

# A....LEEMING RESCUE TEAM SCALE 15 PEAKS IN AMERICA....I

by Sergeant D. Wright (*expedition organiser*), and Sergeant J. West (*RAF Leeming Mountain Rescue Team Leader*).



The RAF Ensign is unfurled on the summit of Mount Rainier by (left to right) Corporal R. Naylor, Flight Lieutenant D. Drew and Sergeant D. Wright.

THE original concept of this expedition was born in the RAF Leeming Mountain Rescue Section last January when I asked Jim West how he fancied a climbing trip to the States. To Jim this conjured up visions of sheer walls in the Cascade mountains or the Yosemite National Park, and the following day he produced an advertisement showing Mount Rainier (14,410'), extolling the natural beauty of the area and going on to say how it was a must for a holiday. Although we were not looking for a holiday, it was apparent—even from a tourist photograph—that the snow and ice on the mountain would make an excellent training area.

A period of intense letter writing ensued, directed to the US Embassy in London, the Rainier National Park Warden, 'The Mountaineers'—Seattle, US Army base at Fort Lewis, and the McChord Air Force base. Letters were soon flowing in both directions with brochures, details of distances, prices, campsite fees, accommodation and dozens of other answers in reply to our enquiries.

It was at this point that we had a rare stroke of luck. The US Army at Fort Lewis had appointed a Captain Thomas A. Staadt to be our liaison officer during the visit. At this stage the whole expedition was still very much in the melting pot although we were becoming more optimistic as the weeks went by. Captain Staadt eased the pressure on the most pressing problem (that of finance) by offering some assistance with transport and commissary facilities for food. We were loaned a substantial amount of gear by the RAF Mountaineering Association, to whom our thanks are due.

An application was also submitted for a grant to purchase additional specialised equipment but the fund was apparently exhausted. However, Training Command acting with great energy arranged for the sum to be provided from other sources, and we were most grateful to receive a grant of £342 from the Nuffield Trust and a further £50 from our Command HQ. This greatly encouraged us because although all the signs from Command and Group indicated general approval and great interest in the venture, the tasking of an aircraft to the Western Seaboard remained the great stumbling block. However, when after weeks of rumour and counter-rumour, accompanied by frantic telephone calls, we had almost abandoned hope, MOD advised us that our application had been successful.

## Intensive Preparation

While we awaited the results of our application we had optimistically undergone a programme of jabs, briefings and physical fitness training, with the help of a strenuous programme prepared by the Physical Education Officer. With the aircraft finally approved it was just a question of packing and getting our dollars, although the dockers' strike gave us some nasty moments because we could see our aircraft being put onto some other task.

Fortunately this did not happen and the following members of the expedition assembled at Lyneham in August:—

Wing Commander D. Whittaker, MBE (Liaison Officer); Flight Lieutenant D. Drew (expedition leader); Pilot Officer P.

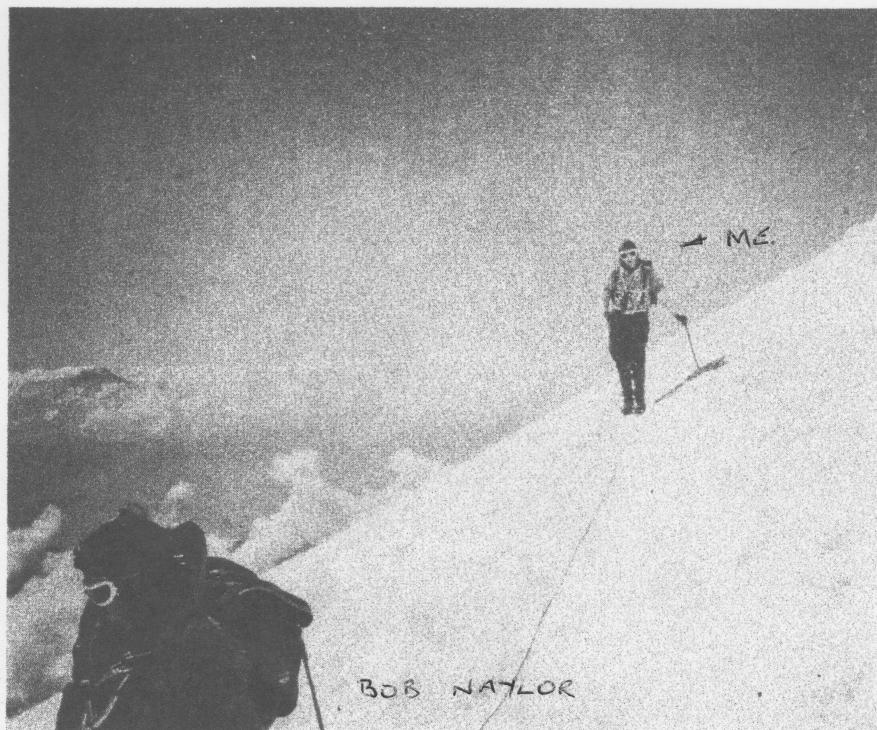
Whalley, Sergeant J. West (team leader); Sergeant D. Wright (deputy team leader); Sergeant R. Clark; Sergeant K. Taylor (Kinloss MRT); Corporal R. Naylor (Valley MRT); Corporal N. Lord; Junior Technician E. Rogers; Junior Technician M. Greenwood; Junior Technician F. Allender; Junior Technician G. Chapman (Leuchars MRT); SAC G. Stobie; SAC J. Walker; SAC P. Luff; SAC J. Collins.

