

# ARMY MOUNTAINEER



Winter 2011

Cuba | Mera Peak | Djangart Valley, Kyrgyzstan | Avalanche Kit



The Journal of the Army Mountaineering Association



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# ARMY MOUNTAINEER

The Journal of The Army Mountaineering Association



## LIFE ON THE LEDGE

Just when you thought the barrel was empty. Signs you're not one of the better climbers in town:

- You climbed 5.8 your first day climbing, and 8 years later a 5.4 lead still scares the bejeezus out of you.
- You're mad that 5.2 doesn't have the a/b/c/d modifiers for better delineating the subtleties of this tricky grade.
- You know every pitch and every move of the Nose, but the most you've ever done is scramble half-way up the 3rd class approach, got scared, and climbed back down.
- The exposure in your local climbing wall terrifies you.
- The only thought you have before a big climb is "How am I gonna get Joe to lead all the pitches?"
- You fall off the front steps of the gym.
- The best finger jam you've had was when you slammed your hand in the car door.
- You've had to be rescued off a top-rope.
- Your partner regularly hauls you up on a Z-pully.
- Favourite call to your belayer: "Tight!"
- Your team uses you to "test" for avalanche stability.
- You've chopped the rope with your axe while ice climbing.
- If you find yourself repeatedly yelling "FALL-ING!!".....on the approach.
- You clip the lead quickdraws at the climbing wall while on top rope and get stuck.
- Your leg is still recovering from being impaled with your ice axe while practicing "self arrest" on the bunny slope.
- You think "Hypothermia" and "Frostbite" are the up and coming rock groups.

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Col (Retd) J Peacock

Lt Col MH Bazire MBE

## **President**

Brigadier Ivan Hooper

## **Chairman**

Lt Col Cath Davies MBE TD SCOTTS

Mob 07855 469252

amachair@armymail.mod.uk

chair@armymountaineer.org.uk

## **Vice Chairman (Mountaineering)**

Lt Col Paul Edwards RLC

Mil: 94391 3946

Civil: 01264 383946

amavicechair@armymail.mod.uk

chairmountaineering@armymountaineer.org.uk

## **Vice Chairman (Sport)**

Lt Col Pete Skinsley RLC

Mob: 07742 194128

amavicechairsport@armymail.mod.uk

amavicechairsport@armymountaineer.org.uk

## **General Secretary**

Major Matt Hing RLC

Mil: 94214 5754

gensec@armymountaineer.org.uk

## **Expeditions Secretary**

Maj Warren Hartwell RAPTG

Mil: 95581 7904

expedsec@armymountaineer.org.uk

## **Public Relations Officer**

Capt Tomo Thompson R SIGNALS

Mil: 95471 8920

profficer@armymountaineer.org.uk

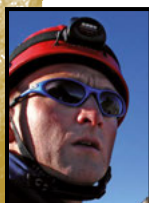
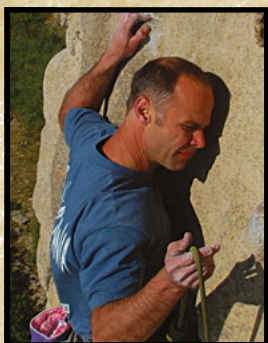
## **Webmaster**

Capt Ross McKenzie RLC

Mob: 07983 422193

amawebmaster@armymail.mod.uk

webmaster@armymountaineer.org.uk



### **Journal Editor**

Col John Whitby

Mil: 94391 2074

Civil: 01264 382074

journal@armymountaineer.org.uk

### **Treasurer**

Maj Steve Marsh AGC

Mil: 94381 2381

treasurerer@armymountaineer.org.uk

### **Equipment**

Post Vacant

### **Membership**

Helen (Membership Secretary)

Mil: 95581 7694 (Fax also)

secretary@armymountaineer.org.uk

Rebecca (Membership Clerk)

Mil: 95581 7694 (Fax also)

Email: membershipclerk@armymountaineer.org.uk

### **Publicity Officer**

Maj Johnjo Knott RAMC

Civil: 01748 873183

Email: publicity@armymountaineer.org.uk

### **Meets Co-Ordinator**

Post Vacant

### **Training & Development**

Capt Sam Marshall AAC

Tel: 94331 2652

amatrainingofficer@armymail.mod.uk

trganddev@armymountaineer.org.uk





# Foreword

*Foreword by President*

As always, a brief thumb through the articles in this edition of Army Mountaineer gives some idea of the breadth of activity of the AMA and our members. Climbing Mera Peak; adventures in the Alps; cadets in Scotland; the Army team's success at the Inter-Services sport climbing championships and as part of the Combined Services team, all make great reading. For those keen to sample the more esoteric: climbing in Cuba, Kyrgyzstan and Hawaii will provide lots of interest.

As I write, the British Services Antarctic Expedition 2012 enters the final stages of training and preparation, with the squad deployed on MRX2 and the advance party deploying before Christmas. For the uninitiated, BSAE is a tri-Service, Type 3 AT exercise, deploying 24 servicemen and women - including 12 Army mountaineers - to the Loubet Coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. The expedition's main effort will be the ascent of unclimbed mountains as well as new routes on 'established' peaks. The exercise coincides with the centennial anniversary of Captain Scott's expedition to the Antarctic and will be conducted in the "Spirit of Scott", with both exploratory and scientific aims and objectives. The exercise will also raise funds to support the "Help for Heroes" Charity with over £10K banked to date. BSAE is an Army lead and our Vice Chairman (Mountaineering) Paul Edwards and his joint team have been pulling out all the stops to plan and organise the expedition, raise the required

£500K, gain the necessary approvals and clearances and train and prepare the squad. It is a mammoth task and to get this far in the current climate is a huge achievement in itself. We wish them all a safe and successful expedition.

So 2012 will be busy. Alongside BSAE we are running a number of expeditions including a 'high end' trip to Cerro Torre and Exercise Indian Tiger, a joint venture with the Indian Army to Shri Parbat. As you will see from Pete Skinsley's sport climbing programme, there is plenty going on 'indoors'. Reinvigorating the meets programme remains a priority for 2012, even though the closure of our Scottish huts has curtailed our plans for Christmas. All of this needs to be enabled by good communications and we will continue to develop and build the website. We wish our new Editor John Whitby every success with the journal and I urge all members to help him maintain the quality of this journal by getting your articles and photographs in to him, and in good time.

Finally thank you to our sponsors Cotswold and DMM and particularly to Towergate Wilson. Also to Helen and Becky who continue to provide us with outstanding support in the AMA office.

Have a great winter season; see you on the hills.

## Editorial

Looking out of the window into the evening gloom the leaves are thick on the ground and the grip of Autumn is with us. But, will the Winter bring the right weather? Last year saw a changing pattern that brought many Scottish winter climbs into good condition but variable snow in the Alps. The North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO) has a primary influence on our winter weather. Permanent low pressures over Iceland and high pressures over the Azores determine wind directions and accompanying weather. For many years we have had warm, wet westerlies. Last year easterly winds predominated bringing cold conditions to the UK. The NAO suggest that these conditions could exist for up to 10 years bringing good winter climbing prospects in the UK and less reliable snowfall in the Alps.

Reading this edition of the journal, I would highlight the Towergate Wilson advert on the inside front page (the principal sponsor of the AMA). I took out their insurance for my season in the Alps this year. Their customer service was excellent and the premiums about 10% cheaper than the BMC. I will certainly be beating a path to their door again next year.

Finally, a strong raft of articles and the photograph competition have been let down by a shortage of photographs and many of those submitted are at too low a resolution for publication which is real shame. A plea from the editor – ensure that you take high resolution cameras on your travels and take the time to plan and execute those quality shots that make the article come alive.

### **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.



Many of the discounts that retailers offer our members have recently been renegotiated and despite the economic hardship that the industry is currently facing, we continue to enjoy excellent support from leading manufacturers and retailers of equipment and clothing. Please see details below and note that these businesses do have access (securely) to the AMA membership database and will know if you're a paid up member. They will request your AMA number when you order. The businesses retain the right to refuse these discounts.

## CHANGES TO AMA DISCOUNT SCHEME WITH COTSWOLD OUTDOOR

With immediate effect, the 20% discount code for the AMA at Cotswold Outdoor Ltd is AF-DFMC-P2. The old code (A3000) will not work anymore. Additionally, YOU MUST BE IN POSSESSION OF A VALID AMA MEMBERSHIP CARD TO USE THIS CODE IN STORE. No card, no discount. Cotswold Stores have a copy of the AMA card. Cotswold has been particularly supportive of the AMA, but has had several problems recently with customers attempting to claim AMA discount in store without cards. The shop staff in Preston was on the receiving end of some particularly abusive language recently from members of HM Forces attempting to get the additional AMA discount. Please carry the card and be polite to one of our key sponsors. Cotswold is using an intelligent retail management system to monitor usage of the new code.

## Summit Mountaineering

Summit run a whole range of walking, scrambling and climbing courses from their bases in the Wye Valley and Snowdonia; they specialise in learn to lead and technical development. 20% discount to all AMA members and their families. Call 07896 947 557 info@summitmountaineering.com quoting AMA number. www.summitmountaineering.com

## PHD / (Pete Hutchinson Designs)

POC - Emma Harris, can be contacted on 01423 781133 or via the e-mail address. PHD offer a 25% discount off all standard items to the AMA. <http://www.phdesigns.co.uk/index.php>

## Beyond Hope – Evolv, Metolius, Prana and Rock Technologies

POC – Lee or Rick 01457 838242  
Trade price + VAT + carriage deal to all members of the AMA. [www.beyondhope.co.uk](http://www.beyondhope.co.uk)

## DMM, Crux, Lightwave and Mammut Ropes

Trade price + VAT + carriage deal to all members of the AMA  
POC - 01286 873580 Anne Rhodes or Katrina Spinney.

## Montane

POC – Kris Carrick 01670 522300 x 210 kris@montane.co.uk  
UK Pro Price List for AMA Members applies. All orders must be via the Montane Customer Order Form. [www.montane.co.uk](http://www.montane.co.uk)

## Paramo

A new scheme is now in place whereby the mountaineering qualifications and or experience of an individual are assessed by Paramo and then turned in to a sliding scale of discounts within their Pro User scheme. As this is a scheme which treats each applicant individually, you need to speak to Paramo personally. Ring Alex Beaumont via +44 (0) 1892 786446.

## Millets

Most High Streets have one – 10% off with AMA card and your MOD90

## Blacks

Most High Streets have one of these too – 10% off with AMA card and your MOD90

## Mountain Equipment (via Magic Mountain shop in Glossop)

20% discount. Phone Magic Mountain on 0161 3665020 ask for mail order department, quoting your AMA number.

## Terra Nova

They now operate a system similar to Paramo whereby AMA members need to contact the company direct and set up a Pro User account via password. When you then re-log in to the Terra Nova site the price list will auto adjust to reflect your discount. Magic !! info@terra-nova.co.uk +44 (0) 1773 833300

If you have any issues with the scheme, or know of any other companies willing to offer discount to the AMA, please drop me a line.

Lastly, a reminder, please use these discounts for personal purchases only!

## Tomo Thompson

Public Relations and Recruitment Officer  
Army Mountaineering Association  
95471 8920  
amaprofficer@armymail.mod.uk

profficer@armymountaineer.org.uk

## Winter Meet 2011

The MOD have closed all of the AT huts in Scotland as a cost saving measure for the Christmas and New Year stand-down period. Unfortunately, because of this, there will be no AMA Winter Meet this year.

AMA Members requiring developmental training for the Winter award schemes are advised that there is a Winter Concen-

tration for mountaineers and climbers at JSMTW(B) from 5–17 Feb 2012.

**Further details and applications are to be made through the usual JSAT process.**

## CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to the winner of the Summer 11 Gear Giveaway. Andy Parsons wins a pair of CU Belay Glasses kindly donated by CU Belay Glasses UK. Well done Andy, no more stiff necks then! The glasses normally retail for £95 and can be purchased from [www.cubelayglasses.co.uk](http://www.cubelayglasses.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 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.

## 2011

6 Dec 11

### UKSF Climbing Championships.

*Hereford.*

Contact: Sven Hassell.

14 Dec 11

### Tri-Service Bouldering League Round 3.

*The Climbing Hangar, Liverpool.*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley (See 2011DIN10-032 for details).

## 2012

18 Jan 12

### Tri-Service Bouldering League Round 4.

*The Climbing Station, Pontypridd.*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley.

18 Jan 12

### Tri-Service Bouldering League Round 5.

*The Climbing Academy, Glasgow.*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley (To be run by Fg Offr Jimmy James).

TBC Jan 12

### Army Team Training Weekend.

*TBC*

Contact: Volunteer required.

18 Feb 12

### Army Bouldering Championships 2012 and Tri-Service Bouldering League Round 6.

*JSMTC(I), N Wales.*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley (DIN to follow).

TBC Feb 12

### Army Team Training Weekend.

*The Peak District, Sheffield.*

Contact: Volunteer required.

10-11 Mar 12

### Climbing Works International Festival.

*The Climbing Works, Sheffield.*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley (2 Combined Services Teams).

TBC Mar 12

### Army Team Training Weekend.

*Cardiff & Bristol.*

Contact: Volunteer required.

TBC Mar/Apr 12

### Divisional Climbing Championships 2012 (UK & Germany)

*TBC*

Contact: TBC (Future UK sport structure still TBC by ASCB).

TBC Mar/Apr 12

### Combined Services Climbing Team Training Camp.

*Fontainebleau*

Contact: Lt Col Pete Skinsley (Details TBC).

TBC Mar/Apr 12

### Bouldermania.

*Tielen, Belgium.*

Contact: TBC (Combined Services Team selected from the Army Bouldering Championships and Tri-Service League).

TBC May 12

### Army Team Training Weekend.

*Reading & Westway.*

Contact: Volunteer required.

21-25 May 12

### Army Festival of Climbing.

*Capel Curig, N Wales..*

Contact: Volunteer required.

TBC Jun 12

### AMA AGM Weekend Meet.

*JSMTC(I), N Wales.*

Contact: Maj Matt Hing (AMA Gen Sec).

Details @ [www.armymountaineer.org.uk](http://www.armymountaineer.org.uk)





# “The Best VS in the World”

£50  
ARTICLE

The “classic” route up the South Ridge of the Aiguille Dibona is 14 pitches of immaculate granite on what has to be one of the most inspiring peaks that I’ve ever been fortunate enough to see. On top of this, it’s also all do-able in a long weekend from London.

8 pitches into the route, shouting “Take! Take! Take!” at the top of my voice as I tried to reverse some very suspect flakes, it didn’t quite feel as I’d sold it to my partners. We were running late, had managed to go off-route on a knife-edge ridge and were definitely beyond the route’s maximum grade of Fr5b.

This tale began, as so many do, in a pub. After a typical winter’s night session at London’s Mile End wall, I’d carefully laid a beautiful picture-book guide on the table and asked “So, anyone interested in going to the Alps for the weekend?” Quickly capitalising on the advantage that professional photography had given, I glibly summarised it as “A quick flight out, hire a car, walk in, climb, walk out, and fly home. Four days max.” All very doable, all very plausible.

