

## THE MITRE RIDGE—JULY 26, 1942.

WING-COMMANDER LORD MALCOLM DOUGLAS-HAMILTON.

At nine o'clock on July 26, J. B. McDonald, his son Sandy, and I set out from Braemar with the object of "having a look at" the Mitre Ridge. We had seen it from the Sneck four weeks previously and it looked steep; this appearance turned out to be no fallacy on closer acquaintance.

There is a brief description in the "S.M.C. Guide" of three climbs up the Mitre Ridge, one called the "direct" route, one an alternative route, climbed by Cumming and Crofton, and one apparently very similar to the direct route, climbed by Ludwig and Dawson. The "direct" route started, it states, with 110 feet of holdless slab. This did not sound inviting, so, in advance, we decided to try the "Cumming-Crofton" route.

By one o'clock we had made our way up the Slugan, then had come over the Sneck and were seated on rocks in the Garbh Choire eating our sandwiches and looking up at the Mitre crags. Half an hour later we were at the start of the climb and had begun roping up. We made two mistakes that we shall not repeat. We each carried a rucksack. I shall not attempt again to lead up the Mitre Ridge with a rucksack on my back. The climb requires a certain amount of rather delicate balance work at times, and a heavily laden rucksack militates against this considerably. The second mistake was to bring only one 100-foot length of rope. The full 100 feet was several times required to achieve a really safe anchorage, and this necessitated a waste of time in untying the rope and throwing it back for the third climber. These two errors made the climb far longer than it would otherwise have been.

The brief description of the climbs in the "S.M.C. Guide" gives no indication of the standard of difficulty, and even now I should not like to give an opinion on this point. The weather was wet most of the time we were climbing; the rocks were wet and cold all the time, and so were we. These conditions made the climb both difficult and unpleasant, though in retrospect one can really look back on it with

the pleasure with which one always does look back on a hard day on the hills. The crags scare you, handle you roughly, and sometimes defeat you altogether. But if you fail, there is no ignominy in your defeat. Triumph there may be when you succeed, but it is the triumph of character first and foremost, and a victory in which there is no unpleasant aftermath because there is no vanquished. You take with you as you begin the descent a sense of achievement and physical fitness, a camaraderie with those who have shared the rough passage, and, above all, that lasting friendship with the hills.

The climb commenced with some moderate rocks leading up to a chimney. I could not get up the chimney unaided; it was made for a smaller man. I might have managed it if I could have jammed myself in, but my chest, swelled doubtless with the pride of hoped-for achievement, just would not fit. The chimney splayed open and gave no holds on the outside. McDonald came to the rescue to give me his shoulder, but I had to stand on his head before I just managed to reach a hold above and wriggled up to a stance. Fortunately for McDonald I had started the climb wearing *kletterschuhe* and his head remained fairly intact. The rucksacks came next, and then McDonald with the help of the rope. Sandy, being the slimmest, could jam himself into the chimney, and was thus the only one to climb it honestly. The next step was across wet slabs to the right, and doubling back to the foot of a crack 100 feet high. Having got to the crack the holdless nature of the wet rock gave me insufficient sense of security, so I retreated and changed my chilled and soaked feet into nailed boots. Then the rain came, and for the next three hours poured and sleeted on us until we were fair imitations of damp rags. We continued to climb, however, and moved just often enough to keep us alive. Here I abandoned the "Cumming-Crofton" route, and by a traverse to the left got into a shallow gully by which it was easy going to reach the platform on the "direct" route.

The next step was a balance traverse to the right, a pull up, and a traverse to the left on to a grassy platform. Sandy

came next and then the two rucksacks, and lastly McDonald with his rucksack on his back. The next lead was 100 feet over what was the most enjoyable part of the climb—not too difficult, fairly strenuous, and with good holds. It ended on a sloping grassy ledge like the roof of a house, but I was able to get a fairly good belay round a rock. Sandy followed, then the rucksacks, and I threw the rope down to McDonald. It went wide, and while drawing it up again it got wedged between two rocks. No amount of pulling would shift it, so there was nothing for it but to climb down to the jam. Even then I could not get the rope loose, and was faced with the alternative of cutting off the end. Foolishly, I had brought no knife, and my attempt to cut the end with a stone made little impression on the rope. All the while sleet and rain was beating down on our already soaked bodies; life seemed a pretty miserable affair. Then McDonald, having said he also had no knife, suddenly remembered he had a sgian dubh in his rucksack, and with difficulty he got it out, and I was just able to reach down for it. The rope cut and lowered, he soon joined us, and that trouble was over.

Above the grassy slope was undoubtedly the crux of the climb. The ascent of a vertical wall followed by steeply sloping rocks and grass and then another vertical wall was hard going, and at the latter I had to pause and warm my fingers before tackling it. A pull up on what seemed inadequate foot and hand holds enabled me to surmount the wall and scramble up to the gap where the two climbs join. Throughout this pitch there is no good belay, and the leader has the uncomfortable feeling that if he should slip he will drag the others down with him into the fearful chasm below. In dry weather the difficulties may be slight, but in wet conditions everything is slippery and the rocks seem to slope the wrong way. However, at the gap is real security. Sandy and the two rucksacks followed, and then McDonald tied himself on for his effort. He had a heavy rucksack containing a cine camera which he was loth to risk being hauled up over the rocks. He found it difficult to balance on the traverse we had gone, and thought that with a pull he could come straight up. I had had a look at the route he proposed

to take and was certain it was far harder. With the help of the rope some progress was made at first, but only served to get McDonald into a worse jam. With the next handhold just an inch or two beyond his reach he slipped off and swung clear of the rocks with a clatter, to dangle on the rope over the void below. From my stance I couldn't see him, but I shouted down, "Are you all right?" He apparently was unconcerned about his predicament, for the reply I got was, "Look at the marvellous rainbow." With our faces to the cliff we scarcely had time to see anything more interesting than handholds or footholds, but the first thing that struck McDonald when he swung round was the wonderful sight of a rainbow below him and completely filling the wild Garbh Choire. Unfortunately, the rainbow to us was merely a promise of "No rain for a bit—only sleet!" I lowered him until he got hold again, and eventually he made it by our original route. Sandy was cold and shivering, but he had the life in him to say to his father, "I wish I'd seen you hanging on the rope!" One trouble on this pitch was the steepness which prevented the leader being able to direct the others, who were out of sight until the last few feet.

After that the climbing was straightforward and quite pleasant, despite the weather conditions, which were showing some slight signs of improvement. The three teeth almost level with the top make a sensational but comparatively easy finish to the climb. It was 7.30 P.M. when we shook hands with each other on the top, having spent six hours on the rocks.

There was some coffee in the flask, and McDonald and I laced ours with his "emergency" brandy, which, together with the warmth of our congratulations, restored the circulation in our chilled bodies.

We descended by way of the tops and the Snowy Corrie, picking up on the way down an exposure meter which McDonald had lost four weeks previously. But that's another story.

It was 11.30 P.M. when we got back to Braemar to do justice to a meal which marvellously had not been spoiled by our very late arrival. It was a good hard day, with the weather conditions only really bad during the actual climb, but, as McDonald said, "It Mitre been much worse!"