

# ARMY MOUNTAINEER



Spring 2010 | Epics | **Trekking in India** | Steve McClure | **How To...** | Flora & Fauna



The Journal of the Army Mountaineering Association



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# ARMY MOUNTAINEER

The Journal of The Army Mountaineering Association



## LIFE ON THE LEDGE

### COME CLIMB A MOUNTAIN WITH ME

Come Climb a Mountain

You must come climb a mountain with me

So that you can see,

The valley lawns,

The lacy streams,

The ships about the seas.

You must come climb a mountain with me –

The sun will be our host –

And you will see

The singing thrush,

The white-winged swan,

The man dumping garbage by the sea.

You must come climb a mountain with me,

And you will know the wind,

The skying pines will be our grass,

The cloud-puffed hills our trees,

We'll watch as Herod's soldiers work,

See Caesar's ships at oar,

Odysseus' bow,

Prometheus' chain,

Lucifer and Michael's war.

You must come climb a mountain with me

So that you can see,

Above the cold and careless waves,

And the ceaseless rolling sea.

You'll see the deafened cardboard judge

Wash in the Lady's eyes,

And hear the numbing siren's wail

Across the blackened skies,

And the woman's failing music

In their lucid Paradise.

You must come climb a mountain with me

So that you can see,

Above the cold and careless waves,

And the ceaseless rolling sea.

FRANK M. TIERNEY, 1970–2001.

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## **President**

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## **Chairman**

Lt Col Cath Davies MBE

Mob 07855 469252

amachair@armymail.mod.uk

## **Vice Chairman (Mountaineering)**

Lt Col Paul Edwards

Mil: 94391 3946

Civil: 01264 383946

amavicechair@armymail.mod.uk

## **Vice Chairman (Sport)**

Maj Pete Skinsley

Mil: 96161 5778

Civil: 01793 785778

## **General Secretary**

Major Matt Hing

amagensec@armymail.mod.uk

## **Expeditions Secretary**

Maj Andy Fowle

Mil: 95581 Ext: 7904

amaexpeditionsec@armymail.mod.uk

## **Public Relations Officer**

Maj Tomo Thompson

Mil: 94779 8126

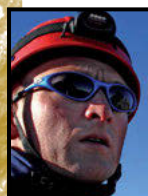
Civil: 01904 668126

amacomms officer@armymail.mod.uk

## **WEBMASTER**

Maj Johnjo Knott

amawebmaster@armymail.mod.uk



## **JOURNAL EDITOR**

S/SGT Sven Hassall

Mil: 94475 5652

Civil: 07818 016 66

amajournaleditor@armymail.mod.uk

## **TREASURER**

Post Vacant – for financial enquiries please contact the Membership Secretary

## **PUBLICITY OFFICER**

SGT Marc Reynolds

Civil: 01248 718 364

amapublicity officer@armymail.mod.uk

## **EQUIPMENT**

Capt Malcolm Sperrin

Civil: 07789 647 091

amaequipmentofficer@armymail.mod.uk

## **MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY**

Mrs Helen Smith

Mil: 95581 7964

Civil: 01248 718 364

amamembership@armymail.mod.uk

## **MEETS CO-ORDINATOR**

Sgt Barry Whale

amameetscoord@armymail.mod.uk

Mob: 07979 963 820

## **TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT**

W01 Sam Marshall

Tel: 94331 2652

amatrainingofficer@armymail.mod.uk

# APPOINTMENTS



# Foreword

AMA Chair  
Lt Col Cath Davies MBE

Another decade, another Journal! Your Association is in fine fettle to move into the new decade with membership holding up despite the operational tempo and exciting projects in the pipeline. We carried out the selection process for Ex CHAM-DO DRAGON and the Joint Service 2012 expedition to Antarctica in November and it was gratifying to see the number and quality of personnel who turned up at JSMTCL. To give you a flavour, there is an article on the epics (anonymous, I hasten to add!) they admitted to on their applications; it makes interesting reading. I must admit I would need to see some evidence of a tasty logbook before I took the first contributor, if only to assure myself they had some good luck sometimes! Elsewhere in the Journal you will find a mix of articles designed to educate as well as amuse, all aimed at helping members develop their own personal skills on the hills and information on how to improve their climbing. Even if you think it is too late for you, I am sure you'll find a top tip that is helpful.

If you want an idea of what high altitude mountaineering is like before you take the plunge, or if you have been there before but have a masochistic desire to relive it, read Major Steve Marsh's very personal account of his climb of Cho Oyo, the sixth highest mountain in the world. Capt Andy Simpson's account of the difficulties he encountered finding instructors to assist him in training his post-operational

soldiers with an eye to climbing Mera Peak, do show how difficult the climate is with the non-availability of Regulars due to ops, and the non-availability of Reserves due to lack of funds, but he managed. He is a great example of how AMA members add value to the Army by enthusing soldiers to challenge themselves in the mountains and helping them gain qualifications through Distributed Training.

It was with much regret we had to call off the Winter Meet this year, the first time this has happened in my memory. But the extreme low temperatures had created a combination of dire living conditions at the Tulloch Hut and very dangerous conditions on the hills so it was the right call. I am sure we will make up for it next year, as it is always one of our more popular Meets. On the subject of Meets, many members have said they want more of these, but Meets do not run themselves. Sgt Barry Whale is the Meets Coordinator and he wants to hear from anyone who is willing to head up one of these events. You do not have to be qualified and Barry can keep you right on paperwork and risk assessments and generally guide you through the process. Step up to the plate and get involved!

Once more, Sven has put together another cracking and varied Journal. Read it, enjoy it and get some ideas for your next adventure.

## Editorial

We are mountaineers and we are young enough and fit enough to enjoy it; we will be talking about the things we do now for the rest of our lives. Perhaps for a while and in certain company because of the sheer enormity of the tasks we set ourselves but enduringly because of the people with whom we share the experience. This is what mountaineering is all about and why I could never give it up.

Climbing is not..... about cranking hard grades. It is not even about getting to the summit (although I readily acknowledge the pleasures of doing so). It is about the journey to get there. It is about having a hard day carrying heavy loads, trying to switch off to the discomfort and physical effort and coming back and feeling rubbish, it is about retiring to your tent and flaking out on your soft down bag and trying to ignore the pumping rhythmic pain in your head; it is about going to the toilet in your pee bottle because you



The editor enjoying 'perspective'

can't face the effort of putting your clothes back on and going outside again into the cold and wind and then your tent partner, without asking, takes it straight from your hand and makes the long trek to the base camp latrine to empty it for you; here lies the true

pleasures of climbing. It is in the team work. The understanding of exactly what your rope or tent partner is going through and piling in there to help because you know that one day it will be you and that without question he will do exactly the same.

It is about the shared experiences. The night climbing epics in the Wye Valley because that was the only time you could squeeze it in between work and family, the real priorities of life. It is the hysterical laughter of three people off-route in North Wales having bitten off more than they could chew, sharing a belay ledge the size of a piece of A4 knowing that if any should fall they would take the other two and the directional gear with them. It is about the friends you meet and their families and the collective enthusiasm for anything other than the office and resigning oneself to a pointless life, it is about finding out your personal possible and impossible; above all though it is a yard stick that allows you to appreciate all the other things that are not climbing. The warm embrace of a loved one, the smile of a nephew's face when you walk through the door, the comfort of a sofa, the taste of a real ale in an old fashioned country pub listening to the rain hit the misty glass. The mutual appreciation of friends and the changes of colour as the wind blows through long grass.

Mountaineering is ..... Perspective.

Sven  
amajournaleditor@armymail.mod.uk

### PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

The AMA recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions.

# AMA Spring Meet 2009

It was a horrible wet and stormy night as I left North Wales, heading for my first AMA meet in Ambleside, as a recently joined member of the Association. Funny really, considering that I am nearly 40 and left the army some seven years ago.

On arrival at the hut, I received a warm welcome from Will and Alun and we headed into the town to sample the local hostelries and partake of a wee libation or two with the other guys. There we met up with Geordie Taylor and Rich and set about planning our weekend as well as meeting up with some of the others.

For the weekend I was 'hooked-up' with John, a young infantry officer and Dom, an even younger officer cadet. As an 'old soldier' I was a little apprehensive, thinking I was going to find it hard keeping up with these young thrusting lads belting over the hills like mad things as I did when I was in my 20s. But this old soldier had nothing to worry about and I realized I could still hack it with the best of them, well Geordie anyway!

Despite a night of sharing a room with 17 other guys, farting, burping and snoring,

(one thing I haven't missed) we got off to an early start on the Saturday. The weather was looking wet and windy, much as the hut had done last night, but at least the air was fresh as we headed up the Langdale Valley searching out our quarry that was Gimmer Crag. The rock stretched from our feet high up the valley side into the mist, not wanting to reveal its upper tiers and challenging us, if we dared! Off we set onto the greasy rock, making our way slowly, as I sized up my comrades in difficult conditions. They both proved worthy of the task at hand and some hours later we were abseiling off, heading for a pint and some chips, mmmm!

Sunday was a glorious day and we were up for a good day's climbing. We headed over to the Borrowdale Valley and for Shepherd's Crag. We started off on a decent VD, Little Chamonix, a fairly exciting little number and sections were expertly led by Dom, while John dangled off an E1, checking out the moves and taking some great pictures of Dom and I. Next we headed for another VD on the slabs where Dom and John both led the route easily. Once warmed up we moved across to this great VS and the three of us flew up this little baby. Finally, Dom and

John took on a slightly steeper VS and managed to tame this beast after some wrestling with gear placements. Unfortunately, then we had to head off as my army training was called upon and I was back in the kitchen to get a good old chicken ruby on the go for dinner.

The last day was again glorious and Will and I headed off to the Langdale Valley to take on a long mountain scramble, the west ridge of Pike of Stickle. So with minimal gear and big boots off we set, up the wrong route! We ended up on what must have been a Severe, but we rose to the challenge and finished it off in good style. On the top we could see for miles and while congratulating ourselves on our legendary climbing abilities this chap appeared and while chatting we noticed an unusual piece of equipment attached to his rucksack, given the conditions, an ice axe! For the life of us we couldn't see any ice anywhere, bizarre!

All in all, a bon weekend was had and I am looking forward to the next meet. Thanks to Geordie Taylor et al for the organization and hard work put in to make it all happen.

**Simon Edwards**

## WATCH THIS SPACE!

### 3 CS Battalion REME Prepare to climb Mera Peak, Nepal.

Exercise DIAMOND CRAMPON was a 7 day Alpine Mountaineering Expedition to Saas Fee in the Swiss Alps, training and preparing for the 3 CS Battalion REME attempt on Mera Peak (6476m) in Nepal; the highest 'non-technical' peak in the Himalaya. In outline, the plan was to take a group of complete novices across all ranks with the majority being junior soldiers and develop them as mountaineers to a level they could successfully summit a Himalayan peak.

The window of opportunity for exped members and the instructors to all come together in the Alps was small, and unfortunately required a number of individuals to return early back to Paderborn



from Post Tour Leave. The opportunity to train was unfortunately quite short and we had to cram the entire practical syllabus of the Alpine Mountaineering Proficiency into five days! Luckily, the weather remained excellent all week and we were able to do so.

All potential Himalayan summiteers spent two days learning the basics from crampon technique to crevasse rescue before moving on to putting those skills into practice on ascents of multiple 3000m peaks. Not Himalayan by any means but a significant jump from Paderborn!

The final days training was spent learning further rope work and an intro to rock-climbing. All expedition members had a physically and mentally hard week; learning a huge amount, not only about alpine mountaineering but also about the demands and preparation required to climb a Himalayan peak.

Thanks must go to Lt Col Mark Smyth REME and Sgt Kev Burn RE, both from other units, who willingly volunteered their leave in order to instruct.

Organisation of an Alpine mountaineering expedition can be challenging, obtaining the necessary instructors to conduct activities that are suitably exciting enough to focus the minds of soldiers recently returned from operations requires substantial legwork, but all involved will agree it was worth the effort. This article is very much the leader for the forthcoming write up of the exploits of the 3 CS Bn REME Expedition to Nepal-more to follow soon.

**Capt DA Simpson.**

# CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations go to the winners of the Autumn 09 Gear Giveaway; the names pulled from a chalk bag were Barry Whale and Howie Barnes, who win a hoody and chalk bag respectively.

One of the best indoor climbing facilities in the country; our thanks

go to Boulders for their continued support to the Association and the Army Climbing Team.

Please take a look at their website:  
[www.bouldersclimbingcentre.co.uk](http://www.bouldersclimbingcentre.co.uk)



# DIARY

Mark and record the following dates and get involved. Further details where not stated can be obtained through the Meets Co-ordinator (Barry Whale) and will be on the website closer to the time. We are always looking for people to help organize meets. If you feel you could contribute, please contact the Meets Co-ordinator. Meets marked as 'BSAE' will be run jointly with the British Services Antarctic Expedition Squad.

Also, the Training and Development Officer will be reinvigorating the series of training and workshops provided during association meets. These will take place during a single day or morning of the meet and will be open to all members of the association at no personal cost. If you are interested in attending these then please try to make your intentions known as early as possible in order that instructors can be sourced. If you are interesting in helping to run a workshop or coaching session, please contact Sam Marshall, the TDO.

