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SOME EXPERIENCES IN MOUNTAIN WARFARE TRAINING

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(Continued)

IN May 1943 we moved to North Wales, being based first on Capel Curig and later on Llanrwst, in order to train cadres in rock climbing and cliff assault landings. Further to assist in this training, which was necessarily of an individual nature, two civilians were attached to the school, Mr. A. W. Bridge and Mr. Williams, a local quarryman. May opened with a snowstorm and a flood which lapped almost to the doors of Capel Curig; then the weather improved, and for the greater part of the spring and early summer the hills gave of their best. There were bad patches, of course, and I should like to place on record a curious electrical phenomenon which occurred during a violent thunderstorm over the Conway valley. A stream of lightning lasting an appreciable fraction of a second struck a hillside. A brilliant blue-green ball of fire then appeared at the point of impact. This remained for fully ten seconds before exploding with a violent detonation. I understand that this is the rare phenomenon known as ball lightning and has something to do with the ionisation of the air consequent upon an unusually sustained and heavy electrical discharge.

The crags of North Wales are admirably suited to rock climbing training, since every route is guide-booked and graded with meticulous care. Climbing indeed has been reduced to the nature of a formula in which the x quantity is the climber and not the climb. Since, however, the most intriguing study of mankind is man, all else falls into its proper proportion, and it becomes quite immaterial what has been written about a particular toe or finger hold when the run out of the rope is uncomfortably long and the exposure unpleasantly obvious.

It soon became clear that strength and agility are the prime essentials on the sound rock of many Welsh courses, and there were few men who were not able to lead a 'very difficult' after but a few days' instruction. I can remember a time when one was conscious of a mountaineering

background to Welsh and Lakeland rock climbing. This background still persists in Scotland, but the grades, the guide books, the scratches, in places snail-like smears on the face of the crags, have wellnigh eliminated it in Wales and the Lakes, and climbing there has become a special yet delightful technique of its own.

Among those trained I can recollect only one failure, curiously enough a Scots gillie who was unable to accustom himself to height. I took him on myself in an attempt to overcome his disability, but when on one of the easy climbs on the W. face of Tryfan the poor man, who had been enduring untold agonies, turned an ashen face to me and announced that he wanted to throw himself down, it was evidently hopeless.

Men were taught to lead almost from the start, and *pour encourager les autres* it was customary for instructors to accompany their parties unroped. I daresay we all of us had our little contretemps. On one occasion, when climbing Route II on Lliwedd, a corporal of my party, more noted for dash than judgment, managed to miss the route and lead out on to a very awkward place. It was necessary to climb up beneath him and advise him as to how he could descend. He remained apparently stuck for what seemed an age, then, suddenly making up his mind just when I was expecting him to come off on top of me, he retired with the utmost nonchalance and aplomb.

There were days also when it was possible to seize an hour or two and indulge a personal fancy unattended by responsibility other than towards one's own neck, on one or other of the crags, solitary hours when it was possible to recapture the ancient peace of the hills.

At the end of the day we would crowd into a bus and return to base, the men often singing classical opera. Thanks to the sensational Press, Commandos became known as toughs and thugs almost to be classed with gunmen and gangsters. I can only say that I did not receive a single complaint from any civilian during the whole course of training. Tough they certainly were, but as for conduct and discipline I do not believe there has ever been a finer unit in the British Army than the Special Service Brigade. We who trained them are proud to have done so. They restored our faith in many human values.

And now I should like to describe an extraordinary incident and a very brave action. It began with the philosophy expounded by Mr. Bridge. He is not only a skilful climber but an adept in the art of falling. I do not mean that he ever falls off accidentally, though I have seen him do so deliberately from a mere 25 feet or so. Like all of us he abhors falling off, but he maintains that if a fall does occur then the climber should use his best endeavours to save himself the worst consequences. If possible he should jump for a ledge, even though it be 100 and more feet lower, rather than allow himself to strike some projection and be turned upside down. Mr. Bridge was assiduous at teaching this to his pupils and one of them undoubtedly owes his life to it.

