

So the avalanche risk is 4...? Out of 5...?....Right.....

Exercise Imja-Tse's Winter Training week

For the majority of the 20 or so people who arrived at Ballachulish on Sunday night, the drive up was more than enough to set the scene for the week. Looking out of your window and having to crane your neck to see the top of the mountains is not something most of us get on the drive to work. The Exped's Scottish training week was a chance for people to get through several different winter courses including winter mountaineering & winter climbing. Instructing was provided both exped members and staff of JSMTW Ballachullish.



The week started with several lectures that would continue through the week on winter skills and snowcraft. Being told the Avalanche risk for the region was a 4 out of a possible 5 was enough to wake everyone up. After an initial issue of kit we made our way up the hill to try out our crampons and axes. At this point, if you were concerned about there being no snow at the foot of the mountain, there was plenty as we went further up. Here we got the first taste of Scottish winter weather as wind and snow sandblasted our faces. The luckier ones managed the full experience of crampons and ice axe arrests. The not so lucky managed at least to roll around in the snow like 5 year olds.

Next day it was straight out onto the hills for a 7 hour summit of Stob Coire nan Lochan. At a height of 1300m, it was definitely worth the view at the top. As with all hills, once up you've got to get down and it was a long way down. Tom Wardley attempted to make up for his abject failure in not bringing the Admiral with him by tobogganing down the mountain on his map. Whilst mildly amusing, he still has a long way to go.



Day three was an ascent of the Devils Staircase along the West Highland Way to Kinlochleven where we stopped at the Ice Factor climbing wall. For another new experience, we all tried our hand at climbing on the worlds largest indoor ice climbing wall. For many, the first chance to get up a wall with real ice axes and front pointing on crampons.

On day 4 we received our kit for the overnight expedition and made the 2 hour journey over to the Cairngorms. Our objective was to climb up onto the Cairngorm plateau practice our winter navigation and construct our own snowhole to live in for the night.

After picking up the containers and bags from the Cairngorm Poo Project, we got a chance to practice our navigation in virtual whiteout conditions, but under expert supervision, we were never far from our planned route. Once at the snowhole location got stuck into the hard work of digging out a home for the night.



After 3 hours, we had a very respectable chalet for 6 with sitting room and breakfast bar. Under the expert supervision of volunteer chef Kev Shore, we settled down to eat our ration packs which were unusually tasty after a days hard work.

On emerging the next morning, it was surprisingly easy to work out the location of our snow hole, even though the snow had camouflaged it well. Our use of yellow snow as a marking system may have been somewhat unconventional but it worked well. After a quick summit of Cairn Gorm it was back to the Ski centre to contribute to the cairngorm poo project.



Overall, the week at Ballachulish wasn't just there to get us out on the hills or to introduce us to the fundamental differences between summer and winter mountaineering. It was to develop each individual by challenging them to work outside their comfort zone. By the end of the week, all novices and winter newbies had a much greater appreciation for the dangers of winter conditions and the need for proper preparation. Also the need to be able to rely on your equipment and team mates.

For many of our civilian counterparts, courses like these might seem like paid holidays but the value they give us in personal development is priceless. Each participant increased their comfort zone learning skills that will be valuable across both working and personal lives.

Many thanks to James and the staff at JSMTW Ballachullish. for all the hard work in organising our training. I'm sure everyone agrees that it was a brilliant week where we were all given the opportunity to push ourselves. Now we can all look forward to the next phase of training at JSAM.

Cpl Jude Chambers RGN

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