

AIRCREW MOUNTAIN CENTRE, KASHMIR

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Read before the Alpine Club, October 7, 1947

FROM time to time and in various ways, the name of Aircrew Mountain Centre has cropped up in the annals of mountaineering. The most recent, and probably the fullest account has been given in Wilfrid Noyce's *Mountains and Men*. But the inside story has not yet been told, and I welcome this opportunity ; for I am sure that the account of the difficulties we faced, and the way in which we overcame some of them will interest those who attempt similar schemes.

It happened that in 1943-44 the strength of Royal Air Forces—including Dominion Air Forces—in the East had increased enormously. Throughout India and parts of Burma, squadrons were deployed on airfields, necessarily constructed on the flattest and lowest and therefore the most unhealthy terrain. Aircrew personnel spent a little time flying, an occupation which provides little exercise but an immense amount of physical and mental strain. They also spent a lot of time waiting to fly, enduring equal mental strain in the worst climatic conditions the world can produce. On their brief leaves they usually went to hill stations where there was little to do but drink third rate alcohol, and they came back scarcely refreshed. The physical deterioration of its first line troops was therefore causing the R.A.F. growing concern.

In the spring of 1944, Air Vice Marshal (now Air Marshal) Goddard went on leave in Kashmir, and went on a trek into the Himalaya. The idea immediately struck him that such a holiday was exactly what was required for the jaded aircrew of the plains. He therefore conceived a plan for some sort of recreation centre at Ganderbal on the Sind river with a higher camp at Sonamarg. In winter the centre might develop a skiing camp at Gulmarg in the Pir Panjal. This scheme was apparently approved in Delhi, and a circular put out asking all who were interested to send in their names. Air Marshal Goddard then flew away to U.K. leaving his staff officer, Squadron Leader Rudkin, to put the plan into operation within one month.

Prior to this, I had been working with the army in Arakan and had very little to do once the arrival of the monsoon forced the abandonment of the forward airstrips. I would have completed my four years overseas in October of that year and would have been due for repatriation to U.K. I was therefore at a loose end. When I returned to Chittagong from a month's leave in Eastern Tibet I heard of the Mountain Centre project via the circular just mentioned. I immediately borrowed a Hurricane, flew the 1500 miles, and was in Delhi the next day, where I was immediately appointed O.C. of the as yet non-existent unit.

It was now mid-July ; the unit was to open in mid-August and was to build up to house 100 aircrew, and it had a very high priority.

Beyond that there were no more limitations than have been mentioned in this paper. What a magnificent position it was : a clear directive ; the minimum of restrictions ; enormous resources.

We were the music makers
We were the dreamers of dreams
Walking by lone sea breakers
And sitting by desolate streams.
World losers and world forsakers
On whom the pale moon gleams
Yet we were the movers and shakers
Of the world forever it seems.

Never have I moved so far or so fast as in the next ten days. Back to Chittagong in the old Hurricane to get my A.O.C.'s permission and to collect my kit, and back to Delhi again ; up to Rawalpindi with Rudkin in a Harvard and up to Srinagar by car ; a hectic two days of interviews and back to Delhi ; then down to Calcutta again to collect an equipment officer and place orders for the equipment ; eight thousand miles at a little under a thousand miles a day. Meanwhile Rudkin was working away at the detailed plan, getting it passed by all the various branches of Air Headquarters whose assistance we required. The B.M.C. and the Himalayan Club were asked for the names of climbers who could give technical assistance, and then we tried to get these people released from their various jobs—people with reputations such as Noyce, Harry Tilley, Whittle of Borneo, and Doc Graham of R.A.F. Mountain Rescue fame.

Round about August 10 therefore equipment and personnel started collecting at railhead at Rawalpindi. There the adjutant, Vipond, and equipment officer, Gerry, were busy establishing some form of order. But we were never to make our target date. An enormous landslide had blocked the road up to Murree and for a whole week we were delayed. However it did enable Mr. Johannsen, our contractor in Srinagar, to assemble the fleet of house boats that were to be our headquarters, and the masses of tents which would form the camp. Our deployment in Srinagar was particularly helped by the Vospers, and Major Hadow (a member of this Club). A day or two after our arrival in Srinagar we moved our six boats through the network of waterways to Ganderbal where we set up our base. Meanwhile we deployed our tentage and native servants to two small transit camps at Kangan and Gund, and a main camp at Sonamarg (9000 ft. above sea level).

At last, only one week later than our original target date, we got our first batch of 11 aircrew. They had come by train and bus from the plains of India and were very tired and jaded. We therefore gave them two days to recuperate at Ganderbal, giving them every opportunity to get into Srinagar. Then they set out on a three day walk up the Sind valley, covering 40 miles during that time, and stopping each night at the rest camps at Kangan and Gund. Each camp contained sufficient tents and beds, and a native contractor who provided meals.

Aircrew then spent 18 days at Sonamarg before coming down in the same manner. Intakes arrived every three days, and by the end of a month we had a full hundred aircrew on our hands.

