

THE ALPINE JOURNAL

VOL. LV

MAY 1946

NO. 272

SOME EXPERIENCES IN MOUNTAIN WARFARE TRAINING

By F. S. SMYTHE

Read before the Alpine Club, December 10, 1945

IN Napoleon's time a campaign could be won by an infantry army which crossed a mountain range. Nowadays, infantry must be supported by guns, armour and motor transport. These require roads, and roads in mountainous country are few and far between. Thus, mountain warfare is a struggle to seize and hold communications. It is in this struggle that mountain troops are necessary. Mobile, lightly armed units, highly skilled in mountaineering, must range the flanks of communications and carry out raids on the enemy's rear to disrupt his communications and shoot up his transport parks, headquarters and so forth. Others must act as flank guards to major attacks on enemy positions astride the axis, which attacks will be made by mountain divisions trained to operate a few miles and within artillery support from the axis; such troops will be trained only to operate below the permanent snowline and are designated 'blackshod,' the lighter, more skilled troops, which operate above the snowline, being 'whiteshod.' In winter, however, all operations may be 'whiteshod'; thus all troops must be trained in both summer and winter warfare. There are, of course, many secondary factors, principal among these being the use of the air arm with its influence on communications, reconnaissance, supply, and airborne and parachute landings. In conclusion, it must be stated that there is no fundamental tactical difference between fighting in mountains and fighting in lowland country; it is a matter of adaptation, but a vital adaptation to new conditions physically, technically and, not least, psychologically.

At the commencement of the war Germany had twelve or more mountain divisions, but the majority of these were later engulfed in Russia. We had none, and our experience was limited to fighting on the North-West Frontier of India against a lightly armed guerrilla type of enemy, plus some limited activity during the war of 1914-18 on the Alpine front.

In 1939 a suggestion was made to a certain high ranking officer that the problems inherent in a global war, in which fighting was certain

to take place in hilly and mountainous country, should be studied, at all events by a nucleus of experienced army officers and mountaineers. His reply was, 'My dear fellow, who on earth wants to fight on mountains?' It is a sad fact that to many people the close juxtaposition of contour lines on a map is suggestive not of possible advantage but of direst possibilities. As an officer in Italy remarked, a trifle peevishly, 'We always seem to have to fight the blighters uphill': a remark which sums up the foremost art of mountain warfare, use of ground.

In 1939-40 preparations were made for a so-called 'Finnish Expedition,' and there was formed a unit called the 1st Scots Guards Ski battalion. Meanwhile I worked at the War Office designing and ordering clothing and equipment. It was heavy clothing, possibly because my original instructions were to produce clothing equally suitable for the Himalaya, the Balkans or the Sub-Arctic regions. Preferring to be on the safe side I plumped for the Sub-Arctic. In this I was assisted by Mr. Edward Shackleton. We had been working for some weeks when a member of the Cambridge Institute of Polar Research appeared to tell us that a complete dossier of equipment designed for just such an operation as Finland or Norway had been sent to the War Office before the war. It had, but no one was able to find it. All this, and much more, was typical of the days of the 'Phoney War.'

Turning to a lighter theme, Shackleton desired to show officers of the War Office and Ministry of Supply some of his father's polar equipment. A large box full of this was brought to the Ministry of Supply and placed before the assembled company, which included Lord Woolton and various generals. Somewhat in the manner of a conjuror about to produce a smiling lady in spangled tights, Shackleton proceeded to undo the cords securing the box. Next instant the lid flew open and out billowed a vast swarm of moths leaving behind a species of predigested powder, all that was left of the equipment.

Then came Norway. Our county regiments, unused to anything more formidable than the Mendips or the Cotswolds, advanced along the deep and narrow valleys. There they were ambushed, outflanked, and cut off by enemy mountain troops operating over the mountains. In Greece, where the enemy employed strong forces of mountain troops, much the same thing occurred. At Keren we assaulted frontally exceptionally strong mountain positions for several weeks and suffered heavy casualties in so doing before a turning movement was made and Keren reached, whereupon the Italians' defensive position fell to pieces.