The first cadre trained in North Wales came from No. 4 Commando. Some time after the course had ended it was detailed to give a demonstration in assault landing on the cliffs some 20 miles W. of St. Ives to various officers from the War Office and Admiralty. The landings were to be made direct from the sea on to the base of the cliffs in light folding assault craft, a most hazardous business.

I travelled to Cornwall to witness the exercise. There was time for only one rehearsal. The boats put off from an L.C.T. and approached the cliffs. The tide was at flood and suddenly a biggish swell began to manifest itself. I, who was near the water, soon realised that a fragile boat could not live in the surf at the base of the cliffs, and I hastily scrambled up to warn Lord Lovat, O.C. of No. 4 Commando. He at once signalled to the boats to stand off. All did so except one boat under the command of Lieut. Haig-Thomas which did not observe the signal. This endeavoured to land its crew on a ledge at the base of a promontory, but directly it touched the rocks it was overturned and its occupants, all of them wearing assault equipment, thrown into the surf. One man was dragged down by the anchor and drowned immediately, and another presently succumbed to the weight of his equipment. A few were hauled to safety on ropes by some men who had been detailed for just such an emergency, but the remainder with the upturned boat were washed into a narrow rift in which the surf raged furiously. Meanwhile I raced along the top of the cliffs followed by Corporal Meddings and Lord Lovat, since the best chance of succour lay in a descent of the promontory to the far side of the rift. In one place we had to cross some steep grass and here Corporal Meddings slipped. He was unable to stop himself and slid down and out over the edge of the cliff, which at this point was fully 100 ft. high, straight into the narrow jaws of the rift. Yet he still had sufficient control over himself when he reached the edge not only to remember Mr. Bridge's advice but to act on it: he jumped. He jumped clear of all projections and disappeared from sight into the rift. I saw him for an instant in mid air, then above the beat of the surf there was a horrible sound far beneath.

Ropes were procured and I was lowered down to the ledge where I found not only Haig-Thomas and the remainder of his crew but, to my astonishment, Corporal Meddings who had no worse injury than a severely dislocated shoulder. As he was in great pain a Neil Robertson stretcher was sent for and he was hauled up the cliff. The others followed one by one, but it was not until long after dark that the rescue was completed. It was then that I heard the story of Corporal Meddings' extraordinary escape and his bravery following upon it. He fell into the rift at a moment when it was deep in water and missed the upturned boat and the struggling crew. Finding himself still alive although with a dislocated shoulder he at once seized hold of a drowning man and after a desperate struggle managed to fight his way to the ledge. Because of his outstanding bravery he was recommended for a decoration but, I understand, did not get one, since the

gentlemen who decide these matters held that his action arose out of fortuitous circumstances.

In July 1943 I accompanied a military Mission to the U.S.A. and Canada. This Mission, which was under the command of Brigadier C. N. Barclay, had as its principal objects the ordering of American mountain and skiing equipment and the selection of a training area for the Lovat Scouts who had been detailed to receive instruction in high mountain warfare.

At Washington I was entertained by members of the American Alpine Club. Nothing could have exceeded their helpfulness and hospitality. Several of them, including Major Robert Bates and Mr. William House, were attached to the Quartermaster's Department which had a large subsection in the Department of Development and Research, devoted entirely to the development of mountaineering and skiing equipment.

For the space of some weeks there were innumerable conferences and in between these I dashed to and fro by air across North America. I must confess that some of us found the conferences a little trying, and it seemed that in these parts the rule is that anyone who decides anything at a conference is not invited to the next conference. At one conference an elderly general raised the question in all seriousness as to the type of oxygen apparatus which would be needed by Alpine troops. Major Rory O'Connor, our equipment officer, certainly had his hands full, but preserved a saintlike demeanour throughout. Finally, when a large quantity of equipment was ready to be shipped to the Middle East, grave doubts were raised as to whether it was after all the right equipment. The Department of Development and Research had one catalogue and the Quartermaster another, and the two did not always coincide. Some of the gear had been ordered out of one catalogue and some out of the other. To make sure, I went to Boston and visited the docks with an American colonel, where we prized open packing cases with a hammer and chisel. Happily all was well.