## **2-5th April 10 Easter Meet**

*Kinlochleven*

A departure from the normal location for this year; the Easter Meet will be on Ben Nevis, Scotland. I know what you're thinking.....Should I squeak my boots or sharpen my axes?! We wait with baited breath to see how the conditions pan out.

Contact: Jonathan Petch 07954 321 047

## **14th April 10 REME Climbing Champs**

*Craggy Island, Guildford*

Contact: Mike Smith [usersm7148@aol.com](mailto:usersm7148@aol.com)

## **7-9th May 10 Army Team Training**

*Hereford/Wye Valley*

A dual meet in the beautiful Wye Valley with coaching for the Army Team whilst the Antarctica squad continue their demanding training schedule.

Contact: Sven Hassall 94475 5652

## **20-21st May 10 Army Climbing Champs**

*Cardiff*

After the fantastic hosting and route setting of last year; the Army champs will again be at Boulders in Cardiff.

Contact: Pete Skinsley 96161 5778

## **29-31st May 10 Spring Meet**

*Lake District*

Including scrambling, multi-pitch climbing and navigation workshops depending upon weather conditions and numbers attending.

Contact: Dennis Healy 94641 4680

## **25-27th June 10 Annual General Meeting/BSAE**

*North Wales*

The AGM will again be hosted at JSMT(C/I) on the beautiful island of Anglesey. Always a hit, the AGM offers the proximity of Gogarth, Llanberis, the Carneddau, in short the majority of the countries greatest mountain experiences on the doorstep. This year there will also be mountaineering workshops provided on both days. Oh, and the bar is open until late!

Contact: Will Brant [brains\\_w@hotmail.com](mailto:brains_w@hotmail.com)

## **17-31 July 10 Joint Services Alpine Meet/BSAE**

*European Alps*

Contact: Paul Edwards [amavicechair@armymail.mod.uk](mailto:amavicechair@armymail.mod.uk)

## **28-30 Aug 10**

### **Summer Meet/BSAE**

*Peak District*

Including learning to lead and 'climb harder' workshops.

Contact: Jon Leighton 07900 891 649

## **24th Sept 10**

### **President's Dinner**

*Shrivenham*

This is a non climbing meet.

Contact: TBC, please check the website.

## **31st Aug-03rd Sept 10**

### **Autumn Meet**

*Lundy*

A fantastic opportunity to climb on this wonderful island at a cost subsidised by the association. Limited places available so please book early.

Contact: Barry Whale 94641 4686

## **23-24 Oct 10**

### **South West Meet**

*Devon or Cornwall*

Including sea cliff climbing workshops and the opportunity for guided climbing.

Contact: Barry Whale 94641 4686

## **26-28th Oct 10**

### **Inter Services Climbing Champs**

*EICA, Ratho, Edinburgh*

Contact: Pete Skinsley 96161 5778

## **27-28th Nov 10**

### **Army Training Meet**

*Hereford/Wye Valley*

Coaching climbing and the regular curry!

Contact: Sven Hassall 94475 5652

## **02nd Dec 10**

### **UKSF Sports Climbing Championships**

*Hereford*

All details via ECC ISTAR 22 SAS

## **29 Dec 10 - 05th Jan 11**

### **New Year Meet/BSAE**

*Cairngorms*

Following the unfortunate cancelation of the meet at Tulloch in 09, the winter meet will once again return to the cairngorms for 2010. If this year has been anything to go by, we can all expect plenty of snow, ski-ing and epics. A Winter Mountaineering Proficiency Course (WMP) and Winter Climbing Proficiency (WCP) will be on offer to those with the relevant pre-requisites. Winter (and winter climbing workshops) also available.

Contact: TBC

**Details at**

**[www.ArmyMountaineer.org.uk](http://www.ArmyMountaineer.org.uk)**



# RIVER CROSSINGS

Graham 'Sven' Hassall MIA

The negotiation of water obstacles will offer both unique and undesirable challenges to the expeditioner; an alien and often-unpredictable medium, the unplanned crossing of water should ALWAYS be considered an emergency measure and avoided at ALL cost. Fortunately, with careful planning, the majority of river crossing scenarios can be avoided.

It is a wise precaution when planning an expedition to research any water crossing points thoroughly. In the UK this is a simple matter, as OSGB maps are clearly marked with bridges (and types) or with 'Ford'. The depth of water can also often be accurately gauged by considering the local geographic and meteorological conditions. In the rest of the world however, you may not be so fortunate to be supported by such accurate mapping or engineering; take advice, speak to the locals and always ere on the side of caution.

## Characteristics of waterways.

- Upper Reaches.** 'Young' rivers can be variable and unpredictable being reactive to local conditions.
- Valley or Middle Sector.** Erosion in established riverine areas will have created bends and islands as the river erodes the softer materials in its path. In the lower sections, multiple channelling may occur. Flash floods can bring dangerous volumes of water and flotsam for up to 24hrs after significant rainfall.
- Delta.** The widest part of the river; the delta will have slower currents but deeper silted water. The delta may be subject to tidal influence.

## Dry Crossings

In many of the world's mountain zones simple log bridges created by deadfall or machete suffice as crossing points in the river's upper reaches. The well-practised locals will surely make light work of them despite them being narrow, slippery from rain or mud and with serious consequences for anybody falling into the difficult ground below.

When crossing makeshift bridges consider the following:

- Use a walking pole to provide stability (be sure not to trap the hand in the wrist strap as this will hamper your recovery should the worst happen).
- Wear helmets if available.
- Consider the use of the rope either as,
  - A tension line to provide balance.
  - A means of ferrying bags and equipment across.
  - A means of readily deployable recovery (throw-line).
- Discuss and brief on the actions the party will take should the worst happen (see comments below).

## Wet Crossings

Lower down in the valley the river will be wider and deeper, presenting a formidable natural obstacle. Crossed by bridges and

fords, these can be destroyed or denied due to flooding, You should take all possible actions to circumvent the new obstacle in your path; are there other crossing points further upstream? An extra hour or twos walk will ultimately be preferable to a cold and dangerous crossing.

The delta is an unjustifiable place to cross and it will not be discussed here, it is sufficient to reiterate the advice in the previous paragraph.

## Crossing Considerations

Before committing, consider:

- State of the river.** Rivers are affected by meteorological conditions both at their point of origin and discharge. Unseasonable precipitation upstream (rain or melting of snow/ice) may be the cause of flash floods. The water level may subside when conditions upstream improve (drier/colder).
- Tidal effects.** Beware crossing in areas affected by tide, especially at times of full moon when large tidal movement can exacerbate flooding. Even at 'Shallow water' strong currents will be created as a large body of water is displaced.
- Riverbed.** What is the nature of the riverbed? With soft sand or gravel you may get away with keeping your boots dry, but be cautious; stubbed toes or sharp stones have a great knack at putting you off your balance! Tree routes can hinder entrance and exit.
- Obstacles.** Avoid even the smallest fishing nets like the plague and beware debris brought down by floods, much of which will be just below the surface.
- Weather.** The time required for a wet crossing is considerable – What is the weather doing? Is it still raining hard up stream? Will the water rise half way through resulting in a split team?

## The Home Bank

When, and only when all other options have been explored (including sitting it out) then you must wholly commit to the crossing; efficiency and speed are paramount.

- Take time to search for the most suitable crossing (and entry) point – there will be less water upstream and in areas of hard bedrock where the river will be shallower but wider. Make the best use of islands and above junctions where the flow will be less – it is often better to do several small crossings than one major one. Bends should be avoided, as they will always have deep water and a difficult exit on the outside.
- Have a plan and brief it thoroughly, communication will be difficult once your team is split between the far and home banks; it also helps to take people's minds off the potentially nasty outcomes and eases your burden of responsibility. Be enthusiastic, directive and selective with whom you brief the risks too, if it doesn't help then keep it to yourself! You may wish to pass your intent to Mountain Rescue (dial 999) or the Coastguard



(Channel 16 (156.8Mhz)) if possible. It will at the very least give them a start point should the worst happen.

- c. Pair weak or non-swimmers with a stronger partner and do a head count. This will help with identifying when everyone is across. Get people busy and get a brew on the go if time permits, its warmth and the boost it gives will be very welcome once you are in the water.
- d. Prepare your gear:
  - i. In all but the warmest climates it is advisable to strip to your underwear and then cover up with your waterproofs, they'll shelter you from the wind out of the water and protect against bumps and scrapes whilst in it. Dry clothes on the far bank are very welcome. Take socks and insoles out of your boots and do them up tight. Tuck away any laces, draw cords or loose material that will cause drag or snag and do up your collar and cuffs. Don't trap trousers into boots however as this will prevent water from draining making exit difficult.
  - ii. Wear a helmet and use a walking pole (without the wrist loop) if you have them, and attach a head torch or cyalume if there is any chance of it getting dark.
  - iii. Empty water bottles and pack everything INSIDE the rucksack and wear it loosely, without the waist belt. They are surprisingly buoyant with plenty of trapped air between equipment – be prepared for them to ride up and don't immediately discard it if you slip or it gets washed off, you will need the equipment later. If you have a knife then keep it handy (but not open!) in case of entanglement.

### In The Water

Try to enter slowly and calmly at a point you can exit from should you need to retreat. Take a moment to adjust to the force and temperature of the water.

If crossing alone then use a pole for balance and finding obstructions. Face upstream but look towards your exit point and your feet. Move sideways one point at a time – Foot, pole, foot, foot, pole..... Keep your feet wide apart and never too far from the riverbed.

Multiple people simply slip in behind the front man whose actions do not change. The team move together and SLOWLY using each other for support. It makes sense to have your strongest person at the front to take the strain of the water, everybody else tucking in his lee. Consider stacking large parties in a pyramid for extra stability, i.e. 2 behind the lead, 3 behind them and so on.

If crossing individually or in groups then send a strong party first to assess the conditions and to assist on the far bank.

A throw line should be ready at any point should someone stumble, Do not attempt to pull the swimmer in, you will only succeed in dragging them under the water. Instead walk downstream assisting where possible as they swim to the previously planned Home/Far Bank.

Your second strongest person or party should cross last, on hand at any point in order to assist.

### The Far Bank

Reaching the Far Bank is a worrying time for the leader. The worst scenario during a river crossing is that of a split party with people on either side unable to cross. Do all you can to expedite the crossing once committed.

- a. The exit point must be considered whilst on the Home Bank. Steep sides and mud banks can be difficult to exit from. Strong tides and currents may mean you will only make one downstream of your entrance.
- b. Water, especially combined with wind conducts heat many times quicker than air and people will start to chill upon exit. Send a group shelter over early with someone who can motivate and assist people dressing and warming in it. Brew up quickly and help each other to re-warm and re-pack.
- c. As a leader you must account for everybody immediately! Ensure that no one has been washed away or left on the Home Bank.



Local bridges such as this one in Nepal, are often slippery with mud and water and with serious consequences of a fall

Allow everyone to take time to enjoy what they have just done; a real time river crossing is quite an adventure! Maximise the post crossing high to get cold bodies moving again.

### Wet Crossings (Tethered)

If you have none swimmers, a chance that a swimmer may not be able to exit or hazards such as rapids downstream then you should use a rope to assist.



The consequences of a fall from a local 'deadfall' bridge. Nepal

Ropes and water are a dangerous combination and must be a last resort. Ensure the crossing area is free from obstructions and conduct thorough rehearsals on the Home Bank before committing. NEVER tie the rope to either side.

Described here is the simplest method of crossing. The process requires a minimum of three people.

- a. Tie a large loop in the centre of the rope. This should slip over shoulders but be big enough to slip out of quickly.
- b. Number One puts the rope over his shoulders and crosses in the manner described above. He is assisted by tension from the rope upstream of him. This is held but not tied off to Number Three or the last person to cross. The other end is downstream with Number Two, ready to assist Number One to the Home Bank should he slip.
- c. The empty loop is pulled back and Number Two crosses. This time with assistance from either side. Should he slip then the closest person assists his recovery whilst the opposite bank pays out. The Home and Far Banks must NEVER let go of the rope.
- d. Number Three recovers the loop and then throws his spare rope across so that Number Two can assist him.

In summary, the most successful river crossing is that avoided! Once committed however, strong leadership and clarity of thought are essential for a safe crossing to take place. Planning ahead and communicating that plan are everything – the thing you did not discuss or did not think about will be the thing that will wreak havoc!

# Flora in the British Uplands

*A Sea of Bog Asphodel*

Ask most ML holders about Flora and Fauna and they will undoubtedly list several wild flowers that you have never heard of, or point something out to you that you probably forget 10 minutes later. It is not easy to find information on plants that you will see in most Upland areas of the UK without help.

I had a friend give me a good steer prior to my ML assessment last year. Since then I have discovered a range of different plants that have a variety of uses. Below are a few examples to help any aspirant MLT, ML and general enthusiast improve their own knowledge about the plants in the British mountainous environment.

**Cross Leaved Heath/Bell Heather.** These two plants look very similar apart from the positioning of their crimson purple flowers that make them so easy to spot. They are compact, small evergreen shrubs with narrow green leaves. They grow mainly across moorland and rocky outcrops throughout the summer and well into the autumn in vast clumps. The bell like flower (hence the name) prefers dry acidic heath land where insects, particularly honey and bumble bees are attracted to the flower.

