

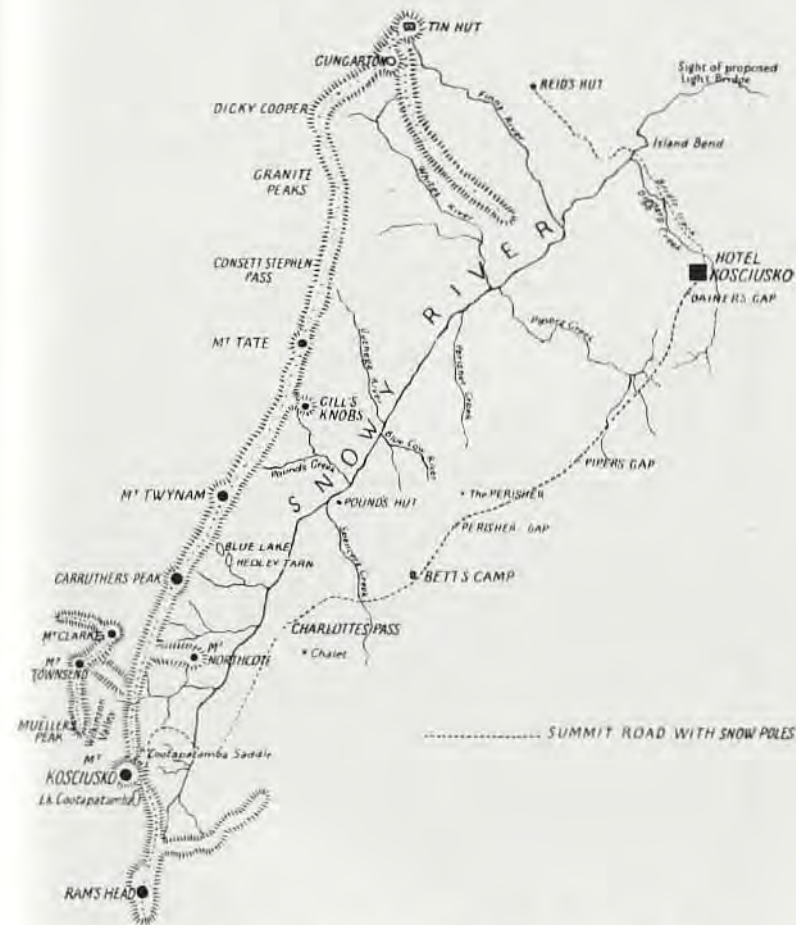
# The Retreat from the Main Range

(By L. G. Teece.)

The unfortunate tragedy of the 1928 season, wherein Hayes and Seaman lost their lives, has given rise to much speculation and discussion with regard to the actual causes which led to these fatalities. Seaman's body was found in proximity to the road, within two miles of the Summit, at a spot where nobody should ever be lost, provided that he observes ordinary reasonable precautions. In all probability Seaman was never actually lost and could have followed the snow posts unaided and thus returned to Betts Camp. In all likelihood he was overcome by cold and fatigue whilst waiting for his companion. Hayes's body, on the other hand, was found to the south of Rawson's Pass, in the direction of Cootapatamba, and, as I will point out, this is the only region where a ski-runner is likely to be hopelessly and irretrievably lost. Since this has occurred much discussion has taken place as to the best course to pursue if suddenly overtaken by bad weather whilst on any part of the Main Range, and the purpose of this article is to point out the various routes to safety which should be followed in such an eventuality.

An examination of the map will show that the road from the Hotel to the Summit, the Snowy River and the Main Range form three almost parallel lines, running from the north to the south. These lines are, of course, not actually parallel, but gradually converge, and may all be regarded as finally meeting at the Cootapatamba Saddle, just below the Summit. Approximately the Hotel Kosciusko, Island Bend on the Snowy River, and Tin Hut on the Main Range, lie opposite to one another, and, as the crow flies, Tin Hut and the Hotel are about eight miles apart, though to travel by the nearest ski-ing route involves a journey of twenty-eight miles.

