



## THE SKYE RIDGE

### I. FAILURE

BY V. J. DESMOND

This is the story of how Ted Courtenay and I nearly did the Main Ridge of Skye.

When Ted approaches you with a gleam in his eye you know he has conceived the idea for another do and that shortly you will be having a very exacting time. The idea now was to give the Skye munros a pasting; actually they gave us one, as you will see. Mountains and motor-cycles are mixed together in Ted's conception of an ideal life. Both lead to severe discomforts, particularly the motor-cycles. He certainly managed to mix them with a vengeance this week-end. You might indeed call this 'A Week-end in Skye—and No Helicopter Either.'

Our final plans were big. We would add the Trinity week-end of Whitsun to Coronation Day and the Monday intervening; that would give us from Friday 29th May, 1953, to Tuesday, 2nd June. We would leave on the Thursday evening to get a good start. We were going to get Blaven and the Main Ridge plus

Sgurr Dubh Mor and Sgumain and possibly return to Brittle. We would emulate Murray and leave a tent at Loch an Athain. We sent on parcels of food and kit and carried more food and a tent on Ted's 350 c.c. B.S.A.

Ted called for me in Wythenshawe. 'Mick Connick here we come' said he, adjusting his goggles. We left Manchester at 6.0 p.m. on the Thursday and reached the Beattock fells at 11.45 p.m. We put up the tent and brewed up, then slept from 1.0 a.m. to 4.0 a.m., leaving at 5.0 a.m. in heavy rain. The weather later improved to bright periods and squally showers, so that the run through Stirling and Callander and up to Lochearnhead, where we breakfasted, was very fine. When we were going through Glencoe the hail driven by the northerly gale was so fierce that the Man of Iron had to stop the bike for a while. At 3.0 p.m., after a scenic though wet drive through Invergarry and past Loch Duich, we reached Kyleakin, and at 5.30 p.m. Glen Brittle, after running off the Brittle road onto the moor in one brief but exciting episode. At Glen Brittle the rain came down as it knows how in those parts. Mr Macrae kindly gave us permission to use the barn for accommodation, for which we were most thankful. A lover and his lass were already in residence and we felt mean, but they treated us very kindly in the circumstances.

Our original idea had been to set up the second tent at Loch an Athain on Saturday morning and to set off the same evening. As however Saturday was showery we decided that we should only wet our dry clothes by venturing down Glen Sligachan and that the labour involved would imperil our chances on the do; so we had a lazy morning and afternoon. For a couple of hours we wandered by the beach, picking bluebells and gorse, which Ted arranged tastefully by the door of the indoor tent which our two friends had pitched in the barn.

At about 6.0 p.m. we had a meal and 8.0 p.m. saw us on our way, unable to bear inaction any longer. We carried plenty of clothes, and a 120-foot nylon three-quarter rope. Our footwear was vibrans, which I think we later regretted.

Gars-bheinn was reached at 10.30 p.m. The light was still quite good in spite of cloud but a strong and cold wind blew. We put on everything we'd got; I wore four sweaters, two coats, two scarves, a balaclava, and thick trousers. In fading light we reached Sgurr

nan Eag, and here the rain began in earnest. We found a small cave, into which we packed our bodies with our feet dangling over the corrie. It was grand up there in the dark. Occasionally the wild scudding clouds would break and we would catch the gleam of a star ; but each time our hopes of a change for the better were dashed as fresh rain squalls met our enquiring noses. At length our feet and legs, exposed to the weather, became so cold that to move was imperative. We switched on our lamps and started off again. It was weird to climb in those conditions ; we longed to be on the Ridge at night in good weather.

Our pace was slow to very slow at times. The rocks were wet and often greasy and in vibrams we had to be careful. Added to this, we neither of us knew the Ridge ; I had been on Skye for twelve days in 1947 but this was Ted's first visit.

On Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn there was more light and we turned aside to climb Sgurr Dubh Mor, which is not usually done on the traverse of the main Ridge but which is a munro. Back then painfully to Da Bheinn (this divergence and a later one to Sgumain were severe trials) and onwards to the Thearlaich-Dubh Gap, reached in grey light—a forbidding place and an equally forbidding morning.

The wet basalt streamed with water and the holds were greasy. After the usual abseil the 80-foot (the longer) side was led in socks for safety. Then we had difficulty over sack-hoisting.