Both plants have had many uses throughout the centuries, ranging from stuffing for mattresses, fire wood and the brush end of barn brooms. Perhaps of more interest to the mountaineer though is that the flowers,

**By Barry Whale**

steeped in hot water were used as an early type of Tea and has long been known by herbalists. John Gerard, the 16th century herbalist, noted of the Heathers that: *'the tender tops and flowers were said to be good when laid upon the bitings and stings of any venomous beast.'*

**Soft Rush.** Growing in wet, peaty ground, the Soft Rush develops into a dense tuft up to 100cm in height with tenacious roots, they are fibrous and tight packed however, meaning that the plant does not creep around, instead it grows into a tight clump and spreads only by seed. In Scotland hunter gather societies would eat early sprouts raw as part of their staple diet. Other uses include candle-lamp wicks - by peeling back the green outer layer reveals a spongy white pith that is easy to extract, this pith was then dried, sometimes plaited with fish oil. As for uses by the mountaineer..... it helps you find your way across boggy moorlands without sinking to your knees!

**Bog Asphodel.** This plant likes to frequent acidic soil that lacks calcium. Most often seen as a beautiful shaped group of 6-20 star shaped flowers above a 10 to 40cm erect leafy stem, the plant will generally flower between July and September with a

yellow flower, which sometimes turns orange; these eventually dry out and sometimes survive all through the winter sticking above the lower growth. It is believed livestock can be susceptible to broken bones if they graze on it, hence the nick name 'Bone Breaker'. The plant was formerly used by upland people as a wool dye.

**Sphagnum Moss (Bog Moss).** Sphagnum moss grows in woods, next to streams, moorlands and especially in bogs. It grows in different colours from light yellows and greens to reds and browns. Every other cell in the plant is hollow and therefore fills with air and/or water, therefore keeping the plant above the wet acidic soil it favours. Indeed, it can cover this ground so completely that it promotes the anaerobic decomposition that is needed to form peat, as such it is now a protected species.

When dried these empty cells mean the plant is very absorbent; in this state it has been used to fill nappies and incontinence pads for the elderly. During conflicts in the late 19th Century and well into the First World War it was used to make particularly effective wound dressings as the moss also contains some antiseptic properties.

**The Rowan Tree.** This is one of the few trees that can be found in the uplands and is easily identified by its crimson colour berries. It prefers to grow around streams and rivers up to 1000m above sea level.



*Tormentil*



*Bell Heather*



*Butterwort*

Otherwise known as Mountain Ash, it has been the subject of many superstitions: In Scotland, farmers used to tie Rowan twigs to cows tails to ward off the fairies, whilst mothers would place necklaces of the berries around babies' necks to ward of supernatural threats.

More acceptable to modern science, the berries have been used to aid jam making and to make wine and occasionally even whiskey.

The wood of the Rowan is hard and heavy, making it very useful for the manufacture of such things as wheels and ladders. Second only to the Yew, Rowan was a valued source of wood for the construction of longbows.

**Ribwort Plantain.** An unmistakable plant that is right under our noses not just in the Uplands but around our homes and gardens as well! It grows in areas of disturbed earth such as tracks and paths, especially gates. It has been referred to as 'White Man's Footstep' by native North American tribes. They say wherever the white man went, destruction and therefore plantains would follow. During early 17th Century medicine it was used to heal bleeding wounds and external bruises by squeezing the juice of crushed leaves into the wound to stem the bleeding.

The leaves can be steamed and eaten as a Spinach substitute and in Alaska is still sold as a canned vegetable.

17th Century folk law has it that it was used by children in a game in the Shetlands. Pick two flower stems, remove the anthers, wrap them in dock leaf and hide under a stone. If the next day another plant grew this was a sure sign that the children would be married and it would last.

**Butterwort (Bog Violet).** This plant can often be found living in close proximity to Sphagnum Moss as they both like the same environment. It has purple flowers and yellow-green leaves in a shape resembling a starfish. You do need to look carefully to spot this one, it is one of the two types of Carnivorous species found in British uplands and quite intolerant of any pollution is becoming rarer. In the summer its flower attracts a variety of insects such as small flies and ants.



*Soft Rush*

The leaves exude enzymes which the insect gets stuck in and are then digested by the plant. In modern times, the same enzyme has been proven to help milk separate and to help form butter; the origin of the name perhaps?

It was also used in 19th Century folk law; if a woman went down on one knee and plucked nine roots, knotted them together in a ring and placed them in a girls mouth while reciting a blessing the next man she kissed would yield and be forever obedient. (Please don't try this at home – lest your milk coagulate!). The flower was also used to make dye for wool.

**Tormentil.** This is another eye catching plant with its yellow flower. It can be seen in acidic moorland between May and September. It was collected and used on huge scales until the 1950's in order to boil the routes for the tanning of leather and nets.

In the 17th century the roots were boiled in milk to form a medicine that was drunk as a cure for diarrhoea. Another medicinal use saw it chewed as a remedy for cold sores and applied as poultice to corns.

Once again another plant used to make dye for clothing.

**Cotton Grass/Bog Cotton.** Yet another plant that resides in boggy ground. It is easily identified by its cotton like looking heads which can grow up to 4cm in length. This has a long history of being used to make clothing such as wedding vales in the Orkneys and as bedding in the 19th century. For some reason black faced sheep are said to be fond of it. The sheep crop it in a way it looks like it has been cut with hook and farmers believed this to be the sheep's favourite luxury food. It was also known for its renovating power and herds-men believed that if a weak or ill sheep has 2-3 mouths full, that they are sure to make a full recovery.



*Cotton Grass*



*Ribwort Plantain*



*Rowan tree*



# DIM DRINGO!

**In a recent survey of applicants for the Joint Services' Antarctica Expedition 2012, members of the association were asked to describe the worst EPIC they have ever had in the mountains. The following is a collection of the more interesting answers.**

I have been **avalanched twice**, once on Gimmegela – from off Kanchenjunga, once on the descent from Tikha Parbat. I also ruptured all my knee ligaments and broke the head off my shin while making a ski descent alone off-piste in St Mortiz, with an **eight hour crawl back to the village**. However, the worst situation was being stuck on the Shigri Parbat Ridge for **11 days with almost no food** and in a horrendous storm while waiting for the storm to abate, the only way off being via the summit.

I suppose my worst epic was when I slipped and **fell 300m down the side of Ben Nevis**. It was during a WMP in 2007 we were moving up Coire Leis nearing the ridge line, when the snow of the foot hole I was using gave way and I lost my footing and started to slide, very very quickly. Eventually managing to come to a stop with an ice axe arrest a long way further down from my group. Luckily I had made it down without too much injury. **I was air lifted off the mountain** and taken to Fort William hospital, and then on to Inverness where I spent two weeks recovering from a dislocated ankle. I am lucky to be here and I want to make the most of the opportunities that my life presents to me.

While climbing in the Upper Gorge in Rjukan, Norway I abseiled into the river edge before walking the short distance to the route we had planned to climb. I was with a novice partner who was getting her first taste of ice climbing that week. As we walked in I suddenly noticed that the river edge had become very flat, without the snow covered rocks and tree roots that I had been tripping on earlier. As I realised where we were standing there was a booming noise as **the ice cracked around my feet and we both started to sink slowly into the frozen river**. I couldn't swim properly because of the weight on my back (a bag with a coil of rope over it) and the cramponed boots on my feet. Luckily I could just scrape the bottom on the river bed with my crampons (no such luck for my much shorter partner!) and the water wasn't too fast flowing at that point. I managed to push my friend towards the bank, getting her crampons through my thigh in the process, and then hauled myself after her. The temperature was about -8 and we had to climb out up a W1 3 waterfall (luckily only one pitch!) to get back to the car. Not the best of days!

Towards the end of the day on an ice climbing trip, my friend took a fall on the 3rd pitch. He was **semi unconscious** and I had to get him down to the ground and then evacuate him off the mountain with **2 shattered ankles in the dark and storm**. It took about **9hrs of carrying and crawling** – but I only lost one ice screw!

On Shishapangma in 2007, I got to Camp One at 6500m in high winds and snow to find our tents half buried. We dug them out as much as possible but during the night the snow kept falling; we tried to clear the snow but eventually the tent collapsed on us. **My tent partner woke up screaming** thinking he had been avalanched. The tent was ruined and in the early hours we had to escape to one belonging to another team. Later, this started to deteriorate with **poles breaking and skin shredding under the sheer force of the wind**. The weather remained horrendous and we had to descend in white out conditions and high risk of avalanche. I was quite tired!

An individual cross country night nav ex on Sennybridge in zero visibility and horizontal rain in April. Hypothermia was a major worry. With hindsight, I should have found a sheltered spot and crawled into my bivvi bag until the light started to break. On the night, I took an extremely convoluted route handrailing linear features as far as possible. My only comms were a pack of miniflars, that hopefully the DS would see in an area of about 30 square kilometres. **Nobody had a clue where I was and I only had a vague idea most of the time**. It's the only time I have ever felt truly alone in a pretty inhospitable environment and ill equipped to deal with an emergency. The people organising that 'training' exercise should be ashamed of themselves.

UK – Cuillin Ridge, Skye 2003. Whilst scrambling on the Cuillin Ridge a member of the party pulled up on some poor rock which came away in his hands resulting in him plummeting over 100 feet over a series of slabs. To cut a long story short, we got down to him and called for assistance (he was quite badly hurt); I then remained with him whilst the rest of the party retraced the route to meet MRT. **It took over 7 hours for them to get to us** and I then had to walk off the route as the weather was too bad for the helicopter to come back in; cue another 3 hours walk off. As a very novice mountaineer at the time, I had only recently lead my first few climbs and went on my first JSAM a week later; I didn't lead again for about 2 years as a result!!

Alps – Climbing an AD rock route above Chamonix, we began our retreat having not summited (moving too slowly to complete in guidebook time). The retreat was around 15 abseils but first we had to find the abseil line (recently installed with permanent fixed abseil chains and the next point signed with paint etc). Having traversed we found some old pitons/tat and could see the proper abseil points further down and across. I was second down and managed to snag the ropes behind some rock (having removed some gear we had put in to stop this happening for the 1st one down!). The ropes then slipped out from behind the rocks with such force that I ended up being pendulumed across the mountainside. It happened so quickly that I was also tipped upside down by my rucksack (and **I screamed like a proper girl!**). In order to stop me hitting the rockface, my climbing partner grabbed the rope and had the skin on the palm of one hand removed in the process. This now left me pretty shaken and my climbing partner with one usable hand with around 14 abseils still to go. Sure enough, the ropes then got stuck on the pull through of the second abseil before we were able to continue down (rather slowly). It was starting to get dark when we bumped into 2 other JSAM attendees who had had an epic on another route (their abseil line joined ours) so at least we had some company on the way back to the hut which we reached at about 2200 having left at 0200! The hut warden had been watching our descent and kindly left us some tea and cake outside for our return (and dressed my climbing partner's hand the next morning). We walked out to the hospital the next day; I learnt about abseiling from that!

Coming off Mount Kenya. Just the two of us, only 21, no food and no water left (no stove – **light is right?!),** weather crapped in, up in a day, but abbed off a wrong bit of the ridge and were still going down at midnight on day two when found the tiny hut on the Normal route to spend the night in. Slept clipped in on 10 inches of water ice! Got down lunchtime the next day after freeing most of the normal route to collect snagged abseil rope. Phew.

Cairngorm Plateau March 2002-At the time inexperienced and out with a pal from work. We Became navigationally challenged in blizzard conditions. Darkness fell and I had just enough battery in my phone to ring MRT. They were fantastic and after describing the features around, they talked us off and then met us down at the ski centre after a long walk off the hill. We found out that 110mph gusts had been measured that day on the plateau - Huge learning curve!!!