The first point to recognise is that in the event of really bad weather no runner could survive for long on the Main Range itself, and if he were attempting to travel against the wind his rate of progress would be negligible. If travelling in the teeth of a strong blizzard, it is not uncommon for the runner to be actually blown off his feet, and under such conditions a strong skier would soon be exhausted. Thus the first step in an emergency is to descend by the easiest and quickest route from the Main Range. In the Snowy River Valley lies comparative safety. Kosciusko itself is the southernmost limit of the range, so far as the ski-runner is concerned. Let us first consider,



Map showing the country dealt with in Dr. Teece's article. The bridge track to Reid's Hut does not at present go beyond the Snowy; and the proposed light footbridge is wanted on this track at Island Bend and not where shown.



therefore, the course to be adopted on the sudden onset of bad weather whilst on the Summit itself.

There are two routes from the Summit. The first is to descend directly to Rawson Pass at the Cootapatamba Saddle, and the second is to travel north down the more gradual slope which leads to the saddle between Kosciusko and Northcote. Rawson Pass is the more usual route in fine weather, and in bad weather it offers the attraction of speedily bringing the runner in touch with the snow posts, whence the journey home is easy. Rawson Pass, however, has very decided disadvantages at times of bad visibility. Kosciusko is not an actual peak, but rather an elongated mound, and even in fine weather on leaving the actual Summit one cannot actually see Rawson Pass. It is always necessary to run down cautiously for the first hundred feet till you can actually see the Pass below you. Usually one can only run off the Summit on to the Pass along a strip about a hundred yards wide, and on either side of this strip are huge cornices, a fall over which might easily be fatal. Thus if the range of visibility be reduced to a few yards it might well be impossible to find Rawson Pass at all. If one keeps too far south and is fortunate enough to avoid the cornices, one will emerge into the practically unknown country near Lake Cootapatamba, probably without recognising one's whereabouts and with no land marks with which to find the right track. No one has ever skied in this part, and anyone who found himself here, in a dense fog, could only find his way out of this valley by means of a compass, and if he were unaware of his location he would be much puzzled by the long climb which would be necessary to get out of this valley up on to Etheridge or the Ram's Head. If he had run down from the Summit into this valley and imagined that in missing Rawson Pass he had gone to the north of it, his natural inclination would be to follow the fall of the ground under the impression that he was descending into the Snowy Valley, whereas the fall of the country south of Rawson Pass would really lead him into the precipitous and densely wooded valleys towards the Victorian border, from whence he would probably never emerge.

One hears, in general discussion, much about the value of following any particular watershed, in order to find one's way, but this is no easy matter in a fog. In a really dense fog it is at times difficult to tell whether you are travelling on the level or down hill. The level country which lies ahead will often appear a steep slope. If you are standing in a depression in the ground you cannot tell whether you are at the foot of a long, steady climb or whether two hundred yards advance will bring you to the

rim of this depression and thence to a descent. Thus when the only guide to the proper direction is to follow the general fall of the ground, simple though it sounds, it is often a very confusing task. In fine weather one does not notice the dips and depressions or the momentary ascents which mark the site of any hill. Thus in a fog one is frequently perplexed by finding oneself travelling up hill when one believes that the right course should involve a continuous descent. It is, therefore, necessary to carry a compass on every expedition, however short it may be, or however confident one may be of one's knowledge of the country. The portion of the country that is most frequented by ski-runners is in reality a long strip of no great width, and, even if the runner be totally lost by setting a course due east, he will at the worst gain the comparative shelter of wooded country within a very few miles. If one steers in an easterly direction from the Summit of Kosciusko itself, a journey of less than three miles will bring him to the precipitous margin of the Thredbo Gorge, and he would soon recognise it by its precipitous nature, its freedom from cornices and the fact that one enters thick timber after descending the first few hundred feet. If, however, one got caught on the Summit in bad weather, the difficulty of finding Rawson Pass and getting off the Summit may prevent the adoption of this plan. In bad visibility I consider it far safer to resist the temptation of looking for Rawson Pass and the quickest route to the snow posts; it is safer to travel north, down the easier slope to the saddle between Northcote and Kosciusko. This slope possesses certain characteristics which are an unfailing guide under any conditions. It is a steady unvarying descent, which one follows in a straight line, since it is not too steep to take straight and there is not even a single momentary ascent to confuse him. On either side of the correct route the ground falls away very sharply. On its westerly side are numerous large rocky outcrops, and one must always keep to the right of these. On the eastern side there are no rocks, but the fall is very precipitous, so that there is no temptation to get too far to the east. You know at once when the saddle is reached, for its surface is quite flat and it is about 150 yards wide. At this point a right angle turn is made towards the east, and an easy, though fairly steep run brings one into a wide, flat valley. He continues almost due east, travelling on flat ski, on an almost imperceptible descent, till he reaches the unmistakable banks of the Snowy River; though over the last 400 yards the descent steepens markedly. Once the Snowy River is reached all danger is at an end. It can be followed down to Charlotte's Pass,



and then a steep hill climbed and the snow posts reached. If the weather be too bad to determine when you are opposite Charlotte's Pass you can continue along the Snowy River till you reach Spencer's Creek, which is the first big creek which comes in on the right hand side, and from here it is only a few hundred yards to Pounds' Creek Hut.