Right from the beginning, however, our way was beset with difficulty. The aircrew themselves arrived with the idea that they were to have a nice lazy time on houseboats, and many were very unwilling to undertake mountaineering which they considered unnecessarily risky. As Noyce concludes in his book, mountaineering is not everybody's meat. To overcome this, we established a small camp at 11,000 ft. in the Thajiwas valley for the keen climbers, and developed a series of treks for the rest, each under an instructor, into Ladakh and the surrounding Himalaya. The organisation of the centre was unusual in that all ranks fed together, and no one was expected to shave. Uniform was discouraged as the Kashmir government refused to permit a military unit in the state. However, discipline was never in danger, even though some of the Dominion aircrew did make their feelings pretty plain on occasion.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of all was that of keeping everybody fed. The catering was entirely in the hands of native contractors who had quoted Rs.3 per person per day. However, when they realised the ravenous appetites with which they had to cope, they were a little taken aback. We paid each of the contractor servants a weekly wage, and they worked well, but the quantity of food available was a continual matter of discussion. Contractor after contractor, and even Mr. Johannsen, gave us notice since at Rs.3 (3s. 9d.) per day they could not make ends meet. Nor could we get permission from Delhi to increase this meagre amount.

Our British staff consisted of about 8 officers and 25 other ranks. Of the officers, only 3—the adjutant, the equipment officer and myself—were fully administrative and we had our hands full. The chief trouble was accounts. Since everything was paid for in cash, our turnover was as high as £3000 a month. We had no safe and had to keep everything we drew from the bank on our persons or in a small cash box. Later in the year when the equipment officer was withdrawn and the adjutant went into hospital, I had to take my wretched money about wherever I went. I am sure the Ancient Mariner never grew to hate his albatross more than I my odd £1000 in my pockets.

Meanwhile the season drew on and the water in the Sind river got lower and lower. Soon it became obvious that either the house boats would have to be moved or else they would go permanently aground and take on a most disagreeable list. We asked Delhi for permission to move but day after day we got no answer. Taking the law into our own hands, we moved. Then came a telegram from Delhi; eagerly we opened it; it said we could move. This time our site was at Nsim Bagh, about 5 miles from Srinagar on the Dal Lake. In every way it was more convenient than Ganderbal, except that it was 5 miles further from Sonamarg. The boats lay alongside old Mogul gardens in a place of exquisite beauty, where the kingfishers flew among the chenar trees.

During this time, I was kept fairly busy, and did not get more than the odd chance to get away from administration. Now and again I was able to take a party out on the hills, or do a climb with Noyce, Tilley and the rest at Thajiwas. By mid-October winter was coming on apace, and the snow line was slowly coming down. The climbers had already conquered most of the glaciers and many of the peaks in the area, 17,000 ft. being reached more than once. It was especially noticeable how much more aircrew, being used to turning on their oxygen supply at 10,000 ft., suffered from oxygen shortage—perhaps psychological—in the hills. By now the nights were becoming very cold, and there was intense frost, so that we had to build fireplaces in the communal tents, and provide everybody with about twelve blankets. This unseasonal warmth encouraged the field mice to delay their hibernation, and it was common to wake up and find several sharing, not merely your bed, but also your pyjamas. Tilley claimed that he found two in his beard in the morning.

According to the experts of Srinagar, the first real snow of winter was not to be expected in Sonamarg until December 1. We had therefore arranged for the last course to leave there on November 20, and the camp to be evacuated by the 23rd. However, winter came a full month early, and on November 15, when I was up in Gulmarg making arrangements for the opening of the skiing centre, snow fell thickly down to 9000 ft.—thick enough even for us to do a little skiing. As soon as the storm was finished, I went down to Srinagar, and up the Sind valley. Up to 7000 ft. we had no difficulty, but once we were in the gorge we met the snow. We could tell that conditions must be bad higher up as we met an exhausted ram chikor on the road, and were able to capture this enormous bird alive. In the gorge the snow was nearly a foot deep. We coped fairly well on our four wheel drive until we came to a piece of road with particularly steep camber. At this point we slid ignominiously over the edge and fell 15 ft. on to a bank of snow. We eventually reached Sonamarg that night, ram chikor and all.

Chaos reigned. The night before 3 ft. of snow had fallen on the camp and most of the tent poles had snapped. Those few in camp at the time had survived in one tent which they managed to keep clear of snow. They had now evacuated into the Sonamarg dak bungalow, which was in fact nothing more than an old fashioned khan, complete with mice and fleas. The most serious aspect was that a party of aircrew under John Hansbury was due across the Zoji La that day. If this was impossible, they might be marooned in Ladakh for the winter. After a wonderful meal of ram chikkor, and a night's battle with the vermin, Noyce and I set out for Baltal, at the foot of the pass. The scenery was magnificent, but a bitter wind blew in our faces. Half-way there we met some of the Ladakh party. They had crossed the evening before. In Ladakh there had been little snow, so they had set off to the pass and started down the other side. As they descended the snow got deeper and deeper, and a blizzard blew in their faces. There came a time when it was impossible to return uphill, yet going



Photo, A. J. M. Smyth.]