Jasper in Alberta was decided on as a training base and the well known tourist resort of Jasper Lodge, a delightful village of log huts, replete with every modern convenience, was requisitioned from the Canadian National Railway. My job was to make preliminary arrangements, reconnoitre the training area, prepare a training programme and instruct some eighty-six Canadian instructors in their duties. In this I was greatly assisted by Major Rex Gibson of the Canadian Alpine Club, and together we spent some time examining the training area. The new and splendid road between Banff and Jasper had been opened in 1940. It is one of the finest mountain roads in the world and makes possible an easy approach to innumerable peaks, some of them still unclimbed. Distances however are great. As one old timer remarked to me, 'You'll find the Columbia Icefield chalet handy for the station, I guess.' It is 65 miles from the station.

All mountain ranges have their special characteristics. In the Alps

it is the alps. In the Himalaya it is sheer height and magnificence coupled with the subtle charm of the untrodden and the unknown. But in the Canadian Rockies it is the forests, and he who travels there must perforce fall in love with these vast expanses of timber and the fascinating wild life that dwells therein, even though he may have to toil interminably through the clogging bush and the spillikin-like masses of deadfall.

It was October when we made our reconnaissance, chilly already, and the valleys golden with aspen poplars. We did no difficult climbing but made a number of easy ascents to good vantage points, peaks such as Mount Athabaska, Nigel and Wilcox and various summits in the neighbourhood of Maligne Lake.

The crevasse danger on the Athabaska Glacier, especially where it debouches from the Columbia Icefield, is the greatest I have experienced anywhere. On one occasion Gibson, a Canadian corporal and I were descending off the Icefield in poor light. The glacier was mostly bare ice, yet such snow as there was covered the crevasses with a thin level pie crust which was almost impossible to detect even in good light. Gibson and I had continually cautioned the corporal as to the necessity for a tight rope but with little effect. Suddenly Gibson, who was leading, disappeared into a nasty bottle-shaped affair. The loose rope between him and the corporal ran out; the latter was pulled off his feet and began to slide down the ice towards the crevasse. I got such purchase as I could and managed to check the corporal at the exact moment that he, a powerful man, got his heels into a slightly deeper patch of snow. Gibson meanwhile was some 15 ft. down the chasm. We endeavoured to pull him out, but failed when the rope bit into the tip of the crevasse. I continued to hold the corporal until he had improved his stance—an ice-axe belay was impossible in the hard ice—then approached the crevasse and, cutting away the snow from the rope, praying meanwhile that the corporal would be able to hold Gibson from his insecure stance, inserted my ice-axe between the rope and the lip of the crevasse. Then we both hauled for all we were worth and just managed to raise Gibson who was by then almost exhausted. It was a near thing and it took place 70 miles from the nearest help.

The Canadian instructors began their course in November. Not one of them was an expert mountaineer and Gibson and I were hard put to it to teach them the fundamentals, as well as attend to an avalanche of paper work. Many, however, were expert skiers and Major Groff, the chief skiing instructor, and one or two others were of international reputation. The cold weather had set in and we found the neighbourhood of the Columbia Icefield on which we were based a very windy area, the snow being thin and poor as a result. I remember one ski ascent, that of the Snow Dome, as one of the coldest expeditions I have made anywhere; a gale of wind was blowing and the temperature was minus 20°. One sergeant was badly frost-bitten in both feet and I had a frostbitten rim round my neck between

my helmet and collar ; a fully attached parka should always be worn in these latitudes. Our American boots, supplied later, a dual purpose skiing *cum* climbing boot with a rubber-cleated sole, proved excellent if somewhat heavy. An edition of these boots is the obvious answer to climbing on Everest, since they are excellent on both rock and snow. During this course no special ration was available and it was remarkable to observe how quickly stamina and the power to resist cold deteriorated with the lack of sufficient fats and carbo-hydrates. But the Canadian instructors put their backs into their training, notwithstanding all difficulties, including lack of equipment, which had not arrived from the U.S., and we were a very happy party at the Columbia Icefield chalet hotel.