It depends what you call 'worst'... Amongst other things, I've experienced horrific Scottish weather on the cairngorm plateau and have assisted in a rescue following a fall onto rocks down a snow slope but... for this answer the physical effort and exertion which soloing the Cuillin Ridge (minus TD gap and Basteir Tooth climbs) traverse in 10.5 hours and in less than ideal weather is my personal best in terms of a worst epic. It was made an epic firstly by the weather in that I was soaked to the skin before even starting the traverse, then travelling light my first water cache had been dis-

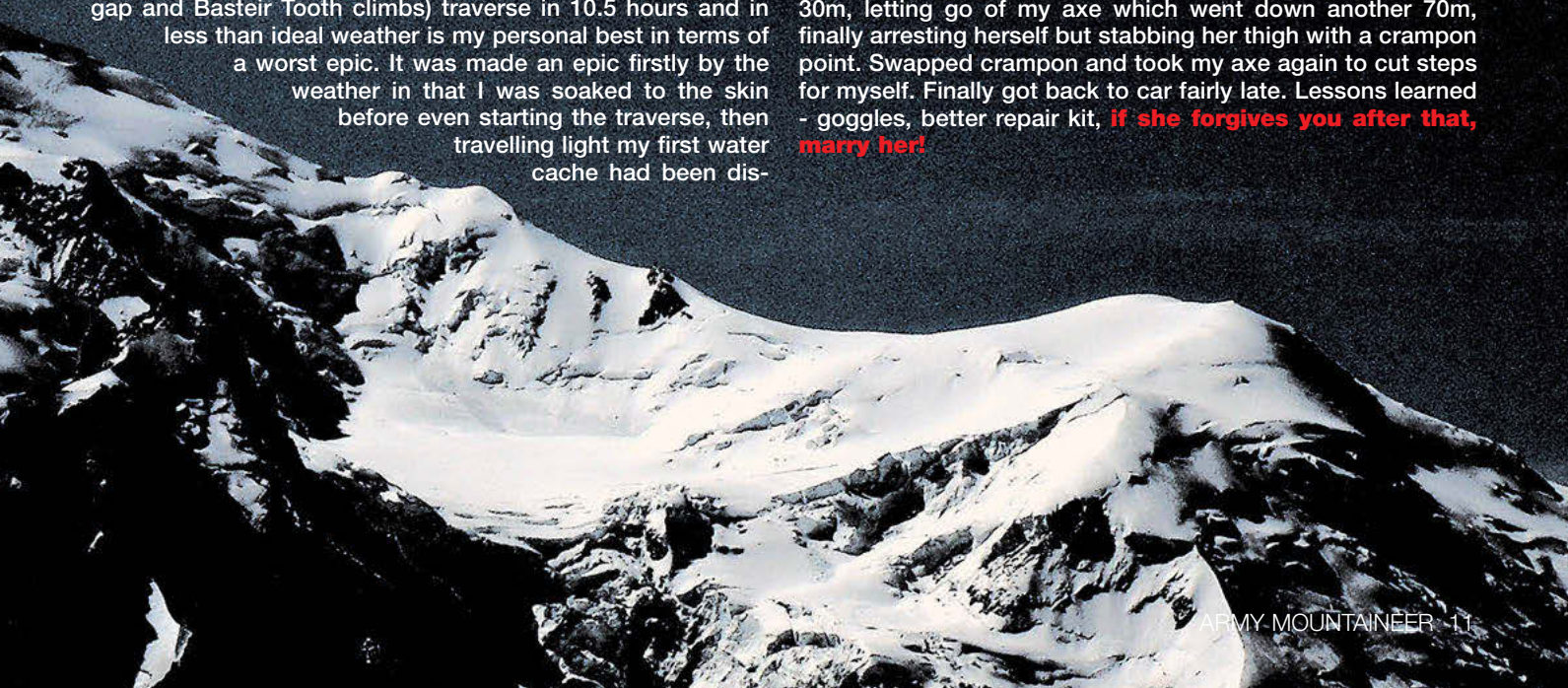
covered by someone else and was missing, then when I finally completed the route, I made a navigation error on the decent which resulted in even more distance and even more time. Despite my 4am start and really pleasing route time, I didn't make it to the pub for dinner.

Winter walking age 18 in the Lakes. Got slightly lost and started following a couple of walkers ahead of us as the clouds came in. Realised we were in trouble when they came back towards us out of the clouds asking us where we were! We did roughly know so managed to head down the hill in the right direction and back to camp.

Although I wouldn't quite class it as an epic: On a route on the S Face of Piz Ciavezes in the Dolomites, a friend and I were winding our way up the face, route finding as we went. We got deceived by old pegs/tat and found ourselves off-route. We decided to forge on, during which **my partner got sprayed in the face by some kind of snake** (which we then used all our water to wash off...), I took a lengthy fall when tat broke during a pendulum (learnt a lesson that day!), and we had to make some bold, full rope length pitches to get back on route.

During our attempt at Mont Blanc during August 09 weather conditions deteriorated rapidly. What had been a benign summer environment rapidly deteriorated into a winter climb. Snow and ice became real concerns but more importantly the wind was gusting in excess of 100 kph. Shortly after crossing the Grand Couloir on a rib of rock we heard 'below' called from above. **A large fridge sized boulder passed between myself and my team-mate ahead of me,** missing us by inches. The climber who had caused the rock fall fell and landed close by me on a ledge. The climber went into shock having sustained some injuries. Although nothing major was broken the climber was taken down by his team. When we arrived in the Gouter hut conditions were severe. A call came through that 18 climbers were missing near the Dome. The guides prepared a rescue party and after several hours managed to recover all 18 in reasonable condition. We did not summit due to the weather and the decent proved to be interesting. The experience taught me the value of preparation and the importance of not underestimating a climb.

Glas Maol, Glenshee on 03 Jan 00 with my girlfriend (now wife). I slipped on verglas on the way up and without crampons and slid down 30-40m, then Esther had problems with a contact lens which we rectified by huddling down on one knee and taking it out, only to get back up again and have <10m visibility. Took a bearing to get back into a valley to car, but Esther's left crampon broke so I fixed it with some elastoplast tape. It failed again so I lent her my axe as well and I used poles. Esther tripped whilst contouring around and slid 20-30m, letting go of my axe which went down another 70m, finally arresting herself but stabbing her thigh with a crampon point. Swapped crampon and took my axe again to cut steps for myself. Finally got back to car fairly late. Lessons learned - goggles, better repair kit, **if she forgives you after that, marry her!**



# THE CLIMB OF CHO OYU (8201 METRES) – TIBET – CHINA

£175  
ARTICLE

BY MAJOR STEVE MARSH AGC (SPS)



*Route up to summit from Camp 3*

It was at 0130 hours on 27 September 2009 that I experienced the envelope of extreme cold, pitch darkness and much personal anticipation whilst standing in complete isolation faced with my greatest ever challenge. Outside a tent at 7500 metres in an unforgiving temperature of minus 30 degrees and the prospect of 700 metres of steep snow and ice climbing to the summit of Cho Oyu at 8201m. All this was compounded by the oxygen levels being a third that of sea level.

The summit dream had started a year earlier with a personal ambition to expand upon my ten years of high altitude Himalayan mountaineering experience and make the huge jump of an attempt on an 8000 metre peak. I had chosen Cho Oyu, the sixth highest mountain in the world at 8201m, situated in Tibet, only a few kilometers from Mount Everest.

This was a civilian expedition that had gathered together experienced mountaineers from around the world including USA, Australia, Russia, Germany, Holland and the UK.

The adventure was to last six weeks, beginning in Katmandu, Nepal and then onto the Tibetan plateau for the journey around the back of the Himalayas to Cho Oyu base camp at 4800m. Our expedition was not alone as the Chinese government had issued 26 teams with permits to climb within Cho Oyu's two week September weather window.

We had 3600 kilogram's of equipment to transport across the most barren terrain in the world and for that we hired 75 Yaks. Three days later we had established our advanced base camp at 5800m in what only can be described as a moonscape of rocks surrounded by mountains none of

which are lower than 7000m; this was to be our home for a month. From here we systematically transported on our backs the equipment, stores and supplies required to establish camp 1 (6400m), camp 2 (6800m) and camp 3 (7500m) in preparation for a summit attempt.

The long arduous days of climbing on snow and ice, fixing ropes, ferrying supplies and setting up tents, all without enough oxygen to feed our bodies took its casualties; we had a rigid acclimatization program but three team members were still forced to return to home early due to sickness and pure exhaustion.

In total, you have to climb the equivalent height of three times the mountain during your acclimatization period, all necessary to ensure your body can adjust to the severe lack of oxygen.





Camp 1



Maj Marsh breaking trail

8000m peaks have their own weather patterns as their peaks sit in the high jet streams and climatically they only offer a short weather window of a few days per year when the wind speeds drop off sufficiently to allow a human being time to climb above 7800m without being ripped off the mountain by the winds. Our first window of opportunity was to be 27 September 2009 with the window closing 01/02 October. Eight members remained along with four high altitude Sherpa guides and our Dutch

leader. The time had come and we finally made our last move to camp 1, then camp 2 and on again to camp 3 for the big push. Preoccupied at camp 3 with melting snow for drinking water (two hours to produce a litre of water!) with three to a tent. Useful sleep is not possible in the 'death zone' so teamwork, mental and physical preparations are key.

Summit night and most of us were carrying bottled liquid oxygen, essentially supplying

two litres per minute to our starved bodies and trying to thin our blood sufficiently to prevent fingers and toes from freezing solid. Climbing through the night looking like the Michelin Man in crampons and cradling your ice axe, hacking your way through the famous rock bands that spread geologically to our neighbor Mount Everest proved to be a physical endurance test like no other I have ever experienced. As dawn broke it became apparent that the first glimpse of the elusive summit was still hours of work away.



Camp 1 and prayer flags





*Yak drovers moving equipment to camp 1*

Seven of us eventually reached the summit, all between 0820 and 1015 hours. Standing there was surreal and what most mountaineers dream of. Almost the entire world is below your feet; just Mount Everest standing majestically next to you in full splendor reminding us all that she is another 650m taller!

The return journey down the mountain to camp 2 lay ahead, several hours ahead. It is on this part of the journey, the descent, that most accidents occur when climbers are exhausted by the delirium that the oxygen deprivation causes. Focused mountaineering skills are still required however, especially on the near vertical sections and ice wall

abseils. Safety was still further away, and it would take another two days to get back to the sanctuary of advanced base camp.

The trip was marred slightly with the death of a fellow climber in the tent next to me at camp 2 (not our team). Following his successful summit attempt, the American died in his sleep and it was sad to watch his body being placed into a large plastic bag in order to lower it off the mountain. He would later be transported to the road head on the back of a yak and then on for eventual repatriation to the USA. A risk we all have to accept when conducting such an adventurous activity.

Although this was a private venture with a personal expenditure of almost 10,000 pounds, I would like to thank the AGC Regimental Association, Young Officers Enterprise Fund, Berlin Infantry Brigade Memorial Fund, GOC 1st (UK) Armd Div Welfare Fund and my chain of command, for the financial and moral support that they gave me.



*Maj Marsh Camp 1*

*Maj Marsh climbs to camp 3 at 7500 metres*



# PHOTO COMPETITION



**£50  
PRIZE**

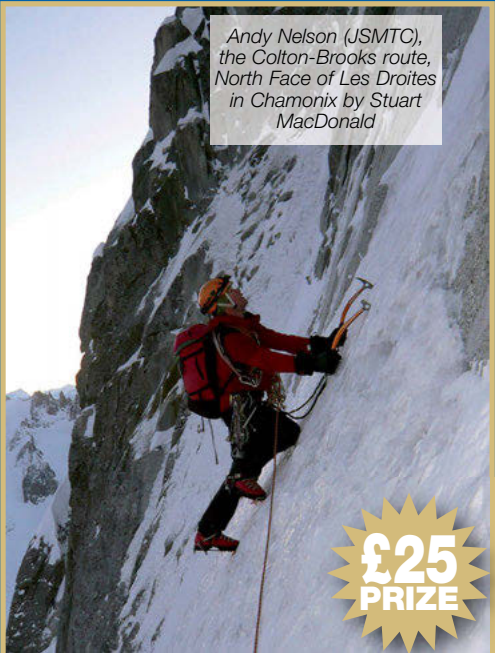
***This is your chance to be both rich and famous!***  
*Submit your favourite mountaineering photograph along with credits (Who, where, when?) for the famous part, and, if chosen as the best submitted in the edition you'll get £100, £50 or £25 for your trouble. Ok, so not quite the rich part but it's a weekend in Llanberis or a slap up meal!*

*(Photos should be the highest quality possible and emailed to the editor, along with a credit and caption) [amajournaleditor@armymail.mod.uk](mailto:amajournaleditor@armymail.mod.uk)*

*Jon Leighton on the Golden Triangle F6c on the island of Ko Laoliang in the Trang province Thailand*



*Debs Hardey finishing the last pitch of Tjonnstadbergfossen WI4 in Rjukan, Norway*

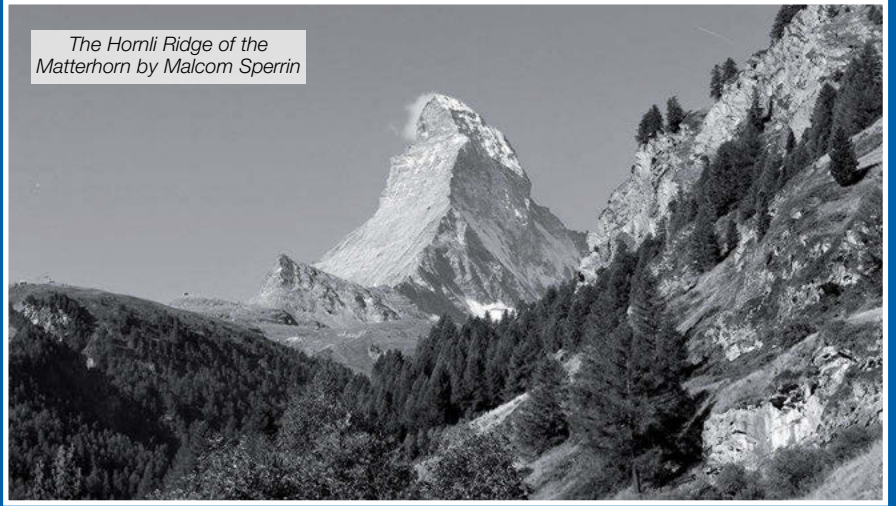


*Andy Nelson (JSMT), the Colton-Brooks route, North Face of Les Droites in Chamonix by Stuart MacDonald*

**£25  
PRIZE**



*Lehner Wasserfall Klettersteig,  
Austria by John Higginson*



*The Hornli Ridge of the  
Matterhorn by Malcom Sperrin*



*Trekking in South Africa*



*Mucking about in the snow on  
Tryfan by Joe Garton*



**£100  
PRIZE**

*Arctic Turn, Antarctic Peninsula  
by Meryon Bridges*

# Trekking In The Home Of *Paddington Bear*

£100  
ARTICLE

**A**dventure training? Hill walking in Brecon anyone? Or mountaineering in Peru? Luckily for eleven of us, representing 1 – 4 MI Battalions, Lt. Hilton had organised a month long, truly unforgettable expedition to the home of Paddington Bear. The Exped itself took advantage of the time needed to acclimatise to help build school accommodation in the Cuzco region, before heading to the highly testing white peaks of Huaraz.