The Thearlaich rocks are a good scramble but they are of basalt, and as usual were wet so that they needed care. Over to Alasdair, which peak Ted took a great fancy to, then down and up to Sgumain, avoiding the highly greasy Bad Step. Back to Alasdair, back to Thearlaich, and down to Bealach Mhic Coinnich. We reached the summit of Mhic Coinnich via Collie's Ledge. ' Mick Connick we've arrived and to prove it we're here ' said Ted. Time 9.30 a.m. We got some views hereabouts and the rain actually stopped long enough for the rocks to dry in patches. But the cold wind blew harder, and rain came frequently.

An Stac was enjoyable—a clean, steep scramble. Then the Inaccessible towered over us. We were up the long side in a few minutes but the abseil on the short side took longer than it should. Sgurr Dearg was reached at 11.30 a.m. I have not kept a record of times of halts for food but of course we had them. Several rocky

tops over which we now passed caused me to think we had traversed Banachdich, to arrive at length, disappointedly, at the real Banachdich.

Some rocky tops beyond Thormaid were again a source of delusion in our ignorance, for we thought they were Ghreadaidh; but when we came to Ghreadaidh there was no mistaking it—a clean, sweeping crest along which to balance or crawl as the weather and confidence permitted. We got metaphorically tied up on these peaks, both because of mist and because we often had difficulty finding the easy ways down. Rain still came at us at intervals. On Mhadaidh and Bidein however we had somewhat better conditions and for the first and only time during the day we saw Blaven. Mhadaidh is a fine series of scrambles but Bidein's central peak proved awkwardly slippery and nasty to descend.

From Bidein's northern peak the weather again looked threatening and we had to make our decision. We were not physically tired and could have got round to Gillean and h-Uamha. But going at our present pace we should undoubtedly have had another night out, and in bad weather again. The important point was that if we continued we should not have the Monday to sleep it off in but instead should have to leave at noon that day after having reached Brittle in the small hours. As Ted had to drive the bike 500 miles it seemed altogether wise to call off our attempt, though it was a severe wrench to do so. Now, back at home, though the disappointment has deepened, I feel that our decision to abandon the expedition was the right one. So at 6.0 p.m. we turned down from the bealach between Bidein and An Caisteal into Coir' a' Mhadaidh. It was now raining again. We arrived back at our barn at 8.0 p.m., just twenty-four hours from leaving it.

During that night the weather went from bad to worse. Next morning (Monday) we left Glen Brittle at 11.30 a.m. and at 4.55 a.m. we were in Piccadilly, Manchester, the journey having taken 17 hours 25 minutes, which included halts for food totalling two hours. If Ted was disappointed in not getting the Ridge he could at least look back with satisfaction at his fine feat of motor-cycling.

Though we had failed, yet we had had a week-end to remember, for during our 1,000-mile trip we had seen some of Scotland's finest scenery and had climbed some 17 peaks. We were both keen to try the Ridge again at the next available opportunity.

## 2. SUCCESS

BY D. J. LEGG

Only two weeks after Vin Desmond and Ted Courtenay had made their attempt on the greater traverse of the Ridge, I had ten days' camping in Glen Brittle with Vin. It followed that the main item on the programme was a further attempt on the Ridge, since I had now become infected with Vin's enthusiasm. Unfortunately, although everyone told us what a wonderful week it had been immediately prior to our arrival, the weather after our arrival was bad, with much rain and wind, and although we managed to get in a couple of climbs—the Window Buttress of Sgurr Dearg on the Saturday of our arrival and the Cioch Direct on Sron na Ciche the next day—we could make no definite plans. Instead, we decided we would start off for the Ridge immediately the weather showed any sign of improving. With the short nights in June we felt it would not matter a great deal where we were on the Ridge when night fell, since if the territory became very awkward we could just wait where we were till dawn.

So when on the Tuesday the weather looked a little better, we collected our gear together and with heavy rucksacks, containing much warm clothing, started the long slog round to Gars-bheinn at 2.20 p.m. The tops were still in mist but this had risen slightly and, being ever optimistic, we still hoped for fine weather. We arrived on the cloud-immersed summit of Gars-bheinn at 4.40, to be greeted immediately by cold rain, which continued to increase in intensity as we began the traverse. By the time we had reached Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn we were both so wet and cold that the thought of a night on the Ridge quickly decided us to abandon our plan. We dropped off from the col between Sgurr Dubh and Sgurr Thearlaich and thence returned to our tent, which we reached soon after eleven o'clock. So ended our first attempt.

