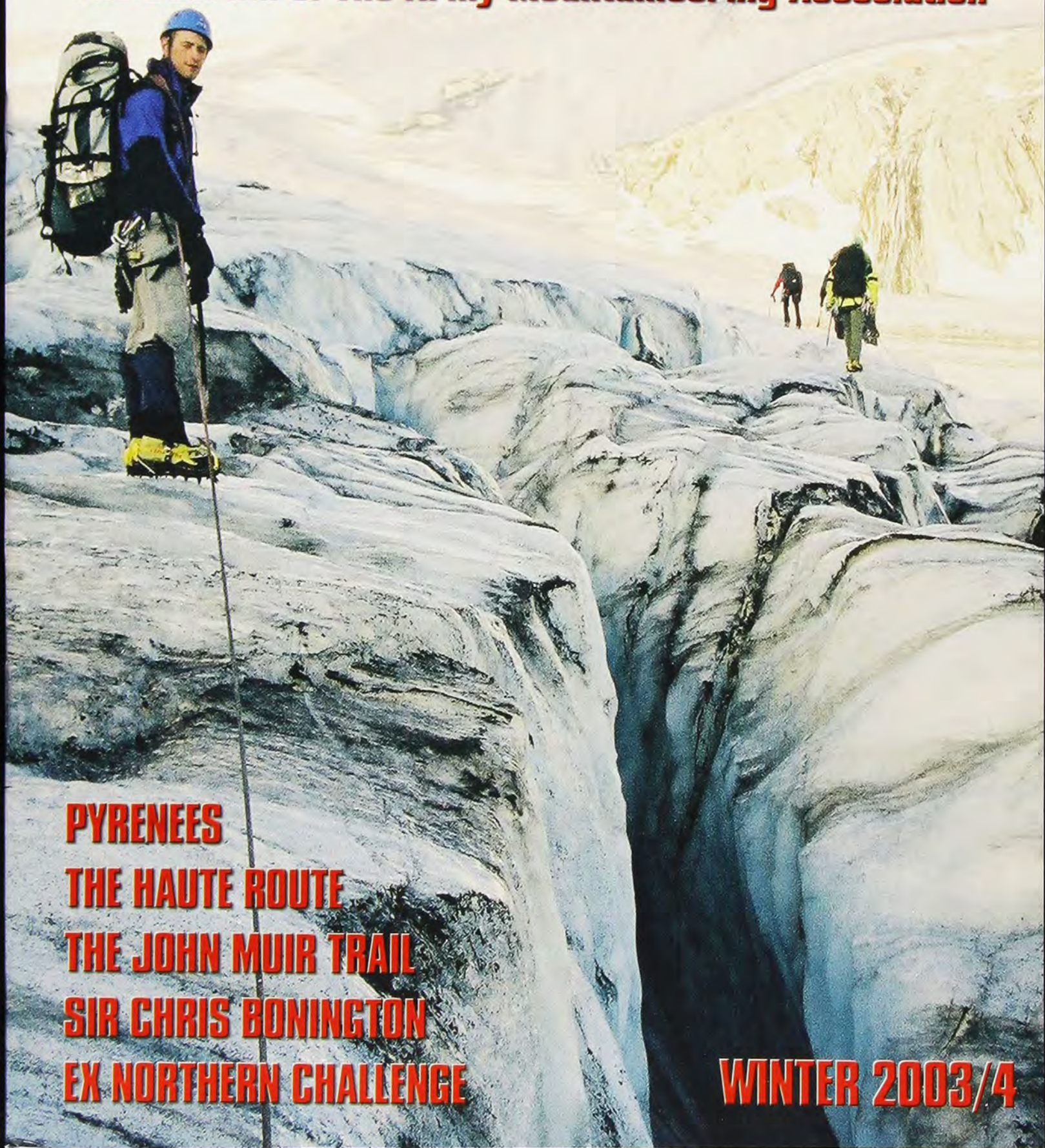


ARMY MOUNTAINEER



The Journal of The Army Mountaineering Association



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ARMY MOUNTAINEER



The Journal of The Army Mountaineering Association

Foreword

by Vice Chairman, Mountaineering

It seems appropriate that I, as Vice Chairman, Mountaineering, have been given the opportunity to write the Journal foreword, after such a year of achievement for the AMA in mountaineering terms.

Our flagship expedition, Ex NORTHERN CHALLENGE, took 83 army personnel, 72 of them AMA members, to the Canadian Rockies. Substantial achievements were made in developing alpine experience and acquiring JSAT qualifications. Our thanks for organising this mammoth project go to Maj Kev Edwards. You can read more about the expedition elsewhere in the Journal.

Capt Stu Macdonald's ambitious expedition to Alaska, Ex DENALI MARATHON, met with some very varied weather conditions and did not succeed in achieving its original aims. However, as anyone who attended the AGM and listened to the excellent presentations, the aims of AT were certainly met. Pte Jules Ratcliff, a mountaineering novice, who deployed to Alaska before he had got the sand from behind his ears on his return from Iraq, was able to vividly prove this, as he recounted his experiences.

And it is against this background of increased operational tempo that these successes should be measured; 48% of the Army deployed at one point in 2003 and average tour intervals standing at ten months across LAND command. Indeed, standing in as I was for Maj Andy Stevens, our JSAM rep, who was deployed on OP TELIC, I was gratified to see the applications for JSAM roll in as people returned from the Gulf. The AMA also supported a ski mountaineering trip to the Canadian Rockies, an alpine mountaineering trip to New Zealand and another Alaska trip, a very challenging expedition to the remote Chugach Range, mounted by Malvern College CCF.

Looking ahead, 2004 offers opportunities for all AMA members to get involved in activities, whatever their particular interests. ICE MONKEY, our annual ice climbing expedition, will take place in Norway and we will run two HOT ROCKs, for those who want to improve their rock climbing, one in Spain before Easter and the other in the States in November.

In 2006, Sgt Dave Bunting plans to climb Mt Everest by the West Ridge. The DCI is out, so those who are interested in either the main or the developmental team should seek it out and get their applications in.

In 2007, our 50th anniversary year, the plan is to put the A into AT in a big way by tackling a high peak in a remote area; research is underway to identify a suitable summit, so watch this space.

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Foreword</i> | 2 |
| <i>AMA AGM and Members Weekend</i> | 4 |
| <i>2 Div Sport Climbing Championship 2003</i> | 5 |
| <i>Exercise NORTHERN CHALLENGE</i> | 6 |
| <i>Wilderness Tales</i> | 10 |
| <i>Army Shock - Soldiers get high on white powder</i> | 12 |
| <i>The FANY in France</i> | 16 |
| <i>Contemplation on the John Muir Trail</i> | 19 |
| <i>A legend in his own lifetime - Chris Bonington</i> | 20 |
| <i>You, The AMA and the BMC</i> | 22 |
| <i>Book Reviews</i> | 23 |
| <i>Army Bouldering Championships - 14 Feb</i> | 24 |

On the Cover:

Ex Northern Challenge

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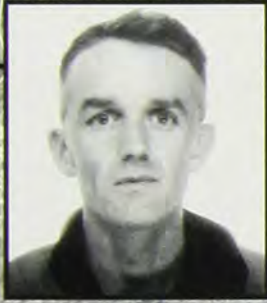
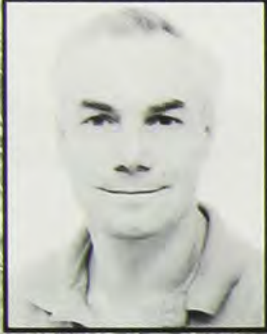
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RADIOS

The AMA owns a set of radio equipment for use by its members and others. The set consists of eight hand held Motorola GP68 VHF sets, one GM350 VHF base station, solar panels, video battery charger and all the ancillaries. This service has been provided by the AMA from the contributions you make as members of the association, therefore the equipment is yours and you should make full use of it. The set has been tested world wide and found to give excellent service in the mountains. The hand sets (5W output) provides a good line of sight service up to 5km and more when used with the base station's 25W output. The set, or part set, is available by booking it through the Publications Editor, Steve Willson, with the following conditions.

1. The radios must be insured by the expedition for the replacement cost, details on request.
2. A hire fee, to cover maintenance and renewal, of between £50, for part of the set, up to £150 for the whole set paid to the AMA on collection.
3. The expedition must book their own frequencies through which ever country they are visiting and then inform the Publications Editor to program the radios prior to collection.

The equipment is very good and it will improve the command and control of any expedition not to mention the increased safety cover.

DIGITAL CAMERA

The AMA has added a Nikon 990 Coolpix digital camera to it's collection. This is a very high quality professional device that is capable of capturing impressive images that can be used for web pages, presentations or just snaps of your climbing. Any member of the AMA can hire this equipment for £25 (up to a month) or £50 (up to two months) for use on climbing/walking trips. The AMA Journal is also always in need of quality images and the camera will be available at AMA meets to capture the action. This will be at nil cost to the meet organiser.

If you have any questions about the radio set, digital camera or their availability please give the Steve Willson a call on 94561 3453 or 01412 243453 email stevewillson@msn.com - Please make use of this kit!

EDITORIAL

By the Journal Editor

Another journal another editor. Hopefully trawls permitting I will be able to remain in post for a couple of years at least. Many thanks to Steve Wilson and Dave Reith for their recent efforts and the production of a first rate journal.

For the Winter 03 edition I hope we have captured the spirit of the AMA. The articles cover the full spectrum of mountaineering activities; the epic NORTHERN CHALLENGE, ski mountaineering, sport climbing and trekking the John Muir Trail. They also reflect the diverse nature of our membership with articles from regulars, territorials and cadets and an excellent interview with one of our Honorary Vice Presidents, Sir Chris Bonington.

Enjoy the Journal and enjoy the winter.

Cheers

Howie Barnes

Submission Requirements

There will continue to be two Journals per year, submission deadlines are 1st January and 1st June with the Journal hitting your doormat approximately six weeks later. Please keep sending me your articles - anything; reports, opinions, reviews, comments and lots of photos.

Rules - not many.

Text should be sent electronically - floppy, CD or e-mail.

Photographs can be prints, slides or digital (floppy, CD or e-mail).

Always include captions for your photographs.

Submissions should be sent by post to:

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Warminster, BA12 0DJ

Or electronically to:
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Army Mountaineering Association (AMA) Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Members Weekend 26-28 September 2002

By Major K P Edwards APTC, AMA Meets Secretary

The AMA AGM 2002 was once again a tremendous success with an attendance of over seventy members. The gathering at JSMTc INDEFATIGABLE represented a broad mix of the membership. Having bravely faced the Friday traffic and numerous road works it was great to see many who had not attended an AGM for some time and wanted to reconnect with the Association. It was also fantastic to meet a few of our newer recruits who were attending their first meet as a taste of what the AMA has to offer. This included a large delegation from QUOTC, Northern Ireland who had been encouraged to attend by a long time AMA activist, Lt Col (Retd) Phil West.