After mustering at Aldershot and being issued a mountain of kit, we met Carol for the first time. Carol is the highly eccentric head of Project Peru, the project we would be helping out with during our initial acclimatisation period. Project Peru is a UK based charity whose aim is to provide relief to vulnerable people living in the poverty that we were later to see for ourselves. During this meeting Carol enthusiastically outlined the adventure we were about to have, describing the warmth of the people along with the mission of the Project, whilst warning us of some of the unexpected treats that we may be facing, like eating guinea pig.

About twenty-four hours later we were driving from the airport, seeing the poverty that we had been warned about. Most strikingly, we drove through areas that were extremely rich, contrasting with the numerous small shacks, making up the slums of Lima.

warmly greeted by the kids, proudly showing off local dances and singing. Although our time at the Refuge was only short, it was long enough for LCpl Cooper to show off his football skill and Cpl Winks to dominate the volleyball court, a game traditionally played by females in Peru. We were struck by the opportunity that was given to these children, who without the help of Project Peru, had nothing.

After a very touching goodbye from the Refuge, we negotiated the Peruvian bus system to one of Project Peru's satellite projects in the Cuzco area in southern Peru. From the densely populated, cloud engulfed slums of Lima, we arrived in the cloudless high villages of the sprawling mountainous area.

We were lucky enough to arrive during the festival of St Peter and Paul, which entailed long speeches, lots of dancing and much homemade alcohol, all punctuated with the odd firework. Sadly our dinner of tripe soup was not the guinea pig that we had hoped for, but it did come from the cow that the village had sacrificed in our honour. This was extremely humbling as almost all the houses in the village were made

On our arrival at Project Peru's Lima Refuge, we were

*Dave Brown*



Arriving at the refuge below Ishinca, with Ranrapalca behind

from mud and straw, there was only one phone in the village and only recently had the village been connected with electricity.

The next day we started building the accommodation for the school, which will house kids from the local villages. On the way to the site, we bumped into the remains of the celebrations from the previous day. After several shots of homebrew, especially enjoyed by LCpl Porte, we were allowed to continue to the site by the remnants of the party, where fully fortified, we started the building.

Our job was to dig the foundations for the new building, gather straw for the brick and facilitate the brick making by redirecting a nearby stream. After a certain amount of marking out of where to dig by the engineer, we started.

Over the next three days, the foundations began to take place and the villagers were extremely impressed with our efforts. So much so that when we visited another village, we were treated amazingly well and shown enormous hospitality by people who, relative to us, lived in extreme poverty. Here, having concrete sprayed on your

walls was a luxury that few could afford, meaning your house would last about thirty years before rebuilding rather than five years without the concrete. We were invited into lots of homes and given a locally made corn drink called chicha and various nibbles made from the locally grown multicoloured corn.

After a couple of days of showering in brisk mountain water and truly stunning views, we were joined by a team of OTC from London University. They were to take over from us on the building and we worked with them for the last day. After some very fond farewells to people who had really taken us into the hearth of their village and shared everything they had with incredible hospitality, we made our way to Huaraz where we were surrounded by tall, 'touching the void' style, pointy white peaks. In every direction there seemed to be a mountain to climb, with the culture of mountaineering seeming to be an undercurrent for everything, even the hostel had a cuckoo clock on the wall.

From Huaraz we planned three trips into the White Mountains. The first trip was really to put our new mountaineering skill into practice in the field. We camped in a cow ridden plateau in a high sided valley with a powerful looking glacier at the top. The valley extend-



*The team descending from the summit of Ishinca*



*Digging the foundations at Sanayca*



*Dave Brown, LCpls Kirchmair and McGreavey and Cpl Lloyd*

ed all the way through to the Black Mountains at the other end. Every so often a large shock of ice would fall down the steep sides crashing into the rocks below, ever so slightly unnerving in the middle of the night.

During this first trip, we had our first taste of moving at altitude, the ugly process of moving across moraine fields, walking with crampons on and in some cases, dealing with the altitude sickness. We were also to use this trip to practice our rope work and even got in some climbing, on both rock and ice, with LCpl Porte claiming a couple of bouldering world firsts.

Although this trip did not materialise in a peak, it did provide a good skills foundation for our subsequent attempts. Additionally, our AT instructor Dave Brown was able to point out some of the rich array of flora that was unique to the National Park where we were, especially the types of lichen.

All too soon, it was time to take the extremely wiggly bus ride back to Huaraz, with a mountain on one side and a very steep drop on the other. Every so often there was the odd landslide to negotiate, but we all arrived back in Huaraz safe and sound. The next couple of days were spent in Huaraz recuperating and blowing out a few cobwebs with the Exped drink of choice, a Pisco Sour. After finding out that altitude certainly does multiply the effects of alcohol, it was time to plan for the next trip, which had the twin objectives of Urus and Ishinca, an opportunity to put what we had learnt into practice.

The new campsite was fairly wide, with high sided, white topped mountains on either side and an enormously powerful glacier at the head. The day after our arrival we attempted our first peak. An Alpine start before dawn saw us scrabbling up a mountain path, over a moraine field and to the snowline in torch light. At the snowline, and after a moment of relearning how to put on the crampons properly, we prepared ourselves for the next section on the glacier. Initially walking on snow and rock, not easy in crampons, gave way

to walking solely on the snow. Every so often we would pass a huge crevasse, really putting the power of the mountain compared to our ant like efforts into perspective. But none the less we carried on up a fairly steep pitch, described by LCpl Kirchmair as "relentless." It was towards the top of this steep incline that the Exped recorded its highest vomit, which was savagely criticised by LCpl Kirchmair as it offended his eyes on his way past.

After this incline, we had broken the back of the ascent. It was only a relatively short distance to the top. And there we were standing on top of the World, or as close pretty well any of us had previously got. All too soon, it was over and we were on the decent back to camp for a celebratory Coca-Cola from the horribly over priced cartel of shops.



*St Peter and St Pauls celebration*



*LCpls Cox and Porte and Cpl Lloyd on the summit of Urus*



*Cpl Lloyd making friends with the locals*

The following day was a rest day, filled with rock climbing and cards. The next day the weather closed in, causing some uncertainty as to whether we would attempt our second peak. In the early afternoon, the call went out and we were on our way up to a refuge which was to become our high camp.

After a slightly cramped night, another Alpine start meant we hit the snow line as the dawn broke. After a long steady ascent we were faced with the final push to the summit, a near vertical climb of about forty metres. Although this would not have been a problem at sea level, at altitude it was a little more testing. However all members of the team were up to the challenge and another peak was achieved.



*Lt Hilton and Dave Brown talk tactics*



*Ice climbing training on Ranrapalca Glacier*

In this short period of time, the majority of the Exped had gone from never having been mountaineering before to having climbed two peaks in excess of 5400 metres. The drinks when we got back to Huaraz were very well deserved.

The next couple of days presented an opportunity to eat the much anticipated guinea pig or cui to the locals. After some regrouping and getting to know the local culture a little better and in some cases very well indeed, we were briefed on our next trip to the mountains. Due to the worst weather conditions in the area for at least thirty years, the original plan was revised and our sights were firmly set on Pisco, which seemed a suitable homage to our new found fondness for the Sour drink of the same name.

Although Pisco was not as high as we had hoped, the mountain gave us the opportunity to learn some new skills. After a night at Base Camp and High Camp respectively, we spent a night on the glacier, which presented its own unique challenges of cooking and keeping warm. But after successfully negotiating these obstacles, it was another Alpine start and a race to the summit before the weather closed in.

The route to the peak was truly spectacular, winding through a crevasse field of awe inspiring proportions and jaw-dropping beauty. At times the teams had to move quickly over patches with little cracks in them which would soon develop into the gaping chasms seeming to go right down to the centre of the earth.

After snaking our way up the mountain we reached the summit and the weather cleared so that we could see the panorama. Looming over us was the mighty Huascarán and in the distance the mountain which inspired the Paramount Pictures logo. This was it, the culmination of several weeks hard work, going from nothing to achieving a peak of 5700 metres, it certainly was a moment to be thankful for.

As we made our way back to Base Camp, we saw the climbers crossing the moraine field as we had done a few days before. It was immensely satisfying to think that we had all accomplished what they were all hoping achieve.

The celebrations in Huaraz were huge and deservedly so, led from the front by Lt Hilton who bravely showed the way. All that remains is to say thank you to Lt Hilton for organising what really was a once in a life time trip, providing all that attended with an experience that none of us had ever imagined having before. Also many thanks should go to Capt Ingold, who was MO for the expedition and made sure that we all came back in the same condition as we left. Finally a big thank you should go also go to Dave Brown the AT instructor, without his careful and diligent oversight, the Exped would not have been the tremendous success that it was.

# MT BLANC – MAYBE?

By Charlie Dalziel

During the first week of July when the summer Alps are at their most alluring, a group of 8 soldiers and officers from across 1 SCOTS and 2 SCOTS, The Royal Regiment of Scotland, set out to Chamonix, the heart of Alpine mountaineering. The initial intent of Ex NORTHERN HACKLE was to introduce a group of novices to summer Alpine Mountaineering with a view to climbing Mt Blanc (4808m) using the Gouter Route following a detailed acclimatisation and training programme.

Following a short transfer from Geneva airport to Chamonix, the group arrived fresh if slightly damp, into the valley as the weather in Chamonix decided it had no intention of following the expeditions intended itinerary. Base camp for the week was at the French Army's Ecole Militaire de Haute Montagne, located within easy walking distance from the centre of the town. In this Phase 2 training establishment, where Suunto watches are most definitely the fashion accessories of choice, the welcome was warm and friendly as the school

proved to be an excellent location from which to conduct our training.

The first day saw the group take the train up to the Montenvers Station on the Mer de Glace glacier which acts as a stark reminder of just how quickly the Alpine glaciers are retreating and shrinking. Having fitted harnesses and helmets a series of ladders and ledges took us down to the glacier floor where an afternoon of basic skills training including walking with crampons, moving whilst roped up and ice axe techniques were conducted. The weather held and the day not only got us thinking about working together on a rope and how to move on ice and snow, but also helped with the all important acclimatisation process.

Daily weather updates from the local Mountain Guides Office began to paint an ugly picture; snow and winds continued up high and it became apparent that the likelihood of climbing on Mt Blanc was decreasing, never mind the likelihood of summiting. The guides, Lt Col Cath Davies and Maj

Kevin Edwards, were determined not to lose the initiative and began putting 'Plan B' into effect. Hopes were still held high, fingers crossed and further training undertaken.

The next outing, the 'Traverse de Couche' took the group along a ridge line and up to a rocky summit of 2500m on the second day. Visibility was limited to meters at some points before a change in the wind lifted the cloud, revealing the abyss below our feet. To most of the group's relief, the vis soon closed again! For once, the restricted visibility helped to focus the mind on the job in hand and allow individuals climbing techniques to emerge, develop and improve.

The weather continued to disagree with our summit aspirations so the following day we spent an afternoon single pitch climbing in the Chamonix valley. Not content at simply getting to grips with mastering the correct techniques, a speed climbing competition ensued, with Pte Richardson pulling some impressive moves out of the bag in a unique but effective style.







The following day, Maj Kev Edwards demonstrated his great ability to see into a window of opportunity, by kicking the training up a gear with an early morning call and a climb to 3800m via Aiguille du Midi cable car and on to the Cosmique Arête.

The Cosmique Arête is one of the classic routes above Chamonix and there was some congestion in the lower parts of the route as the local guides heaved their clients up any way possible to speed their progress; our guides adopted a more British and courteous approach. The route proved to be a fantastic introduction to mixed Alpine mountaineering as we came to grips with our crampons on rock and ice. The good weather conditions meant we encountered many more

people on the route and we realised that if we were to catch the last cable car down, we would need an escape plan. A series of lowered descents and scrambling on what can only be described as 'cat litter' resulted in the CO and Adj being bruised and bloodied by falling rocks. On reaching the glacier floor we had to make a quick move of 300m of height gain in decreasing visibility and 50mph winds. What is tricky enough during good conditions was rendered challenging to all, non more so that LCpl Dunlop who decided he would attempt it with one crampon (!) the other having broken and rendered use-

less. Concentration of the highest degree was demanded if the group did not want to take the express way down to Chamonix via the side of the mountain several hundred meters below. With Crystal Maze like timing, running through the corridors of ice, heavy breathing and jumping of barriers, the team just made the last cable car down.

In order to get a true feeling for summer Alpine mountaineering, no expedition is complete without an overnight stay in a refuge. For us, this would be in the Albert Premier Refuge on our way to the Aiguille du Tour (3500m). Having climbed to the refuge from La Tour ski station at the end of the Chamonix valley we took a welcome rest and hearty meal in the hut's communal environment, and then climbed into a 24 man room, 4 bunks with 6 places, lying next to a stranger you haven't even seen in the daylight. In these dormitories ear





plugs are as necessary as mountain boots and crampons are on the mountain.