The advance party of the Lovat Scouts arrived in December but, unhappily for me, the day they did so I went down with appendicitis. I had already had unbeknown several attacks and had staved them off with large doses of castor oil which my medical friends tell me is not the best treatment. Happily, Sandy Wedderburn was able to take over and it was largely due to him that training was carried out so efficiently. Since Major Peacocke has already dealt adequately with the mountaineering and skiing side of training there is nothing I need add, especially since I was able to take little active part in it when I returned. The progress of the Lovats in both skiing and mountaineering was only equalled by their enthusiasm, though, if truth be told, a course of four months can only be regarded as a grounding in high mountain warfare.

To assist in their training six American instructors under the command of Major A. Innes-Taylor were attached from the Arctic Rescue Training Centre at Echo Lake in Colorado, and I should like here to pay tribute to their magnificent work. Among them was Mr. Belmore Browne, the conqueror of Mt. McKinley, who at the age of 65 seemed as tough as ever. He is a fine artist, and his drawings and paintings, especially drawings to illustrate hints and tips in back-woodsmanship, were as useful as they were beautifully executed. He taught us how to build an igloo. Once the various tricks have been mastered there is no doubt that the knowledge could be put to useful and perhaps life saving advantage in many other parts of the world, including the Alps. I remember one instance in which by body heat alone he and I raised the interior temperature from minus 17 to plus 32 in less than half an hour, while a primus stove brought it up to 60° in less than five minutes.

A flight of 'Norsemen' aircraft piloted by expert Canadian 'bush' pilots was attached to us for air cooperation purposes and many of us enjoyed some memorable flights over the Rockies. I remember one occasion when the visibility was so brilliant that the whole of the main chain was visible from beyond Mt. Assiniboine to the Alexander range, a distance of quite 250 miles. On the same day I made a flight to Mt. Robson and flew round and round the mountain in an ascending spiral taking many photographs which depict every angle of the peak.

It was the only occasion on which I have been conscious of a feeling of height when flying, and the glimpses down the tremendous precipices which seemed almost to breathe with a cold icy hostility at the noisy intruder produced a momentary queasiness almost synonymous with the view down a high sea cliff or tall building, both of which I have always disliked intensely.

Another and most interesting flight was that to Alaska at the invitation of General Gaffney commanding the U.S. North-West Staging Route, along the Alaskan Highway, to Fairbanks. There my Adjutant, Major Parnwell who accompanied me, and I were asked what we would like to do, so I asked for a flight over Mt. McKinley. An aircraft, a D.C.7, was at once laid on and we enjoyed a magnificent trip spoiled only by a storm raging on the uppermost part of the mountain. I shudder to think what the temperature must have been in that storm since at 15,000 ft. it was minus 65°. Mt. McKinley is of Himalayan magnitude and magnificence, and even Kangchenjunga cannot show a more prodigal wealth of ice fluted ridges and torrential glaciers. We flew to and fro across the N. face of the mountain which must be the greatest in the world since it rises in one sweep of about 17,000 ft. in precipices, ice slopes and hanging glaciers. Later we flew to Anchorage, and concluded the trip with a flight down the west coast to Vancouver. I have never seen anything finer than this coast where the mountains spring 15,000 ft. out of the sea and you look down to see the Pacific rollers lapping the great glaciers that descend from Mt. Logan and Mt. St. Elias, of which peaks we enjoyed a grand view. There is mountaineering enough in that 1200 miles of mountains for many succeeding generations of mountaineers, and aircraft will soon open up much country hitherto inaccessible or at least very difficult to reach because of the bush.

It has only been possible despite the length of this paper to touch upon training both in Britain and Canada. The Lovat Scouts never had a chance to prove the value of their training on high mountains, but in the Italian Apennines they proved beyond all doubt its all round value, for the man who learns to fight among mountains will always be superior to the man who has learned only to fight on the plains, in all those qualities of hardihood and initiative that go to the making of a good soldier. It is time that this value was recognised and that those who know it should cease being voices crying in the wilderness. What better training could a young man have who has joined a training corps or been conscripted to the Army than a mountain training? Such training goes beyond the Services: it has a national significance. Heaven forbid that we should organise our youth on Nazi lines. All that is essential is to introduce them to the mountain way; everything else will follow.