The logistics were straightforward: avoid the French holidays, fly Easyjet, hire a car, book a night in a “FormuleUne” motel and make a call to the gardienne of the nearest hut. Cheap and easy.

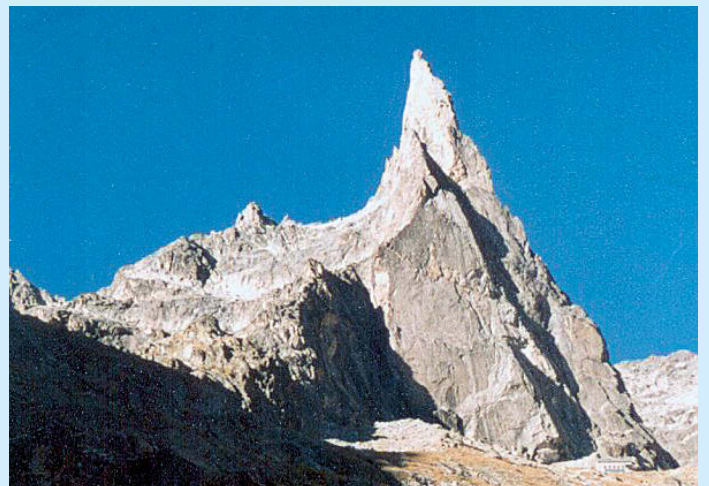
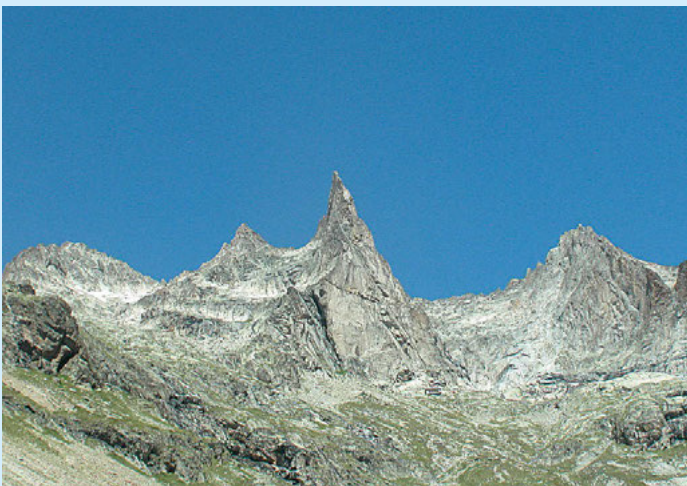
A little research identified that the route did require a light rack with a few small friends. As it wasn’t “bolts all the way” and as the three of us had never climbed together, we planned a shake-out in Snowdonia and went to the Idwal Slabs to develop something like the fabled Alpine efficiency. Actually, we climbed very well together despite taking, in error, the Direct Start (HVS) to Tennis Shoe (HS) and Lazarus (S) and Groove Above (S) provided more entertainment. So, whilst we hadn’t quite managed Alpine changeover speeds at our belays, we’d not hung around and had enjoyed climbing together.

The story of our trip over to France is a long one. Suffice it to say that we did not regard the cancellation of our planned flight as our airline’s greatest hour but, having pretty tight timelines to get in and out from the climb, we simply delayed everything by 24 hours. Unfortunately this didn’t mean that we avoided further issues.

After a shorter night’s sleep than planned, we (more accurately, I) embarked on some protracted “badmin” in the motel as we debated and decided what gear we should take or leave in the car. Gear packed, we spent more time, hungry, buying too much food in the local Carrefour and, after brief diversion to Decathlon, drove off into the mountains.

The walk-in to the hut was clearly marked and so I led on, setting the tone for the team. My ensemble consisted of old trainers, flimsy running shorts (survivors of the 80s) and a red sun hat whilst carrying a huge tarte aux abricots in a supermarket carrier bag and having a large “pain de campagne” sharing the back of my pack with my crampons. Aurelio has forgotten both his sun hat and shorts and improvised with a knotted handkerchief and rolling up his trouser legs. John, in shame at our sartorial failings, powered on ahead.

We wound our way up through the alpine Spring flowers to enter and traverse along a narrow gorge above a torrent. When, at last, we crossed over the stream and a view of the mountain gave us an excuse to rest we stared in awe at this granite blade and greedily demolished the whole of the tarte. Though we first caught sight of the hut shortly after this, it never seemed to get any closer and we spent a further 2 hours of grinding switchback ascent to reach it. In recompense were the panoramic views up to the Dibona and the surrounding peaks. After the effort of getting there, we were settling into our slow walk-in paces, breathing in the mountain air and it all felt worthwhile.



On arriving at the hut we checked out our approach for the next day, a whole 50m from the hut, then returned to steaming bowls of hot chocolate to quiz the guardiennes on the route. They recommended a 0800hrs start, as the sun hit the rock then, and that we only needed trainers for the descent. We were, however, warned that afternoon thunderstorms were forecast but reassured that any lightning would probably hit the surrounding peaks first.

As Aurelio started the first pitch, John's suggestion of, "Don't hang about, get climbing", and mine that, being a mountain route, he might "run it out a bit" didn't appear to be received with a complete confidence in our judgement. A congested start hampered us as the first belay could only accommodate two parties; getting past this belay and the "tunnel" pitch that followed it lost us half an hour. Nevertheless, the views were awesome and the climbing was fantastic; varied and thought-provoking but not overly strenuous or serious. Aurelio later claimed that leading the second pitch through a rock tunnel would, alone, have made the trip worthwhile.

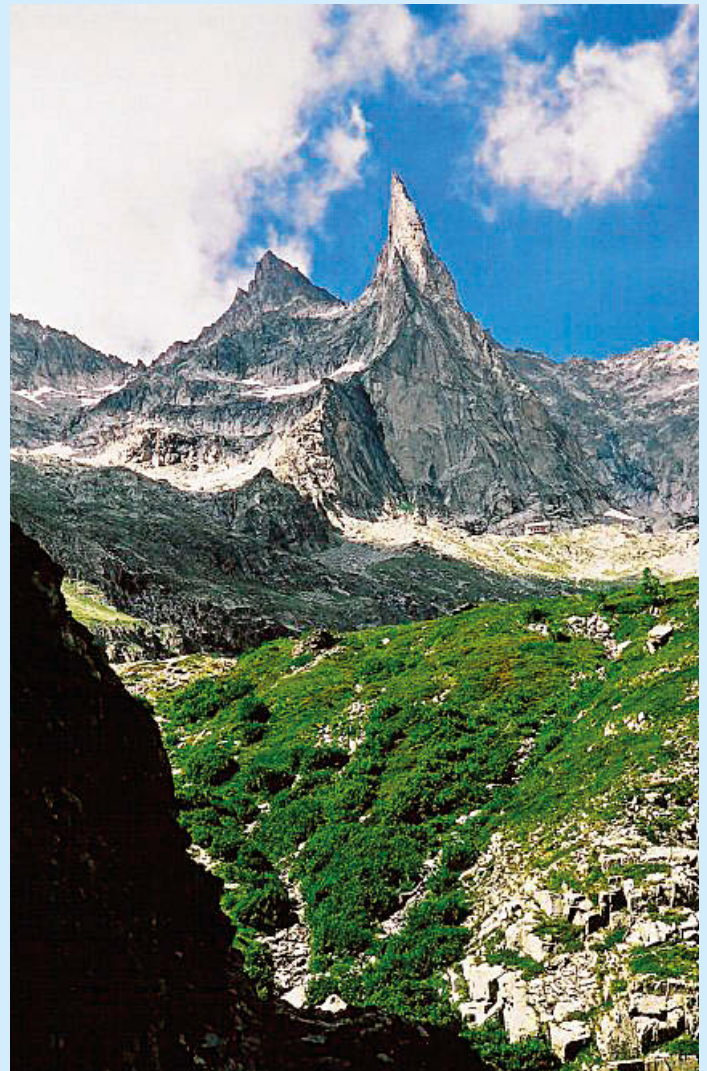
Two pitches in and the crowds had thinned as the routes began to diverge and the faster parties pulled ahead of us. We headed off right under overhangs and up a system of corners and crack towards a large ledge crossing the ridge one-third of the way up.

At the ledge we took a short break and swapped leads. John, our strongest leader, moved confidently "à l'attaque" and disappearing around a corner. The rope paid out quickly, so quickly and so far that Aurelio and I eventually had to break down the belay and move together with John. Privately, I was becoming worried that we were already behind time and I was concerned about how we would deal with the greater difficulties ahead. We were much slower than I had anticipated and distant clouds were now building around closer summits. I had spent my time on the ledge reflecting on what fore-warning mountaineers have of impending disaster. Was there a slowly increasing sense of tension or just a sudden catastrophe? I was beginning to feel the former.

We arrived to find John in a crevasse stance with a bit of a tangle of rope from having to rapidly assemble the belay. Whilst a bolt ladder protected a harder variation directly up the arête, we knew that our route took a concealed line around the East face before rejoining the crest. A tricky move off from here took John off a few metres below the arête. Again the rope payed out, and out, then slackened, then payed out, then slackened and so it continued. We could see a party belayed ahead of us and so John ignored two rusty bolts that looked like an old belay stance to follow them into a corner. Assembled at this point, the arête to the left and the bulging wall above hid the route and any other parties from view. We were now very much on our own, without a reassuring double-bolt belay and looking for a way out. John led off again to the right of the bulging wall and disappeared from sight; the rope payed out very, very slowly. Lightning began to light the clouds around nearby peaks and it rained.

Returning to the beginning of the tale, it's significant that, after this point, each of us has a very different recollection of what happened and when we tried to match our route to the topo guide, we seemed to have climbed through an area left blank like medieval cartographers' "terra incognita". Though I clearly remember the loose flakes and thin cracks of John's lead, I vehemently denied for a year that I'd led the subsequent one or two pitches of rattling chimneys and off-widths that took us back to the arête and into sunshine. Aurelio remembers an entirely different sequence of pitches and, after his magnificently bold lead, John just sat, silently, looking out from the mountain. Whilst we were still working effectively as a team and, in retrospect, had done the hardest of the climb, we were uncertain as to where precisely where we were and were also very definitely gripped.

Aurelio took up the lead again as a bunch of Italian aspirant mountain guides on another route streamed passed us, one leading in approach shoes. Our relief at seeing others on the same route was short-lived as they rapidly left us alone again. Aurelio said that it was at this point that he had started to worry about how we would



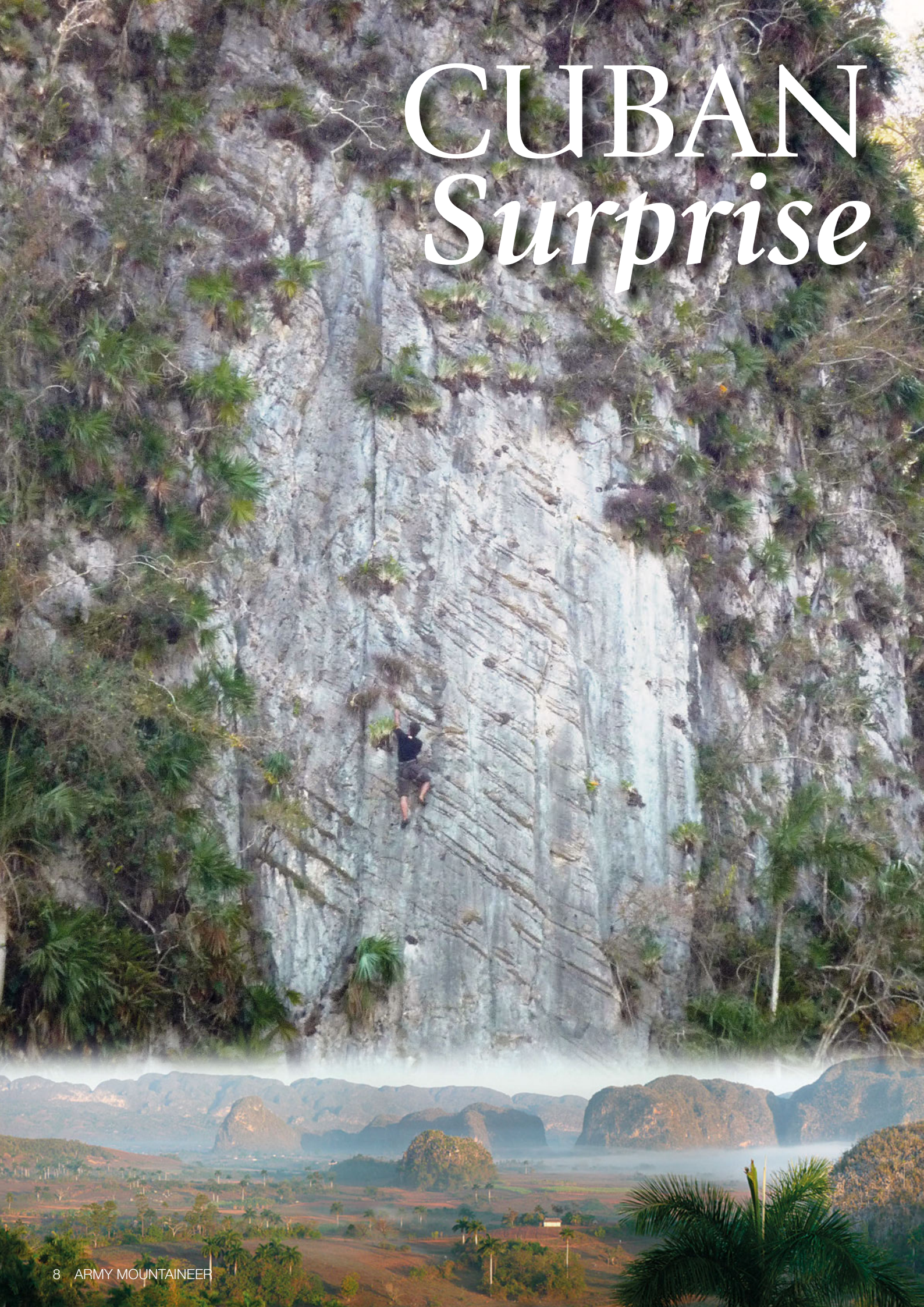
get off the mountain; he was clearly more of an optimist than I was. Our options were pretty clear: the West face was overhanging and unknown, the East face was steep, loose and unappealing and the way that we'd ascended traversed and wove around overhangs too much to be certain of finding abseil anchors. There was no other option but to continue! The next two pitches were difficult and technical; firstly up twin "cannelures" (water-worn cracks) and then, after a belay below a tricky overlap, another thin slab. The ridge had narrowed and we belayed in a huddle on the incredibly exposed edge of the West face.