The following morning at 0400 we had a quick breakfast and then made tracks for the summit of the Aiguille du Tour. A relatively easy climb was rewarded by a spectacular view as the skies cleared, showing us Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Europe complete with snowdrift 'quiff', and what could have been. Taking in the views from the summit at 7am, one could only stand amazed at the incredible 360 views into France, Italy and Switzerland.

Our final day in Chamonix was spent climbing 'the Index' above La Flegere. A 400m rock climb, and without the limited visibility of previous days, a fair amount of exposure was on offer. If we thought the last day was going to be relaxed, we were definitely wrong. Our final climb was to be five pitches of steep granite followed by an abseil and, towards the end of the day, a reminder of the power of the weather - dropping temperatures and rising winds. This was a great opportunity for those who only days ago had been novices, to demonstrate their new found skills, taking their own safety and that of those around them into their own hands at every step.

We came to France with the aim of conducting training and acclimatisation in order to summit the highest peak in Europe; it

would be expected for one to feel disappointment or frustration when the weather put a halt to this ambition. The reality however was that the heavy snowfall on the mountain prevented us from reaching the roof of Europe but instead delivered us the opportunities to push ourselves physically and mentally in some alternative but no less demanding Alpine terrain. The excellent judgement and depth of experience of both Lt Col Cath Davies and Maj Kev Edwards meant that every day was exploited to the maximum, and with huge success. Every novice on the trip at one point or another found themselves very far removed from their comfort zones; clinging on to rocks, on a ledge above the void and found it in them to carry on and up. Perhaps if those on the trip had known what they were going to undertake as a result of not being able to climb Mt Blanc, they might have thought better of it. Standing at the bottom of mountain after a long and demanding day though, the looks on people's faces always made it obvious that although comfort zones were truly smashed and limit surpassed, total enjoyment and a huge sense of achievement was experienced by all.



# SIKKIM SLOG

£50  
ARTICLE

## A TRIP TO INCREDIBLE INDIA

By Lt R C Milton AGC (ETS)

They lunge at you wildly. Dropping from trees, or attaching themselves as you brush past the lush green foliage; their bite is silent and painless. Capt Jen Robbins AGC (ETS) found one on her chest, Cpl John Moffatt had the misfortune to find one on his throat whilst the whole expedition suffered bites on ankles, wrists and hands. Thin and thread like to begin with, they gorge themselves on your blood until they appear slug like in appearance. What am I talking about? Leeches. And of course since exotic pests demand exotic locations, this was never going to be any ordinary mountaineering expedition.

Ex Sikkim Slog was the AGC Mountaineering expedition that took place between the 30 Jul and the 16 Aug 09 in the region of Sikkim, North Western India. Organised by Maj Eddie Elms AGC (ETS) and ably assisted by Capt Jen Robbins and Capt Lisa Tankaria-Clifford AGC (ETS) it was both ambitious and arduous. The aim in short was to 'plant' the Corps flag on one of India's highest and most spectacular mountain passes. The expedition will also develop the affective abilities of AGC soldiers by challenging their teamwork and outdoor skills by trekking in a mountainous area, and introducing them to an unfamiliar culture.

The expedition began with the issue of kit from Worthy Down. Challenge number one was ensuring that we all had the correct documentation and visas. Unfortunately, of the original 18 group members, four were unable to attend due to illness and visa problems. Challenge number two was

how to pack for potential temperature extremes of 35degrees in Delhi to -10degrees on the mountain. Of course, rather unhelpfully we had an airline weight limit of just 20kg. Nevertheless, with everything packed and with all group and individual kit issued, the main body minus Maj Eddie Elms and Maj John Maher who were the advance party set off for London Heathrow.

Arriving in Delhi, there is nothing that can prepare you for the complete assault on your senses. From the hawkers and beggars, to the heat, exotic smells and incessant beeping of horns, it was a relief to board the bus for the hotel. Our stay in Delhi was short. With just an afternoon to acclimatise and brief visits to Ghandi's cremation site, the Old Fort and Old Delhi for a treacherous rickshaw ride, we were soon back at the airport flying onward to Bagdogra in Sikkim.

Cocooned between Nepal, Bhutan and bordering China, Sikkim is a small mountainous region with strong Nepalese influences. Met at the airport by our guides, Bikkash and Prem we were soon negotiating the narrow, twisting roads towards our first overnight stop in Gangtok, the region's capital. Barely pausing for breath, the next day we were again on the move to Yuksom, which is where the trek would begin.

Situated at 1750m above sea level, Yuksom is a small, very basic mountain hamlet. Met the next day by our entourage of three guides, two cooks, one Sherpa, seven porters, 15 yaks and





3 yak herders we were soon meandering our way through dense forest upwards towards our aim; the Goecha la Pass at 4940m. That first day's trek was for many in the group, the hardest. With an initial ascent of 1300m, daytime temperatures were high and of course everyone was very conscious of the lurking leech menace. It was at this stage that we were joined by two local stray dogs. From an initial "Don't touch them, they may have rabies!" attitude; in typical sentimental British fashion they were soon named and accepted into the expedition party. Indeed, rather unimaginatively, they were nicknamed "Goldie" and "Blackie". No prizes for guess-

ing their colouring! Later joined by "Shaggy" at our first overnight stop, it was LCpl Pam Pearce our resident dog whisperer who ensured that our plucky canine expedition members never went hungry.

The second day of the trek was easier. At this stage the daytime temperature was cooler and we could now relax a little knowing that the leeches were unable to live at our ever increasing altitude. Indeed, our increased isolation from the outside world was brought into strong perspective when a Dutch member of another group





accidentally struck his head. With the risk of concussion, potential altitude sickness and the nearest Doctor being in Gangtok (up to three days travel away) he was soon whisked back down the mountain to receive medical attention. Indeed, the lack of medical expertise in the event of an accident was a concern. Nevertheless, we did have alternative therapies in the form of our expedition 'Witch Doctor', Capt Dawn Hyland. The cry of "Anyone for a drop of ginkgo?" (good for altitude sickness apparently) and a spot of healing reiki, were soon being employed for all sorts of pains and ills!

It is above 3,000m that the risk of developing Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) can occur. With mild symptoms including breathlessness, a racing heartbeat and a headache, it affected us all to varying degrees with some more affected than others. It is for this reason that ascent over and above this height must be gradual and structured. Thus over the next few days of the expedition, the ascent was more gradual in order to allow our bodies to acclimatise to the thinning air.

Our accommodation and food during the trek was generally basic but sufficient. Sleeping in tents and eating mainly vegetarian food, our diet was supplemented on the third night by a freshly slaughtered lamb. Dispatched by Major Elms with one swift blow to the back of it's neck with a kukri, it made an interesting addition to that night's dinner. Indeed, we were constantly amazed with the magic that our two chefs could conjure up with just one pressure stove.

The whole group were mystified as to how jelly dessert was made and a cake baked at nearly 4,000m without a fridge or oven!?

It was on day six of the trek that the ascent that we made our attempt on the summit. Setting out at 0200hrs, it was a difficult 5hr slog to the peak. Unfortunately for us, the views were shrouded in mist when we arrived there. Nevertheless, it was a great feeling to have finally reached the top and we were all delighted that two of the dogs had also decided to join us for the journey, all the way to the top! After photos, sweets and potato snacks it was time to head back. The descent was a tiring further 3hrs, followed by lunch and then another 2hrs to get us down to a lower altitude before a second day was spent walking back to Yuksom.

Once off the mountain, we were fortunate during our period of R&R to visit both Darjeeling and Agra where in the latter we visited the Taj Mahal and the Mughal Red Fort; both extremely memorable experiences.

In summary, the trek was an amazing but challenging experience. To some degree everyone was pushed out of their own individual comfort zone whether it involved the physical nature of the trek, or indeed coping with the weather or the altitude. All in all, the group's thanks go to Maj Elms and his team for organising an extremely successful and rewarding expedition.





I was sitting in my office minding my own business when Major Matt Swannell walked in. I had only been with the Regiment for a few short weeks, and most of those had been spent on exercise as part of the PDT package for Op Herrick. I still had no clue about life as a young officer in general and none about what was to come my way over the next 18 months. Matt (my new BC) asked “if I was keen to do a bit of a mountaineering trip” to which I immediately said “yes”. Little did I know how much work that simple word had just created for me and how much of my time would be taken up in the planning and organisation of the trip. After all, I didn’t think I’d be organising it, I was just joining in, right?

Actually, that was almost the case as this particular trip was handed down to me from Captain Elliot Woodhams. He was now the Battery Ops Officer and now too busy to organise it; the plan had therefore been collecting dust for a little while until I showed up. Elliot handed me a pile of paperwork, a lot of it hand-written, with place names and peaks I had never heard of; even more of it was photocopies of guide book entries and proposed routes. All I had to do was to find us a group of willing volunteers, transport, a place to stay, routes to take and equipment to use. What I had not appreciated was the amount of paperwork required to achieve this.

I was safe for a time: Op Herrick was a convenient way, as well as an excuse, not to have to think about what I still needed to do. The speed at which a little over six months passed however was breathtakingly shocking. One minute we were standing on the

runway at Brize Norton, the next, there we were again, a little leaner, a little more tanned and all looking forward to ‘relaxing’ post tour. This is when the fun really started.

After sitting on the back burner for months, the planning for EX NORTHERN WHITE ROCKET could now begin in earnest. I already had a small core of climbers from the Battery who had declared their willingness to join the group. The BC would act as one of the instructors as he already qualified and experienced, so we just needed to find one more instructor to get things off the ground.

Dougie McGill (HQ 2 Div) and Liz Korda were exceptionally helpful, guiding me through the new JSATFA format over the telephone. As I kept adding new information to the pages online I soon became relatively proficient at using the new format and soon became the regimental subject matter expert (SME). Gaining the requisite approvals for political clearances, loan pool stores, CILOR applications, funding and a whole host of other bits of paper proved to be the main challenge.

As a new Subaltern with little experience I was a little naive about how long it takes for political clearances and for loan pool stores requests to be processed, and I was therefore caught slightly short by the time constraints; the originally planned dates for the expedition had to be pushed back from just before Summer Leave to just after. This worked out well for all of us in the end so it wasn’t too much of a problem. We got our required forms in on time, gaining our clearance and access to equipment from DSDA Bicester.

As the expedition was classified as High Risk and Remote we had to deliver a High Risk and Remote Presentation to Dougie McGill in Edinburgh. The BC and I travelled up one day to deliver the presentation; as the expert, the BC did the bulk of the work and I just tied up any last minute administrative matters. We passed the presentation and were given final permission to conduct our expedition from HQ 2 Div and LAND.

All the while this had been going on we had been searching for and then finalising our second instructor. Major James Woodhouse (TA infantry) who was a hugely qualified individual and also has his own mountaineering business as his primary profession. He would bring vast experience and knowledge and frankly we were lucky to have him. This would also allow us to effectively split the group into two teams that would speed the learning process as well as allowing us to make quicker movement over glaciers and difficult ground.

The day before the expedition was due to leave the UK we had to drive down to Birmingham International Airport in order to collect the two combi-vans that we had booked for the expedition. I had requested these because I knew we would be taking with us significant amounts of equipment, and that we would not require any specific licences to be able to drive them. This allowed us to spread the driving burden across the group so that we could drive down to Chamonix in one trip; with a brief pause on the Channel Tunnel. The vans were excellent and were exactly what we needed. They were large enough to carry everything and had enough space in each

# A baptism of fire on the roof of Europe

Richard Pusinelli



for everyone to be relatively comfortable during the journey.

After collecting the vans we drove to Bicester to collect our loan pool stores. There were three pallets worth of equipment for us to go through and check off, so we enlisted Sgt Pike to be the QM for the trip while the BC and I checked it all for suitability. In the end we had been given pretty much everything we had asked for.

The next morning the whole party met up to go through all of the equipment and be issued with everything they would need for the expedition. Thanks to the efficiency of Sgt Pike we were ready to leave fairly rapidly; we just needed to pick up the BC from his house before we hit the road heading south. James Woodhouse would fly from Edinburgh and meet us in Geneva.

The rest of the group was made up of Bdr Hallam, Bdr Harvey-Morgan, LBdr Ward, LBdr Clarke, Gnr Cole, Gnr Crossland, Gnr Hancock, Gnr Davies. They were all members of 74 Battery (The Battle Axe Company) and most of them had been out with us on Herrick. I knew them all and they were all a very good group of men that could be relied upon – one of the decisive factors mentioned during our High Risk and Remote Presentation.

The journey south was uneventful, and we made it to Folkestone in good time to spend our last minutes in the Duty Free shop. On the train the light deflectors were fitted - aided by the residue from previous trips the vans had obviously made to the continent, and before long we were on the road again. Night fell as

we drove south but we stopped only to refuel and grab a bite to eat occasionally.

Gnr. Cole had a small incident at one of the many toll booths we had to pass through when one of the very high kerbs jumped out and scraped the side of his van. We were in the van behind and saw it happening but the damage was very minor so we carried on. We discovered that the European Toll card we had been given had expired two months before so we had to use the fuel card; the guys quickly worked out a method of passing this back to the vehicle behind in order for them to pass through.

We finally arrived in Chamonix just after dawn and as nothing would be open for a few hours we dozed in the vans waiting for somewhere to open for breakfast near our campsite; Croissants and hot chocolate – what would become the staple breakfast for the trip.