The journey to McChord Air Force base in Washington State took three days and we finally arrived after travelling via Newfoundland, Ontario and Nebraska. We were met at McChord air base by Captains Staadt, Gilbrough, and Kaczmarek, Colonel Hogan (Commanding Officer of the 9th Aviation Battalion) and Major Capps. The team was based at Fort Lewis, Tacoma, as guests of the 9th Infantry Division, 'The Old Reliables', who provided wonderful hospitality during the stay.

Mount Rainier, at 14,410 ft, is the highest peak in the Cascade Range which starts in Northern California and runs parallel to the Pacific coast, going north through Oregon, Washington and into British Columbia. Geologically the Cascades are new mountains and much of the rock is broken and loose although some areas of the range are granite, providing sound rock and excellent climbing. Most of the major peaks, such as Rainier, St. Helens, Adams, Baker, Hood are extinct volcanoes.

The first two days were spent preparing the equipment and arranging for the collection of the rations, a task which kept Wing Commander Whittaker busy. However, everything was prepared and we divided the tents, cookers, food, ropes etc. between us; everyone then retired to allow for an early start the following morning for the initial attempt on Mount Rainier.

Weather conditions were generally good throughout the expedition's stay on Mount Rainier.



### A sustained test

The snow-line in the Rainier area is about 5,000 ft so most peaks over 8,000 ft can boast a glacier and many, like Rainier, have very complex glacier systems. Mount Rainier was chosen as the main objective because of the very nature of its glaciated and crevassed features which, combined with the height, was designed to test the team members under sustained conditions. The climate of Washington State is temperate, most of the precipitation occurring in the winter months with very heavy snow falls on the western slopes of the Range.

The ascent of Rainier was by a technically easy route, with complex route finding problems through the mass of crevasses on the glaciers. We had walked to Camp Muir (10,000 ft) the previous afternoon from Paradise (5,000 ft) and stayed overnight in the cabin. The team began the ascent at 04.00 hours by crossing the head of the Cowlitz Glacier, in the shadow of Gibraltar Rock which is notorious for its rock falls. We continued up the Ingraham Glacier to the 'Cleaver' (12,400 ft) into worsening weather, high winds, blizzards and visibility down to 20 ft. Several members returned to Camp Muir with altitude sickness but the remainder with the American contingent vanished into the gloom and eventually reached the summit where the temperature, recorded by Captain Gilbrough was well below 0°F. A wealth of experience was gained by this first climb and everyone treated the mountain with much greater respect than on the day before.

It had been the intention to spend a substantial part of the expedition on Mount Rainier carrying out a programme of snow and ice training and some ascents by the more difficult routes. Unfortunately, after two very bad winters (each with over a 100 ft of snow and the prevailing high temperatures), the mountain was in poor condition—except on the technically easy routes. A fall of 8 inches of fresh snow made matters even worse, so to allow the surface to consolidate a little, we cast our eyes elsewhere.

The team split into two parties of nine including our two American climbers, Noel Gilbrough going with one and Mike Kaczmarek with the other. We then moved north to Cascade Pass. The two peaks climbed on this assault were Mount Baker (10,750 ft) and Mount Shuksan (9,038 ft)—the latter being a classic Alpine peak. From a high camp at Lake Ann, one party lowered the guide book time of six hours to three hours five minutes. The snow here was hard, the weather was perfect and the rock sound—conditions ideally suited for fast times. The parties then changed over and, therefore, each party climbed both peaks.