With rucksacs thrown into a bedspace the first order of business for most members was a well-earned drink in the bar. The Friday programme was kicked off by a presentation by Stu MacDonald and Tania Noakes on the exploits and tales of the challenges faced by two independent AMA teams in the Denali range, Alaska. This was a highly rewarding and successful expedition, reflected in the tremendous team spirit.

As we were still under the influence of an extended summer, the weather was superb. Our members made the most of their good fortune by grabbing some fine mountaineering and excellent climbing routes. On the Saturday morning the majority of members dashed off into the mountains to enjoy a rewarding day indulging in their activities. A group of members without partners were swiftly organised into teams and pointed in the right direction with suitable objectives in mind to match their aspirations. Rock climbing partnerships spread themselves across North Wales, each achieving a significant crop of routes from the more traditional routes on Idwal Slabs to ascents of hard lines at Gogarth.

The AGM commenced at 1900hrs and the main focus was to highlight the work and ongoing development being carried out by the committee. Each one of the committee members

updated the membership on what had been achieved throughout the year as well as providing an insight into future events. With a membership of over two thousand supported by a committee of enthusiastic activists the AMA continues to flourish and is going from strength to strength. We said farewell to committee members who were moving on to pastures new and thanked them for their hard work on behalf of the membership.

Following the AGM people graduated towards the bar where they were treated to further presentations on Exercise NORTHERN CHALLENGE and the launch of an Everest expedition to the West Ridge in 2006. The evening finished off with a raffle to raise funds to support the work of the AMA. The prizes had been kindly donated by HB Climbing. Amidst the disappointment of not winning the only person still smiling was the Treasurer.

It was an excellent weekend and hopefully everyone enjoyed the programme. I hand over to Major Damien Gartland who is the newly appointed Meets Secretary and hope you will give him your fullest support in the organisation of events. I shall have taken over as the Chief Instructor JSMTc by the time you read this article so you know there will remain a strong influence at the centre of AT on behalf of the membership. Many thanks to the Commandant JSMTc who has not only been a staunch supporter of the AMA but also very much at the forefront of establishing the home of the AMA.

As the newly appointed Expeditions Secretary I would like to use this opportunity to advertise some future events:

AMA Ice Climbing: Norway: 02-12 February 2004

Exercise HOT ROCK: Spain Spring 2004

Exercise RED ROCKS: USA, November 2004.



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2nd Division Sport Climbing Championships 2003

By Sgt (SI) C Blackledge APTC

The 2nd Division Sport Climbing Championships were held at Rock Antics indoor climbing centre, Newton Aycliffe leisure centre, on Fri 19 Mar 03. The Championships took the form of an Individual and Team top roping competition, which were extremely well supported, with 59 climbers taking part.

The Championships consisted of five categories, which were as follows:

Up to Very Severe (VS).

Hard Very Severe (HVS).

Extreme 1 (E1).

E2 and above (Open).

Team (3 combined individual scores).

The format for the competition was designed to challenge climbers of all abilities, whilst facilitating a full day of enjoyable climbing. Five routes were set at various grades by the staff from Rock Antics. All competitors attempted each route and scored points dependent on how much progress they made. Points were then totalled up, and the competitors with the highest score in each category were presented with a trophy and climbing related prizes.

Final

The final eliminator round took the form of a lead climb, graded at F6C, which was used to determine the overall individual winner and 2 Div Champion. The top ten climbers with the highest accumulative points of the 5 routes set were selected to take part. Competitors were placed in isolation, and then called forward one by one in reverse order. This created a fantastic atmosphere with anticipation, as each climber was led out with a rapturous applause from the enthusiastic crowd. One climber managed to top out in fine style; Capt Legge representing 38 Engr Regt was the overall individual winner and 2 Div Champion. Ocdt Roberts representing UOTC Sheffield was runner up, and just missed out of the top hold, preventing him from topping out.



SMI Lewis

Team Event

The Team event consisted of three climbers from the same Unit. The team with the highest accumulative points from the five routes set was crowned the winning team. A total of 15 teams took part with interesting names such as 'The Tremblers' and 'Bite Me'. The winning team was UOTC Sheffield, comprising of OCdt Roberts, OCdt Beighton, Ocdt Warner. They take away the 2 Div Sport Climbing Champions Trophy until 2004.

Results

The rest of the results for the competition were as follows:

| | | | |
|-----------|-----------|------------------|------------------|
| Female | Winner | OCdt Barton | UOTC Sheffield |
| | Runner-up | OCdt Craig | RMCS Shrivenham |
| Under 21 | Winner | OCdt Anderson | UOTC Sheffield |
| | Runner-up | OCdt Edwards | UOTC Sheffield |
| Vet (35+) | Winner | Cpl Johnson | ITC Catterick |
| | Runner-up | Cpl Poxon | 120 AYT |
| VS | Winner | LCpl Salisproury | 9 Regt AAC |
| | Runner-up | OCdt O'Sullivan | UOTC Northumbria |
| HVS | Winner | OCdt Craig | RMCS Shrivenham |
| | Runner-up | OCdt Styles | UOTC Manchester |

Overall the competition was a huge success. The format of the competition was simple, which allowed novice competitors to enter, and for many, it was their first sport climbing competition. Several competitors were surprised at how well they had actually done, and they have now been inspired to take part in the Army sport climbing competition later in the year. This can only be a positive step into the exhilarating world of Sport climbing within the Services. Finally I would like to thank all competitors and officials for their support and I hope to see you all back next year... Happy climbing!

EXERCISE NORTH

NOT SO MUCH AN EXERCISE, MORE AN ADVENTURE...

by Maj Cath Davies, Vice Chairman Mountaineering

IN THE BEGINNING

Ex NORTHERN CHALLENGE 3000 was the brain child of Maj Kev Edwards, at the time Meets Coordinator for the AMA. Having been involved in Himalayan Dragon, the huge AMA trip to Nepal to climb all the trekking peaks, as a team leader, then having led the Pennine Alps section of Alps 2000, an expedition aimed at climbing all the Alps 4000m peaks, Kev had no fear of large scale. Going where few other men would dare to tread, he proposed to the AMA committee that we should mount the largest AT expedition ever seen, to climb all the 3000m peaks in the Canadian Rockies. Once we found out there were 81, and calculated how many people might be needed to crack them all, even if you had a month, we realised the enormity of the project. As that began to sink in, Kev then added that as he had become aware no expedition was being run for the Army Canoe Union (ACU) that year, he wanted to take along some paddlers who would paddle as many as possible of the 300 classic white water rivers. Well, take a big project and make it bigger, as you do, or rather as one does, if one is Kev Edwards! Deeper discussion, once the shock had worn off, revealed that in fact, Kev's plan fully supported the AMA mountaineering development plan which the Committee had presented to the members, and had been approved, at the previous year's AGM. Because of the type of 3000m peaks in the Rockies, the expedition offered challenges for all AMA members, be they human flies, mere mortals or alpine experts. The area had ample scope for introducing novices to the alpine environment in an

adventurous and remote setting, whilst still challenging the experienced (more on that later!). In addition, by sourcing sufficient instructors from the Army in general, the JSMTCs in particular and using Subject Matter Expert (SME) civilians too, Kev intended to carry out distributed training as part of the expedition, so that as well as log book experience and memories, expedition members would come back with qualifications as well. We agreed the level of grant, Kev capped the numbers at 165 (!) and the project rolled forward. As Vice Chairman, Mountaineering, I felt my support had to be more than just moral, so I volunteered to be one of the instructors, negotiated the month off work and tried to help out on the organising. Frankly, Kev and his 2IC, Capt Tony Willets, had it pretty sown up, so I didn't have to do too much.

The best laid plans of mice and men 'gang aft aglay' as the bard said, and after receiving 165 applications, Op FRESCO and TELIC 1 and 2 reared their ugly heads. This meant constant changing of personnel and a final contingent of 83, a not insubstantial number in the circumstances.

Not surprisingly, the expedition went swimmingly well, 53 of the peaks were climbed, 158 km of Grade 2-4 white water was paddled and 218 qualifications were achieved. Kev Edwards produced a fantastically comprehensive PXR and anyone thinking of going to the area should, as their first step, dig it out. Rather than rehash it here, I am going to try to give a flavour of the expedition by recounting some of my own experiences.



The author on the summit of Mt Baker, 3172m, looking south over Peyto Icefield.

SETTING OUT

I deployed early, with Kev and Tony, and a frantic day of prepositioning transport and kit was followed by four days of picking up parties from Calgary Airport, transporting them to our base in the Kananaskis valley, briefings and kit issue. Our base was Fortress, an out of season ski resort with a variety of accommodation and facilities. Groups were based on a number of chalets, with some people accommodated inside and others in tents outside, but all sharing the cooking and washing facilities. This worked very well throughout, as groups tended to rotate through, rather than all be in Fortress at once.

Our first activity day was Wednesday 23 July, when we all set out at dark o'clock for the long drive to the Columbia Icefield to practise crampon and ice axe techniques, roped glacier crossing and crevasse rescue skills. Columbia Icefield was chosen for its ease of

access, the very same reason it's a tourist mecca. What the Japanese tourists, having debussed from the mega large wheeled glacier bus in their civvies on top of the glacier, all thought, as 72 of us, kitted to the teeth in Gore-Tex and climbing hardware, tramped up the glacier tied together, one will never know, but it's worth speculating!

The next day, Kev and I took our groups on a rocky ridge route and climbed Mt Shark, 2786 m, a Diff scramble. It was our first introduction to Canadian Rockies rock, aptly described by Tony Willets as 'kitty litter stacked up'. Pick a hold, any hold, and it will probably come off in your hand. Obviously, you can then discard it and choose another one, which brings me to the next problem, rockfall. Loose rock was to be a recurring theme of the trip, leading Capt 'Woody' Wood in our team to rechristen the range 'The Canadian Crumbles'. We also had our introduction to another great Canadian

ERN CHALLENGE

sport, bushwacking, when the walkout took three times as long as the walk in, owing to Kev spotting a short cut down a fire break, or so I thought, from the back of the group. It transpired that he had just cut off the ridge too early and hours later, Ron Hills in shreds, having spent some time inwardly thinking 'Isn't this the kind of terrain bears like in the early evening?', we made it back to the bus.