As I took up the lead again, I'd given up trying to work out how many pitches were left and just climbed. As it began to hail, I followed what seemed the easiest line, taking us back to the East face. I tried to forget the lack of protection and just focus on what was in front of me and not what was (or was not) beneath me. After bringing John and Aurelio to a cramped belay suspended over the face, I had to exit via a strenuous layback and make a few thin, determined moves protected by a half-inserted chock before I could head up to find increasingly easy ground below the crest. Nearing the full length of the rope, I took what shelter I could from the wind and weather in a narrow fissure which was obviously also a regular "pissoir". It was only when we all came together here and then peered out of the other end that we realised that we had got to the top and, as a fitting climax to such a tall story, the wind punched a hole in the clouds and we had a chance to take in what we had achieved.

Two careful abseils brought us down to a col and, after a short, scrambling traverse, to safe ground where we rehydrated, ate cheese and sausage, packed away the climbing gear, put on our trainers and set off down the snowfields back to the hut and the laughter of the guardiennes. It was 2230hrs and they had saved us an enormous supper which we supplemented with a few cold beers.



# CUBAN *Surprise*





What does Cuba call to mind? Ché, Fidel and the revolution, the Bay of Pigs, missiles, outrageous, mouth watering cigars, music, rum cocktails and dancing, 1950s American gas-guzzling automobiles, magnificent architecture - Spanish colonial to Art Deco, Caribbean beaches and Guantanamo Bay? Well Cuba has all these things in big buckets and is a unique place to visit. Life is preserved at some point (depending where you are) between the age of the buccaneers, through sugar to JFK, but, apart from some nice new Chinese coaches, it doesn't go much later. This is partly because, despite the proximity of Florida, it remains a daft but handy US Federal offence for Americans, or American business, to go to the island.

Yeah yeah, but this is the AMA magazine, I know. Well, in the western part of the island, near Viñales, there are some splendid great limestone haystacks, known as mogotes. This was a surprise holiday (ahem, 50th birthday - yes I still have a Whillan's nutcracker), so I didn't know about all this, in fact I had no idea until I was standing at Gatwick looking at a departures board that I was going to Cuba at all. But we bumped into an American couple (who had sneaked in) who wanted to share a lift from the airport to Havana and were there for the rock. Long story short, a couple of days later I was borrowing a harness from Oscar Rodríguez, the climbing king of Viñales and therefore of Cuba, who also runs a B&B, or casa, where the few, hairy, thin young climbing types from all over the world hang out.

Half an hour's walk in the glorious sunshine and a cosmopolitan crew of seven - my wife and I, an American, a Dutchman, a 6 month old baby, and a German and a Sri Lankan

on leave from the humanitarian operation in neighbouring Haiti - were at the rock. Climbing is not 'sanctioned' in Cuba, so the fact that we were in the middle of a Cuban Army patrol competition added an entertaining but friendly enough dimension.

What about the climbing then? Well the easiest stuff was in the mid 4s, (plenty hard enough to me) but almost all the routes were over 5, and longish, single-pitch-plus. The website says: 'overhanging limestone faces on 1,000-foot freestanding crags rise above traditional thatch-roofed Cuban houses, red-soiled farms, and verdant palms and pines. The climbing is superlative, cranking jugs and pockets in chiseled karst limestone on improbable lines through stunning overhangs of stalactites and tufa columns'. Yep. Quite a few good bolts too. I only climbed for a day (see Paragraph One for other, pressing distractions that might fill a mere week) but our new friends were back for several more days. I think the Cuban Army may have learnt something from our end of the Cold War, for as I was grunting up something that most readers would be able to do in roller skates, across the valley between me and an Army rest stop on the other side wafted the clear sound of a movie sound-track reminiscent of late-night cookhouse entertainment on a long exercise circa 1982. Altogether, a touch surreal.

Getting a formal expedition to Cuba might be a bit edgy, worth a go, but as a private trip it's brilliant. There is lots of info at [www.cubacimbing.com](http://www.cubacimbing.com) and we found the Lonely Planet guide pretty good too. Hurry before Mackydee's mucks it all up - Virgin flies direct from Gatwick.



Walking in



The Spirit of Cuba



Che in Havana





# Exercise TIGER ASCENT

*'Take Nothing But  
Photos Leave Nothing  
But Footprints'*

Earlier in Jun this year, a team of six from Soldier Development Wing (SDW) headed out to the Costa Blanca, Spain for a week of rock climbing. The team (Cpl Schofield (Exercise Leader) R SIGNALS, Cpl Cumberbatch 1 R ANGLIAN, Cpl Hollick RLC, Cpl Moughton REME, Cpl Stafford Duke of Lancashire's and Cpl Dawber RE) left Sennybridge on the 19 June heading for Liverpool airport for a 1900 departure to Alicante. The first 'panic' moment was the anticipated luggage weigh in which was limited to 20kg. Some members of the exped pushed the weight limit more than others with Cpl Cumberbatch weighing in at a cheeky 19.8kg.

The exped landed in Alicante at 2330 approx. We collected our bags and hire car and started the short journey to our accommodation. It was a spacious Sangyong MPV, the engine made a nice growl – probably actually a bad sign in hind sight as within an hour of being in Spain we had our first hiccup. Soon after leaving a motorway junction we all felt the car suddenly break and soon learnt, thanks to Cpl Moughton using his REME experience that the clutch had gone. After nearly an hour sitting beside the motorway and about 20 poor jokes later the Spanish equivalent of the AA arrived. Little did we know how difficult the language barrier would be due to the fact we had a Spanish gentleman wanting to recover our hire car but leave us stranded, luckily we were by a toll booth where a helpful worker translated and advised us on our location and what the hell was happening. After a quick call to the hire company we learnt that we had to collect a new hire car in the morning. We did eventually make it to the accommodation thanks to Cpl Moughton flagging down a lift. Problem solved after all!

After catching up on sleep after last night's problem, the exped woke up fresh and ready for climbing. Cpl Schofield had collected a new hire car earlier that morning. The exped met up at the accommodation reception ready to head off to the first venue of the exped. Cpls Hollick and Schofield had participated in military expeds before in this region and decided Echo Valley would be the most suitable crag for the day. Roughly a 30-minute drive from Benidorm it offered climbs within the abilities of all the exped members.

When arriving at the crag it was a welcoming sight to see the crag covered by shade, even more thankful was Cpl Stafford as he had only shaved his head 2 hours previous and was grateful to avoid any unwelcome sunburn. After a quick gulp of water the party paired off and started climbing. We organised it so that a Rock Climbing Leader (RCL) was with Rock Leader Trained (RLT) personnel to assist with developing climbing techniques and gain teaching experience vital for progression in the climbing scheme. The pairs were Cpls Cumberbatch and Hollick, Schofield and Moughton, Dawber and Stafford. These pairs stayed together for the majority of the exped. The crag itself 'Echo Playa' had 13 bolted routes, 6 of these looked challenging but achievable. The first climb was relatively simple for all climbers with 'Espolon Izquierda' being a 4+ this was a good warm up. On the other hand Cpl Dawber jumped in at the deep end and made his way up a 5+ straight away and made it look relatively easy. Around 4-5 climbs per climber later, Cpls Hollick and Cumberbatch climbed 'Rad' at 5+ a



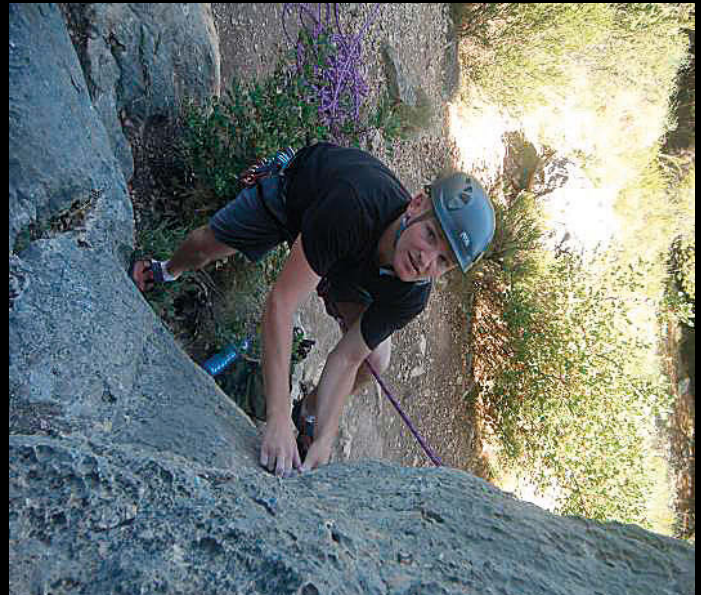
pumpy, and slightly technical route which was the perfect end to their day. On the way back we found a new love 'The Wok' which was a Chinese all you can eat buffet, this ended up being our local after climbing restaurant throughout the week.

The next day we met up and headed off to a venue called Sella, roughly a 45 minute drive from Benidorm, this had plenty of climbs on offer, the crag we decided to visit was called 'Sector Colp de Cot and Marion', this had a mixture of single and multi-pitch climbs. Straight away after arriving at the crag Cpls Dawber and Stafford identified a multi-pitch climb they could do called 'Cul de Sac', a two pitch climb starting with an 18 metre pitch at grade 5, leading onto another 18m pitch at 5+. Cpl Dawber climbed the first pitch pretty impressively, while Cpl Stafford made it look more of a struggle, this was a very good climb with the edge of rather long run outs between bolts. Cpls Cumberbatch and Hollick did not mess around either and went straight onto a three pitch route 'Marion' at grade 5 was a good challenging classic route it is easy to see why it's so popular among the climbing community. Cpls Schofield and Moughton completed various climbs throughout the day; 'Pequene-cos II' was a grade 4 climb and was a favourite with the pair but thought it was under graded considering the polished nature. Later on in the day they completed 'Mister Pi' a 5+ climb with a height at 24m. Arms pumped and feeling good we met back at the hire car and made our way back to the accommodation.

Before each day, the six of us would practice and maintain our rope work skills and drills. Safety in climbing is paramount! Knots, problem solving and casualty drills still needed to be maintained regardless of locations. Then afterwards, enjoy the climb! Plan the climb, climb the plan as we say. After the previous few days climbing, there were a few guys with aching arms so we decided to stick to the single pitch climbs of 'Sierra De Toix' with easy access and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea its easily the most beautiful crag most of the guys had ever climbed. All pairs completed around ten single pitch climbs with 'Bella Ruta' being the group favourite, giving a great view of the sea from the top. The only slight complaint of the crag was the lack of shade. Ok if you're desperate for sunburn (Mad dogs and Englishmen), but would recommend taking lots of sun cream as it was also the hottest crag we climbed.

The next day we decided to head back to 'Sierra De Toix' as we were so impressed the previous day. Keen to get some multi-pitch climbs in the logbook. Cpls Cumberbatch and Cpl Hollick kitted up and headed up a climb called 'Lara', an approx 80m pitch 3 pitches in total ranging from 4 to 4+ in grade, while Cpls Dawber and Stafford headed for a 5 pitch climb called 'Glibber' graded 5+, this was a nice climb with good belay stances, but the second pitch was a little tricky. The sun was shining and the sea was metres away, plus both pairs were having great banter when meeting at the pitches as they were only metres apart.

Friday was the chosen R&R day which was brought forward a day from originally planned so we could push the grades on the final day. Aqualandia was the venue, a water park situated just on the outskirts of Benidorm. We decided to go on a weekday to hopefully miss the weekend madness and it proved to be a great experience. The waterslides was fantastic fun and I personally cannot remember laughing so hard in ages! 'The Black Hole' was a personal favourite with Cpl Cumberbatch as you flew down the slide in total darkness not having a clue what's coming your way. The choice to go on a Friday was a good call as there were no queues. The best



moment of the day was watching Cpl Schofield come down the slide and suddenly flap his arms in horror as he was racing down. If only we had a camera at the ready.

After recharging we all felt fresh after a day's rest, the day sacks were on and our kit was ready. The venue chosen was Echo Valley because we already knew the route to the crag and it was only a short walk from the car park. There was also a few climbs for lads to get in there logbook that we never achieved on the first day. As we got to the crag, everyone was feeling on top of the world and up for attempting and hopefully completing some higher grades. Cpl Cumberbatch had been climbing well all week, and after Cpl Dawber had finished a 6a climb 'El pilar' he plucked up some courage and had a crack; turns out he couldn't even get 2 feet off the ground! More than the other members of the exped who didn't have it in their locker to attempt the climb! As it was our last day climbing it was also our last night in Benidorm, so we decided to head into town for a couple of quiet beers and cheesy acts before getting our heads down in preparation for the flight home in the morning.

We had arranged to meet at the reception at roughly 0900. At this point the lads were quite conscious that nothing had dramatically gone wrong yet and were quite proud of the fact we could head back to Sennybridge 'drama free'. The bags were packed and Cpl Cumberbatch and Cpl Hollick made their way to reception, at this point the drama started. Cpl Schofield came running past Cpl Cumberbatch at the reception saying those words you don't want to hear a few hours before leaving for the airport. 'The cars been towed'. We had parked the car illegally right under a sign in Spanish saying 'Sunday market no parking por favor'. After some quick thinking by Cpls Schofield and Hollick, and a bit of luck finding taxi being close by. We got the car back 45 minutes later at the cost of a 100-euros fine with the members of the exped splitting the bill and lesson learnt, next time take a Spanish dictionary. We arrived at the airport just in time. Scoffed up and Ipod's fully charged the NCO's jumped on the plane and got some shut eye as they made their way back to Liverpool airport.

Overall, Exercise Tiger Ascent was a huge success. All were tested and pushed yet enjoyed every waking moment Spain offered us. We came away with priceless memories, experience, a fat log book, and a better understanding of how core values can be used, not only within the military but within all aspects of life. We look forward to passing on our experiences to our peers and sharing what we've learnt.

We'd like to thank the Army Mountaineering Association, 4th Division Headquarters, and all individual respective Regiments and Corps for granting us funding to make the expedition happen. The NCO's would also like to thank Cpl Schofield for putting in the hours organising Exercise Tiger Ascent.





# Djangart Valley, Kyrgyzstan

£100  
ARTICLE





The unclimbed Point 5318m in Kyrgyzstan's Djangart Valley represented our primary objective as we set out for the region in early July. Alas, it remains unclimbed. Our attempt was foiled by a thirty six hour snow storm that began within minutes of our establishing camp on the mountain. Though we pushed up a rock rib to 4,750m once the weather had cleared, the cracking of an avalanche slab around us as we tentatively ventured to link up with another safe passage spelled the end of our climb. The route had not been difficult up to this point and didn't look particularly taxing above, though the same can certainly not be said for the approach up the N1 glacier. Point 5318 is a worthy and achievable objective just waiting to be climbed. Our trip to the Djangart was not without success though, and despite being riddled with difficulties (as you might expect from an expedition to climb virgin peaks) we return having made two first ascents.