At this point it must be made clear that without the generosity of the 9th Aviation Battalion and the 9th Infantry Division, in providing free transport to inaccessible areas, our achievements would have been far less spectacular. The hard months of extra



training paid off well and overall this must have been one of the fittest RAF expedition parties to have taken part in such a venture and in climbing ability certainly one of the strongest.

#### Appropriate names

After rest and re-supply the groups moved to Rainier National Park and Cascade, the latter being an area of fantastic spires and knife-edged ridges with the very descriptive names of 'Ripsaw Ridge' 'A Mile of Pinnacles' 'Thunder Peak' 'Mount Challenger' to the north and 'El Dorado' and 'Bonanza' peaks to the south.

The pass was one of the main routes across the range from the east in the days of the Yukon gold rush. Miners trekking from the East to Seattle crossed the Cascades via the pass.

Two parties climbed Mount Sahale by the south ridge and a rope of three the difficult 'Mix up Mountain' and 'Triplet Peak.' Bob Hiatt one of the GIs accompanied the party and acquitted himself very well considering he had never climbed before.

The Rainier National Park party was made up of those climbers who had not reached the summit on the first attempt. This time we had beautiful weather for the climb and all of us made it to the summit in good style. The views from the top were superb, and we unfurled a large RAF Ensign on top to the consternation of several American climbers! So, all members of the expedition reached the top of Mount Rainier.

After a two-day break the parties were split again, one going south to climb Mount Adams (12,307 ft) and St. Helens (9,671 ft), the other group moved to the Leavenworth area in Eastern Washington, climbing several rock routes on the granite walls of Tumwater Canyon and comparing the British and Americans gradings. Later, Icicle Mountain and The Mole, a granite spire on the Wenatchee Divide, were ascended in temperatures exceeding 100°F. Mount Stuart was climbed by three ropes of three on different routes, all quite hard with complex route-finding problems.

Mount Adams was climbed with three ropes via the Suksdorf Ridge, two Americans again reached the summit, these being Greg Pybon of the US Army and Lynn Foss, the 16 year-old son of Hal Foss, the Director of all rescue operations in Washington State. This party went on to climb Mount St. Helens via two routes, the Little Lizard and Big Lizard, both descending via the Dog's Head which must be the best and longest scree slope in the world, about 2,000 ft of deep pumice, allowing a rapid, bounding descent.

After a few days rest a final trip was organised to 'Monte Cristo' a mining ghost town, partly restored, where some of the finest climbs of the whole expedition were encountered. These were 'Monte Cristo',

'Cadet Peak,' 'Wilman Peak,' and finally the 'East Wilman Spire,' all hard climbs by the selected routes.

In all 15 peaks were ascended including several rock climbs up to 5-8 grade (VS). A total of 130,000 ft in height had been climbed and a great deal of invaluable experience was gained by the team both in general mountaineering and the complexities required to ensure the success of this or any other expedition. We feel that no party could have surpassed our achievement, certainly not at such low cost.

This winter the team will be able to put into practice all the training techniques assimilated on the expedition. The less experienced team members gained a lot of confidence and now have the ability to move both quickly and safely in snow and ice conditions. This can often prove a great asset in rescue situations where both safety and speed are essential. The more experienced climbers had a chance to polish up their ice-climbing techniques and look forward to doing some good routes if conditions permit.

Perhaps the hardest-worked member of our expedition was Wing Commander Whittaker who ensured the smooth running of the expedition with some shrewd bargaining, tact and diplomacy. The team thank him for his efforts and hope that his enjoyment was not marred by all the overtime he put in on our behalf.

#### Friendliness and courtesy

It is fitting that we should pay tribute to our hosts, the US Army and in particular the 9th Infantry Battalion and 9th Aviation Division. The hospitality afforded to us by our American hosts, both Service and civilian was quite remarkable. Their friendliness, kindness and never-failing courtesy were features of the visit which will not be forgotten.

To mention everyone by name would be quite impossible but for those who climbed with us, notably Tom Staadt, Noel Gilbrough, Mike Kaczmarek, Greg Pybon, Bob Hiatt, Bill Albers and Lynn Foss, we say a special thanks, and it is our earnest hope that we left as good an impression with our hosts as the one we brought home with us.

Finally the team members would like especially to mention SPEC. 5 Greg Allen who spent endless hours running the climbers about either socially or to the climbing areas. We also apologise to his good lady for keeping him out late on several occasions and accept full responsibility for doing so!

We are currently hoping for a return visit by the 9th of this month—to be hosted by RAF Leeming—when we shall entertain them on our own stamping grounds.



Flight Lieutenant D. Drew negotiates an ice wall 13,500 ft up.