On Fri 25 Jul, we went off to a local crag, Heart Creek, to check everyone could tie on, climb, abseil and prussik. Now we had all the basics covered, the Canadian Rockies were our oyster. But first, our Patron, Maj Gen Nick Parker, GOC 2 Div, had arrived the day before and we were to have a social with him that evening, down by the Fortress Centre barbecue. We rushed back to shower, change and eat before the due time. Then word was passed 'Social delayed one hour, the General's not back'. He was with Paul Mills, a civilian instructor, and Andy Parsons, the AMA Communications Officers' groups, on a short day trip to Mt Arethusa, 2912m, close to the road nearby. A further hour delay was then announced, then a postponement to the following evening. Kev and Tony set out to the group's start point and Capt Dave Neely, one of the other instructors, and I monitored the safety net in the base chalet. Around about 2200hrs, not long after General Nick's ADC came up in search of news, they all returned. There had been no drama, just a protracted descent of multiple abseils, time consuming with such a large party, linked together by gullies only one person could descend at a time, due

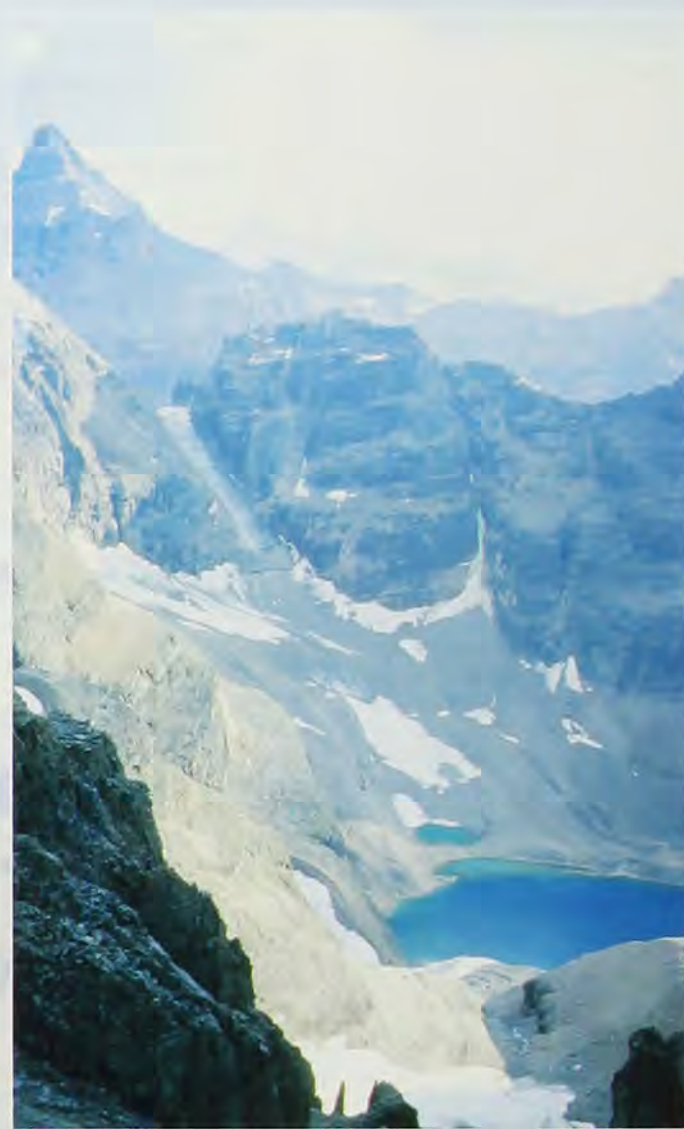
to rockfall. Finishing with three hours of descent in darkness, it had, however, been a long day, especially for the General, who did not have the benefit of acclimatisation. Kev Edwards, over the obligatory cold beer in the chalet afterwards, asked General Nick if the climb had put the adventure into AT for him, to which he replied 'No, but it certainly put the physical into PT!'

General Nick, as patron, had spoken to all the instructors on his arrival, and it was clear from the timbre of his probing questions he was well aware of the challenges involved in carrying out worthwhile AT. It was now very clear he knew we were not on holiday either.

The social was reset for the following day, so we climbed another local rocky ridgeline to summit Mt Edith 2554m, again a Diff scramble. This enabled us to get back at a reasonable hour for the event, which was very sociable and enabled General Nick to speak to the majority of expedition participants about their experiences.

BACKWOOD ADVENTURE

Kev and I had combined forces with our teams up to this point, but now he was to join the paddlers for their introductory phase. The teams wanted to get some snow/ice work under their belts, so a plan was hatched to walk in 15km to a remote backwood site, Turbine Canyon, situated below the Haig Glacier, which was surrounded by 3000 m peaks. These mountains were known as the 'Military group', as they were all named after military men famous in the period of the mountains' first



View from Abbot Pass, down the scree to Lake Edna.

ascents. This five day trip encompassed some good glacier work, ice axe and snow work which we had been unable to do on the dry glacier of the Columbia Icefield and yet more chossy, dangerous ridges. We bagged two 3000m peaks, some team members completed their first pitched snow climb and one team bivvied on the glacier too. Combined with the fact that our arrival at the backwood camp coincided with another group announcing their imminent departure because they had seen so many bear,

it was adventurous stuff. We had, however, decided that if something wasn't it the current guidebook, it was for a good reason; the objective danger of the loose rock was more than the peak was worth!

BIG MOUNTAINS

With this in mind, after a well deserved rest day, we teamed up with Kev again and on Mon 4 Aug, set off for the Abbott Pass Hut, in the Lake Louise area, with a plan to ascend Mt Victoria, 3464 m, Gd 2, and Mt Lefroy, the

mountains on either side of the col in which the hut is situated. The route in goes from Lake O'Hara, through some of the most stunning scenery in the Rockies, then spoils it all by finishing in the mother of all scree slopes for the last 500m of ascent. Once at the hut, a traditional stone building looking as if it has been lifted through time and space from the European Alps in the late 1800s (which it might as well have been, as it was designed and built by the Swiss mountain guides who came to ply their trade in the Rockies at that time), we surveyed the routes. Due to the extreme heat of the summer, Lefroy had gone from the straightforward Grade 1 snow climb I had been expecting to three runnels of Grade 3 ice, some of it steep and black, leaving me with the thought 'So, if I can get a team up there, how do we get down?'. It was not a happening thing, so reluctantly, a new plan was made to follow Kev's team, at a decent interval, onto Mt Victoria, a fine prize in itself. The climb the next day, once the inevitable loose rock had been surmounted, was splendid, in a fantastic location and with quite enough technicalities to keep everyone focussed. Indeed, moving short roped, my own team had two slips in awkward situations which were both held by the second man before I, as leader had to take action. The only

drawback was that because of the now pervasive forest fires below (due again to the hot summer), photo opportunities were marred by the brown haze that enveloped everything.

ONTO THE ICEFIELD

On our return to Fortress, the teams once again split, with OCdt Andy Simpson, a JSRCI and climbing demon, taking those who wished to focus on rock climbing and achieving some classic multi-pitch routes, whilst I took a group onto the Peyto Icefield to endeavour to knock off as many of the 3000m alpine peaks in the area.

On Thu 7 Aug we walked in to the Bow Hut and I introduced the team to the concept of the alpine start. Not, it would seem, normally used in Canada, I felt the hot summer made it the way ahead, given the poor snow conditions in the afternoon. It was hugely successful, with everyone agreeing that distance covered on the glacier in the morning in darkness was painfree, with the added advantage of seeing wonderful shooting stars and on one morning, the aurora borealis. This was slightly tempered by losing OCdt Ben Foster more than



Cpl Ian Forsyth on the Summit of Mt Rhondda, 3055m.

twice his body length down a covered crevasse on our first morning, shortly after we had all been gathered together on the glacier for a break. However, as there were five of us on the rope and he was the last man, I as second didn't even notice he had gone, due to the swift action behind me, and a steady walk forward popped him out unharmed. We bagged six

3000m peaks, culminating in the ascent of Mt Baker, 3172m, a fantastic mixed ridge, starting with a steep, curving snow arête, followed by some steep and exposed snow and rock work that let everyone know they had climbed a true alpine peak. We walked out on Mon 11 Aug, with everyone agreeing it had been a fantastic culmination to the trip.



Peyto Icefield, en route to Peyto Hut.

ASSESSMENT (OF NERVES)

On our return to Fortress, we move into the assessment phase of the distributed training, where all those endeavouring to achieve anything above proficiency awards were put through their paces. My aim was Alpine Mountain Leader and Advanced JSMELE and with four others, I was assigned to Henry Methold, a civilian instructing officer from JSMTCC Ballachulish, for the assessment.

We moved up to Columbia Icefields and spent a day going through our paces on the glacier. Henry was then looking for a mountain day that would allow us to demonstrate our abilities as competent leaders on alpine routes. Tony Willets, with two years as OC at Trails End, the British Army AT camp in the Rockies, had suggested the North East ridge of Mt Athabasca. We looked at it from the Columbia Icefield. I suggested that in normal years and normal conditions I was sure it was a very fine route, but as it was, it looked pretty bare, and in my now not inconsiderable experience, that meant loose.

Off we went the next day in the wee small hours, anyway! An early slip on steep ice had all three on the first rope making a rapid descent from a shoulder back onto the glacier, which had its amusement value for us students on the second rope, as head torch after headtorch sped by to our front. Henry wasn't quite so impressed. Luckily, no damage was done and we pushed on to struggle up the inevitable scree slope, thankfully now in daylight, before getting onto the ridge proper.

We roped up, in order to practise our excellent short roping techniques. It just made us like the Three Musketeers, 'One for all and all for one', as there was nothing anywhere on which to belay. We spent the next five hours climbing an upside down chest of drawers (everything pulls out when

you grab hold of it) watching rocks the size of television sets crash past us (and that was an experienced, capable rope ahead, with an instructor on it!). At one point I caught up with Henry, who admitted the route was, in his words, 'a bit precarious'. Those weren't the words I would have chosen and my reply is not printable here. We finally made it to the upper snow slope and hence to the summit ridge.

The views over Columbia Icefield were awesome and our descent, even under the fearsome seracs (and by now at a late hour) was uneventful, although I feel anything would seem uneventful after the North East ridge. Once down, we repaired to the Icefields Visitor's Centre for a well deserved refreshment. It was at this point that Cpl Ian Forsyth chose to share with us a conversation he had had with a Canadian as he was preparing his rack the night before at our camp site. The Canadian was a local climber, whom Ian assessed was fairly experienced by the comments passed on the routes Ian was describing he had done. Then the inevitable 'So what are you doing tomorrow?' to which Ian replied 'The North East Ridge of Athabasca'. 'The North East Ridge of Athabasca? Wow, strong shout, I don't know **anyone** who's done the Northeast ridge'. Just as well Ian hadn't shared that with us all a bit earlier, or we might have missed out on 'The North East Ridge of Athabasca, not so much a route, more an adventure.'