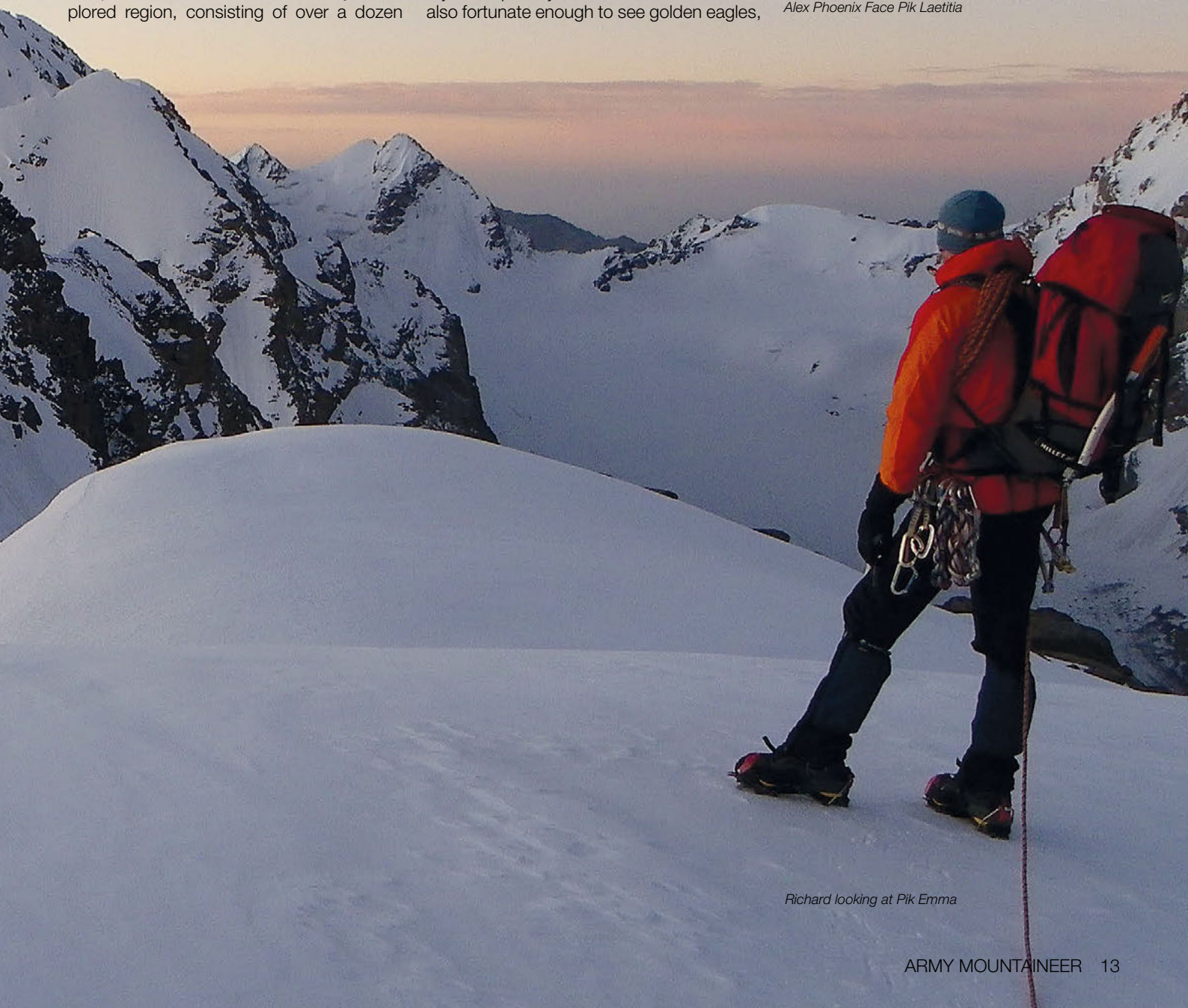
Inspired by a 2010 Anglo-American expedition to the area led by Matt Traver and Mike Royer (their superb expedition report can be found at [www.kyrgyzstan2010.com](http://www.kyrgyzstan2010.com)) we headed to this remarkably unexplored region, consisting of over a dozen

unclimbed peaks over 5,000m and countless others above 4,700m. What we had not appreciated prior to our arrival was just how beautiful the valley would be, nor how great distances would be and the difficulties of access in an undeveloped area. This particular problem was greatly increased by our inability to arrange horses in order to set up base camp in the valley itself. Instead, we were forced to set up on the wrong side of, and 900m below, a 4,200m col, thus adding five hours to each walk in. Consequently, some objectives became two days arduous walk away and instantly reduced the amount of climbing we could realistically hope to do. Our fitness, on the other hand, improved beyond all expectations! And so very early on in the trip, we realised that what we had embarked upon was very different from any mountaineering either of us had done before. The unknown presented as much of a challenge as anything we would face on the mountains themselves.

When we did gain access to the valley we were stunned by its natural beauty. Not only were the mountains and rock walls hugely impressive, but so too was the variety and quantity of wild flowers. We were also fortunate enough to see golden eagles,



Alex Phoenix Face Pik Laetitia



Richard looking at Pik Emma





*Richard exit Phoenix Couloir*

marmots, a wolf, foxes, yaks and eventually a flock of the notoriously elusive and endangered Marco Polo sheep. You certainly don't need to be a serious alpinist to enjoy this magical valley. Having enjoyed the experience of an unplanned stay with nomads during our overland journey to the Djangart, having been taken in for tea with numerous friendly Kyrgyz families along the way, and now walking amongst such outstanding natural beauty, we were already of the opinion that this trip was well worth embarking upon, even before setting foot on the mountains themselves.

It was climbing that had brought us here though, and finally we were ready to begin. Our first objective was the modestly high Pt.4783. Though we knew nothing about this peak, we perceived that it would offer views of our intended route on Pt.5318. A further attraction was that the peak formed part of a ridge line which had seen no previous ascents of any of its mountains. We weren't disappointed either. Though the approach to the ridge via the north west rib was somewhat tiresome, with rock quality never quite matching Chamonix granite, the north ridge itself was set in beautiful ambience and provided interesting, but never difficult, climbing. The ridge began as a broad and gentle crest but the further south we travelled, the narrower and steeper it became. Soft snow forced us to make a bivvy several hundred meters short of the summit, but neither of us minded spending the night in such a spectacular location. The final hour or two of climbing the next morning presented mixed ground, a heavily corniced ridge and a beautiful summit. In this condition, the route was of around AD in grade.

A peak that had caught our attention on our very first day in the region was one not even marked on the map. Eventually we located it as a tiny ring of contours reaching up to

4,940m in height. Being strikingly in appearance, as well as being within a couple of hours walk from camp, this peak became our next project. The line to the summit was so obvious and inviting that it required no discussion, a prominent couloir followed by a direct line up the upper face. The tedious scramble over rubble is an inevitability of the area, but once we'd overcome this we ascended the increasingly steep snow and ice couloir in the most spectacular mountain setting. Thoughts were soon entirely back onto the climbing itself though as the exit from the couloir presented a seventy meter traverse on seventy degree snow and ice, the first difficulty of a truly fantastic route. An hour later and we were making our way up a one hundred meter rock step on sound rock of grade III/IV, which gave access to the summit block itself. From this vantage the final block looked as if it would be easily negotiated.

How wrong we were. After an hour of trying to force a way through, soft snow on an eighty degree slope turned us around. Sensing another summit though, we made a freezing bivvy without tent or sleeping bags at 4,650m with the intention of completing the route in the morning. Perhaps predictably though, it was not to be. Life became extremely miserable at midnight when it started to snow. This weather lasted into the following morning and forced us to descend. Feeling that the route was almost completed though, we returned to the peak with just four days of our trip remaining to attempt to complete what we had started. It wasn't easy though, with the final face presenting unexpected difficulties of mixed climbing at Scottish grade 5 for two hundred meters. What we had thought might take an hour to complete took nearly three before we reached our summit, Pik Laetitia. We christened the route 'The Phoenix' due to it being completed after our initial failure and we grade it at TD due to the difficulties of the final face.





So what of Point 5318? Our third climb took us back into the Djangart Valley to the highest peak of the region. This time we would need two days to get to the mountain, the trek over the N1 glacier's moraines alone taking seven torturous hours. Being equipped for an alpine style climb, our supplies would last for six days only. It was then with great disappointment, not to mention discomfort, that our first thirty six hours on the mountain were spent in a cramped bivvy tent while the snow poured down outside. With the weather clearing slightly on the fourth day of our trip, we looked to edge slightly higher up the mountain by means of a rock rib in order to make a bid for the summit once the snow had consolidated. This we did with relative ease up to 4750m, before being confronted by a sixty meter snow field to get to another safe rib. We tentatively moved onto this snow, hoping for safe passage, but our luck was out. A sudden shift of the ground beneath us and a crack the size of a tennis court around us halted us in our tracks. There was no need for any discussion, this was the end of our climb.

So we return from Kyrgyzstan wondering whether our expedition was a success. Point 5318m remains unclimbed but we have established two great new routes of which we can be proud. We learnt that a trip of this nature is entirely different from any kind of climbing trip that we have experienced before. Indeed, had we not even achieved a single summit, we both agree that the trip would have been worth embarking upon for the experience alone. It is here, in a land of no guide books, no telephriques and no assurances that both experience and the experience count more than anything else. We wondered, during our journey back to civilisation, whether applying an alpine style of climbing, as we did, was the most suitable for the expedition.

With base camp being two arduous days walk away from the highest mountains and long slogs up moraines being a necessity, time on the mountain was limited by carrying only alpine style quantities of supplies.

Our attempt on Point 5318m, for example, simply couldn't stretch to incorporate a 36 hour snow storm plus a day or two of snow consolidation. However,

an alpine  
style  
climb



allow us to make three other climbs in the time available, which a siege on one objective would not have. We're not the first mountaineers to have faced this dilemma of course, and the choice for future expeditions may be different. Either way, our advice to anyone else planning a similar expedition would be to expect the unexpected, be flexible, keep on smiling and you might just come home with something to show for it.

If you wish to learn more about the expedition, there is a facebook page entitled Djangart Ascents Kyrgyzstan with details of routes, logistics, upcoming lectures and many more photographs from the trip.

Many thanks all of those people who so generously supported our expedition and through their contributions allowed it to happen: The AMA; The Austrian Alpine Club (UK Branch); BARCLIF; TrekKits; Goretex; and The Mount Everest Foundation.



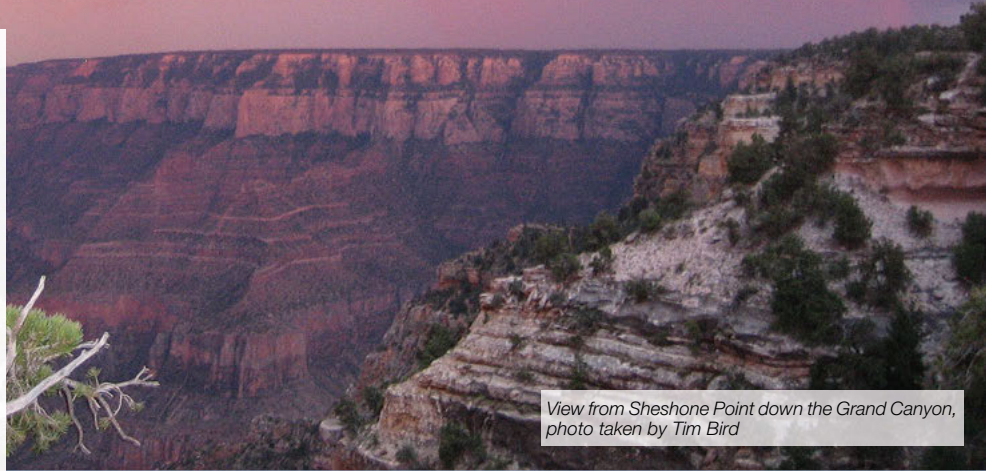


# PHOTO COMPETITION

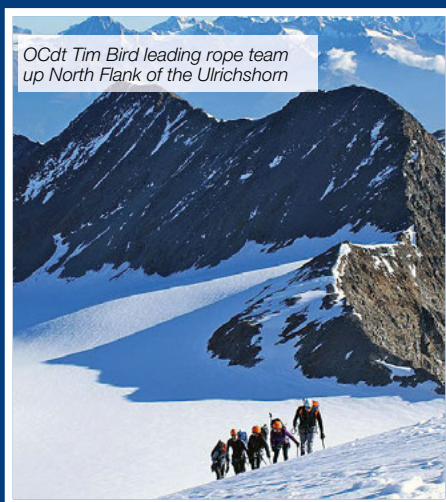
***This is your chance to be both rich and famous!***

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 or £50 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 e-mailed to the editor, along with a credit and caption) amajournaleditor@armymail.mod.uk



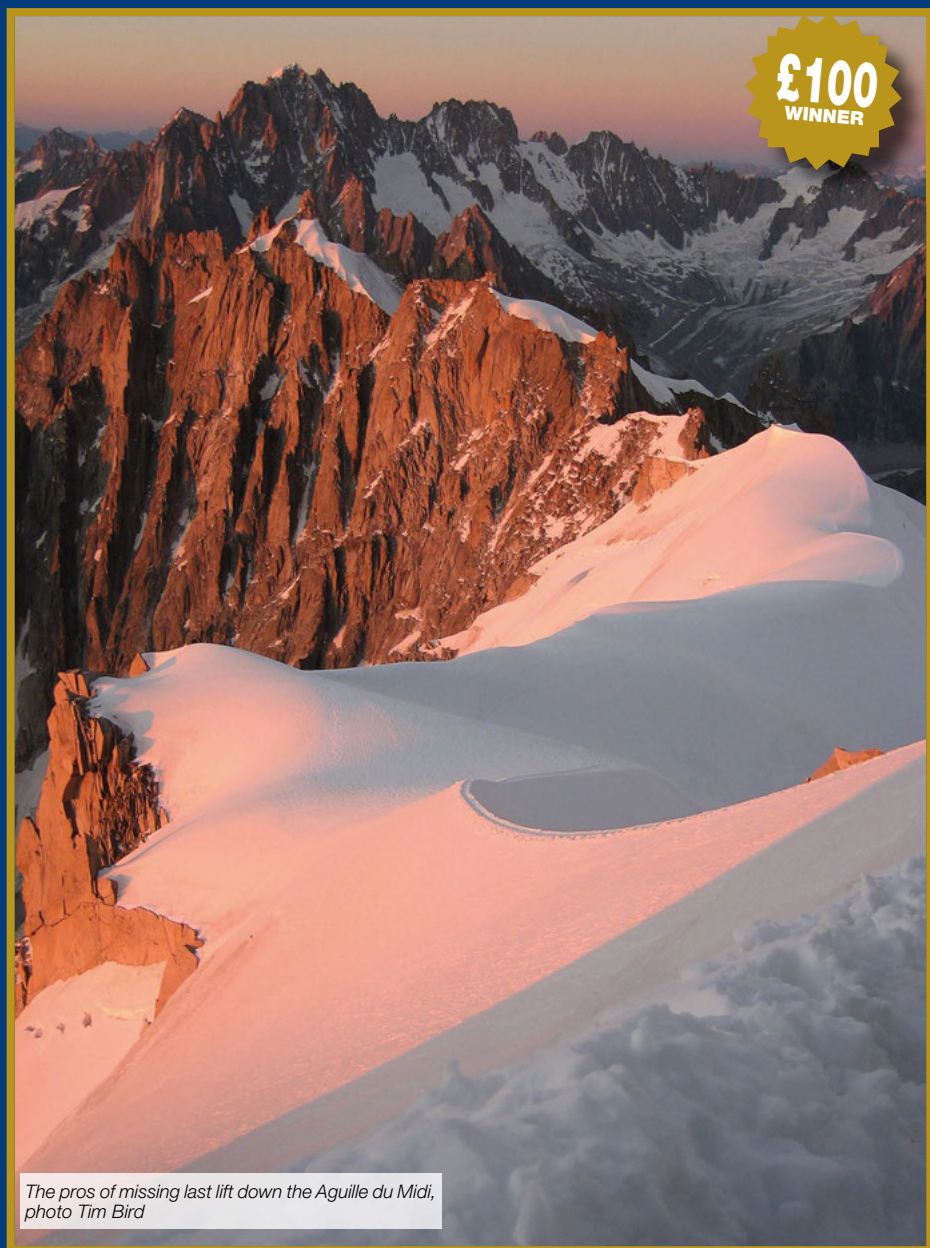
*View from Sheshone Point down the Grand Canyon, photo taken by Tim Bird*