The campsite turned out not to be too busy and we were able to spread ourselves out across a number of pitches. We pitched all of our sleeping tents in a straight line – very military – and the extra tepee-like tent Bicester had given us as a central storage area. Sgt Pike very soon had everything under control and I shot off to collect James Woodhouse from the airport.

When we got back James introduced himself to the group and then immediately launched into a lesson about acclimatisation, altitude sickness and other factors to be careful of at altitude; finally adding realism to the whole expedition, especially for the younger members and inexperienced members. He then also gave us a show-

and-tell lecture on the equipment he would be carrying and what he thought we should all carry for our first climb the next day.

Our plans had always been flexible, and so, bearing in mind the skill and experience of the group as a whole, we decided to go for the summit of Tête Blanche the next day, as our first goal. Mountaineering skills and techniques would be introduced and practiced during the ascent, building towards a skill set robust enough to attempt Mont Blanc.

We took the Le Tour cable car up part of the route before taking to our feet for the first time in earnest. Alpine pacing was lesson number one for both groups. We walked at a steady pace in order to allow our bodies to adjust to the altitude and James took the opportunity to point out much of the Alpine Flora and Fauna around us. With this pace many other people passed us en route to the Albert Premiere Hut, but as we were booked in we did not need to hurry. By the time we got there it was mid afternoon and we allowed the guys time to relax as we had an early morning start the next day.

Spirits were high that night in the hut and people took a while to settle down, but not until after much hilarity and joking around; eventually everyone settled down for the night. Just as well, our four thirty start was a bit of a shock to the system and we took a fair while sorting ourselves out. By the time we were ready to leave and get going the majority of other climbers had long departed. Once going though we made good progress, although the second rope team, lead by the BC fell a little behind as they too were receiving instruction. By the

time we made it to the top the sun was well up and we had beautiful views all around that we all hugely appreciated. We met up with the second rope team just as we came down off the top to return to the hut. Sgt Pike had managed to twist his knee on the way up; sadly this was to trouble him for the rest of the trip. It was doubly sad as he was far and away one of the most determined to summit on Mont Blanc.

The way down was smooth enough, with only one small delay when Gnr Davies slipped and had to be helped down with a minor ankle strain.

We had not thought twice about climbing over a weekend, until we arrived back down in the valley (Sunday) to find everything shut. A bit of a problem with no food to cook for dinner! We finally found the French version of Spar and made do with a simple, yet very tasty pasta bolognaise that was a bit of a group effort to cook and clean up.

Our first peak had been more arduous than expected and we decided to take a rest day from alpine climbing and try to give Sgt Pike's knee an opportunity to recover. Some headed to Servoz with the BC to do some sports climbing whilst James took others to Clocher et Clocherton further up the valley. It was another stunning day - we were blessed with absolutely perfect weather for the whole trip. We were to find though that Gnr Davies had a significant fear of heights but to his credit, really showed us all how focussed he could be. In one moment on that day he demonstrated all that was best about military adventurous training; pushing himself further than he - and we - thought he would. The whole day was a huge success and it was only disappointing that we were unable to fit another day like it into the programme.

Our second training peak was to be the Domes du Miage, a double peak with a saddle in between. This meant a drive to

Les Contamines, followed by a walk up through the woods to the Conscricts Hut. Here we stayed for another night in order to leave early the next morning. Unfortunately we had to leave Sgt Pike at the hut as his knee was not appreciating the punishment of the previous day. The glacier was not so easy to traverse this time around and we had to zig zag back and forth to find a route through the crevasses; yawning gaps that would appear in the ice.

The sun was once again well up by the time we reached the saddle. This time though the wind was also picking up. Our next move would have been along a ridge with a shear drop on one side, but this would have been a little too much for some. Never one to be put off, James took two of us that were still up for having a go on to the summit. Meanwhile Rope Two were also having confidence problems and returned to the col. Halfway across the ridge, with wind whipping across the exposed face, James wisely decided that discretion was the better part of valour and made a tactical withdrawal to the col. We had certainly achieved our training aim for the day and we started to head down.

Once again we suffered casualties on the way down; both Bdr Harvey-Morgan and Gnr Cole sustaining sprained ankles on our rope. Nothing serious, but enough to prevent them trying to climb Mont Blanc later in the trip. Meanwhile the other rope was suffering casualties of a more psychological nature; Gnrs Hancock and Crossland decided that mountaineering was not an activity that they were comfortable with. Both stated that they had learned a huge amount so far, but that they would not be confident enough to scale Mont Blanc. It was an honest and forthright conclusion but meant that even less people would be making the summit attempt. Fortunately Gnr Crossland changed his mind later on.

On the way back down we collected Sgt Pike who had been patiently waiting for us at the Conscricts Hut.

This next part of the journey was doubly hard for him as descending is significantly harder on the knees than ascending is. Despite his mental grit and determination he was reduced to a very slow and deliberate pace, although he now had company in the shape of those with fresh wounds. The rest of the group was free to make its own way down, and after a brief halt outside a mountain hotel a race ensued that included nearly all of those still fit. It all started when the BC moved to guide the front of the group; he had to run to catch up with them as he had started at the back, but once he got there decided that he was enjoying the leg stretch and thought he would carry on. LBdr Clark loves to run and set off in pursuit, that was it - cue a race down a mountain in heavy boots, carrying kit and with walking poles being used for balance. It was slightly odd, and a British woman walking with a guide could not understand why people were flying passed her. Such is the way of things in the Battle Axe Company!

At the bottom we were able to take our boots off while we waited for the remainder, a welcome relief to tired, hot and sore feet. Due to the injuries we had picked up in the group and the fact that some did not believe they could make the summit of Mont Blanc, the BC, James and I had a meeting to decide what our next move would be. Our pool of people willing and physically able to climb Mont Blanc had shrunk from 12 to seven. Gnr Cole, LBdr Harvey-Morgan and Sgt Pike all had injuries, and Gnr Hancock had made the call that he could not get to the top. Gnr Crossland had had a change of heart and was now included in the group to try to make the summit. We then decided that we would maintain the two rope format, but change the combinations to try to achieve success. Rope One would now be the BC, LBdr Clark and I. Rope Two would be James, Bdr Hallam, LBdr Ward and Gnr Crossland. We would leave the next day to go up the cable car to Aiguille du Midi and stay at the Refuge Cosmiques, the staging post for the 3M route (Mont Blanc du Tacul, Mont Maudit and Mont Blanc). Rope Two would have a rest day then take the Train Mont Blanc (TMB) to the Tête Rousse Hut, from where they would try to climb the Bosses Ridge via the Gouter Hut.







Once on the mountain, the early morning starts continued. Less people than we thought started on the route to du Tacul, and it made for a much more pleasant experience. This was the first time I had walked or climbed with the BC but found that he set a very similar pace to that of James. As we made our way up the long path towards the summit as dawn arrived. It was not a particularly difficult peak, and when we arrived at the top we found people already up there. In order to maximise the acclimatisation potential of our current altitude we all donned our warm clothing and just sat on the peak as the sun continued to rise. We were up there for so long that groups would arrive thinking there was no one in front of them, only to find LBdr Clark doing his best Buddha impression, lying out of the wind with the sun on his face.

The return journey was unremarkable, but when we stopped for lunch on the glacier below the Cosmiques Refuge, just as the BC was telling us of a story of a jet flying into the cable car lines of the cable running in to Italy, a jet chose that moment to fly low enough so that it passed below the cable! We were a little stunned, as well as amazed that they still flew so low considering previous disasters.

Once we arrived back at the hut we all went straight to bed as we knew we had a 0100 start the next morning. Fortunately the hut was quiet and we got a good amount of rest, getting up for dinner before returning to bed.

The morning of the summit attempt started well, despite the early hour; we had a good breakfast, got started with minimal fuss (lessons learned earlier were paying off by now). This time though there were considerably more people on the move, all trying to make it to the top themselves. We set off at a slightly faster pace than the day before and reached the shoulder of Mont Blanc du Tacul quicker than we had yesterday. This time we continued on, heading for the col head torches lighting the way. Other rope teams varied in size from between two people to six. We easily kept pace with them and became part of a long snake of climbers heading up the

steep ice to the Mont Maudit ridge. Although late in the season and therefore with good foot placements carved into the slope, ice axe and crampons were still required to make progress. We got to the top without incident and broke left while everyone else carried straight on to Mont Blanc. Our new route took us up the ridge towards a large rise of rock that we had to clamber over and around in order to climb further. By far the most technically demanding part of the day; at one point the BC had to use an ice screw as a belay anchor point so that we could safely cross a particularly steep section of ice. A combination of further rock scrambles and small pitches of ice took us all the way up to the summit, and as we got there the first rays of light of the new day broke the eastern horizon. Of the three previous Mont Blanc ascents the BC had done, he had never climbed Maudit, so this was a first for him. We all felt an enormous sense of satisfaction. There was not another soul in sight, except those already climbing Mont Blanc away in the distance.

After a brief stop for a photograph we then turned around to find a route down to the col to Mont Blanc. This descent was slightly more of a challenge as the ice gradient was such that we had to front point for a considerable way. Further down, in order to speed things up, the BC lowered us from a belay, unfortunately nearly putting us in a crevasse! Tied in, I was perfectly safe and as the ice disappeared below me we were able to roll backwards back onto the glacier. All good fun.

The final climb loomed above - the long slope to the summit of Europe. This was to be a long, hard slog. Our pace was reduced to approximately 100 metres of ascent for every 20-25 minutes and the last few hundred metres of climb felt as if it would never end. Stepping over the final crest though was reward enough. Views to far horizons, including the route we had just travelled, as well as

part of the next leg to come, all visible under a crystal clear sky. We hastily took some photographs in the cold wind and then beat a hasty retreat towards the Gouter Hut. This would take us passed the Dome du Gouter, which as it turned out was as highest point the second rope team reached.

Our pace down was so fast that we easily caught and passed many other rope teams en route. It took us a fraction of the time of the ascent and we were in the Gouter Hut for a celebratory bolognaise before we knew it. We were not entirely sure what time the last train down on the TMB would be and so we soon resumed our pace down the steep and precarious route to the Tête Rousse Hut and glacier below. From then on it was another fast walk - our feet were suffering a little by this stage from the amount of work we had asked of them - as we couldn't quite get up to another run. Unfortunately LBdr Clark managed to twist his knee on this part of the descent and so had to hobble the last little distance to the train where we finally caught up with the second rope team, also waiting for the train. They'd had a rough time and had not been able to stay at the Gouter Hut as it was fully booked. They had tried to make a full ascent from the Tête Rousse but the altitude gain was a bit too much and they had to turn back. The train ride was heaven for us all.

We only got three out of our party to the highest point in Europe; but, crucially we had all reached our own peaks, fully demonstrating the benefit of all that is Army adventurous training. Each and every one of us has come away with amazing experiences and for some, a taste for more.

Thanks to the AMA for the part they played in supporting our adventure.

# SPORTS CLIMBING ROUND UP

**Maj Pete Skinsley, Vice Chairman (Sport)**

Both the Army and Combined Services Sport Climbing Teams were in action overseas at the back end of 2009. In all 16 people from the 3 services got away and tested themselves against the best the military has across Europe.

Belgian Military Championships. Capt George Best, OCdt Matt Abbott, Sgt Wayne Clarke and 2Lt Ali Ellwood represented the Army in Belgium. The wall had been used the week before for a World Cup competition and the military event was on the same routes! "Quite steep and quite hard" was a common phrase used to describe what was in stall for the team. None of the men made the final but George and Wayne managed to get equal 29th out of over 70 men, with Matt close behind in 34th. Ali pulled a blinder and took 3rd in the women's overall competition. In the international speed competition the team took 3rd behind Belgium and France. The tour was thoroughly enjoyed by all and the Belgians proved ever the consummate hosts.

French Military Championships. A Combined Services team of 5 led by Flt Lt Phoebe Denton headed to a chilly Chamonix, with the Army represented by Capt Mark Stevenson. The eliminators held some surprises and a stopper move on the 7a spat all the British men off, missing the cut for the semis by one point; Mark finally placed equal 31st. Phoebe was placed 2nd female in the qualifiers and made it through to the final where she came 3rd overall and brought home the silverware. In the bouldering Mark came 27th and Phoebe the runner up. The team came 3rd in the overall international event behind France and Belgium.

European Military Championships. A Combined Services team of 7 went out to compete in the highlight of the sport climbing year with the aim of bettering the performance at last year's event in France. Maj Pete Skinsley, Maj Mike Smith, Capt Tom Odling and OCdt Josh Conway represented the Army with Surg Lt Steve Glennie RN, Flt Lt Stu Harth RAF and Cpl Andy Woolston RAF making up the team. It was an entertaining week with 10 nations turning up. The usual suspects were there and it was good to meet up with friends from previous competitions and talk to the professional athletes about how they approach climbing and the services.

Day 1 saw eliminator lead routes from F5b-F7b and all 7 team members comfortably topped the 7a. The 7b route was a step up and Steve Glennie faired the best making it onto the final headwall but falling just short of the top. Unfortunately Stu Harth dislocated his shoulder on the route but after resetting it and the traditional Brufen and strong coffee, Stu was back to normal but retired gracefully from the event. The bouldering took up the rest of the

day with 12 problems from Font 5-7b. The standard of setting was top draw and 3D climbing was the way forward. Full off dynos, mantles, crimp fests, horizontal presses and a thrutchy corner were all included and tested the team to the full. At the end of day Steve and Tom qualified along with 28 others for the semi final. More importantly we were ahead of the Belgians in the team event - this being the focus of the week!