So ended a superb expedition, undertaken in the true spirit of the AMA, members giving up their time to enable the less experienced to achieve, but also achieving themselves, everyone developing their skills and experience in different ways and all set in an environment that offered new challenges to most (when did your last climbing estimate take into account the threat of bears and forest fires?). Many thanks must go to Kev Edwards and his 2IC Tony Willets for the hard work undertaken to enable so much to be achieved by so many.



Lunch on the col between Mt Robertson and Mt Douglas, 3194m.



On the ridge line, Mt Shark, 2786m.

WILDERNESS

A brief personal account of a visit made to the Chugach Mountains of Alaska by a team from Malvern College CCF in July/August 2003.

Lt. Roger S D Smith (RATO Malvern College CCF)

"Just remember that 24/7 I'll be on hand to offer you assistance...see you on 7 August - weather permitting!" were Mike Meekins' final words as he prepared to taxi his Tiger Cub plane down the outwash gravel air-strip beside the Matanuska glacier.

He then flew off and left us to our own devices for ten days.

The location was stunning - we had just been individually flown in by 'Bush plane' to the remote Scandinavian Peaks in the western Chugach Mountains of Alaska. "We", by the way, were a party of eight cadets and three Officers from Malvern College CCF whose objective was to carry out ten days of alpine mountaineering in this wilderness mountain environment. The

true climbing potential of the area was unknown since there is no published guide book to the area - merely maps, information gleaned by word of mouth, emails, the internet and entries in the Mountaineering Club of Alaska's Scandinavian Hut log book. But there's a catch! Access to this invaluable resource is only possible if you've slogged up all 700ft of "Dog Bone Hill" from the air-strip to the A-framed hut perched high on tundra vegetation close to the lateral moraine of the Scandinavian Glacier.

For company we had an abundance of spectacular views of mountains and glaciers, Ground Squirrels galore, Snow Buntings, Dall Sheep and evidence -but no sightings- of Bears. Mind you we'd already had our Bear encounter at our



Ice climbing



The Team.

TALES

previous -week long- camp at Crow Pass when one dropped in for breakfast just as we were making porridge! Incidentally during our time there we had completed a thorough programme of alpine mountaineering skills training on the Raven Glacier and neighbouring peaks in disappointingly wet and cloudy conditions.

Weather fortunes were to change whilst we were at the Scandinavian Hut and day by day the pressure rose and stabilised resulting in sunny days and occasional clear cold nights.

Not surprisingly the intensity of achievement in such pristine surroundings was significantly amplified. I have only once previously witnessed such a phenomenon and that was in Greenland where once again we were many days walk away from civilisation!

Each day brought us different challenges as we became accustomed to this natural wilderness. Our first venture was up the right-hand fork of the Scandinavian Glacier. Here we learnt that without the diurnal fluctuation in temperature, and therefore no appreciable freezing at night, snow-bridges over crevasses were soft enough to collapse frequently under our weight! In retrospect the experience 'sharpened' our rope handling skills as we became very proficient at extracting each other from numerous bottomless pits!

The days spent defying gravity on serac walls were deservedly popular with the party. Successful mastery of the use of front-points and ice tools on vertical ice also required the practical application of the principles of

conservation of energy. The "whack-and-dangle merchants" soon learnt the benefits of becoming 'ballerinas-on-ice' as their aching arms bulged in testament!

The most accurate maps to the area are the USGS "one inch to the mile" and I had forgotten just how much detail can be gleaned from them. At certain points the proximity of contours -especially when they're at 200ft intervals- yield cliffs where one might have anticipated steep ground! Not surprisingly we therefore came across a number of vertical drops that required laborious circumnavigation. Sadly loose rock was in abundance and some days were spent trying to find ridges to climb with sufficient friction to hold neighbouring rocks together so that we could make upward progress. I particularly remember close to the summit of Greenland Peak experiencing an odd sensation when rock beneath my feet and hands simultaneously moved in four separate -and opposing- directions. It took us the best part of two hours to regain the relative stability of vegetated tundra 1000ft below! On another day our fortunes and the rock quality were much better as we tackled the whale-back ridge close to camp. Three hours of Grade 1/2 rock scrambling led to a very respectable summit that we dubbed "Donkey's Ears" on account of a rock formation of that nature at the top. Undoubtedly this whole area would present a totally different perspective when the frost shattered rocks are cemented together with snow and ice. I must remember that for next time since this area certainly warrants further visits.



Climbing Donkeys Ears.



On Raven Glacier.



Cooking at Crow Pass.



Norway Peak from camp.

ARMY SHOCK... Soldiers

Skiing the Classic Haute

Ex ALPINE SNOW DRA

An expedition to ski the Classic Haute Route from Argentiere to Zermatt was undertaken by members of 28 Trg Sqn RE (ATR Lichfield), plus attachments, between 26 April and 06 May 2003. With increasing commitments at home and a cloud looming over the Middle-east it was looking increasingly likely that this expedition would not go ahead. It was therefore with considerable pleasure that we actually set out.

After travelling out on the Saturday and having a skiing 'shake-out' day on Sunday, Monday saw the first bit of touring. We met early so we could take the first cable car up to the Aiguille de Midi. Despite our lack of coffee at breakfast we put on brave faces and smiled as we stepped out of the ice tunnel at the top station. It was not always graceful but it was a breathtaking descent. The only stop was at the Torino hut (where we had our long awaited coffee) and then it was onwards, down the valley. In total it is about sixteen kilometres long descent from the Midi to the Montenvers station where you catch the funicular railway back to Chamonix. The best and longest downhill I have ever done.

Tuesday: After a couple of days of promising training and the threat of poor weather on the way it was decided to start the Haute route a day early. It was therefore with some disappointment that we awoke to an overcast morning, with a drizzle to further dampen our spirits. Our luck did not seem to be holding out as the cable car to the top station was not running. We consoled ourselves with the fact that skinning up to the top was a nice warm-up. We made it round the Aiguille de Montets and the weather had improved so we had decided



to press on. We survived the moguls on the descent and skated across the Argentiere glacier, and then started to climb. It was a steady plod up the Glacier du Chardonnet in the heat of the day, with the sun now beating down. It took about two hours of solid climbing to scale the 1000m to the col. There were other groups climbing too, and when they stopped we took advantage of the lead. This saved time at the col, which required a roped descent. There was nearly a disagreement with a German guide who appeared to want to bring his group down on our rope, but fortunately international relations were maintained and they freed our rope so we could continue. After a short traverse below the Petit Fourche we reached the next climb – up to the Fenetre de Saleina. The last section was very steep and there was the constant



s get high on white powder

Haute Route by Capt Simon Ash

DRAGON 26 Apr - 06 May 03



risk of if one fell it was likely to bowl the unhappy folk climbing below. We were all tired by now but the thought of refreshment spurred us on and it was not long before we were in the Trient hut admiring the magnificent view without the distraction of hyperventilation or a heart attack.

Wednesday morning and we awoke before five to the hut stumbling into action. The forecast was bad and everyone was making a dash for the Val d'Arpette before the clouds broke. A quick breakfast and then it was a scramble for the kit in the dark. Outside the air was bracing and the visibility was reducing. It was dark and a white out, a catch 22 situation. If you did not use your light it was too dark to see, and if you did use your light it reflected straight back and you still could not see! The first major descent was full of slightly out of control rucksack-assisted projectiles. Our troubles were not over here though. We made the Col, but as almost as soon as we started down the valley it started to rain. Once in the valley we were surrounded on all sides by avalanche prone slopes. We kept our distance as we hopped from one safer spot to another. It was not long before we were at a level where trees and rocks were on the increase and snow was on the decrease. Our "combat skiing" skills were tested as we fought through bushes, across streams and over rocks. With the rain aswell it felt like a good day's skiing in the





Cairngorms (but without the wind). It was not that much further to Champex but we had to walk down what had been piste a couple of weeks before.

Thursday: The weather had cleared up and the morning was fine with a fine dusting of snow giving that 'winter wonderland' feel to the scenery. We made good time up to the glacier proving again that we were a lot stronger going up than going down. This is not a bad thing on the Haute route, which requires a lot of climbing. This was especially true on this day as it was up all the way to the hut. You would not visit the loo at this hut any more times than necessary. This particular specimen was tied down to a

rocky outcrop, towards the edge of the crag, lying at the end of an icy path. Despite the breeze that blew everywhere, including up through the seat itself, it maintained a dizzying stench. Some people do not fully appreciate the dangers of the hills.

Friday: The slope up from the hut was too steep to skin up. The packs were considerably heavier with the skis attached and we again picked a steady pace as we stepped up the ice in our crampons. Turns were taken in breaking the trail at the front, which was exhausting work, especially when the crust started breaking through, sinking us to the knees each step. It was a great feeling to be hauled up though the gap in

the cornice and see some downhill. The descent to the next hut should have been straight forward but the cloud rolled in and to compound our navigation problems, the ever efficient Swiss had left this part of the route on the edge of the map! This meant constant refolding as the route veered on and off the page.

After resting on Saturday we woke on Sunday with high spirits. With the prospect of good weather we started thinking that we could press on beyond the Vignettes hut, our next programmed stop. Chris believed we could make the Schonbiel hut which was in the shadow of the Matterhorn. Everyone was game to make use of the window of opportunity that

had presented itself. So the roller-coaster continued, up and down. What had taken an hour or so to climb in height was lost again in a few minutes, and as our momentum ran out the next col taunted us from afar. During the hottest part of the day we were trapped in a bowl where the sun reflected off the snow and was then trapped by the high south facing walls. All talking ceased as we crept up towards the last col of the route. Fortunately, as we reached the top, the view that welcomed us was that of the long awaited Matterhorn. It was with tired legs and parched throats that we then made the approach down to the hut, which we reached after about eleven hours of skiing.

Monday morning found us trying to discern a ski-able route down.





We had heard that the snow would run out fairly high up but we wanted to walk the minimum possible. After skidding down the ice it was then a process of rock dodging on an ever frequent basis and soon we were forced to walk. The moraine gave way to a track that started to wind its way down from the hydro-station. As the tracks started to multiply the signs were of limited help. We found the right road to take us to the Furi cable car and from there down to Zermatt. We then had the chance for a lunch to celebrate the conclusion of the route before heading back to Chamonix.

And that was it! Back to the UK meant back to reality and the true end to the trip. It had been a relatively smooth ride from start to finish. More importantly we had achieved our aim in completing the Haute route, a long-standing ambition for many of us. So tired yet very content we made it back to Lichfield.



The FANY in France

by Jennifer Cole, Photos: Katie Garrod.

Training a diverse group of volunteer women officers for a week's mountain walking in the Pyrenees is no mean feat – especially when dealing with an age range of 30 years and experience levels that are nearly as broad!