Though the other peaks at this end of the range, namely, Northcote, Carruthers' Peak, Twynam and Gill's Knobs, lie much further away from the road and the guiding snow posts, no difficulty should ever be experienced in travelling home from them—even in a dense fog. It is only necessary to be assured that one has started to descend in a general easterly direction and then to keep on descending till one reaches the Snowy River. The fall of the ground is, in places, very steep, and you may have to make several detours to avoid cornices, but one cannot go wrong if one follows the natural inclination to keep on going down. From all of these peaks, with the exception of Gill's Knobs, the Snowy River is certain to be reached above Spencer's Creek and Pounds' Creek Hut. The descent from Gill's Knobs certainly does not land you at the Snowy River, but it lands you in Pounds' Creek Valley, and this creek is identifiable, even when the snow is exceptionally deep, and can be readily followed down to the Snowy River.

As regards the peaks which lie north of the Consett Stephen Pass, namely, Granite Peaks and Gungartan, the way from them to the Snowy River is unmistakable, but one may not be so happy when one gets there, and in places the descent may be extremely unpleasant. The Ski Club members have had some chequered experiences in descending to the Snowy River from this region. When the 1926 Kiandra expedition sought to escape from Tin Hut, when their food supplies were exhausted, a typical blizzard rendered travelling along the range impossible, and they accordingly followed the only alternative plan and descended straight to the Snowy River along the Finn's River Valley. That was an exceptionally bad year for snow, and, after descending the first thousand feet down a moderate grade and through comparatively treeless country, they reached the snow line, where they abandoned their skis. The last thousand feet to the Snowy River was densely wooded, tremendously precipitous and covered with thick undergrowth. Had this been snow-covered it would have been impossible country to ski on, yet the party after reaching the Snowy and crossing it would have needed their skis to travel the remaining four miles to the Hotel. As it was, there was no snow anywhere near the Hotel, and the distance was easily walked. However, in a

year of good snow, the descent from Tin Hut to the Snowy would have been a stupendous undertaking. It might involve a climb down a thousand feet, through dense undergrowth, carrying one's skis and with the snow up to one's knees. I believe this could be done successfully, but it would be beyond the stamina of anyone who was not absolutely fit. This 1926 party were extremely fortunate that it was such a bad year for snow, as shortage of food forced them to evacuate Tin Hut whilst the blizzard still raged, and this was the only possible route home, for travelling along the Main Range would have been quite out of the question under the existing weather conditions. They had by no means a bad journey, except for the crossing of the Snowy River, which was chest deep and about fifty yards wide and running very strongly, so that they had some difficulty in keeping their feet. Every runner carries in his rucksack a pair of light shoes to wear in the huts in the evenings, and it is a very wise plan to put these on whilst crossing, even a moderately deep stream, for the bottom is always rough and stony, and with shoes on the feet you can cross any river in less than half the time that is necessary with bare feet. Should the current sweep you off your feet, as nearly happened to several of the party, light shoes would never seriously inconvenience anyone attempting to swim; though in truth the current is far too rapid to allow for swimming, and you would be swept down the river till you were able to seize a convenient rock. In a good snow year the river would be much lower and would, therefore, be much easier to cross, though you would be hampered by the additional burden of carrying skis, which would be essential for the four miles' journey from the Snowy to the Hotel. Nowadays, however, Tin Hut is so relatively comfortable and is kept so well stocked with food that anyone would prefer to spend a week there waiting for the weather to moderate rather than follow the Finn's River route to the Hotel.