In Italy, where man power was always a vital problem, the lack of mountain troops was manifested not only by the length and costliness of the campaign along the rugged spine of the Apennines, but by the skill, bravery and tenacity (often described in the Press as fanaticism) of enemy mountain troops.

Only one British Division, the 52nd, was earmarked for hill warfare.

It was trained in the Scottish Highlands, which are hardly to be compared with the higher ranges of the Dominions which could easily have been utilised for the purpose. Intended originally for Norway, it subsequently fought in Holland and Germany where it did fine work, another, if apposite, proof of the value of mountain training.

Apart from various cadre courses, ranging from a few days to a few weeks, in the Lebanon, Italy and Britain in skiing, winter warfare, rock climbing, and cliff assault landings, the only unit specifically trained in high mountain warfare was the Lovat Scouts.

The hard fact is that compared with desert and jungle training little was done in mountain warfare training, far less than circumstances justified, and those of us engaged in propagating this new gospel had much uphill work to do on a steep and ever shifting scree slope of ignorance, prejudice and conservatism. And here I should like to pay a tribute to our President, Mr. Amery. He did more than anyone to convince the War Office of the value of mountain training, and it is due to him that in the end a sure foundation was laid of great value for the future not only from a military standpoint, but because of the physical and psychological benefits of such training to the soldier and the youth of this country.

In 1942, Brigadier (now Major-General) R. L. Laycock, then commanding the Special Service Brigade, asked me to form a school at which Commandos would receive winter warfare training of value to them during raids on mountainous coast lines. As he said, 'Commandos must do anything and go anywhere.' I was given a free hand and selected the Cairngorms as the training area. The Western Highlands would have been preferable from a mountaineering standpoint but the Cairngorms are more suitable for winter warfare training. It took three months to requisition the Fife Arms Hotel at Braemar; the rental was above £1,000 per annum and the matter had to be referred from local to higher authority. During this vexatious delay W. M. Mackenzie of the S.M.C. and I reconnoitred the training area.

The greatest charm of the Cairngorms is that of their loneliness and remoteness, for the hills are most of them little more than heathery puddings. But here and there great greedy bites have been taken out of their sides and granite crags formed. These crags are magnificent to contemplate, and their gullies provide first rate snow routes, but they are usually treacherous to climb. Welsh and Lakeland rock can be bad but is usually obviously bad. Cairngorm granite often looks good but is in reality unsound. It comes away in huge lumps and climbing it is like climbing some unmortared, primordial edifice.

The beauty and grandeur of the Cairngorms is best found in the valleys, wild and lovely valleys which rift deeply into the plateau especially from the S., and in the greater crags and corries such as Lochnagar, the easternmost facets of Ben a Bhuird, the range of crags culminating in the splendid Mitre Ridge, the environs of Loch Avon and the crags of Braeriach. It is unquestionably a fine training area especially for long cross country patrol work. Nor must the forests

be forgotten, sheets of timber reminiscent in places of the Canadian North-West. These remnants of the vaster Caledonian forest have suffered severely during the war, while selfsown seedlings unless fenced in never have a chance to mature owing to the deer which now roam the hills in herds greater than ever before. For the rest there is much heather, many acres of quaking bog and unlovely peat hags and a firm springy tundra of moss, dwarf heather and azalea over which one can walk for many miles along the table lands and sheep backed ridge.