This September, while four of our girls were becoming the first British women to obtain their French military parachute wings, 14 other members of the FANY (Princess Royal Volunteer Corps) embarked upon a week's adventure training in the Pyrenees. The commandant of the ETAP (Ecole des Troupes Aeroportees, or parachute academy) at Pau, Colonel Champenois, had put us in touch with Colonel Nabias. Under his command, we were to be accompanied by military guides from the 35th RAP and 1st RHP for the culmination of a training programme that had begun almost a year before.

The links between the FANY and the Pyrenees go back to the darkest days of WWII when members of the Corps, working as part of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), operated behind enemy lines as radio operators, assisting the escape networks into Spain for both

downed British airmen and French resistance fighters. A Corps visit to the Loire region in September 2002, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the first parachute drop of women behind enemy lines, re-established links with the French Army that enabled current members to revisit the mountains that had played such an important part in our history.

The training programme to prepare for the visit had to be carefully prepared over the 10 months leading up to the trek. The FANY Corps recruits women from a wide range of ages and, consequently, across all fitness levels. While it was inevitable that a certain level of fitness would be necessary for anyone hoping to undertake the trip, it was also important that no willing volunteers were excluded purely due to lack of experience – the aim of the visit was not to be an elitist jolly for seasoned trekkers only: it must be open to all.

Staff Commander Sandra Webb, our training officer, put together a carefully



En route to the Brèche du Roland – our trek doesn't officially start for another day.

planned programme of preparation consisting of four hill-walking weekends in the UK, evenly spaced throughout the year. With each weekend planned to be progressively tougher than the last, the programme would give members of the Corps an idea of what to expect while simultaneously ensuring that everyone present was up to the task. Our aim was to build up our fitness and experience for a three-day mountain trek across three 'cirques' surrounding a base camp at Barèges, carrying all our kit with overnight stays at basic but cosy mountain refuges along the way. One thing was sure – if we didn't

know each other well before we started, we certainly would once we'd finished!

The Corps members volunteering for the training programme covered a wide variety of ages and experience levels – from mid-20s to mid-50s, from seasoned trekkers with experience in Nepal, Morocco, France and the UK, to some who'd never ventured further than the English countryside with a day pack before. Listing previous experience as "gentle trekking in luxury lodges (with donkeys)" wouldn't exclude anyone from the trip – as long as they realised that this was going to



Fantastic scenery and beautiful weather were constant features of the entire week.

be (quite literally!) a steep learning curve. More important than pushing ourselves to the physical limit was ensuring that we learned to work together as a team, understanding all our strengths and weaknesses so that we could support one another as necessary. Along the way, we would learn more about what equipment to choose (and how to use it!); exactly how frugal we could be with our packs (a clean T-shirt every day soon ceases to be a necessity when you've been carrying a Bergen for three days!); how to plan routes, make risk assessments, improve our map-reading and dry our hair with travel towels – (mostly) all useful skills for civilian as well as military life.

The training programme started in earnest in April, with two days walking in the Peak District. I'd previously spent a walking weekend in this area, at this time of year, sleeping inside a survival bag while two members of the group developed hypothermia inside a camping barn, so I did have my reservations about what I was letting myself in for – but luckily, the weather was on our side. We enjoyed a mostly sunny weekend over which we got to know one another better, discovered the joys of a luminous orange emergency shelter (luckily for practice only!), learned to walk on a bearing through almost-gaiter-deep peat bogs (always a useful skill...) and realised that in future, YHAs and camping barns that provided breakfast for us were more desirable than self-catering – although the crate of wine provided by Freeman, who works in marketing for the Californian wine board, ensured that high spirits were maintained at all times. As for the intrepid group, no one got lost and we all made it back alive – giving us hope for the future! The weekend's exertions did leave one or two of our initial volunteers realising that this wasn't the activity for them but, collectively, there seemed to be an overall feeling of "well, this isn't so bad." Little did we know that we were being lulled into a false sense of security...



How much further? Capt Henry still up for more.

The second training weekend, 6 weeks later, took us to the Brecon Beacons. Members of the Corps had scaled Pen Y Fan the previous year, leaving us to take on the Black Mountains – with a promise to return for the appropriately named Fan Y Big another time. The terrain this time was steeper and harder going than the previous weekend – introducing us to the sore muscles that would become a staple of future trips. We certainly learned some valuable lessons over the weekend – such as the importance of long trousers for wading through stinging-nettle infested undergrowth even when the weather seems to favour shorts and the advantages of walking poles, which made handy makeshift walking aids for a twisted ankle and enabled us to get an injured team-mate down from what would otherwise have been fairly inaccessible territory. And we were all still happy to come back for more...

Which took us on to Tryfan in Snowdonia, for the third and probably toughest of the training weekends. We started to suspect that this was going to be a more challenging weekend than the previous ones when our guides arrived: not only were they experienced international mountaineers – they also had ropes with them. Nevertheless we turned up ready and willing for a weekend we had been warned would contain 'some' scrambling. Yes – 'some' scrambling, and the rest a vertical climb up a cliff-face – mostly without using the



Staff Commander Webb navigates a via ferrata cable bridge on our "rest day".

ropes! Saturday's ascent of the North Face of Tryfan was certainly the most challenging climb we had attempted so far, and a necessary experience to ensure that any pangs of vertigo could be overcome. Working together as a team was a must, both to support the less experienced and less confident members of the group and also to ensure that we all knew how to use the safety equipment and that correct procedures were followed at all times. We were all monumentally relieved to realise, on reaching the top, that the way down was nowhere near as steep or rocky as the ascent! Nevertheless, the weekend offered a real sense of achievement – and a realisation that if we could handle Tryfan, we had nothing to fear from the Pyrenees. Even if it was a week before any of us could quite manage a flight of stairs again.

The fourth and final preparation weekend took us to the Lake District and Helvellyn for a three-day training programme – and the first for which we would be carrying full kit for the entire weekend. We should have been forewarned by the experience of one of the Corps who, on enquiring about a suitable lightweight rain jacket for the trip, was asked if she was training for Helvellyn. No – Helvellyn was the training! Many of us had practised with full Bergens on the previous trip, but this was make-or-break for our planned kit: once we set off from our youth hostel on the Saturday morning, there would be no returning to off-load or repack kit until Monday lunchtime. Anything that was in our bags



Capt Kozniewska takes a welcome break from translating.

at the start would have to be carried for the entire trip. Suddenly, the prospect of drying your entire body with a face flannel, wearing the same T-shirt two days in a row, and (gasp!) foregoing a make-up bag the size of a section first aid kit began to form into a realistic proposition.

Unfortunately, the only poor weather we encountered throughout the entire training programme prevented us from completing our proposed course; we'd hoped to traverse the formidable-looking ridge of Striding Edge, but as it disappeared into thick cloud cover it was decided that the lack of visibility, biting winds and wet rocks underfoot made the attempt too dangerous. This was a shame, but at least gives us something to aim for next year. An evening lecture from Tony, one of this weekend's guides, on foot care and the prevention of blisters was also much appreciated by all present!

Which brought us on, refreshed and enthusiastic, to the culmination of our training programme – a week's mountain walking in the beautiful area of the Pyrenees around Gavarnie.

From Heathrow Airport, we caught an early morning flight to Toulouse where we were collected by our hosts for the week; the 35th RAP had laid on a coach and driver to take us direct to our accommodation in the military barracks at Barèges – opposite the area's famous natural spa baths. The hand-written notice, 'Welcome to the British Army' on the door of the barracks

was a lovely start to our stay, and an indication of the warmth and generosity we would receive from the French throughout our visit.

The barracks themselves, housed in a large former Napoleonic hospital, were beautiful and imposing if somewhat basic – there were showers and hot water, but unfortunately not in the same place. Still, the revelation that French ration packs contain a half-bottle of red wine as standard issue soon warmed our spirits!

The main focus of the visit was to be a three-day mountain trek on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, leaving from Luz St. Sauveur and staying at mountain refuges overnight. This gave us Sunday and Monday to acclimatise to our surroundings, beginning with a gentle, essentially sightseeing programme on Sunday which took us by cable car to the Pic du Midi mountain-top observatory. Here, from above the clouds, we had a wonderful view of the snow-covered mountain peaks that would become a familiar backdrop over the coming days. This chance to take in the natural beauty of the area was followed by a virtually vertical yomp back down to the bottom while the cable car made the return journey without us. This gave us a chance to assess our reactions to the thinner mountain air and our guides the opportunity to gauge our speed, confidence and ability

to come down steep and slippery grass without (mostly) sliding on our bottoms!

Our guides must have been reasonably impressed with our efforts, as Monday saw us escorted on a longer, more challenging route up to the Brèche de Roland, a natural break in the mountain ridge between France and Spain. This gave us the opportunity to briefly cross over onto the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, where we paused for lunch in a natural cave at the very top of the Spanish slopes. Coming back down towards the promise of hot chocolate at the mountain refuge was a new experience in itself, as our guide, M. Crampe, introduced us to the pleasures of skiing without skis on the remains of the glaciers that still graced the hillside – and snowball fighting with our French guides helped to break the ice between our two groups. It was only the second day, but we were already finding that no matter how broken and out of practice our French may be, we could chat easily and openly with our friendly French hosts. Formalities had already been dropped in favour of first-name familiarity. The fact that the French army seemed to have picked their most handsome NCOs to send us was, of course, completely coincidental to this!

Which brought us to Tuesday morning, and the beginning of the trek we had all been



The Brèche du Roland, a natural break in the mountain ridge between France and Spain.

training for – a three-day circuit that would take us through three natural cirques to finish at Gavarnie. We had seen some of our route on our way to the Brèche de Roland, and it looked beautiful – rugged, but beautiful. So far, the weather had been glorious and we could only hope that it would stay that way for the rest of the week. While the air was colder in the higher regions that for any of our training weekends in the UK, the freshness and clarity more than made up for this.

The three-day trek itself was everything we could have hoped for and more. The weather held, ensuring fabulous views over incredible mountain terrain, with clear skies that enabled us to see for miles. We soon learned to listen for the distinctive call of marmots – the local prairie-dog-like animals, and to spot the nervous and elusive creatures in their underground burrows. We filled up our water bottles from pure mountain streams, watched the stars in the clear night sky, and rested on the mountain grass with nothing but blue sky and white clouds above us.