For the next few days the weather was worse than ever and since the water was now inside our tent as well as outside we took advantage of an offer from Mr Macrae and transferred everything to the barn. The move did improve the weather temporarily, but on the Saturday we succeeded in getting even wetter than we had done on the Tuesday by making a climb on the Coir'a'Ghrunnda face of Sgumain.

By the next day, Sunday, the 21st, and the longest day, the wind had dropped and, although it was cloudy, the weather looked much more settled ; so as this was the last day we could spare to do the traverse, Vin thought we should get off as soon as possible. Ron Smith had arrived in Glen Brittle with two friends on Thursday evening, and though he had only been out two days and was by no means in training, he decided to come with us. Ron's two companions very sportingly offered to meet us on the Ridge to provide us with liquid refreshment later in the day.

This time we got off at 1.30 p.m., again with heavy rucksacks containing spare clothing, plenty of food, water bottles, rubbers, and 120 feet of nylon. The trudge round to and up Gars-bheinn we found very much harder and vitality-sapping than before ; the air was warm and humid, and we were streaming with perspiration by the time we got to the top at 4.00. Previously we had done the walk from Glen Brittle to the summit without a stop but this time we were forced to take a total of 15 mins rest on the way. I for one was quite sure that I should never manage the whole Ridge, the first part seeming to have taken so much out of me. Nevertheless, we pushed on fairly well to Sgurr nan Eag, where we stopped for food and rest at 4.47.

It had been mostly sunny up to now and the weather was better than at any other time during the last week. Since it was the first time we had been on the Ridge in clear weather, we were very thrilled to pick out the peaks and to trace our route—and how far it looked !

We were off again after 35 mins with considerably increased energy. We reached the Thearlaich-Dubh gap just after 6 p.m. amidst a spit of rain ; as we were all wearing vibrams it was a relief to see that this had not appreciably wet the rocks. We roped down the short side and Vin, still wearing his heavy rucksack, led off in great style up the other side, which I found distinctly awkward with a rucksack. We took just over 20 mins from one side of the gap to the other.

It had now stopped raining and the weather looked fairly settled, although overcast, so that we all began to feel that at last we had a real chance of completing the expedition. We pushed on as fast as was practicable to take advantage of the fine weather, and to save time attained the top of Sgurr Mhic Coinnich by means of Collie's

Ledge. Vin very cunningly here allowed Ron and me to get ahead and then nipped up a shorter route to reach the summit well before us. We were now getting our second wind and I think we were all going fairly well.

The top of An Stac was reached at 7.53. We scrambled up the long side of the Inaccessible Pinnacle and were on the summit at 8.00. We roped down the short side, leaving behind a spare sling which we had used for the abseil, and reached Sgurr Dearg at 8.08.

We had rather a nebulous arrangement to meet our supporting party on Sgurr Banachdich at 9.30 but we were now beginning to have doubts about meeting them since we were well ahead of schedule and anxious to press on to make use of the remaining daylight. Not meeting them would be a serious matter, for our water supply was exhausted and we were being troubled by thirst. Banachdich was in fact reached just after 8.30. We carried on in the hope that our much needed drink had attained the Ridge farther down and was walking towards us. At 9.20 we were on the top of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh. Ear-splitting howls from Vin produced no positive response, only some very impressive echoes. We were more than relieved, therefore, when on descending a short distance, we met one of the supporting party climbing up towards us. They had considered the possibility of our being early and had gained the Ridge by way of An Doras Gully, farther along than originally planned.

The sun was now low and the sky to the north was deep orange with the hills of the Outer Hebrides very clear and black, standing in a sea of red, a rich reward for the week of bad weather. A more material reward, however, was the refreshment dealt out as we lazed in the shelter of An Doras Gully, for our friends had brought with them a small pressure stove, and hot soup was followed by pints of the most wonderful tea I have ever tasted.

