

An Expedition to Gungartan and Tin Hut, 1932

By H. G. Pursell.

[Though the Tin Hut has been frequently used by the Ski Club of Australia, both on Kiandra traverses and trips to Jagungal, the tour described below, by Messrs. Pursell and Hellyer, of the Snow Sports Club, was peculiar for the fact that it was made on home-made ski. It was also, so far as we can find, the only long trip made in that district in 1932.—Editor.]

It is our fixed conviction, that were more skiers to adventure on to the Main Range, to explore its mysteries and to study its vagaries, such a trail would be blazed as would hasten the opening up of one of the finest snowfields in the world. With its noble and commanding slopes it is a veritable skier's paradise, with a fascination that will not be denied by any who have come under its spell.

Our expedition was made possible by the courtesy of the Ski Club of Australia, who made the Tin Hut available to us, and through the assistance and information given by Dr. Laidley, of that club. The journey was made late in the season, in September, but the thrill of crossing fresh fields more than repaid the effort entailed. It would appear as if Gungartan exercised a mysterious "hoodoo" over the Tin Hut, nestling on its breast. I believe that, during the last few years several different expeditions to Jagungal have failed, until the successful ascent of 1928. For myself, at least, I know that, having looked on the promised land of all keen skiers, I am filled by an earnest desire to explore. The mighty Jagungal, rising in splendour from its glistening attendants, seems as if only waiting for someone to break its silence with the swish of swiftly moving ski. So far as we know, only two organised expeditions have climbed it on ski in all its history.

A start was made from the Hotel on the 4th September, after a hearty breakfast. Each had a pack up and carried a pair of ski, with a spare pair to which were lashed our provisions. The day was not at all inviting, being wet and squally, with the snow soft and slushy. After tramping to the Smiggin Holes through the mud, we eventually came to skiable snow and made a slow passage to Betts Camp, arriving there in the afternoon, wringing wet and with sore heels into the bargain. To add to our discomfort, there was no axe at the hut, but we soon had a welcome blaze in the big open fireplace, and after a hearty meal hung our clothes out to dry and turned in. The following day, Monday, broke dull and cold with a light fall of snow. Leaving Betts' at 11 a.m. we crossed Spencer's Creek below the camp, as the thaw was setting in fast and, in fact, all the creeks were open and running. A fair run was made down Spencer's Valley following the creek, the only difficulty being in steering the ski sled through the trees. Light "sago" snow continued to fall until after midday, when we sighted the Snowy and sunshine. Un-

happily Hellyer had a fall, when running down to Pounds' Hut and twisted his knee. This unfortunate occurrence kept us at Pounds' the following day. On Wednesday, Hellyer's knee being much better and the day fine, we decided to start for Gungartan, but as the only way of getting across the now swollen Snowy seemed to be by crossing Spencer's and climbing across on the rocks, near the junction of the creek and the Snowy, we abandoned the attempt. Eventually, in the afternoon, we found a spot just opposite Pounds' Hut where, with the aid of an old ladder, we could bridge from rock to rock, across the lashing water. On this afternoon we saw the strange phenomenon of clouds suddenly sinking into Pounds' Creek Valley, borne on a swift air current, so that in a few moments everything was obliterated in a still silent shroud. Even the sun was hidden and the early afternoon became like a grey twilight, with visibility at only one or two yards. After this experience I always eyed even distant low clouds with awe and a healthy respect. Thursday morning being dull but still, with the clouds riding high, we decided to start with only our packs, containing a spare change of clothes, bread, chocolate, meat and tea, with some kerosene, spare bindings and rope. After an early breakfast we emerged about 9 a.m. from the hut with red eyes, looking like smoked herrings, and an observer might have been excused for thinking that we had just managed to escape from an inferno. Smoke there was in volumes, from the atrocious stove, and only the flame was lacking to give realism to the picture.