The training we had undertaken had prepared us perfectly for the exertions of the trip and, with the help of our MO for the week Captain Eyvor Fogarty, blisters and sore muscles were kept to a minimum and everyone's sense of humour survived intact. By now, we were a closely-knit group of friends who knew one another's

strengths and weaknesses; we knew the optimum times to stop for water and refreshment, how and when to support those with less confidence in difficult conditions and when to simply look up and take in the beauty of our surroundings. We arrived at the refuges each evening looking forward to the relaxation but not so exhausted that we couldn't enjoy the peaceful evening light, fabulous sunsets and the chance to get to know our guides a little better. Their love of their local area came through in all our conversations, and their willingness to share it with us was at times overwhelming. When we came over the final ridge on Wednesday in particular, to a mountain refuge that emerged out of the rolling hills like a picture postcard from *Heidi*, we wondered how we would ever be able to bring ourselves to leave. We had already begun to think about who would be nominated to break the news to the CO that we had decided to set up a Pyrenees branch of the FANY in the Barèges barracks! The final day's effort – a walk down the mountain through pine forests followed by one steep ascent up a glacier to the region's largest waterfall and another through the trees to one of the most beautiful spots in the region, was the perfect end to a fabulous five days of walking. All that remains now is to plan our route for next year!

You can find out more about FANY activities in France on our website: www.fany.org.uk



The end is in sight – down the valley on our final day.

Contemplation on the John Muir Trail

By Tania Noakes

This year I have had some of the most profound experiences of my life, and it was only on the John Muir Trail in quiet reflection that I was able to put them into perspective.

The John Muir Trail traverses the length of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. Named after the famous environmentalist of Scottish origin who was largely responsible for setting up the National Parks system in the United States. He often said that they should have been called the "Range of Light", and as I leaf through my photographs my mind drifts to their slopes and I understand why.

I planned for a year. Inspired by two previous visits to Yosemite Valley and too heavy a focus on climbing that brooked no visit to the backcountry. I would take eleven Officer Cadets across the northern part of the trail, from the Valley to Bishop in just over two weeks. We would encounter Black Bears, catch fish barehanded, relax in natural hot springs, swim in many little alpine lakes and climb a few peaks along the way. In the end I was really proud of my new friends and it was hard to keep down the tears when one of them told me it was the best thing she'd ever done.

It almost didn't happen. A turbulent year of work commitments

and an emotional whirlwind worried me that my planning might go awry. But something in the Sierras was calling and somewhere in me followed that call.

I've been climbing now for over ten years and slowly but surely my relationship to the mountains and my place in them has shifted. Perhaps it was a gradual process, or perhaps like the San Andreas Fault I inched along until the tension was so much that I broke free to find a new equilibrium elsewhere. This year I've been physically higher than I've ever been and emotionally at the opposite end of the scale. Abrupt reassessments of priorities perhaps par for the course at some stage in our lives.

I was in Kenya when one of my best friends died in a motorcycle accident. I didn't find out about it until after I returned from Nepal and I received the news from his wife. I was skiing when my father went into hospital for a hip replacement and because I didn't want to lose valuable training time I didn't return to see him. I was in Greenland when my boyfriend's attention began to wander and in Yosemite when I sealed our fate by only thinking about where my climbing was going

and not where we were going. I became so focused on completing my climb that I began to lose my enjoyment of climbing. I almost got to the stage of wanting to give up.

Then my fault line moved and the aftershocks carried me around the world, first to Argentina, then to Tanzania, to Canada, to Alaska, to New Zealand, and finally with dampening tremors to the High Sierra.

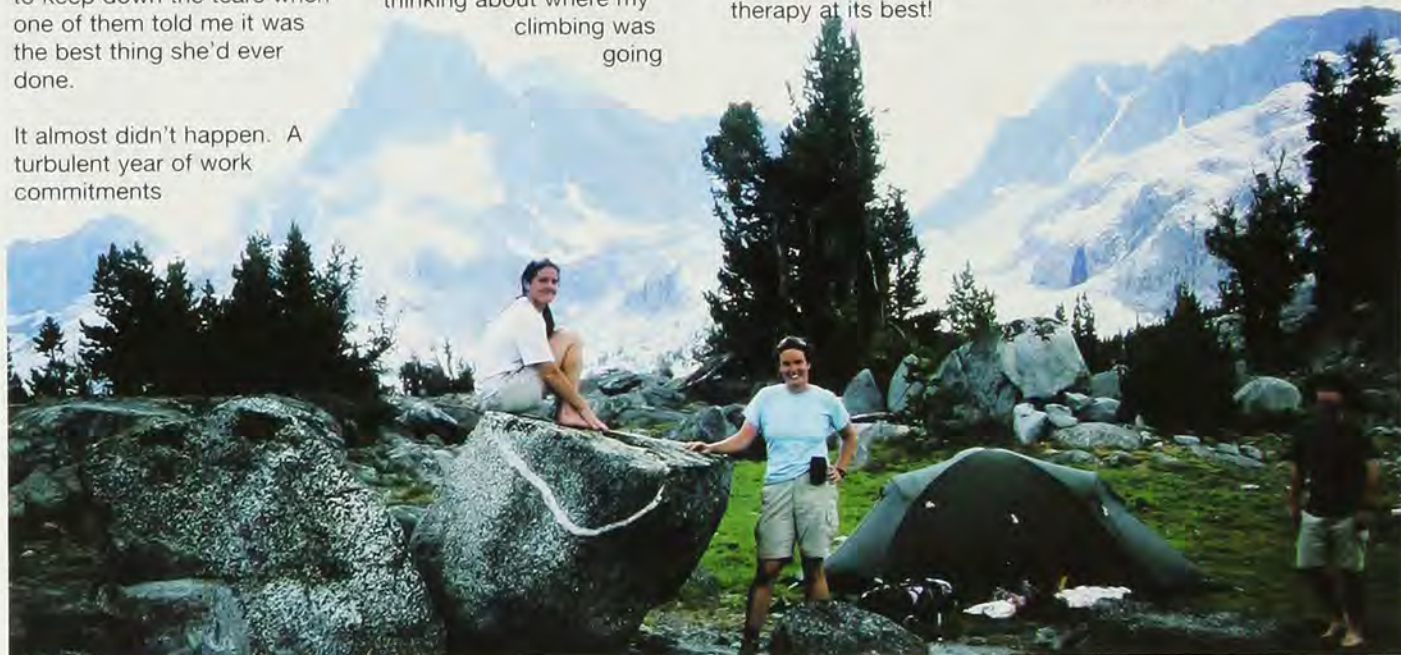
I walked the John Muir Trail initially with a head full of trouble. Day by day that range of light began to lighten my load. After five days I woke to a happiness I haven't felt in years as I jumped into Rosalie Lake with two of my new friends. The cold water seemed to wash away my sadness and the sunshine eased my bruised spirit. I began to breathe in the fresh pine that felt so like coming home and think about next year. I started planning my return. To climb some of the fine granite domes and serrated ridges past which we walked whilst in the backcountry. Perfect granite, reliable weather, inspiring views, good company and thought for the soul... mountain therapy at its best!



Capt Tania Noakes bids to join the Army Angling Team.

I saw my year through clearer eyes and knew it for what it was, the best and worst year of my life so far. Sometimes you win more than you lose in the end, and my love of the mountains now burns brighter than ever within me.

So for an article on the John Muir Trail I hope you will forgive the introspection. John Muir once said, "I am once and hopelessly forever a mountaineer", and in reflection on his trail I am only too pleased to find the same is true for me. Perhaps the same is true of you too. If you ever find you're not sure, contemplation on the John Muir Trail may be just what you need.



Capt Tania Noakes and OCdt Johanna Copeland at Island Pass on the John Muir Trail.

What's it like to meet a legend in his own lifetime?

The AMA's Publicity Officer – Major Blair Cunningham – found out when he chatted with Sir Chris Bonington about his brief military career and his early mountaineering accomplishments.

If you ever get the opportunity to interview Sir Chris Bonington the first part of the challenge must surely be to find his house; if you set out to look for a grand country mansion then you'd be mistaken. Britain's most successful and best-loved mountaineer tucks himself away in one of a cluster of unassuming white-washed, stone cottages almost perfectly screened from the outside world by surrounding vegetation as it nestles snugly below the high Lakeland Fells. His home is accessible only by a rough track that gives no suggestion that the person living at the end of it has stood atop the highest point of our planet.

But I hadn't come here to talk about Bonington's eventual conquest of Everest, nor to ruminate over his breathtaking Alpine adventures and not even to recount the epic tale of courage and bravery in his descent of The Ogre with the badly injured Doug Scott – an incredible story of endurance and determination in its own right. Instead, I had come to find out more about the relatively short military career and the accompanying mountaineering exploits of the one-time Lieutenant Christian Bonington of the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment.

Sir Chris Bonington's military career began with his National Service in the Royal Air Force in 1953 although his commissioning potential was quickly identified and he soon found himself at Cranwell undergoing 'two terms of incredibly unpleasant square bashing' which was followed by a period of further training as a pilot. He had initially intended to join the RAF as in order to get into its Mountain Rescue service but was persuaded that his future lay as a pilot, able to fly over the mountains rather than walk up them to find those who were lost or injured. Alas, his efforts to qualify as a pilot were short-lived as Bonington recalls 'I was ham-handed in

the cockpit of the aircraft and was completely incapable of judging height and distance. My instructor couldn't even trust me on the ground after I nearly ran a plane into a petrol tanker!'

Unable to succeed as a pilot, a career in the RAF lost its allure and Bonington turned his attention to securing a commission in the British Army and so earned the rare distinction of completing officer training at Cranwell and then at Sandhurst. Both at Cranwell and at Sandhurst he was able to indulge his passion for mountaineering and was already climbing at a very high standard despite his early years. At Sandhurst he became the secretary of the mountaineering club and regularly escaped at weekends with fellow club members to climb in places such as Avon Gorge or the Llanberis Pass. In fact Bonington had climbed extensively through the Llanberis Pass in the early 1950s, both during his National Service and whilst undergoing his two stints of officer training. Eager to 'push the envelope' and to follow in the footsteps of the legendary Joe Brown, in 1954 he put up the second ascent of Surplomb which Brown had first conquered in hobnailed boots in blizzard conditions, then a year later completed his own first ascent – Macavity in the Avon Gorge.

Having passed out of Sandhurst fairly high in the Order of Merit, Bonington was posted to Munster in Germany where he joined the '2nd Tanks'. 'I came out of Sandhurst cock-a-hoop with a Field Marshal's baton in my knapsack, thought I knew it all but I didn't even remotely know the basics of how to manage the men under my command' Bonington remembers. 'Leaping straight into a situation without giving a care to the consequences I actually did so much damage to my Troop's morale and

their view of me as their commander that it took the best part of a year to put things right. However, what helped me to repair the situation was that as a climber I had mixed more widely than my officer colleagues in the sense that I'd met and got to know well people from all social backgrounds. More important though was my wonderful troop sergeant, Sergeant Melville, who had served through the Second World War and seen it all before. He was magnificent.'