We reluctantly left in just under the hour, and at 10.35, from the rocks above, watched the sun slowly sink behind the islands. It was still quite light and Vin was very anxious to get Bidein Druim nan Ramh behind him since he had had trouble on his previous attempt on the ridge in finding his route off. He assured us that once we were off Bidein we should have easy going for some time, and that we should be able to speed on easily through the night—once we were off Bidein! This constant reference to the terrors of Bidein

was having its effect ; I needed no urging for the next slice of Ridge and we gained the summit in fine time. We dropped straight off ; although the descent was quite sensational at one part, I was expecting such frightful difficulties that the actuality seemed by comparison easy. Unfortunately the easy bit from there on that Vin had promised us seemed, if only by comparison again, extremely hard, and as it was now dark our progress was slow. I was in front when we dropped off An Caisteal and led off much too far to the right, which involved us in a traverse along a narrow ledge to regain the route. At one point the only means of progress was a stomach crawl ; watching the vague shapes of Ron and Vin coming along after me, I was not sorry it had been too dark to appreciate the steepness and height of the wall while on it myself.

Since it was by now nearly 12.30 and unlikely to get darker, we decided to halt for a further rest and to pass away profitably as much of the short night as possible. However, although it was very pleasant where we were and not really cold (considering the height and time of day), we were cool enough after some forty minutes to be glad to be on the move again. In spite of our lavish refreshment earlier on, we were all again thirsty and our main topic of conversation during our slow progress along the next part of the Ridge was whether we should find the spring below Sgurr a' Fionn Choire in the dark. Fortunately, after about 20 mins of searching in very poor light we heard a trickle of water and were soon able to slake our thirsts.

The next obstacle was the Bhasteir Tooth. Our morale being at a very low ebb at this time of the morning, we were not keen to tackle this until the light was a little better. By the time we had left the spring at 2.50 it was early dawn and when we had reached the foot of the Tooth and had roped up it was light enough to see (if rather dimly) footholds and handholds without the use of a torch. Naismith's Route is not hard, although an attractive climb, but we took a long time, partly owing to the difficulty of finding suitable belays in the half light. Having surmounted this, the last real difficulty on the Ridge, we were in high spirits. The awkward overhanging chimney that had to be climbed before gaining the top of Am Basteir was treated very light-heartedly ; Vin, climbing on Ron's shoulders and head and being pushed hard from behind by me, went up like a rocket ; I, being last, was lifted bodily off the



ground by the other two until I was jammed tight in the chimney and could only gain further height by insisting on a merely tight rope. Speaking for myself, I was feeling distinctly tired by now but the whole Ridge is so full of interest that fatigue was seldom noticeable except on something really strenuous.

With the dawn the clouds had dropped, making route-finding none too easy up to Sgurr nan Gillean; we had some difficulty in finding a route back to its ridge when we inadvertently found ourselves traversing off to the left. The route we did eventually take involved us in some quite interesting climbing. We continued up the ridge and when we could get no higher decided we must be on the summit. It was then 4.37; we had taken 12 hours 37 minutes from leaving Gars-bheinn.

In Vin's view the Ridge was not yet completed since Sgurr na h-Uamha (2,420 ft), which lies at the end of a connecting ridge from Gillean, had to be included. Actually this proved most interesting and involved us in very fine scrambling on the roughest of gabbro yet encountered. This extreme roughness had its drawbacks after so much climbing since my finger tips were wearing rather thin. On enquiring later from Ron I found that his finger tips were almost entirely undamaged; I am not sure whether this was due to the undoubtedly greater delicacy of his climbing or to the hardness induced on his fingers by his playing the double bass. The top of Sgurr na h-Uamha was reached at 5.45 and although Vin did cast longing eyes at Blaven we managed to convince him that it was not a true continuation of the main Ridge and that the next major step in our expedition was to reach Sligachan in time for breakfast.

It was a weary trudge to Sligachan and although the weather had been very kind to us up to now it was raining when we arrived. We found that the bus for Glen Brittle was due to leave in a few minutes; Ron, feeling no doubt he had earned his ride, jumped on board; Vin and I, on the other hand, felt we had earned our breakfast, which in view of our unshaven and unkempt appearance we had by ourselves in a room that we gathered was normally reserved for servants.

By the time we left Sligachan the weather had changed and it was in hot sun that we started the walk back to Glen Brittle. My feet now being very sore, I found the start painful but after a short

distance I settled down to a fairly comfortable plod and soon began to appreciate the wonderful views of the Cuillin on the first really fine day during our stay in Skye. Glen Brittle barn was reached in just over 23 hours after leaving it the previous day and although Vin was fresh enough to go out for a further walk in the afternoon I was not at all sorry to rest.