The Instructional Staff included two A.C.'s, Major John Hunt, who was Chief Instructor, and Captain David Cox. We prayed for snow. The stores were stocked with Greenland sledges, ski and snow shoes. There was even talk of recruiting a dog team from the local canine populace which ranged from Alsations to Pomeranians; it would have provided a noble spectacle. But there was practically no snow during the winter of 1942-43. Instead it blew. It blew as it does during a Tibetan April. It seemed to us that there were five full gales a week and one hurricane. What happened on the seventh, nobody cared; it was our rest day. I suggested that we should call ourselves the Heather Ski Club and that our badge should be a pair of broken ski over a sprig of heather rampant concealing a pointed rock couchant, the whole emblazoned with a flight of horizontal arrows representing driving rain and sleet. This suggestion gained in appropriateness when I *sitzmarked* smartly on to a sharply pointed rock and had to carry out my duties in a bent up position with a cushion in attendance, to the delight of all beholders.

No. 12 Commando was the first to be trained. They arrived under the impression that they were coming for a change of air and a rest cure. They were right as to the former; as to the latter they were disillusioned, but not, I think, saddened. The reactions of the British soldier to mountain training were as might be expected. There was apprehension, resignation, some inevitable grumbling; then, out of increasing fitness, a zest and, finally, an enthusiasm.

A new word was coined for the Bens and Braes; they became the 'Cuds,' a good Lancashire word, I understand. The local inhabitants were sorely puzzled as to the meaning of a series of notices along the road from Ballater to Braemar which ran something like this: 'You are approaching the Cud Country.' 'You are two miles from the Cud Country.' 'This is the Cud Country.' And finally, 'One mile more to the King of the Cuds.' This last meant me.

The secret of success in mountain training is to teach men to enjoy it. It must never be allowed to become a toughening course—that is the worst possible psychology. Nor must a man in the early stages of a course be driven to the limit of his capacity. It is not easy for a skilled mountaineer, to whom walking and climbing on hills is second nature, to appreciate the viewpoint of the cockney from the Old Kent Road, but unless he does he will fail as an instructor. To the ordinary soldier, mountain climbing in the first place is a 'sweat.' Start him



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

SKIING NEAR THE DEVIL'S ELBOW, BRAEMAR.



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

INSTRUCTIONS AT OGWEN.

[To face p. 236.]

off too hard and he may recover physically but never mentally ; in no pursuit are the physical and mental so interdependent as in mountaineering. He must begin with the easiest of walks and a natural tendency to go too fast must be curbed at the outset. He must always feel that he could have done more. Nurse him, rest him, and he will end by astonishing you, and himself, because he has learned not merely to do it but to like doing it.

It is easy to teach a man the technique of climbing, and given sound instruction he will progress amazingly in skiing. What is far more difficult is to teach him an appreciation of country, route finding, map reading and observation. He will soon learn the secrets of camping and bivouacking, and much that is vital in the make up of the mountain soldier, but it will be a long time before he can acquire foresight, that subtle and delicate judgment, that feel and instinct for country and conditions that comes only from experience. That is why I believe two full years, winter and summer, to be the absolute minimum of training in mountain warfare, and even so there must be careful selection and a natural aptitude.

This is not the occasion to describe training in detail ; I am here to relate impressions and incidents. I well remember one occasion which was productive of the typical humour of the British soldier under trying circumstances.

We had set off from Derry Lodge, each man carrying some 70 lb. of food and equipment with the intention of camping for a week by Loch Etchachan. In Glen Derry it was merely blowing the usual gale, but when we turned the corner into Corrie Etchachan we encountered a hurricane. As we mounted the slopes towards the loch the fury of the storm grew and veritable tornadoes of sleet and hail swept down the glen. I was ahead prospecting for a suitable camping site, and behind me was the leading section, which was commanded by a certain cockney sergeant, one of those humorous grumblers that for generations have been the backbone of the British Army—a type our continental friends and enemies have never fully appreciated. Of a sudden a gust whirled me off my feet and flung me violently down on a rock several yards away. As I lay recovering my wind, which had been knocked completely out of me, I saw the section in single file manfully toiling up towards me. Then came another gust which lifted every man off his feet. As they slowly struggled upright there was a momentary lull and in it I heard the voice of the sergeant : ‘ ‘E can ’ave ’is Everest, every ——— inch of it ! ’

The course began with a cadre of officers, N.C.O.’s and other ranks trained for three weeks as under-instructors, a necessary stiffener as my own small staff was quite unable to cope with a Commando. For a week it was possible to ski, or perhaps I should say slide, since skiing is normally associated with snow, not rocks and heather, on the slopes of Glas Maol and the Devil’s Elbow, then the thaw came and the end of snow training except for gully climbing.