But what of the climbing opportunities whilst stationed at Munster? 'None whatsoever. It was awful, flat as a pancake' Bonington recalls of the area's climbing potential. 'The nearest crags were at Iserlohn and I went there regularly taking a few officers and lads with me but unfortunately none were really enthusiastic climbers.' Although



Summer rock climbing on Black Crag, Borrodale, Lake District.

having been climbing for several years by the time he joined his regiment in Munster, Bonington was not the product of a formal climbing programme and learned his craft through watching, learning and climbing with others at every opportunity. There was no formal system of mountaineering qualifications for an



Chris going for the fairytale summit of Shivering with Everest in the background, Norwegian expedition 1985.

aspirant climber to follow, such as the SPA programme administered by the MLTB today. The training Bonington received was all 'on the job' and even today he holds no formal mountaineering qualification.

Whilst in Munster he would save up his leave to take it in large blocks, so spent the summers of 1957 and 1958 in the Alps climbing with the likes of Hamish MacInnes and Don Whillans. In his inaugural Alpine season he put up the first ascent on the South-East Face of Aiguilles du Tacal with MacInnes before returning the next year to claim first British ascents on the Bonatti Pillar of Petit Dru, again with MacInnes, and on the West Face of the Petit Jorasses, on that occasion with Ronnie Wathen.

Bonington's period of regimental duty came to a close in January 1959 when he joined the Army Outward Bound School at Tywyn in North Wales, although he recalls that his Commanding Officer cautioned against the move: 'I knew that this was what I wanted to do. My regiment, however, did not approve and my Commanding Officer said that it was not at all a wise career move but I really wanted to do it. Even without possessing any formal kind of qualifications I was probably one of the best climbers in the country at the time and did not feel that I really needed any to teach at the School. When I got to Tywyn, apart from one other subaltern, the rest of the instructors were senior NCOs who were a cracking good crowd. We were all on Christian name terms and they became good mates.'

The students were all very young soldiers drawn from the Junior Leaders' regiments and the Army Apprentice Schools, each of whom had a three week stay at the School undertaking rock climbing and hill walking but also canoeing, in which Bonington had to become proficient too. Bonington recalls that back in the late 1950s and early 1960s issues such as health and safety and risk management were given scant con-

sideration although he was particularly vociferous in his criticism of the safety arrangements which applied to canoeing activities. Unfortunately his warnings were ignored and sadly the inevitable happened when a student drowned whilst canoeing. 'Many outdoor pursuits are inherently dangerous and the issue is not one of safety but of risk management. You need to look at the potential risks you can do something about and then go for it. In my sphere I think that the bold climbers who have been very successful and have stayed alive, people like Reinhold Messner, are people who have identified then managed those risks carefully' he adds.

In an age when we crave the comfort of lightweight footwear and revel in our Gore-Tex waterproofs it is interesting to receive Bonington's observations about the kit and equipment issued, or in some cases not issued, to the students at Tywyn. 'Students did not wear helmets and actually no other climbers at that time wore helmets either. People only really started wearing helmets in the mid-1960s and the first time I ever wore a helmet was on the North Wall of the Eiger, which was in about 1962. As for the rest of the students' gear it was hardly what you would describe as state of the art. They all wore tricuni nailed boots which I think were surplus stock from the mountain warfare days of the Second World War. They made mayhem and mess on the rocks but it was a bloody good discipline to be able to climb in them!'

And what of his ability as an instructor? 'I think that I was a good Outward Bound instructor but I was also self-indulgent' he admits. 'If had any sense at all that one of my students was even potentially agile I would take them up into climbs that I would find interesting and I can tell you that doing Tennis Shoe [a 141 metre, six-pitch Severe route] on the Idwal Slabs in tricuni nailed boots was quite exciting! However, my time at Tywyn taught me that there was no way I would make a

career as a mountaineering instructor but I actually enjoyed the period and if you think of it, it was one a hell of a sight better than being stationed in Munster, Westphalia!'

Bonington took his instructional responsibilities seriously and believed in stretching the students far beyond what they themselves felt they were capable of achieving. He derived particular satisfaction from those occasions where the more high-spirited, rebellious or known trouble makers amongst the groups despatched to Tywyn proved their mettle. 'Those who fitted such a description often displayed unruly behaviour back in their Junior Leaders' regiment simply due to boredom. The moment you gave those spirited lads some kind of focus or set them something really challenging to do, they would very often shine whilst with others it took a tremendous effort to get them to show some enthusiasm and really commit themselves wholeheartedly to the activities in which they were involved. Unfortunately, there was little opportunity to follow up the potential of those that displayed some talent once they returned to their units, unless there was an officer who was prepared to take his lads out on the crags.'

Bonington remained at Tywyn until the spring of 1960 when he joined the joint British-Indian-Nepalese Services expedition to the previously unclimbed 8,611m Himalayan giant of Annapurna II. Bonington today describes his participation in the expedition as 'the biggest thing that the Army did for my mountaineering career.' Reaching the top of the mountain as a twenty-five year old subaltern in the company Dick Grant, a captain in the Royal Marines, and their Sherpa, Ang Nyima, was arguably Bonington's greatest achievement at the time but the elation quickly wore off on his return to Tywyn. 'I only had a few months left before I was due to return to the regiment and the prospect was not an inviting one, made even less

appealing by the tantalising offer to join a civilian expedition to the Himalayas in 1961 to climb Nuptse' he recalls. A watershed moment had been reached and Bonington decided that the time had come to leave the Army, seeing out the remaining months of his military service at the Outward Bound School. 'I knew that I didn't want to return to regimental duty and although the lifestyle was comfortable and I was well paid, my overwhelming passion and ambition to climb was totally incompatible with my continued military service. I had to leave even though I wasn't absolutely sure of what I'd do next' he recalls.

The story of Bonington's life after his military service has been one of tremendous successes as evidenced by his impressive record of leading expeditions to first ascents over extremely challenging routes such as the South Face of Annapurna and the East Ridge of Changabang, in addition to his own, awe-inspiring first ascent on the South Face of The Ogre with Doug Scott in 1977 and of course his summiting of Mount Everest in 1985, aged fifty, as part of a Norwegian expedition. Yet for all his hard-won achievements Bonington has also known moments of indescribable despair and heartbreaking anguish, on a scale unimaginable to you and I, in the loss of so many good friends and companions through climbing accidents over several years. However, despite all of this, or perhaps more precisely because of all of this, he continues to climb today. When I interviewed him in mid-August he had just returned from an expedition to Kullu in northern India where he had been on an adventurous trek through the Great Himalayan National Park to a high point of 5,205m on the previously unclimbed Jaraun Peak. Now almost seventy Bonington continues to thoroughly enjoy his climbing, either in his beloved Lake District or further afield. 'I love my climbing still. I love doing new routes and they might not be desperately hard - only VS, HVS or E1' he says nonchalantly, 'but they are great and I still get a tremen-

dous sense of achievement and a real thrill from doing them.'

So to my final question: 'What three words sum you up best?' After some considerable thought came the first reply: 'Enthusiastic. Yes. I'd definitely describe myself as that'. Then some time later the next: 'Ambitious. Without

ambition I could not have done what I have done and I'd still describe myself as ambitious today.' The final answer, delivered after a long pause during which he leaned back and scratched his ever-present, trademark greying beard, needed no further amplification. 'Determined' was the one word reply. That simple response really did say

everything about this genuine, sincere and immensely likeable former lieutenant in the 2nd Tanks who has been an inspiration to countless others over a period of many, many years. I had been enormously privileged to spend just one hour in his company and take with me a memory that I will cherish for a lifetime.

Photographs and supplementary information provided from 'Boundless Horizons - The Autobiography of Chris Bonington', Wiedenfield & Nicholson, London, 1988. Reproduced by kind permission of Sir Chris Bonington.

YOU, THE AMA AND THE BMC

Just how much attention do you pay to your AMA membership card? Have you noticed the small BMC logo in the bottom right-hand corner? Hopefully, most AMA members will be aware that their AMA membership also automatically brings affiliated membership to the BMC or British Mountaineering Council. With over 2,000 members, the AMA is the largest club affiliated to the BMC.

The BMC, whose headquarters is in Manchester, is the representative body that exists to protect the freedoms and promote the interests of climbers, hill-walkers and mountaineers, including ski-mountaineers. The BMC's activities are wide and varied and includes amongst others, political lobbying, protecting and negotiating access, the production of technical reports and advice, guide books, annual winter skills lecture tours and general advice across the mountaineering spectrum. The AMA is fully committed to supporting the BMC and its aims and consequently an AMA representative attends the BMC AGM every year as well as other important BMC meetings.

Affiliated BMC membership costs £6.25 for every AMA member and this is included in your £15 annual AMA membership fee. Compared to the full BMC membership fee of £25, the affiliation fee is remarkable value and brings the following benefits:

- £5 Million personal world-wide liability insurance.
- 1 copy per year of Summit magazine.
- Access to BMC huts and the huts belonging to other BMC affiliated clubs.
- Access to BMC travel and activity insurance products.
- Discounts on European coach travel, reciprocal rights to Alpine Huts and many others.
- Access to BMC specialist officers e.g. technical officer.

It is also possible for AMA members to upgrade to full BMC membership for a further fee of £9.50 and brings the following additional benefits:

- An extra 3 Summit magazines per year.
- £10,000 personal accident disability insurance.
- Members handbook, BMC Membership Card.

Those wishing to upgrade should contact the BMC directly. The BMC website has full details of membership benefits as well lots of other useful information and links.

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BOOK REVIEWS

STARLIGHT AND STORM

Gaston Rebuffat

Reviewed by John Foster

Published by Modern Library Exploration, ISBN 0-375-75506-3.

This is an account of the ascent of the 6 great north faces of the Alps¹ which Rebuffat undertook in the 1950s, his mountaineering heyday. After glittering introductions by such luminaries as John Krakauer (of *Into Thin Air* fame), David Roberts and the unimpeachable Lord Hunt, the reader almost feels that the actual prose is bound to be something of an anti-climax. However, in writing, as with climbing, Rebuffat is able to smoothly negotiate the obstacles and difficulties of the craft, to produce a peerless classic.

The success of the book lies partly in its simplicity. Each of the chapters is devoted to an ascent of one of the faces. A grainy black and white photo is followed by a brief history of the first ascent of each face. Rebuffat then gives an account of his own experiences of each face, all of which were early repeats of the climbs. Rebuffat was the first climber to successfully climb all six faces, a fact which he neglects to mention in the book itself! The book concludes with an instructional chapter which could be said to be somewhat ill-fitting with the overall concept of the book, but adds value in its own way, if only to remind us that the early ascensionists of these faces had few of the creature comforts that modern technology affords today's climbers.