THAJIWAS CAMP JUST BEFORE MOONRISE.



Photo, A. J. M. Smyth.]

AIRCREW AT THE TREE LINE.

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downhill was almost impossible against the blizzard and in waist deep snow. At this stage two of the six baggage ponies fell down the near vertical hillside, and their drivers lay down to die. It was only John Hansbury's drive that got the party through, and for it he was subsequently awarded a B.E.M.

After this Sonamarg was closed down with as little loss as possible, and everybody concentrated on getting a skiing centre organised at Gulmarg, on the other side of the valley. Gulmarg is a summer resort at 9000 ft. in the Pir Panjal. The houses are only built for warm weather, and are mostly one brick thick. Although the Ski Club of India had held meetings for ten days at Christmas and Easter, no European had ever lived through the winter in Gulmarg, and there was considerable doubt whether we could keep a supply line for food open to Srinagar. However, Major Hadow, the moving spirit of the Ski Club, considered that it should be possible, and so we decided to gamble on it. We managed to hire the Garden School from Miss Groves and proceeded to instal stoves, lay in a wood supply, and get the walls plastered with straw and mud in an effort to keep out the cold. I am afraid we made rather a bad guess at the quantity of wood required, and as a result were forced stringently to ration ourselves throughout the winter.

In December we lost most of our mountaineering instructors and took on a new set of skiing instructors, including Charles Bagot, who had managed to get several pairs of ski made at the Forestry Research Centre at Dehra Dun. Bindings were made in Calcutta, and boots were adapted from army issue in Kashmir. But the main supply of ski came from Canada, and we had to wait till the beginning of January for these to arrive before we could begin our courses. During the interim, most of the non-skiers like Noyce and myself learnt to ski, and we had great fun at the Ski Club meet. At the beginning of January a great calamity overtook us: we burnt down the mess. This was partly due to the fact that most Kashmiris carry small bowls of burning charcoal and also that all fire extinguishers were frozen solid. The worst side of the case was that we lost over £100 worth of liquor and bar takings.

In spite of these setbacks, we started our courses, and soon had 50 aircrew on the slopes. After the Christmas meet was over, we opened up in the Ski Club hut at Khillan marg, 10,500 ft., and managed to get R. L. Holdsworth, of Kamet fame, to come up for a month to run our touring side. After he went, Noyce took over at Khillan. Our main worry was that Khillan would be swept by an avalanche similar to the one which destroyed the hut in 1936, and all who were inside at the time. Normal avalanches from Aphawat, the 14,000 ft. mountain behind, were diverted E. or W. away from the flat marg. However, in extreme cases these marginal gullies are already blocked by descending avalanches, and the snow from the centre of the mountain has to go straight down. This winter, there was heavy snow at Christmas, followed by an unusually dry period until mid-February,

followed in turn by heavy snow and a warm wind. Noyce, whose foresight saved a possible calamity, has described in greater detail than I can the great avalanche of 1945, which certainly rivalled all previously recorded falls.

As for the course itself, we had far less doubts that it was being appreciated by the pupils. These, after their five-day journey from the front, had their usual two days' rest on the boats, and then up to Gulmarg. The 2000-ft. climb from roadhead at Tanmarg to Gulmarg, together with the sudden cold, was usually a bit of a shock. But they were often on the nursery slopes the same day, and they spent a week under these conditions, before moving on to the runs, where they spent another week. The last week they moved up to Khillan where they learnt to distinguish and move on all types of snow and complete short tours under Holdsworth or Noyce.

Although Aircrew Mountain Centre carried on until April 1946, I left for U.K. in February 1945. By this time, the weather was already appreciably warmer, and it was obvious that supply lines could be kept open, the worst dislocation occurring at Murree, outside Kashmir province itself. During the next season the headquarters were transferred to a hotel and the houseboats dispensed with. In the summer the camp was opened to volunteers of all trades in the R.A.F. and not confined to aircrew, which must have made it much easier to run.

What then were the results of A.M.C.? In some ways they were disappointing, for the response of aircrew as a whole was not unanimous as we had hoped. But at least 50 per cent. greeted the scheme with enthusiasm, and undoubtedly many were claimed for the hills who would never have taken to them otherwise; some first class climbing material was discovered and it is hoped these persons will be heard of again. Not the least beneficiary was the Kashmir government, for a considerable sum of money was brought into the country, much in the winter months that are usually very grim for the poorer people. But the chief results were to be seen in the medical field. Some results of Harvard pack tests, measuring heart reaction to exercise are given below.

Name.	Scores 4.1.45. (at start of course)	29.1.45 (at end of course)
Hazard . . .	51	85
Lowry . . .	68	104
Scott . . .	46	94
Tyndall . . .	—	106
Aitchison . . .	70	107
Wipfle . . .	70	133
Tutty . . .	64	105
Foster . . .	85	119
Linscott . . .	82	150

I conclude therefore in thanking all the higher authorities who made possible Air Crew Mountain Centre, in which I, at least, had one of the best if the busiest half years of my life.