My memories of the Cairngorms are of cross country patrols over

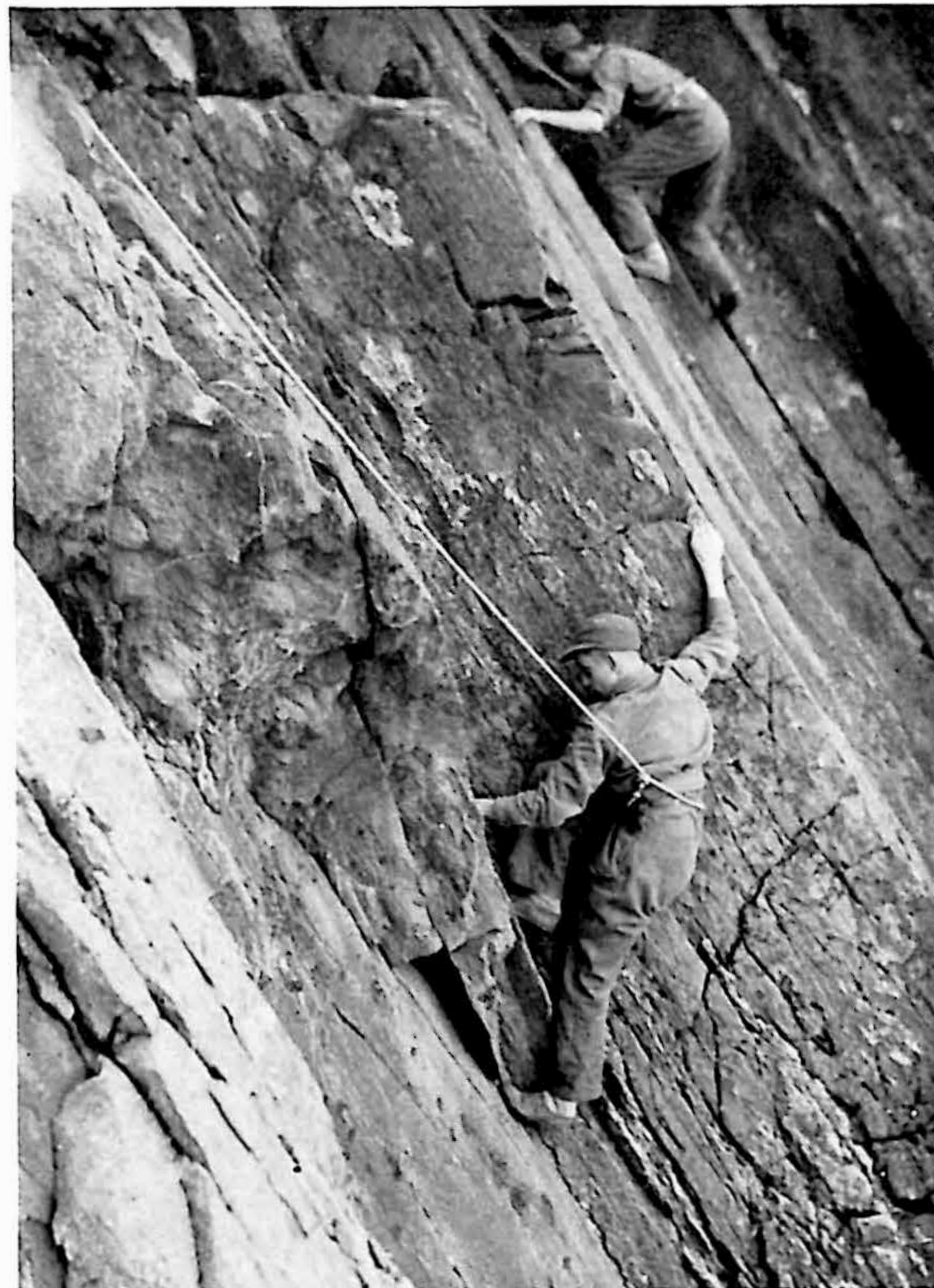
their rolling hills, interminable grinds over heather and bog, miles of puddle and boulder hopping, exhilarating walks over the high ridges and plateaux, days camped in sequestered valleys amidst resin scented forests, and happy hours spent trying to coax the trout out of the streams under the enthusiastic tuition of the M.O., Dr. Eric Fothergill, and David Haig-Thomas in whom we have lost a born naturalist and traveller. If I have been critical of the Cairngorms it is partly because the winter of 1942-43 was an exceptionally bad one for snow and weather, and partly because war and the preparations for war fix a great gulf between the mountaineer and the mountain. To me the mountains seemed not so much hostile as utterly indifferent, whilst the manifold and complex cares of military organisation are utterly at variance with their primitive peace and simplicity. Yet there were many glimpses and gleams through the murk of war, one or two outstanding. On one occasion there was a search party for an instructor who had gone amissing from a solitary walk. It was a night of snow showers and moonlight but towards midnight the snow showers ceased, leaving the moon in full possession of the snow-dusted hills. In order to search the environs of Lochnagar we crossed the shoulder of Carn Beag and descended to the loch. Across the smooth floor of frozen water the face of Lochnagar stood up into the stars. The moonlight, cutting down and across it, revealed every columnar ice-encrusted buttress and thin-turned snow edge but failed to penetrate the gullies which rifted with inky folds the frozen radiance of the Cairngorm's greatest precipice. And finally, to crown all, a cornice full in the moonlight was wreathed like a thin diadem of purest silver across the brow of the mountain. Such a vision was worth even a nocturnal search party and doubtless explained the softness of my chiding when on returning to Braemar next morning I learned that the errant one had also returned, an hour after the search parties had left, and was comfortably in bed.

