Clinical and Other Notes.

THE B.A.O.R. SKI AND SNOW WARFARE SCHOOL

BY

Lieutenant R. J. A. NICOL
Royal Army Medical Corps

When we arrived by train at Bad Harzburg, we were met by a cheerful sergeant who quickly began to tell us of the ordeals we were about to face. We climbed into the waiting transport and proceeded uphill over roads now deep in snow, into the blizzard that was raging, leaving behind the security of the houses at the leave centre. Higher and higher we climbed and the snowstorm increased and rocked our vehicle whenever we left the shelter of the firs and crossed a patch of open road. Neither the steady increase in height nor the thickness of the snow helped in any way to lessen our apprehension of the unknown that lay ahead of us, for we had ceased to see any signs of habitation.

St. Andreasberg, which is one of the highest villages in the Harz Mountains is a charming place. The wooden houses with their varied architecture are dotted along a road which disappears steeply into the valley. All around are beautiful rolling hills, some with gentle, and some with almost perpendicular, slopes possessors of unbroken whiteness or tree-clad wealth.

Two hotels, the “Tannhäuser” and the “Schützenhäuser” were taken over and became our homes for the next four weeks. They were comfortable, warm and most welcome after the outside cold or penetrating wetness. Every morning after breakfast we waxed our skis—an art which is not too quickly acquired, because much depends on one’s choice of wax for the prevailing snow conditions—and, as we smoothed it out with our hands not a few of us had our enthusiasm rewarded with blisters on our palms.

A steep and tiring climb up-hill with skis on our shoulders brought us by 9 o’clock to the “parade ground” on one of the hills, where, in squads of six, each under the instruction of an expert Norwegian skier, we were introduced to and trained in the art of ski-ing. For the first two or three days we were taught to find our balance and ski on the level, up or down hill without sticks so that we would be able to use our legs and bodies to the best advantage when later we would have sticks to help us. Downhill braking in deep snow, hard snow, new snow, slowly or at speed had all to be learnt, and the practice of falling in the correct way at the proper time were all of paramount importance. 12 o’clock would come and with it the return to lunch, or, in the snow, sandwiches and hot tea from our thermos flasks; at 1.30 we would recommence our practice continuing until 4.30. Sometimes, in the evening, we would have a lecture on equipment, tactics in snow warfare or bivouacking in the snow, and at other
times a film show given by the A.K.C., but few were the occasions when anyone stayed up late. No one ordered us to bed but pleasant tiredness after our day’s labours made us seek our beds early, so that we might be armed against the ardours of the morrow.

Saturday afternoon and Sunday were free but many of us would go out ski-ing, or watch downhill racing or jumping in the village, at Braunlage or at Altenau. If our Norwegian instructors entered for any of these winter sports competitions, not only would we be assured of a worth-while exhibition, but also of seeing their unfailing and unbeaten success.

Every week we would have a slalom competition—a downhill race with very many sharp turns—and a cross-country race which was gradually increased from about 2 to finally 10 kilometres. The latter involved crossing flat country, climbing as much as 200 metres, manoeuvring through very thick woods, over rough and uneven ground, across slopes or speeding downhill through trees with all the associated hazards of unexpected turns and half-hidden tree stumps.

One morning we set off with packs and sleeping bags on our backs, which combined, made us tired even after five minutes. Through the woods we skied taking turns at pulling the sledges, which operation thoroughly exhausted us on skis if we were unfortunate enough to have to climb a hill in the process. Finally we reached Ski Kreuz, the top of a hill from which many excellent ski runs start. Nearby we could see the Russian Zone and a look-out post. Some then began digging a well about eighteen feet in diameter and two feet deep in which we pitched our Swedish tent. Others busied themselves with cutting small fir branches which were interwoven to form a floor about one or two feet in depth, for our tent. The remainder cut and chopped firewood for our stove, which was the bottom of the hollow iron tent pole—the stove’s chimney. Outside everything was cold and wet and before the tents were pitched we were soaked to the skin, longing to change into dry clothes and hang our wet ones in the tent to dry. By the time fourteen of us had unrolled our sleeping bags, there was not much room to move. We each took it in turn to act as fireguard in the tent for one hour. Needless to say, an equally important job was to stoke the fire, for it was essential to keep warm, be well rested and have dry clothes. The food was brought up in weasels and was always most welcome.

Next morning some students preferred to remain dirty but some of us washed in snow with snow, and rubbed snow over arms and bodies. Terrifying it seemed and not a little frightening the experience, but we were rewarded by a most pleasant and invigorating feeling. The rest of the day, which was very wet, was spent ski-ing through or in the woods in the heavy cloud that surrounded us. The following morning camp was struck and after about two hours we returned to St. Andreasberg to have a Finnish bath. I feel sure this was designed by someone who had either much leisure time or wished to waste much. It consisted of two tents. In the first you stripped completely and later dried yourself, while in the second, which was heated by a large red hot stove, the floor covered with sawdust and all holes and ventilators blocked, you sat or stood on chairs until with the heat, the sweat poured from you. Thereafter
you dived from the tent and rolled in the snow. A feeling of well-being should and did follow this truly courageous act.

Accustomed as we all are, either in Britain or Germany to a damp and penetrating cold, it was a novel and delightful experience to work and perspire while lightly clad and become quite sunburnt, at a temperature of \(-5^\circ\) C. All that we usually wore were ski boots and two pairs of socks (preferably made of oiled wool), denims and green khaki windproof and water-repellent camouflage trousers and smocks, with sometimes a heavy pullover below, which came as high up as a polo-neck jersey but without the large roller neck. Often we were much too warm with this and skied in the minimum of clothing, but in stormy weather we wore heavy smocks two layers thick, of windproof and water-repellent material trimmed with fur. We did possess white camouflage but fortunately it was not our regular dress as it was bulky, neither waterproof nor water-repellent, and when wet was much too heavy. We wore woollen gloves with or without white leather gauntlets which, incidentally, would get soaking wet, freeze and increase many times the dangers of frostbite. Occasionally we wore sun goggles but fortunately they were not for daily use as they were much too heavy, fitted badly and cut down considerably the normal range of vision.

Our food was similar to the normal British soldiers’ ration and proved both too bulky as far as vegetables and starchy goods were concerned, and inadequate in the amount of energy-producing food, such as meat and fats.

There were, throughout our four weeks, no casualties of any grave severity, no broken bones, and only mild sprains of the ankles, the knees and the thumbs—a fact which, in itself, says much for the excellent instruction we received.

The last day of the course arrived and diplomas were presented with the Bronze Norwegian Ski Badge to the students. Many of us felt that although we had progressed so far in our ski-ing abilities we would not like to have to see action with our present knowledge. We were, however, much encouraged when we were told that probably half of us would already be able to fit into a Norwegian ski platoon—this after only one month on skis.

We could not speak too highly of our instructors. Their untiring energy, enthusiasm and patience coupled with the ceaseless efforts of Colonel Tanum, the chief instructor, who accompanied us at all times as we trained, encouraging us and correcting our faults in a kindly and considerate way, were an unfailing inspiration to us.