*OCdt Tim Bird leading rope team up North Flank of the Ulrichshorn*

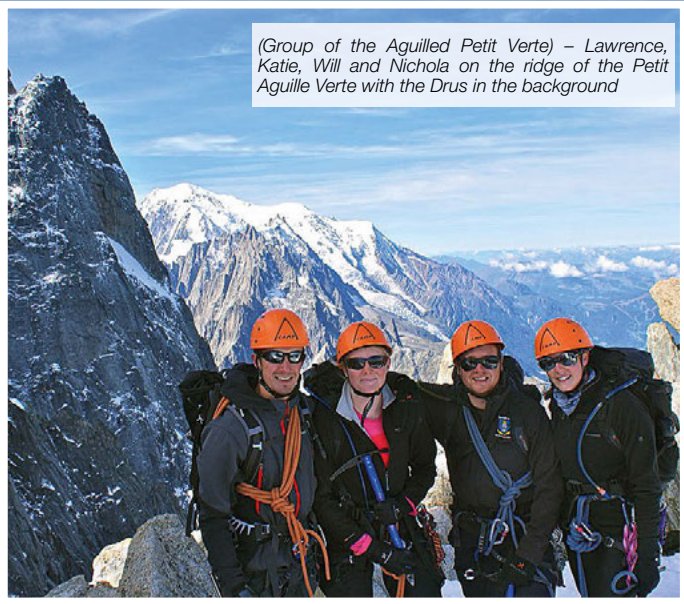


*Katie Hood and Lawrence Wilkinson on approach to Petit Aiguille Vert*

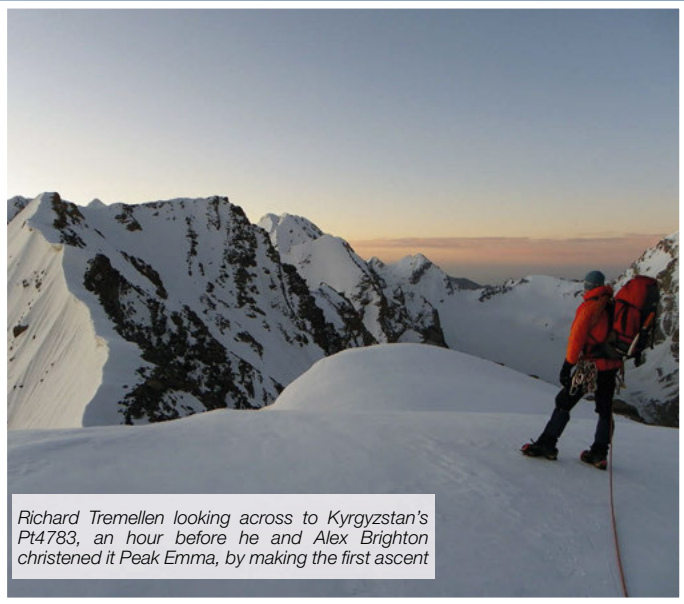


*The pros of missing last lift down the Aiguille du Midi, photo Tim Bird*





*(Group of the Aguilled Petit Verte) – Lawrence, Katie, Will and Nichola on the ridge of the Petit Aguille Verte with the Drus in the background*



*Richard Tremellen looking across to Kyrgyzstan's Pt4783, an hour before he and Alex Brighton christened it Peak Emma, by making the first ascent*



*OCdt Graham Stephenson leading rope team along the SSE ridge of the Weissmies*



*OCdts Tim Bird and Graham Stephenson with the Drus in the background*



*Angels Landing Zion National Park, photo taken by Tim Bird*





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ARTICLE

# Exercise APHRODITE LION – Mera Peak

In May this year the 2 LANCs sent a team of seven mountaineers to the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal to climb Mera Peak, an impressive 6476m mountain that dominates the Hinku Valley to the south of Mt Everest.

Our team was a real mixed bag of experience. CSgt Caris (2LANCS), our main instructor, was our most experienced mountaineer with a climbing pedigree over 30 years. He was highly qualified for the trip with JSRCI, Advanced JSMEL and JSWCL under his belt. Capt Rob Small (2LANCS), the expedition leader and organiser, had worked at Plas Y Brenin before joining the Army as an instructor and had attempted Muztag Ata (7546m) in 2001. My climbing experience is based mainly on multi pitch rock and ice climbing, but I had done several alpine 4000ers including Mont Blanc. I was qualified as a JSRCI/AMP and I acted as Rob's 2IC/team photographer. The remaining four members were physically fit and mentally robust soldiers from the Battalion but had rather less all round mountain experience. They were WO2 Adam Diver (2LANCS, team medic, and G4 rep), Cpl Mark Cary (RLC), Cpl Phil Baldwin (2LANCS) and Pte (later LCpl) Sasha Chilvers (AGC).

Mera Peak is classed as a "trekking peak" by the Nepal Mountaineering association. It is a technically easy mountain which is roughly graded Alpine "Facile". It is no push over however – all the usual risks and issues climbing at high altitude still apply and need to be mitigated against. The training conducted by the team was designed to ensure that we stood the best chance of success on the mountain. Those team members who required basic AT qualifi-

Setting up camp  
at Mera La





Cpl Phil Baldwin at High Camp by one of the precarious tent pitches



The eight seater plane the Lama hired to fly us out of Lukla

cations attended SMP and WMP at CJSATC (Dhekalia) and JSMTG (Ballachulish) respectively. The whole team then completed training that applied specifically to alpine/high altitude mountaineering. This training took place on a wet weekend in Troodos Camp (Cyprus) and included, crevasse rescue, the identification of and treatment of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) and Nepalese culture. The poor weather forced us to practise our skills indoors which meant we got a few strange looks as we prussed up the mess stair well! Ideally the team would have attended the JSAM in order to gain experience of Alpine scale mountaineering first – unfortunately the timing of the expedition meant this was not feasible.

The planning for the expedition was relatively straightforward although it required an inspirational work ethic from the Expedition Leader to plan a major expedition whilst employed as Ops Officer of the Theatre Reserve Battalion (one of the more demanding Captain appointments to be found in the Army) and still have some semblance of a life outside work (just!). All expeditions to Nepal have to register for a climbing permit through a trekking agency and we were well supported by Jagged Globe. They are probably the UK's leading Travel/Adventure company and have years of experience in the Himalayas. Jagged Globe and their sub contractors Summit Nepal Trekking dealt with nearly all logistic elements of the exped, lifting a huge planning burden from the team. The only real logistical task to be completed in the UK was the securing of AT kit from Bicester. This was a slick process and the majority of the kit from Bicester was of the highest standard. As a single Captain I would consider myself a real "gear snob" but I was nevertheless taken aback by the quality of the equipment we were issued. That said, we were issued 6 Jumars that were probably used by Sir John Hunt for his Everest exped in 1953!!

Funding was an issue and initial costs were high (£1,000, particularly daunting for junior members of the team) due to the choice of objective and use of Jagged Globe. Although for a civilian using Jagged Globe, they would expect to pay in the region of £3000 for an ascent of Mera Peak. We worked hard to reduce personal costs to a more manageable £750 by using CSgt Caris as our instructor (rather than a Jagged Globe Guide) and we were all very grateful for grants from the AMA, BIBMTF, RHQ LANCS, 2LANCS and British Forces Cyprus.

Heavily laden, we flew from Heathrow to Kathmandu on May 1. "Jet Airways" gave us a generous 35kg baggage allowance which we just managed to scrape under. We were met by Summit Trekking at Kathmandu airport and taken to the plush "Summit Hotel" probably the most dangerous aspect of the trip. No traffic control and a fearless (suicidal) approach to driving taken by the thousands of cars and motorcyclists made for an "interesting" experience. After a decent meal and a few "Everest" beers (sadly a re-labelled Tuborg) we grabbed a few hours sleep before our flight to Lukla early that morning. Fortunately the roads were much quieter at 5am and we reached Kathmandu Airport without issue. The main problem now was getting all of our kit into a small Twin Otter Aircraft. Tight allowances forced

us to adopt the "British Alpinists on Easyjet" look –boots and down jacket worn with Karabiners in pockets! The flight into Lukla was a memorable experience. Built by Sir Edmund Hillary, Lukla runway sits on the side of a hill at 2800m and is only 460m in length. Fatal accidents do happen here – in 2008 a plane crashed into the runway and in 2010 one crashed into the side of the mountain!

Our Sirdar Ang Dawa met us at Lukla and introduced us to the rest of our support team two climbing Sherpas and a cook with three staff and eight porters. This team was hugely experienced – Ang Dawa alone had climbed several 8000m peaks (including Everest three times!) and had made an incredible 40 ascents of Mera Peak. Even more astonishing is that Ang Dawa is only 28 years old– it puts my climbing achievements into perspective! After meeting the team we had a few hours to administrate our kit and have a quick look around Lukla. We were each allowed to fill a kitbag with up to 15kg of weight which would be carried by the porters. We would carry a daysack with the kit required for the day only. Typically it would weigh 12kg; the porters would carry anything up to 50kg wearing flip flops and jeans. The shopping opportunities in Lukla were fantastic. The street was lined with shops selling various tourist nik naks and fake branded climbing gear. I was particularly tempted by a warm looking pair of "Mammut" mitts (with 200 Fill Power chicken feathers) for £10.

We set off from Lukla at 9am with a 6 hour trek ahead of us. Our route had been recommended by Jagged Globe and it saw us taking a deliberate detour south of Mera Peak in order to acclimatise fully over 18 days with two scheduled rest days. The walking was on a substantial track that we shared with the locals ferrying loads from village to village. Although at a relatively low altitude (2500-2800m) the route was still steep, both up and down and wound its way through Rhododendron forests and secondary jungle. The views were breath-taking. The weather was hot and sunny in the morning and then became increasingly cloudy as the afternoon drew on. It began to rain just after lunch. Our morale took a hit at the thought of a wet night in a tent with no way of drying our kit off. When we arrived at our camp for the night we saw a Nepalese "Tea Shop". These buildings could offer accommodation and would sell a variety of items designed for tourists. Most popular with us were Mars bars (for £2 on average) and Pringles (£5). Each tea shop seemed to sell crates of San Miguel lager – I'm not entirely sure how appealing a hangover is at altitude! We sent in Adam Diver to investigate the price of an overnight room. We were prepared to pay through the nose to escape the rain but Adam came back with the answer – 50p per person! At the time this represented the bargain of the year! As we got higher, later in the trip so did the prices – up to the vast sum of £5!

The next 12 days or so were fairly similar in nature although the terrain we crossed did become increasingly varied. Each morning the porters would wake us up at 6am with a cup of tea. They would provide us with water to wash followed by breakfast. By 7am our kit would be packed away and we would walk for 3 or 4 hours before stopping for a hot lunch provided by the porters. Another 3 hours would see us arrive at either a tea shop or a campsite. It would rain





*The tea house at Khote*

each afternoon and we would hope to be under canvas or indoors by the time it came in. Evening meal would be served at 7pm and soon after the team would be in bed ready for the next days activity. Compared with the complexities and difficulties faced in a normal day in the office (let alone on operations) it was very relaxing to live such a simple existence.

The first significant challenge of the trip came after the first week of trekking and took the form of a pass crossing between Chunbu Kharka and the Hinku Valley. Chunbu Kharka lies at an altitude of 4200m and it was here that the team first began to feel the negative effects of altitude. I was suffering the most, which I found both disappointing and surprising given my alpine experience. The pounding headache and nausea made me feel very antisocial; that afternoon I spent the rest of the day in my sleeping bag.

We all felt much better the next day as we descended the pass into the Hinku Valley. The Hinku Valley is a major geographical landmark; it lies to the east of Lukla and is orientated north – south. Mera Peak lies its northern end. The Hinku Valley can be a risky place to be as the only way out of the valley is by ascending; this poses a problem to AMS sufferers who need to descend as quickly possible. For this reason we carried a “Portable Altitude Chamber” or Gammow Bag. The first village we reached in the Hinku Valley was Khote – a bustling metropolis compared with the other villages we had passed through! We enjoyed our first rest day in Khote and made use of the facilities it provided us; namely a cold glacial river to wash in and the ubiquitous stocks of Mars bars and Pringles. In our spare time we relaxed and practised rope work and glacial travel. Khote was the first place we met other teams attempting Mera Peak. We saw a particularly haggard group of Germans tabbing back to Lukla who said they had successfully summited. They looked tired and extremely sunburnt; it made us wonder what difficulties lay ahead of us!

Having left Khote we spent the next two days trekking up to Khare (5000m). En route we passed the Dukpule Takshing Gumba Monastery and made a “Pusa” (prayer) for the safe passage of the group in Nepal. On arrival at Khare several members of the group (including myself) began to feel the altitude – at 5000m the oxygen concentration drops to 50% of that experienced at sea level. That evening following another excellent meal provided by our chef Pemba we discussed our tactics for gaining the summit. Our scheme of manoeuvre was to climb first to Mera La (5400m) and then return to Khare. The following day we would head straight to High Camp (5800m) via Mera La and tackle the summit early the next morning. Apart from a couple of mild AMS symptoms the group was feeling strong and this plan seemed workable. Our experiences the next day would alter our plan completely.

The route from Khare to Mera La was steep and hard work. The weather was cloudy and unsettled throughout. We came off easy mixed ground at about 5300m and gained a large wet glacier that would take us to Mera La. There was a large trench in the snow and



*Ong Chuu Sherpa on summit day-Always smiling*

all the porters we moving unroped across the glacier. As it was our first time on this particular glacier we took the precaution to rope up. As we approached Mera La I began to really suffer. I had struggled all the way up to the glacier and now was completely spent. Cpl Phil Baldwin was in a similar state (turbo clip). As we descended to Khare Phil’s condition deteriorated significantly. Barely able to focus or keep his balance he was extracted down the hill under the assistance and guidance of CSgt Caris. Phil was the first of the group to use Acetazolamide to help reduce the severity of his AMS. It was clear that our ambitious plan to climb to High Camp the next day was not an option. The team correctly decided to call a rest day in order to let Phil recover.