Another memory, and of an unusual character, is connected with an exercise. I had accompanied a troop across the plateau of Lochan nan Cnapan and down into Glen Eunach on a day of intermittent blizzards when, on the descent to Loch Eunach, a man fell and injured his leg. As I knew where the M.O. was camped I went off in search of him. It was late in the evening and the serried ridges of Sgoran Dubh were being engulfed by yet another blizzard. It was snowing heavily as I made my way down Glen Eunach, and night had fallen before I reached Rothiemurchus Forest. The M.O. should have been camped above the forest near the path to the Larig Ghru and to reach him I had first to cross the stream in Glen Eunach. Unfortunately my electric torch refused to function and in the darkness I took a purler into the swollen stream. As I groped my way on a compass bearing along the fringe of the forest the snowstorm began to abate its fury. The stars appeared and with them an inexplicable ghostly radiance. It was the aurora. A few snow flakes were still falling and as they floated down out of the stars they reflected this



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

PATROL UNDER BEN A' BHUIRD.



Photo, F. S. Smythe.]

SEA CLIFF CLIMBING : ASSAULT LANDING INSTRUCTION ON
BLACK ROCKS NEAR CRICCIETH.

glimmering fire of heaven until I seemed to be in the midst of luminescent flower petals drifting silently to earth. Then, as the diaphanous edge of the snow cloud slowly withdrew the aurora burst forth in full and glorious splendour filling the whole breadth of the northern sky upwards to the zenith with beams, waves and pulses of pearly light.

The rest is anticlimax. At 3 A.M. soaked and half frozen I abandoned a fruitless search, and managed to make a fire by which I sat for the remainder of the night, only to find when daylight came that the M.O., who had descended into the forest to escape the weather, was camped in comfort three hundred yards distant. Happily the injured man had suffered no ill effects—his leg was merely sprained.

