 12-metre high vertical grey rock face which at first glance seemed to offer no foot and hand holds for climbing. To my right a small dribbling waterfall murmured, while nurturing all manner