The book contains a number of key themes. Firstly, a great affection for his climbing companions is evident throughout the book. He claims that 'the Brotherhood of the Rope' is all-important and is one of the main reasons we climb. His assertion is that choice of companion is as important as choice of climb. An overwhelming affection for the mountain environment is also a predominating theme – even through the frequent storms and icy bivouacs that he had to endure, Rebuffat portrays a oneness with the mountain world and displays a certain gratitude that he has been fortunate enough to explore

it so fully. Also, whilst clearly master of his profession, Rebuffat emphasises that climbers should not actively seek out danger, but successfully treading the fine line between challenge, ability and judgement will reap climbing's greatest rewards. Rebuffat is keen to emphasise the value of the Profession of Guiding and it is clear that he brought his own philosophy of integrity and honour to the profession. Is this ethic still in evidence today amongst French Mountain Guides? I hope so.

One incident stands out in particular as an example of Rebuffat's self-assuredness in the mountains. After much deliberation, Rebuffat decided to lead a course of aspirant guides, which he was directing, up the Croz Spur on the Grandes Jorasses. After a safe and successful ascent, one of the aspirants was killed by rockfall whilst bivvying on a ledge. How must Rebuffat have questioned his own judgement after this incident? A similar incident in today's safety conscious world would be blown up into press field days, enquiries, retribution and legal action. Fifty years ago, perhaps the world was a better-proportioned place where people were able to take calculated risks, take responsibility for their actions and therefore better understand the value of activities such as mountaineering.

Overall this is an inspirational account, which could develop motivation and confidence in adventurers of all disciplines. There is something for everyone, whether armchair mountaineer, easy grade plodder or extreme alpinist. The book is easy to read, gripping at times and never disappoints; and amongst the silky prose, lays down the challenge:

"We climbed in a light mist, but we experienced a great joy, a rather savage joy; it was, I believe, the recognition of the urge that every man feels deep within himself – the urge at least once in a lifetime to exceed his limits."

(Rebuffat, on his ascent of the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses)

¹ *The North Faces of the Grandes Jorasses, the Piz Badile, the Drus, the Matterhorn, the Cima Grande di Lavaredo and the Eiger.*

FEEDING THE RAT

Al Alvarez

Reviewed by John Foster

Published by Bloomsbury, ISBN 0-7475-6452-3

This book is a rare thing in a number of ways: firstly, it is written by an author who is more renowned for his writing than his climbing; secondly, it is biographical as opposed to autobiographical and thirdly you feel that the subject of the book shies away from the limelight instead of seeking it. The end result is a simple but engaging book, which is eminently readable due to the author's knack of staying on one subject for just enough time to satisfy the reader's curiosity, not falling into the trap, all too common in climbing books, of trying to say everything about the subject or give a blow by blow account of a particular climb.

The subject of the book is Mo Anthoine, an accomplished climber who based himself in the Welsh town of Llanberis for almost the entirety of his climbing life. Alvarez maintained a climbing partnership with Anthoine, but was clearly in a much lower league, readily admitting that he was the perennial second. It seems that their climbing forays were comparatively infrequent, but special all the same. That said, some impressive climbing territory was covered by the pair, including the North Face of the Cima Grande in the Dolomites and the Old Man of Hoy.

Alvarez captures the spirit of his subject admirably; that of a man who climbs to his limit, albeit with a healthy respect for risk and danger. Anthoine was clearly a climber who didn't take life or climbing too seriously and viewed the friendship and camaraderie as more important than attaining some elusive summit. 'Feeding the Rat' was Anthoine's term for blowing the cobwebs away on a really good climb or expedition following which his urge to push himself to the limit was satisfied once again.

Alvarez illustrates that Anthoine had pretty much the definitive answer as to why people climb:

'I can go up to the Llanberis Pass and do a route I've done fifty times before with someone I like, and really enjoy myself. Then I come back home and forget all about it – it's just been a nice day out. But if I go and do something that taxes me with a mate I get on well with, I come back and savour it. I remember the moves, what the other bloke said – all the little details – for years after. It's the degree of commitment you put yourself to with someone else that defines what you get out of it afterwards. That's what climbing is all about for me.'

All in all, 'Feeding the Rat' is an excellent book which gets straight into the thick of the action, is reasonably thought provoking, takes the reader through a wide variety of climbing adventures and closes an interesting and lively account of Mo Anthoine's life with a fitting and poignant epilogue.

ARMY BOULDERING CHAMPIONSHIPS

14 FEB 04

The Army Bouldering Championships will be held on Saturday 14th February 2004 at JSMTTC(I). The Championship will consist of an integrated individual and team competition and is organised and run by the AMA on behalf of the Army. Entry is open to all Regulars, TA, Apprentices, UOTC and members of the AMA.

Competition Format

Competitors will be organised into groups, which will rotate around a series of circuits. Problems will be graded between 4c and 6b (UK grades).

Prizes will be awarded as follows:

1st, 2nd and 3rd male.

1st and 2nd female.

1st veteran (over 35).

1st and 2nd team.

Under 21.

Teams will consist of three climbers from the same unit. The team with the highest accumulated points will be the winning team. The team event will run concurrently with the Individual competition.

Administration

Climbers wishing to enter should complete and return the application form (opposite) by 02 Feb 04. The event is restricted to 70 competitors. Team names can be confirmed and changed on the day if required. The team event is open to unit and not corps teams.

Entry fees for individuals are £5 for AMA members and £10 for non-members. Team fees are £10. Entry fees should be submitted with the application and cheques made payable to "Army Mountaineering Association". Entries on the day will be subject to a £3 surcharge. Confirmation of entry and administrative details can be provided if SAEs are sent with applications.

Further information and clarification can be obtained by contacting WO2 Mark Hedge; 95581 7900, 01248 715635 and fax 01248 715649.

Accommodation facilities are available for the 13 and 14 Feb 04 at JSMTTC(I); requirements should be annotated on the application form. Alternative accommodation is available in the Nuffield Centre collocated with JSMTTC(I); contact the centre manager direct on 95581 7962 or civil 01248 718362.

2004 ARMY BOULDRING CHAMPIONSHIPS - 14 FEB 04 - ENTRY FORM

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|-------|--------------|----------------|--|-----------|--|----------|
| No. | | Rank. | | Surname. | | Forename. | | |
| AMA No. | | | Regt./Corps. | | | Unit. | | |
| Unit Address. | | | | | | | | |
| Tel No. | | | | Fax No. | | | | |
| Regular * | | TA * | | UOTC * | | Male * | | Female * |
| Age. | | | | Date of Birth. | | | | |
| Under 21 * | | | | 35+ * | | | | |
| PLEASE GIVE AN INDICATION OF YOUR CLIMBING ABILITY | | | | | | | | |
| 4c * | | 5a * | | 5b * | | 5c+ * | | |
| Accommodation requirements 13/14 Feb only - sleeping bags required | | | | 13 Feb * | | 14 Feb * | | |

* Tick relevant boxes TO BE RETURNED BY 02 FEB 04

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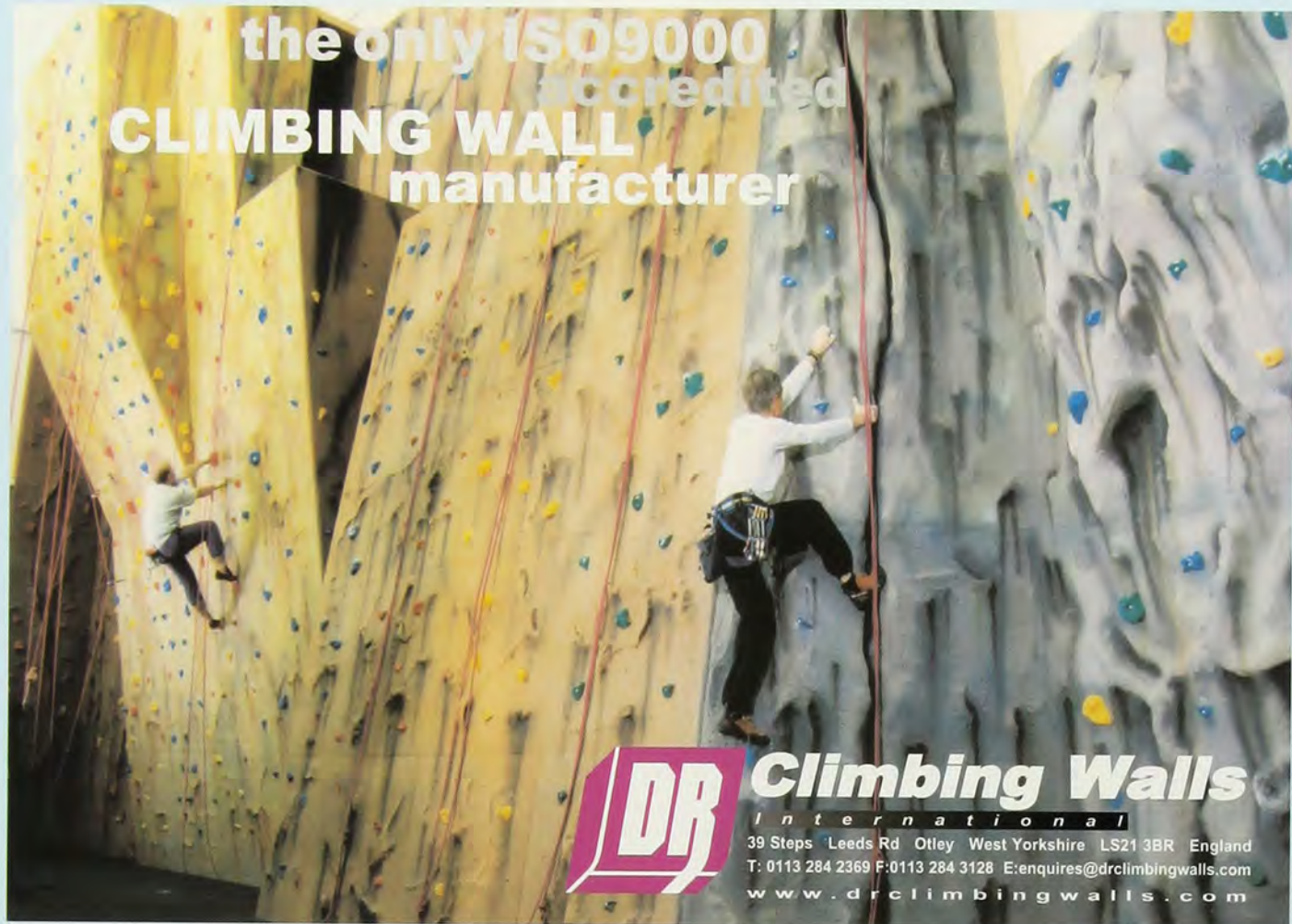
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