The plan was further adapted to give us the best chance of summiting as a group. We would not push all the way to High Camp but would stay a night at Mera La to further increase our levels of acclimatisation. The repeat journey to Mera La was much more pleasant the second time round. The sun shone and the effects of altitude were diminished. We also had the morale boosting presence of an Australian called Tim who was attempting the mountain alone with a team of porters to assist. Our last sighting of Tim was just before he gave up on Mera Peak; he was getting the porters to dress him in a yellow North Face Down suit and give him oxygen from mask/cylinder!! This was at 5300m and about +15 degrees! We assume he wanted a few photos to show his friends at home and claim he had been up Everest!

Mera La was blessed with some truly stunning views and we had a beautiful view of Mera Peak bathed in the moonlight that evening. In the morning we awoke and conducted our “Lake Louise” tests. We conducted these tests at altitude to determine how well we were acclimatising. The test includes a Pulse Oximeter reading to show concentrations of oxygen in the blood and a series of self-assessing questions. Pulse Oximeters are issued to Medics as a Class C Item if you want to get hold of one..... The results of the Lake Louise Tests were disappointing; several of the team were feeling ill, so Rob and CSgt Caris decided for another rest day at Mera La. This frustrated me hugely – I felt we were wasting time. I was convinced we



wouldn't feel any better the following day and that we were potentially missing a good weather window. The rest day dragged massively and was a miserable experience; the incredible views did not offset the growing feeling that we were not going to make the summit. Massive respect for those mountaineers who spend weeks in a tent stranded by a storm or waiting for good weather to come!!

Thankfully the next morning our "Lake Louise" tests were much improved with Pulse Oximeter readings approaching the 80% mark. From Mera La to High camp to we were faced with about 3km of straight forward glacial travel; the steady slope angle meant there were practically no crevasses and we were happy to travel unroped. The views were magnificent –we were treated to our first view of Everest which seemed to rise from its surroundings the higher we climbed.

High Camp proved to be a more remote and desolate spot than we anticipated. The camp clings to the only visible piece of rock on the route that stuck out of the glacier like a sharks' fin. The camp barely had space for our 6 Mountain Hardware Trango tents. Going to the toilet was an epic mission in itself. Sadly High Camp showed the negative impact of climbers on a popular route – the whole place was full of rubbish and human waste. Once our kit was administrated we rested in preparation for a summit bid beginning at 3am the following morning. We would aim to summit at 8am before descending all the way down to Khare for lunch at about 2pm. 3am arrived with most of the team having been awake for about an hour before. We had been woken by the sound of Mark Carey coughing his lungs up – not a good sign! The morning brew provided by the Porters seemed to sort him out and we set off into the night. The temperatures were deceptively low – despite feeling warm in High Camp my hands rapidly degenerated into feeling like two blocks of ice. The temperature was about -15 to -20 degrees which was apparently much milder than the alternate climbing season in October. Most of the team was wearing Scarpa Vegas with Yeti gaiters; I felt these to be overkill for the conditions and I longed for my comfier La Sportiva Nepal Extremes, which sat useless in the back of my van in the UK. Thankfully the sun rose and the feeling returned to our hands – with the associated hot aches all ice climbers/alpinist know and love.

The approach to the summit was a long and monotonous trudge up easy angled neve slopes. The only saving grace was the breath taking views that were developing behind us. We could now see the whole Everest range with Lhotse, Nuptse, Ama Damblam, Cho Oyu and Makalu silhouetted by the rising sun. We eventually reached the final summit slopes where the ground steepened to about 40 degrees for 150m before hitting a 15m wall of ice protecting the summit itself. Ang Dawa led the final ice pitch – which I felt would warrant Scottish III. No mean feat at 6400m! All members of the team were feeling jaded at this stage – the altitude was taking its toll on our bodies. Ang Dawa fixed a rope to the top of the ice wall and using a single axe and jumar we took it in turns to climb to the top. The reward on the summit was one of the finest panoramic views I have seen in 15 years of mountaineering. We did not stick around too long however – time was against us and we needed to descend quickly so that people did not deteriorate further with AMS. A quick abseil regained the easy ground and we tabbed down at a decent

pace back to High Camp where the Porters greeted us with a cup of sweet sugary tea.

With heads pounding from the altitude and legs weary from the ascent and descent it was a slightly emotional walk down to Khare from High Camp. Everyone was quiet – each fighting their own inner battle with fatigue. We arrived in Khare as planned at 2pm after 10hrs of climbing – definitely a QMD in anyone's book! After a well-deserved meal we retreated into our 5 season sleeping bags for a straight 12 hours sleep.

The next morning we began our three day trek back to Lukla. A 2 LANCs flag was left behind in Khare as a gift to the local tea shop owner and as a challenge to the next Army team – see if you can get a flag higher than Khare! We were all now focused on a shower and a decent meal back in Kathmandu! Having successfully summited Mera Peak it felt like the exped was finished – if a helicopter had been available to take us back to Lukla we would have gladly taken it! The descent was actually one of the more dangerous aspects of the trip. The weather was very poor (rain and sleet) and the team had to cross some moderately difficult ground unroped; a major trip or fall could have been quite serious in these conditions.

We were overjoyed to make it back to Lukla safely. That night we hosted a farewell party for the Sherpa/Porter team to show our appreciation for all their hard work. Tips were given out to all (the amount depending of their seniority within the group) and kit that we were willing to part with – none from Bicester clearly!! The most generous was Rob who gave Sherpa Onchu his Rab down jacket. We also brought \$50 of Chang (traditional Nepalese alcoholic beverage) for everyone to share. Needless to say things degenerated quickly!! We found ourselves quickly drunk and dancing around to Nepalese music with the whole porter team - a truly unique experience! Ang Dawa proved that a man who has conquered Everest three times cannot necessarily drink as he was KO'd by 8pm! I also found myself suffering – three weeks without a drink meant that 10 mugs of Chang and 4 beers had a bad effect on me. I woke up on a sofa in the main room with little recollection of the night before and a stinking hangover.

We found ourselves trapped in Lukla due to worsening weather conditions. Frustrations within the team grew with every over priced coffee we drank. Thankfully the Lama (Yes, the travel agency rep was a Lama) responsible for our flights managed to charter an eight seater plane to whisk us away to Kathmandu. We felt very fortunate to leave judging by the huge queue for flights we left behind at the airport. Finally back in Kathmandu we enjoyed the showers and fresh food we had been dreaming about over the last few weeks. It was obvious that everyone who took part had gained a great deal from the experience, be it the mental and physical challenge of high altitude mountaineering, the cultural experience of travelling in Nepal or investing time in a pastime that they love. A career in the Army is not an easy option; training and operations are tough on body and mind but many positive aspects still remain. Expeditions like this are one of the great bonuses of Army life and in an ideal world all soldiers would see the sun rise over Everest and Makalu. I am exceptionally grateful to everyone who helped organise this trip and for all the financial support we received.



*The summit photo. L to R  
Capt Dave Latimer, Capt Rob Small,  
Cpl Mark Carey, Cpl Phil Baldwin,  
WO2 Adam Diver and CSgt Brendan Caris*



# Pursuit of the Impossible – An Interview with Johnny Dawes

This question and answer session with the climber Johnny Dawes is part of a longer interview recorded before Johnny did the first lecture in support of the recent publication of his autobiography. The transcript of that interview will be placed on the AMA website once the almost four hours of it have been deciphered !!

## Introduction:

The full page of The Guardian that was devoted to the climber Johnny Dawes following his ascent of The Indian Face on Clogwyn d'ur Arddu 1986 described him thus:

“Dawes is obsessed by climbing, which has dominated his life for the past few years. He is a small, wiry, affable man whose climbing makes up for lack of inches with supreme technique. Supported by wealthy and indulgent parents, since leaving Uppingham School he has led a peripatetic existence, moving from crag to crag”.

Every climber in Britain has an opinion about Johnny Dawes. Here he is in his own words:

**AMA:** Tell us briefly about the book.

**JD:** It is a finely laced memoir. Parts of it were written in 86, some in 88, several in 02 to 03. Money has been scarce, and I have been working on the book on and off for a long time. In a way it's a personal diary, but it's a personal diary that I kept combing until it was an understandable clear window for other people to look through in to my life.

**AMA:** Did you ever think about joining the Army?

**JD:** Yes. I was in the CCF at school. Hunting and playing searchlight were favourite games when I was a kid.

**AMA:** What are your favourite routes ?

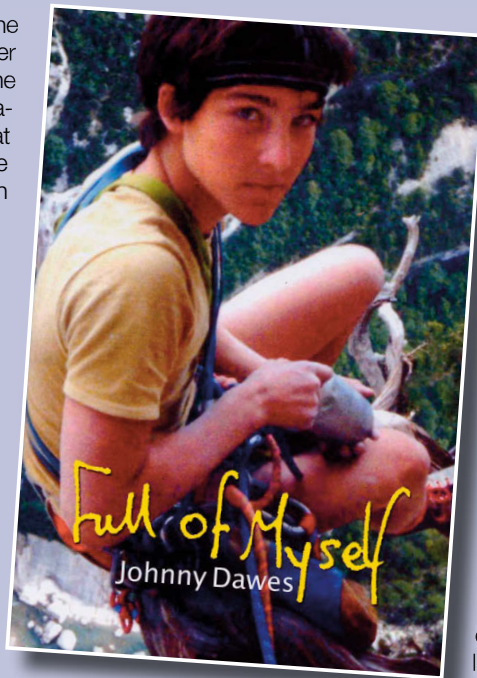
**JD:** Any route in a place and on a crag that I have not been to before. The flavour of a new adventure is key.

On grit, climbs like Big Crack on Froggatt. On slate I would like to continue the investigation of Quarryman Wall.

I didn't mature to the shiniest level of a climbing jewel. Those routes that I didn't quite do are those that I did my best on. Unfinished business. I was frustrated, my life was compromised. I didn't have the cash and I had depression.

**AMA:** Which routes by other climbers or other areas most inspire you ?

**JD** – I would really like to climb the Leo Houlding route “The Prophet”. There are sea cliffs in Chile I would like to see, and a couple of lines in Malta that interest me.



**AMA:** Which other climbers inspire you ?

**JD:** Adam Ondra and Alex Honnold. Climbers with the climb-as-hard-as-you-can gland. They seem a bit less psychopathic than me though. Johnny Woodward and John Allen had the aura of being able to climb anything, that pursuit of the impossible.

Part of me still presumes I am the best. I can still climb E7 on-sight and E6 off the couch.

**AMA:** If you had not been a climber, what would you have done ?

**JD:** Probably an artist. I enjoy painting or drawing. Or raced cars, with gravitas and panache.

**AMA:** As a climber, what, given the chance, would you have done differently ?

**JD:** More climbing. I would like to climb some of Tommy Caldwell's routes in Yosemite. I would like to climb the routes on El Cap off –bolts. On trad.

**AMA:** Where did those jumpers come from ?

**JD:** A woman called Wendy Lawrence made them and sold them in Joe Brown's. Jumpers have gone out of fashion. It would be great to find Wendy and bring the jumper back. Jumpers up top and lycra tights below. It was some look.

**AMA:** What would you like to do before you are 60 ?

**JD:** I have designed a toddlers toy. I would like to write a couple of eco-thrillers for teenagers. I would like to have a go at winning the TKM car racing class. In the shorter term I would like to continue to practice Buddhism. I think a 10 year plan is not wise in the current global meltdown.

**AMA:** What have you been filming with the BBC recently ?

**JD:** A series called “Wild Britannia” for BBC 2, featuring amongst other people, me a poet and a farmer. I climb the Axe on Cloggy, Comes the Dervish and Conan the Librarian. They chose me because I have an opinion, I like to talk about my climbing. It is on TV in March.

**AMA:** Any final comments ?

**JD:** I just want Johnny to be happy and people to enjoy their climbing

**Full of Myself – the autobiography of Johnny Dawes was self published recently. It is available direct from the author at [www.johnnydawes.com](http://www.johnnydawes.com), priced £25.**



# Avalanche Gear –Do You Dig It?

By Stuart Macdonald, Mountain Guide

If you're thinking of heading off-piste this winter then make sure you're properly equipped. As the Equipment Officer for the British Mountain Guides Association I've had the privilege to try a lot of different kit over the past few seasons, so I thought I'd share my experiences with you. There are three essentials when off piste - shovel, transceiver, and probe. Below is some advice for selecting the right gear.

**Shovel:** For years I (and many others) carried a lightweight plastic shovel. However, extensive testing and the experiences of rescuers have shown these to be completely ineffective in dealing with avalanche debris. Only metal shovels are capable of dealing with hard debris.

In addition to the head being metal, the shape of it is also important. A serrated cutting edge has been found to be highly proficient for slicing through hard debris. The shape of the top of the shovel head is also important, with a flat edge allowing a ski boot to be applied to force the shovel into hard snow.

Further testing has shown that long handled shovels are much more effective than short ones for efficient digging. Telescopic shafts with an oval shape are best as it's quicker to locate the pin holes when extending.

T shaped handles are quite popular on avalanche shovels, but they are not the most effective. D shaped grips provide the firmest grip and are easier to use with large gloves and mitts.

**Recommended Product : Ortovox Kodiak**

**Probe:** You wouldn't think that something as simple as an avalanche probe would have many design issues but you might be surprised. The key issues when selecting a probe are length, strength, weight, and ease of use.

If using a short probe you will inevitably find yourself bending down to push the probe deep into the snow. Hence you'll be getting tired, and you might not probe as deep as you should. Always buy a probe at least 2.4m in length.

When forcing a probe through hard debris it is subjected to massive forces. Lightweight, ultra skinny probes, such as the BCA models which fit inside a shovel handle simply don't stand up the stress and break easily. As a general rule, don't buy a probe less than 10mm diameter. Probes should be made of aluminium, steel, or carbon.

The weight of a probe is governed by the length, diameter, and material. As such a compromise can always be reached. My personal preference is for carbon due to the weight saving and the fact that snow doesn't stick to them. They are however more expensive.

Probes are erected in numerous different ways. Some require you to lock sections together with pins, whereas most have a cord or cable that is tensioned to keep the probe rigid. What is most important is that you know how to erect your probe and that you have practised it.

**Recommended Product: Ortovox Carbon 240 pfa, Ortovox 240 Economic**

**Transceiver:** Contrary to popular belief the best transceiver in the world is not the most expensive one – it is the one you know how to use ! There is no point in having a transceiver that you are not slick with. So, whichever sort you have, it is essential to get out and practice with it. Try and make training as realistic as possible with searches on a slope, and multiple deep-buried transceivers to search for.

When selecting a transceiver to buy, there are a few basic criteria to think of. Analogue Vs Digital, Ease of Use, and price.

The debate of Analogue Vs Digital will no doubt continue for many more years. However, for me there is no competition. Digital transceivers make finding victims easier and quicker for the vast majority of people.

A study by the Canadian Mountain Guides Assn found that 2/3 of people could not find two transceivers in 20 minutes when using an

analogue unit. My personal experience of novices with digital units is that they would usually locate two units in under 5 minutes ! So for those of you with an Ortovox F1 in the cupboard, it may be time to upgrade.