This was only one of many experiences, some comfortable and some uncomfortable but all amusing. Many of us can claim, I think, to have seen Professor Collie's Grey Man of Ben Macdhui, for that hill is associated with some remarkable Brocken spectres and fog bows. On one occasion a party of Canadians who were in the vicinity returned to Braemar claiming to have been pursued by a spectral figure that rushed down upon them from over a ridge, then suddenly vanished. I suspect, however, that this was a tribute to another and equally evaporable product of these northern climes.

The Mitre Ridge is undoubtedly the finest climb in the area, but even here there is some treacherous rock. On one occasion I essayed it alone but missed the route near the top and found myself under a crumbling overhang with only loose holds to pull up on. I had ignominiously to call for a rope from a party who were on top of the crag, a justifiable procedure as I was glad to discover, since one of the holds came out exactly like a drawer when the direction of pull was changed, not an uncommon circumstance on Cairngorm granite.

The easternmost corrie of Ben a Bhuidh was a favourite resort for gully climbing and we used to camp there in our miserable two man tents. I say 'miserable' because this was the worst type of tent I know. In 1940 I submitted an Everest 'Meade' to the War Office, a tent of proved design. Now this tent depends for its strength and rigidity largely upon the lateral eave to which the guys are attached. Some genius seeing no point in this dispensed with it and substituted a single guy high up on the wall of the tent. The result was that the sides were pulled out and the roof down until the tent resembled the equestrian curiosity that sometimes appears on the films. At the best, rain collected in a large puddle on the roof to subject the occupants to that slow but effective medieval process of ordeal by water. At the worst, snow collected in such weight that the tent eventually collapsed, sandwiching its wrathful occupants. Thousands of these tents were made and, as I have more than once heard my name mentioned in association with them, I take this opportunity of disowning all connexion with them save that of unpleasant experience.

We were not popular with inspecting officers, and after one or two red-tabbed old gentlemen had been told that if they wanted to inspect

anything, apart of course from kitchens and latrines, they would have to climb the 'Cuds,' we were left severely alone. An exception was made in the case of our own Brigadier and a magnificent camp was laid on complete with a piper, who paraded romantically up and down in the firelight, and every other amenity calculated to soften and impress his inspecting ardour. While on the subject of inspecting officers a useful tip was given to me early in the war. It was, 'Give 'em plenty of bangs.' There is no doubt that the judicious, if extravagant, use of high explosives has sent many an inspecting general away serene and happy.

Courses ended with a week or more of strenuous tactical exercises in which as many as possible of the lessons of basic mountain training were incorporated. They certainly revealed many weak points and the need for a far longer training than could be given during the war. It is easy enough to teach a man to climb, but the finer points such as use of ground, route finding, observation and that instinctive appreciation of country and weather which is the hall mark of sound mountaineering need a long apprenticeship. Map reading, in particular, was always a weak point among officers and N.C.O.'s, and mountain map reading, involving as it does a three dimensional visualisation coupled with an accurate appreciation of space and time, needs much practice.

On the whole, however, exercises passed off well, though I must confess to some despondency on one occasion when a platoon commander preferred to march his men 30 miles along roads rather than walk 5 miles across the hills. But such instances were rare enough to be memorable, and the fitness and enthusiasm of all ranks after a six weeks' training made the instructional staff feel that their efforts had not been in vain.

(To be continued).

ADULA AND OBERLAND : PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

By G. GRAHAM MACPHEE

Read before the Alpine Club, November 6, 1945

IT is a great honour for me to be invited to undertake the task of reading a paper to you this evening, a task for which I am all too ill equipped. You must blame our Honorary Secretary for my being in this embarrassing position. My feeble resistance to his suggestion was soon overcome, for efficient Honorary Secretaries like ours always win in the end. Once they get an idea, they are more relentless than income tax inspectors.