Gungartan lies only about a mile south of Tin Hut, and the usual route crosses the saddle between its two peaks. In moderately bad weather one can get over the Gungartan Saddle from Tin Hut, as has already twice been done. The party who made the first unsuccessful attempt on Jagungal returned from Tin Hut in moderately bad conditions by this route. Once over the Gungartan Saddle the way to White's River Saddle is easy downhill running, and is possible under all conditions. From White's River Saddle there are three possible routes home. The standard route, and one of the finest runs in the mountains under good weather conditions, is along the top of Granite Peaks to the Consett Stephen Pass; this would be quite impossible,



even in a moderate blizzard, as these peaks are high and very much exposed. Gordon's party, in 1928, after failing to climb Jagungal, reached White's River Saddle in bad weather, and accordingly ran down the left bank of the river to escape the weather; they followed it to its junction with the Snowy and came home up Piper's Creek. They found the same conditions, which I have already stated, would exist in Finn's River Valley in a good year of snow. They encountered very precipitous slopes that were densely wooded, had to carry their skis for several miles, and altogether had a most unenviable experience. There is yet a third route home, which has never yet been followed in bad weather, though it has been traversed in the reverse direction under good conditions, but on this occasion it was by accident and not by design. The abortive first attempt of the Kiandra-Kosciusko traverse followed this route, which lies along the eastern side of the range on the slopes which fall from Granite Peaks to the Snowy. When this party reached the southern end of Granite Peaks they encountered nothing but ice, and in their search for good going they ran sharply down to some three hundred feet on the eastern side below the crest of the range. There soft snow was soon encountered, and they then pushed forward at this altitude till they reached White's River Valley, about 500 feet below the saddle. This journey, however, took nearly three hours, and must be fully twice the length of the direct route along the top of Granite Peaks. These eastern slopes of Granite Peaks are much broken up by gullies which, though never very deep, are extremely numerous, and one is forced to traverse around the shoulders of successive hills. No one would ever choose to follow this course in fine weather, but it is tolerably well sheltered, and when the more direct route is impossible this alternative journey should be quite practicable. From the Consett Stephen Pass, which separates Granite Peaks from Mount Tate, the natural way home is down the Guthega Valley to the Snowy, which is reached only a mile and a half north of Pounds' Hut. When one stands on the top of the Pass this appears to be a most enticing run, but it is most deceptive, for the snow nearly always falls badly in the lower and more sheltered part of the valley. This is an eminently safe route, but by virtue of bitter experience every one prefers, in fine weather, to travel from the Pass along Mount Tate to Gill's Knobs, and then run down Pounds' Creek Valley.

Thus in all that part of the range, which runs from Gungartan to Kosciusko itself, the ski-runner is never in any real danger if overtaken by bad weather. However, the problem is a much more difficult one when we come to

that part of the range from Kiandra to Gungartan. In travelling between these two points one must descend at some portion of the route into the Happy Jack Valley, which lies on the western side of the range. Everywhere else the ski-ing grounds lie on its eastern side, and it is on the eastern side that all habitation lies. The spur which terminates in Jagungal, lies still further to the west, and thus the Happy Jack Valley is bounded on the west by the Jagungal Spur, and on the east by the Main Range, and from here, as elsewhere, the line of retreat in bad weather conditions must always be towards the east. To escape from the Jagungal Spur in bad weather, probably the best method is to seek refuge in Farm Ridge Hut. Unfortunately, the location of this hut is known to very few runners, and it is not an easy hut to find; further, it contains neither food nor blankets. Happy Jack Valley itself is usually tolerably well filled with snow, and is open and exposed so that no shelter is to be found here. One would have to travel many miles to the east and cross the Main Range to emerge from the snow country in this locality. Until more runners become acquainted with the situation of Farm Ridge and this hut is properly stocked, the journey from Kiandra to Gungartan will always be a more or less anxious one, to be undertaken only in perfect weather and at top speed, lest a storm should break while the ski-runners are equidistant between these points. Unfortunately, no Kosciusko skier has ever stayed at Farm Ridge and explored the surrounding country, and for some time, at least, we will always be dependent on the guidance of Kiandra runners when traversing this part of the range. The Tin Hut at Gungartan must be regarded as forming at present the northern boundary of the ski-ing grounds of Kosciusko, and, as has been pointed out in this article, we now possess sound knowledge of the different routes to be adopted whenever we are assailed by bad weather in this part of the range. Provided that ski-runners adhere to the rule of always travelling in parties in adequate size and each party includes at least one skier who has a thorough knowledge of the mountains, there need never be a repetition of the unfortunate and unnecessary accident of 1928.