Ease of Use is essential for a transceiver. In my opinion the key requirements for a transceiver are the ability to locate the nearest victim, and the ability to mark a victim once located so that the rescuer can carry on searching. Over-complicating units with lots of buttons and features can only lead to a slower rescue. The number of antennae in a unit will affect the amount of information the unit gives you. A single antenna will only inform you whether you're getting nearer or further away. A three antennae unit will indicate direction and distance, and hence a faster rescue.

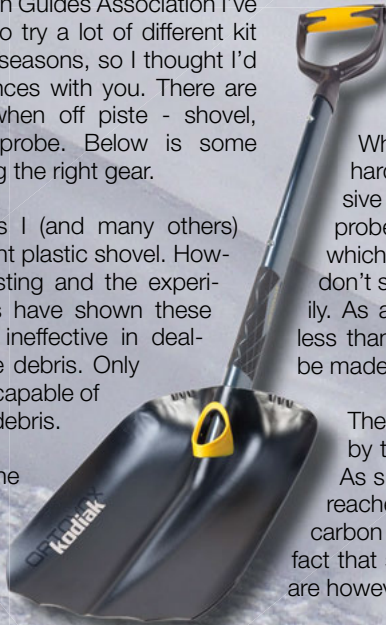
Note: Transceivers should be serviced every 3 years. The most common fault found in servicing is defective antennae.

Unfortunately transceivers are not cheap, with prices varying from just over £100 to around £300. It's a cliché to ask "What is your life worth?" as you could apply the same argument to everything, but digital user-friendly units are among the more expensive ones available.

**Recommended: Ortovox 3+**

To purchase any of the above have a look at [www.facewest.co.uk](http://www.facewest.co.uk).

Footnote: Stuart Macdonald is an IFMGA Mountain Guide based in Chamonix and is the Equipment Officer for the British Mountain Guides Association. He is the Director of The Avalanche Academy, the first and only dedicated avalanche training centre in Chamonix. [www.avalancheacademy.com](http://www.avalancheacademy.com)





# Army Sport Climbing Championships 2011

This year's big one took place at Awesome Walls Climbing Centre in Liverpool in May. With over 100 competitors, it was both a resounding success and a spectacle, especially on the final routes on the main head wall. Andy Long and Rob Lamey, as ever, created routes to test the full range of abilities and got the finals just right with just one competitor making it up each route – perfect! 6 qualifiers and 20 boulder problems on Day One got the arms working with only 3 people making it up all 6 qualifiers and one boulder problem spitting off all comers. Some good falls were accompanied by the odd scream but everyone gave their all to make it through to Day Two.

Day Two dawned with some weary arms but all climbed again in either the Elite, Open or Novice category. The Novice Top Rope final never ceases to amaze with performances far outstripping the day before and two individuals tied for the lead forcing a climb off in the afternoon. The Open went all the way with 7 progressing through the semi to the final. In the Elite Maj Mike Smith, in his final Army Champs, volunteered to demonstrate the semi final route rather than the route setters. A brave decision considering he had tried it the night before but not led it clean! He tied on and went for it through the technical and "sequencey" crux and let out a small scream at the top in excitement when he completed it! Mike has not lost it despite

his age! The route was to test the Elite climbers to the max with only 3 getting up it and 5 qualifying for the final. Cfn Tristan Steed, Army junior team member, putting in the best performance and getting the route clean – not bad for one year's climbing! The conclusion of the team competition took place whilst the finalists disappeared into isolation. The hint for this element of the team competition is in the title of the final event – the speed relay. Now some teams didn't quite get this to start with but with some gentle encouragement from the crowd times got faster! ATC(P) were fastest up the 3 lines but not quite quick enough to take the overall team prize away from HQ DE&S.

The two main finals on the very steep comp wall were designed to see who had the biggest guns and could climb fast and accurately. At 17.5 metres high and 8 metres overhanging there is no time to rest and no second chance. The open finalists were up first and a contorted route up the steep corner and onto the main face soon began to spit off those who did not move fast. In the end LCpl Ruth Matuska, the eventual women's champion, showed the men how it was

done and became the only Open finalist to complete the route. The Elite final was a steeper challenge – straight up the middle of the main overhang with the holds getting smaller as you go! Capt Tom Odling finally achieved the glory and got his hands on the men's trophy. Again he was the only finalist to tame the route and power his way, very quickly, through all the difficulties to the top.

Thanks as ever must go to the sponsors, Cotswolds, Entreprises, DMM, Evolve and The Orange House, and to Awesome Walls for hosting us.

There will be a change in format for the 2012 Army Climbing Championships as the event will be part of the week long Army Festival of Climbing due to take place in North Wales in late May – more details on this to follow shortly.

**The Army Festival of Climbing**  
21-25 May 2012 Capel Curig, North Wales

Featuring:

- The Army Sport Climbing Championships 2012
- Outdoor climbing, bouldering and walking
- Professional instructors for novices and experts alike
- Evening guest speakers

Accommodation at Capel Curig camp

See DIN for details and application form

Or contact the organiser:

Maj Pete Skinsley

Mil: 94214 5451  
Civ: 01252 833451  
Mob: 07742 194128  
Email: chairsport@armymountaineer.org.uk

# Inter Service Sport Climbing Championships 2011

The Inter-Services Climbing Championships took place on Wed 5 Oct at the Castle Climbing Centre in London. With just short of 60 competitors it was a busy day for all with challenges set by the resident setters at the Castle and the external team of Steve McClure and Mark Croxall – and boy were they a test. Full results are attached. Congratulations to the individual winners, Mike, Ruth and Jimmy, and to the team performances throughout the day from all those who represented their Service. As much as it pains me to say it – well done to the RAF for taking the Men's title and retaining the Junior's. The Army kept the Women's title with a strong performance from all the team members. A special mention must go to Mike Smith who stole the show in his final competition before retirement by becoming the Inter-Services' Champion – not bad for a 49 year old!

The Combined Services Team headed off immediately after the London comp for Holland to compete in the Dutch Military Championships at 0830 on Thu am in Eindhoven – not the most pleasant of overnight drives I am told. Hot off the press are the results:

Mike Smith – 2nd  
Paul Easton – 5th  
Ruth Matuska – 10th  
Jimmy James – 11th  
Rich Atkinson – 15th  
Lucy Matthews – 16th  
Andy Hunter – 20th

They then spent a day and a half in Font just to finish themselves off!

**DMM**  
CLIMB NOW WORK LATER

**Tri-Service Bouldering League 2011-12**

12 Oct 11 - Rnd 1 - Craggy Island 2, Sutton, London  
16 Nov 11 - Rnd 2 - The Climbing Hangar, Liverpool  
14 Dec 11 - Rnd 3 - The Climbing Works, Sheffield  
18 Jan 12 - Rnd 4 - The Climbing Station, Pimlypridd  
18 Jan 12 - Rnd 5 - The Climbing Academy, Glasgow  
18 Feb 12 - Rnd 6 - The Iron Wall, JSMT(CI), Anglesey

The league is open to serving regular and reserve personnel from the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and RAF

Registration @ 1200 - Competition starts @ 1230

25 blocs - 4 hours  
Best 3 scores to count

Entries on the day - £10 per competitor

For further details read 2011DINI0-032 or contact the organiser:

Maj Pete Skinsley on: 94214 5451 or 07742 194128 or email: amavicechairsport@armymail.mod.uk

Logos: Craggy Island, CLIMBING WORKS, CLIMBING STATION, CLIMBING HANGAR



# Cadet Centre For Adventurous Training (CCAT)

## Scottish Expedition Week

**T**wenty stars in a week's rock climbing and glorious Scottish weather!

Delivering a busy annual programme of AT courses for the Cadets organisation is more than simply training and assessing Adult Instructors and Senior cadets for qualifications. It is of equal importance to provide opportunities to acquire the essential logbook experience that further develops and enriches a potential Leader or Instructor's depth of skills and knowledge in preparation to being assessed for an AT qualification. This is particularly true for the Adult Instructor who does not live within easy reach of the main mountains and rivers in UK.

An expedition is about the journey, a voyage of discovery and a once in a life time experience. The Scottish Expeditions courses run by CCAT offers these opportunities. Open to both Adult Instructors and Senior Cadets is a mixed menu of courses that includes:

Sea kayaking around the the NW coastline (Summer Isles), hopping from island to island, paddling alongside dolphins and pilot whales while sea eagles play on the thermals above, returning to mainland only for fresh water supplies and perhaps an ice cream.

A mountaineering expedition climbing and exploring the remote and rugged Torridon mountains and further still to the NW High-

lands onto Stac Polladaih where the only company is a small herd of deer.

An open canoeing and kayaking expedition touring the best wild water rivers on the West coast, the Awe and Garry.

To illustrate these adventures, we return to the rock climbers who journeyed from the NW Highlands across to the Cairngorms and the West Highlands, climbing the very best classic rock climbs and bagging a clutch of stars. These were remote routes with a big mountain atmosphere requiring commitment and long walk ins, but bathed in sunshine, provided a climbing experience bar none

**Sat 23 Jul** – Ardverikie Wall, Hard Severe 6 Pitches \*\*\*\*

**Mon 25 Jul** – Cioch Nose, Applecross, Severe, 5 Pitches \*\*\*\*

**Tue 26 Jul** – Savage Slit, Cairngorms, Very Difficult, 3 Pitches \*\*\*\*

**Wed 27 Jul** – Spartan Slab, Etive Slabs, Very Severe, 7 Pitches \*\*\*\*

**Thu 28 Jul** – Reiff, NW Coast, 2 x Severe \*, 2 x Very Severe \*

**Fri 29 Jul** – Stac Polladaih, 2 x Very Difficult classic routes

Generous Scottish guidebooks gave us a haul of 20 stars and all things considered, the team suffered relatively few midge bites. Why go abroad when you can have the adventure of a lifetime in Scotland!





# Obsessive Castillets Disorder

Over the last 5 years I have ran half a dozen or more trips to The Orange House (supported by the AMA). This journal doesn't need another gloss-over of the limestone fleshspots of the Costa Blanca.

If, ignoring the looming presence of the Puig Campana, you rent the roof room at The Orange House, and look over the terrace wall in to the middle distance; you will see a long, long flute of limestone running off to the right as far as the eye can see. I see it as I write this, as I am sat on that terrace. I also see it every time my mind's eye wanders towards the list of things I want to do, have started to do, have never finished doing, in the mountains.

The Castillets is a 9000 metre long wall of limestone architecture. It is featured in an article written by Rowland Edwards MIA for Climber Magazine in the 1980s and is featured in the Rockfax mini-guide to scrambles on the Blanca. It features occasionally in the conversation around the fireplace in The Orange House. Most of the very talented climbers in the House have no interest in 9km of horizontal endeavour. Almost every person that sets foot on the Castillets goes no further than one third of the way along. Few go half way. There is a rumour that Joe Brown has finished the route. Only a rumour.

Up the hill from the village, left at the junction, down the "New Road" for a few kilometres, turn right at the ruined house and drive along the track as far as your hire car will permit. The very bottom of "the ramp" that forms the start of the inclined walk in. Ascend this. Stay, as they say, close to the watershed as possible. Look out for the burst of iron ore. Was this a meteor strike?

On finishing the ramp, you will come to the first abseil bolts down on the ridge. Off this the ridge breathes in, and, in places is a truly narrow flute of limestone, with several hundred feet of air off either side. Imagine the Cuillin, with pitches of 6b, with a view of Benidorm, and a thousand features and abstract formations formed from the battering of salt air and winter downpours on calcium carbonate.

The author of this article, and the owner of The Orange House (Rich Mayfield MIA) have gaps in our collective knowledge of the ridge. Several times a year we discuss the logistics of the full traverse. One day, we say, one day. Whenever that is. We muse about the cache of sleeping kit and water at the half-way walk over, a path that bisects the ridge and how many litres to take causes us as many brain hours, as it must have done for the Moors in their lookout on the ridge (the remains remain). Too much equals too slow. Too little in hot conditions guarantees failure.

This isn't Nanga Parbat. This isn't an epic enchainment in Patagonia. There are no glaciers, espresso bars, cable cars or sign posts. This is an obsession I have held for the best part of a decade. A winding, soaring, fluted obsessive Castillets disorder. Soon. Someday soon.





# The best laid plans of mice and men

As February dawned I found myself stepping over iced patches on Classic Rock's Grooved Arête on Tryfan, in big boots dragging a bewildered, cold and fully stretched Gunner. Why? Well braving the Welsh February was all training for Ex Cockney Explorer an attempt to climb the twin summits of Mt Kenya in hopefully warmer conditions – though probably not for the climbing phase!

Mt Kenya has three main summits - worth talking about - and a host of other subsidiary peaks as result of its tumultuous volcanic history. It stands alone rising out of the African plain in a similar manner to that of it's boring more famous neighbour Kilimanjaro. The plan formulated by the Toby Haughey of King's Troop RHA was to take a team of 12 to the walking peak Point Lenana (4985m) and then split into two teams of 6. This team would be volunteers plucked from around King's Troop's St John's Wood Barracks more accustomed to mucking out stables, polishing brasses and exercising horses through the busy streets of our capital.

From Point Lenana the trekkers would then conduct a circumnavigation of the summits whilst the climbers would make an attempt on the true summit. We would push on to climb Nelion (5188m) by the South East Face, going at a steady Hard Severe in boots at 5000m, and then cross the Gates of Mist to top out on Batian (5199m) before reversing back to Nelion for a chilly bivvy in the claustrophobic Howells 'Hut' and abseil down the next day. Simple in theory but first 4 young horse men and women needed to be converted into climbers and then mountaineers: hence the North Wales experience.

Of the many routes up the mountain we had chosen the Chogoria route to the East for both beauty and a steady ascent/acclimatisation profile. It didn't disappoint when on the second day the local guide - a legal necessity on African Peaks - pointed out an Elephant steadily munching its way through a tree just 100m

away. Without neighbouring peaks or intermediate objectives such as in the Alps or an arduous walk-in, as present in the Himalayas acclimatisation was always going to be a case of slowing ourselves down and ascribing to the 'polle polle' principle. So as we ascended we stuck religiously to the climb high and sleep low theory to aid acclimatisation and added a couple of further checks to try and up our up our chances by checking blood oxygenation, hydrating and the constant discussion of AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) symptoms. Eventually then, we snuck our way to the Austrian Hut (4790m) ready for a push onto Point Lenana the next morning. And here is where the string unravelled, altitude caught us up, kicked in and all we could do was improvise, adapt and overcome: as two of our party of twelve succumbed to forms of AMS.

As we arrived at the Austrian Hut and piled in for the obligatory celebratory tea and biscuits we had received at every previous zenith the gentle headaches we had been nursing for the previous couple of hours nudged gently at us we noticed that one of the Gunners in the trekking team looked drunk. When it turned out he hadn't been taking on Dutch courage rather than the Mountain Fuel we had been using to aid



Close encounters

hydration the decision was made that the trekking team should descend to another lower camp to aid his acclimatisation: a punishing further ordeal for the rest of the group that had to re-shoulder their packs after an already long day. Meanwhile the climbers would push onto the summit the next morning in line with the original plan to aid their acclimatisation for the ensuing climbing beyond 5000m.

