

Reflections on Mountain Leader Assessment

by Grant Signorini

Almost a year to the day after completing my Mountain Leader training, I walked through the doors of Glenmore Lodge where I'd be based for my Mountain Leader assessment. My North Face duffel felt heavy, though not nearly as heavy as the anxiety I carried with it.

Sat alone in my room, I unpacked and organised my gear. Efficiency is a core quality of a Mountain Leader, and although turning up late on day one would not mean failure, I knew first impressions mattered. That night I barely slept. My mind replayed ropework and navigation scenarios in an endless loop.

First Steps on the Hill

After introductions and a briefing, we were driven to the Sugar Bowl car park where the assessment began. The assessor asked who would take the first navigation leg. Expecting something straightforward, I volunteered. My target was a stream junction less than a kilometre away. Though nerves made me second-guess each step, I arrived with a sense of relief.

The navigation challenges steadily increased as we circled back to Glenmore via Allt Coire an t-Sneachda and Allt Mor. At one stream we paused to discuss group management during a crossing. When asked if we would have participants remove their packs, we gave the textbook response: yes, to avoid entanglement should



someone fall. The assessor's blunt reply stuck with me: "I wouldn't let any of you take my kids out. If you need to consider that risk, you shouldn't be crossing." It was a sharp reminder that judgement matters more than textbook responses.

Steep Ground and Ropework

Another restless night was followed by assessment on steep ground in the Chalamain Gap. On the way from Glenmore Lodge, the assessor's frequent "Where are we now?" kept us constantly alert. Now in the steep sided gap, it was time to demonstrate proficient use of the rope to safeguard group members during a steep descent and abseil oneself to secure ground. Fortunately, countless evenings spent tying knots to door handles at home, along with cold days spent with fellow Club member Guy Bromby preparing for his Winter Mountain Leader, paid off. Ropework felt natural, a small island of confidence in an otherwise demanding week.

The Expedition

After the ritual of public pack weighing in the kit room at Glenmore (my practice expeditions helped me avoid embarrassment), we set out for the multi-day expedition. The plan was to reach Faingouran Lodge via Bynack More, demonstrating navigation, leadership, and the ability to bring the mountain environment alive for the group through flora and fauna knowledge.

Fog rolled in just as I began my leg to the summit of Bynack More. Even simple navigation legs weighed heavy on my mind - the fear of failure hanging over me. But, after a short while, we made it to the summit. I briefly relaxed as I took shelter behind a rock and enjoyed the warm feeling of unpacking my lunch. Later, tasked with navigating from a stream junction to a nipple on the North side of Dagrass, nerves got the better of me. I set off without a clear plan and soon realised I was losing control. The assessor spotted it instantly. When I suggested diverting to the prominent top and navigating from there, he told me firmly to continue on the efficient line. Forced to focus, I read slope and aspect with absolute concentration (and a sinking feeling in my stomach).



To my surprise - and relief - we arrived precisely where intended.

That evening, a hot meal and the comfort of my sleeping bag felt richly deserved.

Night Navigation

The second day was long, split between a day hike to Beinn a' Bhuid and culminating in night navigation from a bothy to the small bridge crossing the River Nethy. Blind legs required vigilance, as they had throughout the assessment. Blind legs involve only the navigator being told where to take the group, and the others having to identify where they have been taken to once the leg is complete, one-by-one informing the assessor in private.

My navigation practice with Guy - often venturing out of our tent at 22:00 and returning at 03:00 - proved invaluable. I knew there'd be a time where stumbling around on Ben Macdui in the early hours in thick fog for 'fun' would come in useful. And it did. Each leg went well, and I could confidently say "we are here".

Results and Reflection

By the final morning, the cumulative effect of poor sleep, constant movement, and the stress of assessment left me drained. The slog back to Glenmore was followed by a welcome shower and the inevitable wait in the bar for results.

When my name was called, I walked in with a tight chest and racing thoughts. The verdict: I had passed. Relief was the overriding emotion - not celebration, simply the release of pressure.

Looking back, several lessons stand out. First, the importance of judgment over textbook answers - mountain leadership demands more than technical knowledge.

Second, preparation matters: countless hours of practice with navigation and ropework proved their worth.

Finally, resilience is tested as much as skill; staying calm when plans falter is perhaps the most valuable leadership quality of all.



The experience was far from easy, but that was the point. The Mountain Leader Assessment is not just about navigation or knots; it is about carrying responsibility for others in complex terrain and under pressure.

And one question will remain etched in my memory: "Where are we now?" A simple phrase, but one that defines the essence of leadership in the hills - always knowing, always ready, always aware.

The Cairngorm Club