Day 2 dawned and the semi-final was a stiff F7c route with a stopper move at half height that defeated Tom. Steve faired better making the move and continuing up to the roof and qualifying 6th for the final. The finals in the afternoon proved to be the spectacle that everyone had hoped for. The women's final (F7c) was a walk in the park for Christine Schranz who won. The men's route (F8a+) again had a low and high crux, which split the field. Steve cruised up to the low crux, a full off dyno from one wall to another. He launched, touched the hold but couldn't stay on and eventually came 7th. After a display of pure power, bouldering skill and determination Kilian Fischhuber got the furthest and won the competition. The big success of the competition was in the international team event where the team came 5th overall, this time equal with the Belgians. Overall the event was a real success and the team thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The Swiss were excellent hosts and it was good to catch up with old friends and make new ones. A final word of thanks must go to the sponsors, DMM, who provided the team kit. 2010 brings the European Championships to Britain. They will take place at the Edinburgh International Climbing Arena at Ratho on 26-28 Oct. The event will also double up as this year's Inter-Services so get training now.

Tri-Services Bouldering League. The inaugural Tri-Services Bouldering League, sponsored by DMM, ran from Oct 09 to Feb 10. The event was open to all regular and reserve personnel from the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and RAF. With categories for men, women, juniors and veterans and 5 rounds at walls around the country there was plenty on offer for the novice and expert alike. Grades were consistent at each round with 25 problems at VB to V8 to test everyone. With around 50 people attending each round and over 90 at the final at JSMTCL the competition proved a real success in its first year. Surg Lt Steve Glennie RN proved himself to a step ahead of the rest comfortably winning the men's event. Army Cdt Hannah Beresford romped away with the women's title, but you would expect that from a British Junior Team member! SLT Lee Packer RN took the male junior event and Maj Pete Skinsley was the best of the oldies. The final round also doubled up as the Army Bouldering Championships and Capt Tom Odling took the men's title for 2010 and LCpl Ruth Matuska the women's.



# “That’s me!”

As modest as he is professional; climber, righter, coach and speaker Steve McClure is undoubtedly Britain’s best sports climber and one of only a handful of people to repeat Dave MacCleod’s notorious E11 Rhapsody. Here he speaks to Army Mountaineer about his home and work life and finding time for climbing.

## Please briefly describe your life and job description.

I’m a professional climber. My life revolves around three things; family, house and climbing. The house we live in needs total renovation, back to brick in every room, it takes a bunch of my time but I’m learning stuff fast – can’t plaster yet though.

Climbing takes up most of my time, either doing it or working in it. Most of my income is climbing related. I get some sponsorship from some great companies and in return do lectures, staff training, product development and press exposure. However, most climbing income is from a combination of route setting, coaching, lectures and article writing. I reckon I put 4 days per week into this. In the summer I try hard to get out on rock three times per week, maybe a full day and two half days. And I’ll try and get 2 or 3 week trips abroad climbing to keep up the psyche. I’m in Spain now, writing this. And its pouring down outside.

## Are you married and do you have children?

I’m not married, but have been attached for 20 years, so guess I am really. I have a 3 year old daughter. I never wanted kids, my partner always did and I caved in. She was right, having a nipper was the best thing I (we) ever did. It puts everything in perspective and puts a shine on every day.

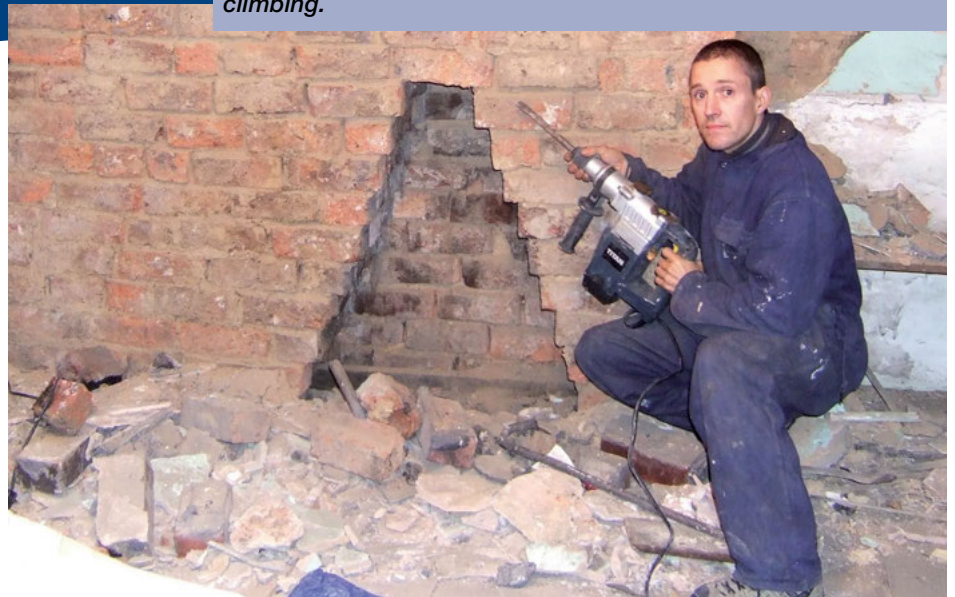
## Your top tip for climbing?

Enjoy it, of course. That sounds very cheesy. But get a handle on what you want. Most of us just go out and enjoy it; the views, the movement, the exposure. But plenty of people these days are caught up in performance; I am to a certain extent. Here it’s really hard to step back and enjoy climbing for what it is, not to get frustrated when you feel you are not 100%, not to get mad when you dropped the last move of the best route in the world!

But if performance is your bag the most important thing is tenacity, hanging in there till the end. Many people flop off when the going gets tough but the true performers will still be hanging on by the skin of their teeth long after they should have fallen off.

## Any funny mountain stories?

We were climbing white slab on cloggy and basically ran out of day. It was pouring with rain by the time we reached the top and we headed down in the gloom but ended up in the wrong valley! Still wearing rock shoes we hiked back to Llanberis, it took hours in torrential rain. Arriving in ‘berries’ at midnight we set off back up to cloggy to get our stuff, but after 2 hours hike and a stumble around in the fog we failed to find it and



so ended up walking back down again, and then had to walk all the way back up the pass to our tent (another 5 miles). Then the worst was having to get up in the morning, in the rain, and put on our rock boots, walk all the way down the pass again and all the way back up to cloggy for our stuff!!

## What is your favourite hill food/meal?

For single stove tent cooking. Fried veg, loads of cheese, all wrapped up in a flour tortilla quickly warmed in a frying pan. Minimum cooking, minimum washing up, maximum taste. Way better than pasta!

## Where and when did you first start climbing?

I was brought up in Cleveland near to the North York Moors, and with both parents keen climbers there was no escape from the sport. Climbing from the moment I could walk my first extreme was at 11, first E3 at 13 and first E5 onsight at 16. University was less climbing intensive where I managed to achieve a 2.1 in mechanical engineering and a 1st in partying! Then, after regaining motivation I suffered severe climbing injuries (tendonitis in both elbows). The only escape was extensive non-climbing travel to India, Thailand, Malaysia and Nepal. Then at last it was back into climbing.

My first sport climbing was in 1994 and my first grade ‘8’ in 1995. Within a year I’d climbed 8c+ and within three I’d managed 9a. However, things really got started when I climbed ‘Northern Lights’, 9a at Kilnsey. After this I quit my engineering job of seven years to pursue the life of a professional climber! Will it work out! I’ll tell you when I’m 40!

## The essence of climbing?

To me, movement is the real essence. But the package needs the outdoors, friends,

and scenery combined with the movement. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t feel danger has to be a part of climbing at all. Reducing risk is sometimes an interesting element, but I don’t have to have that component to enjoy climbing. Moving over the stone is what I go climbing for.

## What’s the worst physical pain you have ever experienced?

Walking down a steep nettle packed hill in the middle of summer after a route wearing just shorts and climbing boots, I stood in a wasps nest which exploded wasps all over me. I got stung about 15 times then tripped over and rolled about 20 metres down hill through the nettles! It stung – a lot! I ended up in hospital.

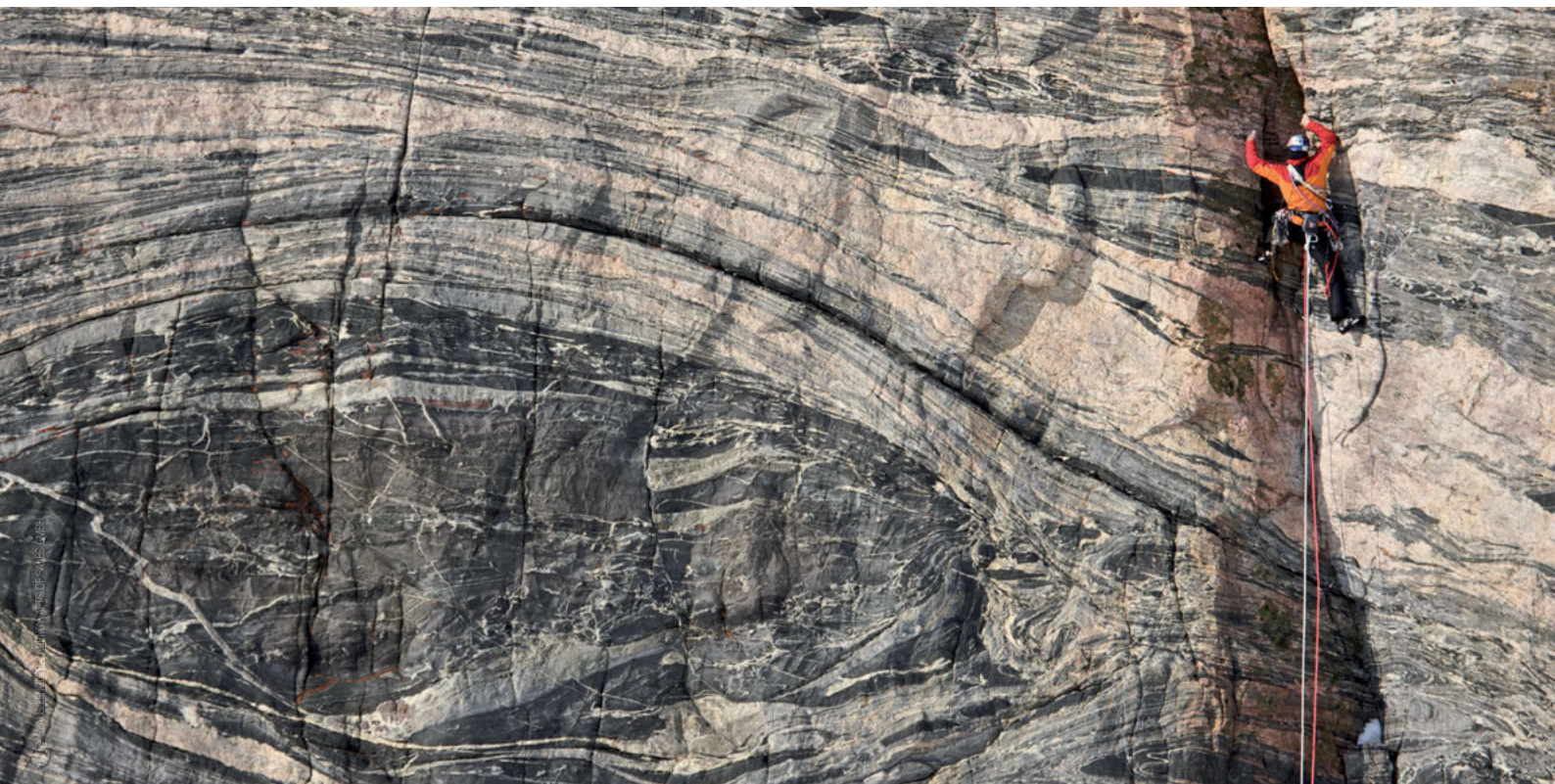
## Any Scars that tell a story?

A ‘dagger’ scar on my chest looks like I’ve been stabbed, but in fact is where a chest drain was shoved in to sort out a punctured lung. It’s a long story. Seconding a two pitch route, I was on the upper pitch, 80 foot up. The leader had reached the top, pulled up all the slack and then when it went tight on me, assumed it had snagged. He tugged it a bunch of times. We’d agreed before hand that if we lost communication he’d tug the rope to signify climbing so off I set. The first hold snapped. I landed on my back. A punctured lung was my worst injury, I got off pretty lightly really. And so did he.

Climb when ready!



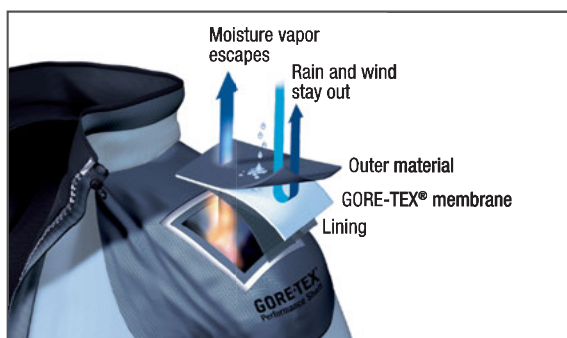
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