Through the night however, the worst really did happen after ensuring that all the students were at full fitness it never occurred to the instructors that either of us would succumb to



The team







Lost valley



Improve and adapt

any ill effects. So as I fought from my sleeping bag to dive to the door of the hut and hurled up in a monumental fashion for the second time that night it was clear the plan was due another change. The consequences of my illness were unfortunately slightly more severe than those of a trekking student. In the morning – at 0400 it was more like the night – the rest set off for Point Lenana to continue their acclimatisation and to gain an objective. The mere 200m of ascent may as well have been overhanging for the likelihood of me achieving it and so I languished in a sorry state awaiting sunrise and a trip in the mountaineer's least favourite direction.

As the sun rose the rest of the climbing team reached the summit with time to stand and watch in awe of the view for miles around from this isolated and commanding pinnacle. Due to the stipulation from the High Risk and Remote Presentation that the climb to Nelion and Batian must be conducted by two independent teams each headed by an RCI to facilitate self rescue should the need arise the race for the summit was off. So following their early morning walk team conducted some ice axe and crampon training on the dry glacier on route to the pinnacles to give the guys a feel for the mountain and then the group headed back down.

After leaving the trekkers the day prior we finally met up with them as we arrived at Shipton's camp, named after the exploratory mountaineering legend Eric Shipton, who made the mountain's second ascent; and it was from here that they intended to make their summit bid. Leaving early the next morning they made their way painstakingly to the top arriving themselves for sunrise whilst at the same time Toby had taken our chief guide to attempt a one day round of the twin summits in a day, avoiding the nasty bivvy on the return. Reunited in Shipton Camp we made our way down the trail on the Sirimon Route, a pleasant but steep end to our walking experience. Seeing others dragging themselves slowly up towards Shipton's Camp was a reminder of what we must have looked like on our ascent.



So in the end we had managed to get 10 people to the walking summit and only 1 to the true summit and against our aims of 12 and 6 this statistically brought us to 83% and 16% successes respectively. But this belies the experiences that we gained along the way, the learning and training for students and instructors alike. Pushing all outside our comfort zones with the instructors having to contingency plan like 10 men, in the end the team had a fantastic experience all over and for me it will make the summit that much sweeter when I go back and try it again: watch this space!





# Ex Cutlers Challenge

## Sheffield University Officer Training Corps

It was the last few weeks of three years together as Officer Cadets at Sheffield University OTC, and what more fitting way to top three challenging years than with one final challenge. So Friday morning, and we embark on the two day drive to Les Alps and the Zermatt valley where we will begin two weeks of training in preparation for a summit of The White Mountain: Mont Blanc. The highest mountain in the Alps standing at 4810m above sea level and dominating the miles and miles of mountain spreading from its flanks.

Our basecamp in Saas Grund at 1500m was in fact at higher altitude than many of us had ever been. On day one, we were straight up to over 3000 meters. Like many others, I had never been this high before, nor had I never set foot on a glacier before. We learnt how to move across the ice solo and in rope teams, how to do crevice rescues, and for a few of us, what the symptoms of altitude felt like.

On day two, we began the journey to our first peak, the Ulrichhorn at over 3800m. The climb began with a walk up from the valley, through lower Alps of forest and rivers, up and up until pasture became rock

and rock became Glacier. Crossing the Glacier, we arrived at the Bordierhutte where we would spend our first night in an Alpine Hut; a cosier night than expected and certainly an interesting experience.

A 3am start after a cosy night in the dorms. We set out in our rope teams across vast snowy slopes as dawn cracked around us, shedding the famous pink glow across the landscape. Upwards and onwards we rose as the sky lightened and by dawn we could see over miles and miles of rocky mountain. Spectacular views from the summit quelled the fatigue of a lengthy climb. Day had not long broken, and in all directions a sea of snow and rocky peaks with cloud mellowing between. It was our first Alpine summit. Following the summit, over 2km of descent across snow and scramble was to challenge many of us. But on returning to the camp that night, we were all thrilled to have made our first peak.

The following day was day four, and onto the Allalinhorn: our first peak at over 4000m, but perhaps the easiest. We began the climb from 3500m; an easy snow plod upwards with once more spec-





*The Bordierhütte*



*Getting used to crampons on day one*

tacular views. The clouds were drawing in fast as we reached the summit; marked by a narrow ridge and a wooden crucifix which looked increasingly sinister against the rapidly incoming cloud. We headed down quickly, just escaping the worst of the weather.

The next day however, the weather did not treat us so well and the days mountaineering was cancelled. It was something we would have to get used to for the weeks to come. Weather will ultimately make or break every expedition in the Alps, and we would come to learn that knowing when to turn back, and indeed when not to venture out at all is one of the most important skills to have if one wants to return from the mountains in safety.

The following day the weather improved and my group did our first Via Ferrata (Iron Route). A terrifying experience for those who like myself suffer badly from fear of heights. The last hour, which comprised a wire bridge across a valley followed by what our instructor named "the vertical wall of death," was enough to push me well beyond reasonable limit, and I left the top still shaking, adamant that I would never do Via Ferrata again. My friend quoted that: "Via Ferrata was really challenging but a great climb with the cargo net at the end" whereas I recall screaming: "whoever invented this should be jailed!" But each to their own.





Day seven: To Italy for three days, with two nights in a hut and the aim of achieving three peaks. We got the lift to 3800m and set out roped up on the long trek to the hut. This was our first experience of the other side of Alpine weather: Until now it had been all T-shirts and sunglasses, but here, the cloud was down and the wind-chill pierced through layers of clothing. We set off roped up, heads into the wind, nothing but white all around and visibility growing poorer. The decision had been made to head out for two hours and at this point decide whether to continue to the hut or to head back. We had been going for only an hour however, when the decision was made to turn back. Worse weather was forecast, and it would be pointless trekking out to the hut only to trek back in worse conditions the next day. Beaten by the elements once again, we headed back down to the valley in Zermatt, and drove back round to basecamp, where we spent much of the next day sitting in tents in the rain.

Weather for the Monday however was predicted better, hence that afternoon, six of us with three instructors made the walk in to the Hohsaas hut from where we would ascent the Weissmies (4017m) the following day. An alpine start in the dark once more; we began a rocky scramble up to a ridgeline from where we could see dawn beginning to break over the snowy caps around us. Onwards along the ridgeline, a long scramble led up slowly up to the summit, by which time daylight was upon us, and below us: miles and miles of mountain and valley. We headed down the steep snow slope and across fields of ice and crevices to reach the lift station on the other side by late morning. It was our last day in Saas Grund.

Tuesday. Already time to pack up camp and move on. To Chamonix Mont-Blanc from where our attempt at The White Lady would begin. The Wednesday was spent on in the beautiful Grande Montetes. Most of us on a small scrambling route, but four attempting the Petit Vert, which lent out stunning views on the ascent and a fantastic scramble at the end. The popular route however took far longer than planned due to the international spaghetti of climbers on the narrow scramble.

We had been briefed that the first half of us would be heading to the Tete Rousse hut on the Thursday, from where our summit of Il Bianco would begin. Plans changed however, as plans do. Weather reports, hut bookings and guide availability all joined forces against us and it became clear that only ten of the sixteen of us would be able to attempt to summit, a day later than originally planned. The ten were decided and on the Friday did a final kit check and boarded the Mont-Blanc Express. The train took us up to over 2000m with spectacular views down into the valley. From here, we walked upwards, before long in pouring rain, to the Tete Rousse hut, which at only 3100m, meant an exceptionally challenging summit day to follow.

We were to head off at 1am the following morning, but as we prepared for bed we received a grim weather report: winds of 70mph predicted at 4000m the following day. If winds of even close to this strength were to muster the whole expedition would be a no go. We were told to get up at 1am as planned, at which point a decision would be made as to whether to head on up the mountain, or call it all off.

An anxious night's sleep, and 1am came quickly. A clear sky, and we headed out at once to begin the climb. The first obstacle to cross was the famous Grand Couloir: a steep piste which channels

rockfall from the ridges around onto the route, making it dangerous to cross especially later in the day when the heat thaws the ice holding the rocks higher up. Following on, a long rocky scramble led us by 4am to the Gouter Hut (3800m) where we roped up and set out onto the snowy slopes.

The change in temperature was extreme at this point. We were high now, and winds were setting in. Before us in the darkness, a trail of tiny dotted lights moving gradually upwards like some silent pilgrimage to another world. Your mind almost turns itself off in the darkness as the slow alpine trudge, one foot in front of the other, goes on and on. The views were stunning, and before long we turned our head torches off and continued by moonlight. From the ridgeline, a white desert with its rolling dunes seemed to stretch below us and crossing above the clouds we truly felt like we were heading to the top of the world. Alpine mountaineering is about speed, so stopping was minimal. We had snacks in pockets, and the fatigue that crept in at times was quelled by the thought of reaching the top.

Before we knew it, we had been going for four hours, and as the beginnings of dawn began to filter through the darkness, we reached a sheltered Col (4200m). Freezing cold by this point, we donned every piece of clothing we owned. As light was beginning to creep across the mountains, the views were spectacular, and right there before us: the White Giant itself. Some of our party were in no mind to admire the views however, and were suffering badly from altitude by this point.

Our rope team was the fourth out of five to leave the Col to persevere up the mountain. We had been walking for only seconds however, when our instructor said quite calmly: 'We'd better catch up with the other teams and tell them to turn around.' We were confused: the sky to us looked clear; the wind calm. However he began to point out the small signs which had told him the weather was about to turn, and rapidly. There was lenticular cloud lingering over the summit of Mont Blanc, and indeed, as we climbed the next hundred metres to meet the others, clouds from all around had begun to move swiftly across the sky. As we reached the Vallot cabin (4367m), the sun was bursting out to the east and with it, a new mass of cloud gathering. With the high winds forecast and the sudden change in the weather, each instructor had by this point privately made the decision to turn back.

There at the Vallot cabin, shivering and dazed, our attempt at the White Mountain came to a sudden end. With a last look at the peak ahead of us, so close by that point, the five rope teams turned. Gutted despite the tiredness, we hurried back the way we had come. Down to the Dome de Gouter, across the ridges to the Gouter Hut, all the way down the rocky scramble and across the Grand Couloir. On the descent, we could see more clouds rolling in; the right decision had been made. Safely down the mountain, we took a break at the Tete Rousse from where we had started at 1am that morning. Nine hours had passed since that hazy memory of our dark ascent; seeming worlds away. A disappointment, but nothing we could do, and perhaps a more important lesson learned as more importantly than conquering Mont Blanc, we all returned safe and well. Over the weeks, we had seen some amazing sights, summited some great alpine peaks, and were returning no longer novices, but competent alpine mountaineers, and not doubting that one day we will return to conquer the white giant.





# “That’s me!”

## Your life in a paragraph?

I started climbing at home in Cornwall with my Dad; at the time a RN AT instructor. Great memories of Bodmin, Dartmoor and the Dewerstone. He gave me a really solid technical foundation and I think I have always been pretty ‘safe’ as a result. That gave me the confidence to ‘fib’ to a mate that I had done more leading than I had (none) and we cut our teeth on Cornish seacliffs. University in North Wales – find some mountains then pick a course – and of course lots of time in Snowdonia; still one of my favourite mountain venues. I didn’t join the family business – the Navy – but managed to pack a lot of climbing into my first few years in the Army, including JSRCI and, through JSAM in Obergurgl, my first introduction to alpine climbing. Lots of climbing and ski trips to the Alps; Dolomites; USA; Norway; Pyrenees, Spain and 6 months running a ski lodge in Bavaria. My wife climbs and we’ve done Mt Blanc and climbed in the Himalayas together but with the arrival of two sons, sailing, diving and sea rowing somehow sneaked in. Now the boys are firmly addicted to rock climbing and mountaineering and have already chalked up some respectable routes in the Tatra, Allgäu and here in Wales and Cornwall. Second wind I think.

## One route you have to climb before you die?

The Aiguille Verte is the most beautiful and compelling mountain I know. I’ve retreated from it twice – once summer, once winter –

and I will get back and do it. Next season; definitely; for sure.

## Where and when did you first start mountaineering?

The Dewerstone, Devon, aged 14. Pinnacle Buttress Direct. A great route on a fantastic crag: I’ve been hooked ever since.

## What piece of gear always or never goes on your rack?

I always clip the guidebook on as I’m notoriously bad at route finding and this avoids many safaris and off route epics. That and an old and cherished Rock 7.

## The essence of mountaineering?

Avoiding the effects of gravity and doing it in good company; ideally with mates or family or introducing novices to it all for the first time.

## What skills should every man have?

Tie an Alpine Butterfly (separates the men from the boys); cook a decent Chilli; watch England play rugby without breaking into a cold sweat.

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

These are really minor so I suppose I’ve been lucky. A dead heat between an incident involving a Whillans Harness and a leader fall, appropriately, off ‘G-String’ at Tremadoc and having a frostbitten toe lanced after wearing a badly fitting pair of leather boots: lesson learned.

## What should every man/woman know about women?

About mine specifically? She will climb, ski or sail in any conditions and enduring all privations and hardships as long as at the end of the day there’s a shower, a bed and a glass of decent Merlot. No bivis. Fair enough.

## How do you make your favourite drink?

I have always been taken with the recipe in Showall Styles Mountaineers Weekend Book for Jam Snow: “Ingredients (a) Jam (b) Snow. Method: Select a snow slope at an angle of more than 45 degrees. If the depths below appal, belay securely to a well-thrust axe. Make a scoop in the snow at the point where the mouth will come if one lies forward against the snow. Pour into the scoop a whole lot of jam (it should be sweetened, not puree) and mix with loose snow. Lie and lap at leisure.”

## Any scars that tell a story?

Only mental ones.

## What was the most cherished possession you ever lost?

A small ex-Navy compass that had been with me everywhere in the hills, on the water and in the field. Lent to and lost by a Shrivensham academic (you know who you are!) on the El Alamein battlefield in 10 minutes flat. How can you loose a compass in a desert!

## What was your first car?

Triumph Herald Convertible. First and best.

## Ever have a recurring dream?

After every sailing trip I spend the next night at home firmly believing I’m back on the boat, at anchor and the boat is dragging its anchor onto a rocky lee shore. Every damn time.

## What is the greatest honour you have received?

Being President of the AMA of course. Need you even ask?

## Top tip?

Appreciate that there are so many facets of climbing to enjoy; so many great days and fine moments. Bouldering as a teenager on an ivy clad limestone railway arch in Cornwall was every bit as absorbing as anything I’ve done since. But Sennen with the surf flying; long days on alpine ridges; klettersteig; bouldering in the Pass; huts and bivis; first sight of the Himalayas; finishing a winter route and skiing the Vallee Blanche just to get home; even festering in bad weather in Cham or Petes Eats. It’s all great. Go and see!







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