

David Cole

Sylvia Varnham O'Regan talks to Australia's ninth 'Seven-Summiteer'

At 6600 metres up Aconcagua – a mountain in South America's Andes range known for its high winds and unpredictable conditions – Australian-born climber David Cole realised he couldn't go any further.

An hour earlier he had stopped to warm up his feet and toes, which had lost all feeling in the freezing weather, but he couldn't. When his climbing partner Jimmy Herbaugh reached the point at which Cole was sitting, he was having the same problem, and the pair made the difficult decision to abort their pursuit for the summit.

A lot was on the line for Cole. Having already spent two and a half weeks on the mountain and aborted another attempt on its east side, with diminishing food supplies and bad weather on the way, he had a creeping fear that history was going to repeat itself. Eleven years earlier he had tried, unsuccessfully, to climb Aconcagua, and he was determined to make it to the top this time.

Summitting the mountain would mark the end of Cole's quest to climb the world's 'Seven Summits' – the highest peaks in each of the seven continents – that began in 1999 when he climbed Australia's Mount

Kosciuszko, and was set to end on this trip in December 2011.

The pair set out early the following morning, hoping to get some sun on their backs as they tried, once again, to reach the top.

'I was nervous,' Cole says. 'If I didn't summit on that particular day it would probably mean having to go back for the third time.'

'In the end, I was fortunate. The weather just held and I was strong on the day.'

He made it to the top and became only the ninth Australian to climb all seven summits. It was a long way from Maryborough, Victoria, where Cole grew up.

COLE'S LOVE OF the outdoors started early and grew when he moved to Melbourne at 18 years of age. It was there he began taking trips up the High Country to go bushwalking, and later became interested in bigger adventures.

At the end of the 1990s, with a job offer in the US, he made plans to travel to Rio de Janeiro for the millennium. He and two friends planned to climb Aconcagua – then considered a hiking peak – while they were in South America. It was Cole's first high-altitude experience and despite the disappointment of having to turn back just shy of the top (or perhaps because of it), he was hooked.

In the following five years he lived in the US and, between working full-time in the automotive industry (as he still does today), Cole went on numerous expeditions in South America, Canada, Mexico and the west coast of the United States.

Usually he climbed alone; other times with a local guide or small group of friends. He liked to stay independent and shied away from organised tours.

But it wasn't solitude he was looking for. 'It's all just the adventure. Looking at the map around the world, looking at some interesting peaks and seeing what's attainable,' he says.

As for the mental and physical challenges of scaling the world's highest mountains, Cole says that's all part of the appeal.

'I like to put myself in an environment



Summit of Vinson Massif, Antarctica, November 2011. Photos supplied by David Cole



High on the Lhoste Face approaching the South Col, Everest, May 2008.

'A lot of the appeal was in the travelling,' he says. 'Without the goal of climbing the seven summits, I'm not sure I would necessarily have visited all of the continents.'

where I challenge myself in both senses. That's what I enjoy. And the mountains are a great place to do that.'

One of the most testing environments Cole experienced was Alaska's Mt McKinley, also known as Denali, meaning 'the high one'. At 6198 metres, McKinley is the highest peak in the United States and, due to its proximity to the Arctic Circle, prone to extreme weather. Cole climbed the notoriously difficult West Buttress route of the mountain with a small group of friends.

'For the three weeks we were on the mountain there was a lot of work; carrying loads, shovelling snow, cooking in frigid conditions. Everyone had to really pull their weight,' he says.

Another memorable peak was the iconic Mt Everest, which appealed to Cole long before he began alpine climbing. On a

backpacking trip in 1992 he walked from the village of Jiri in northeast Nepal to Everest's base camp.

'Everest always had an allure,' he says. 'It has that depth of mountaineering history.'

He returned to Nepal in 2008 and reached the mountain's summit. He went on to reach the remaining five summits: Mt Elbrus (Europe), Denali (North America), Kilimanjaro (Africa), Vinson Massif (Antarctica) and Aconcagua (South America), in the following years. He had already climbed Mt Kosciuszko in 1999.

NOW BASED IN Thailand, Cole is newly married and he and his wife Robbie are expecting their first child in November. But he shows no signs of slowing down.

'I get restless if I don't do anything physical,' he says. 'My plan is to continue

climbing as long as I can.'

And he's never short of things to do. Aside from mountaineering, Cole is a keen marathon runner, paraglider and traveller.

'A lot of the appeal was in the travelling,' he says. 'Without the goal of climbing the seven summits, I'm not sure that I would necessarily have visited all of the continents.'

But he did visit all of them, a realisation that hit him while standing on the final peak of Aconcagua in December 2011. Bad weather had forced him off the hill the day before, and the memory of his first attempt 11 years earlier had never been far from his mind. But this time, after many years, air miles, highs, lows and tests of endurance, he had reached the top.

His friend and climbing partner Jimmy was two hours behind him, so Cole savoured the accomplishment alone. 'It was a sweet moment, because there was a lot working against us and it really came down to that one opportunity on that one day to have any chance of summiting the mountain,' he says.

'And I had made it.'