But leave the hut and follow us over our ladder bridge, then across Pounds' Creek, and face the heart-breaking climb on to the Main Range. Travelling over icy snow on a long traverse, we came out high above the right tributary of Pounds' Creek. This we followed ever upwards, coming out of the valley just below Gill's Knobs, and climbed on to mighty Tate itself. Here we stopped for a much-needed breather, and checked over our course. By this time the clouds had dispersed and the hot sun had begun to melt the surface, rendering the snow wet and slushy. From Mount Tate a magnificent view was obtained of the Main Range. Away to the north the snow country seemed to stretch in interminable waves, whilst where we stood we seemed to be poised on a narrow ridge which fell away steeply on either side, to the Snowy on the east and the deep chasm of Geehi on the west. On the range itself, to the north, Jagungal proudly reared up from the surrounding plateau, like a mountainous gleaming pearl, seeming quite close in the clear atmosphere. We decided to make the Snowy River valley our guide, and after checking our direction by compass, we ran down off Tate and around the high avalanche cornice which marks its eastern side. Although the snow was slow the grade compensated, and a fair run soon brought us down on to the Consett Stephen Pass. The scenery was magnificent, especially on the western side, where the stark standing timber studded the white snow with long, trailing shadows, gradually merging to blues and greens of lower altitudes, with the deep purplish haze shrouding the cavernous river valleys. Through this artist's paradise we mushed along through slushy snow until the Granite Peaks hove

into sight, with White's River valley branching on our right, and Gungartan in the near distance.

The run from the pass had been over undulating country, with one good run, down which Hellyer, with his wide ski, raced along, far out on to the plain. Our goal, from the summit of the Granite Peaks, seemed to be separated from us by a deep valley which appeared to run right through the range. As a matter of fact, there is a small saddle separating White's River valley from the tributary of the Geehi, but it is well down below the crest, and we did not discover it until upon our return journey. The run off the peaks was steep and fast, and misfortune again snapped at our heels, for, in taking a fall, Hellyer badly split the tip of his ski. Although not broken right off, it made fast running both difficult and dangerous. As only the left ski was sound we bore away to that side and a slow, meandering run, carefully picked, brought us eventually into the valley, well to the west of the saddle. The ascent up Gungartan was slow and tedious and, with a sight of relief, we sighted before us the fence which runs over the mountain and down to the Hut. Following this to between the two peaks, where it was obliterated by heavy drifts of snow, we were at a loss as to the position of the Tin Hut, but, knowing it to be on the timber line, we eventually located it about two miles below the summit, at the head of the Finns River valley.

On arrival at the Hut we found the door open, window broken, a sheet of iron off the chimney and the Hut half full of snow. After removing the snow, which proved no mean task, and carrying out repairs to the window and chimney, we settled down beside a roaring fire, and with the inner man satisfied were soon sunk in deep sleep. During the next two days the boisterous weather compelled us to stay within and around the Hut. Taking advantage of this spell, we repaired the broken ski with the aid of two pieces of jam-tin tacked either side of the break. This repair proved quite efficient and enabled us to make our return journey without further mishap. The third day at the Hut dawned little better than the previous two but, after anxiously waiting for the weather to clear, we eventually started on our return journey to Pounds' shortly before midday. Climbing to the summit of Gungartan, the sun broke clear of the clouds, and with light hearts we made a good run down and across the saddle which we had missed on our journey out. This proved a much shorter route than via Granite Peaks. From the saddle the run back was much easier and faster, entailing very little climbing. The entire run back to the Snowy took only three hours.

From Pounds' Hut back to the Hotel the journey was made via Piper's Creek, but, the snow quickly falling, we were compelled to walk.

The self-designed and made ski used throughout proved most satisfactory and greatly increased our knowledge of ski and ski-ing. Although we were particularly fortunate in having good weather for both journeys the snow conditions throughout were bad, and we would strongly advise future expeditions to set out earlier in the season.