

The Main Range from Snowy Plains

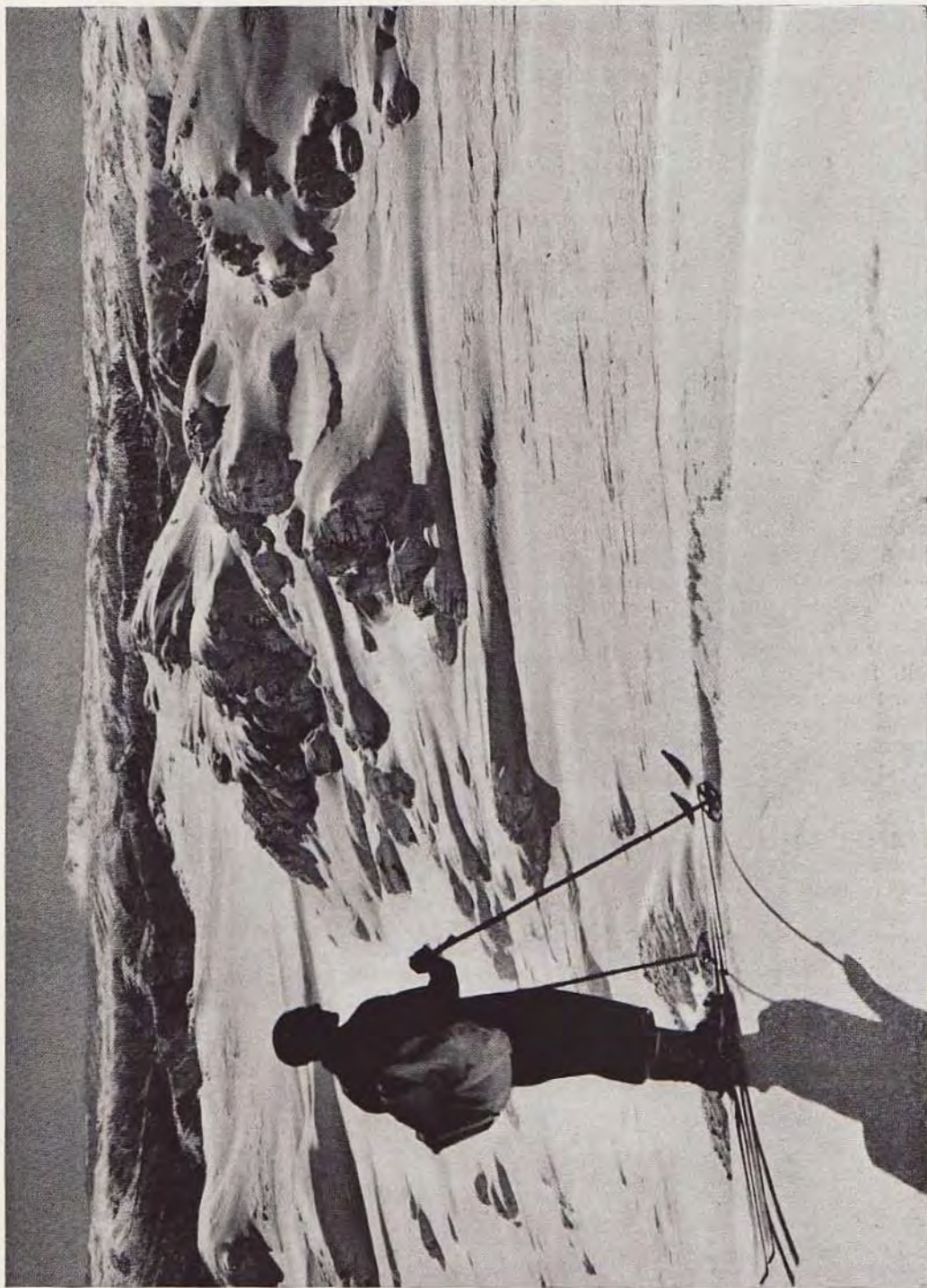
By C. P. Gilder

A glance at the map of the Kosciusko Range and the experience of various parties over the last few years suggest that the entry into the main range in the vicinity of Jagungal lies from the east. From the south the great distance between Pound's Creek and Mawson's Hut before the advent of Ray Adams' Hut at White's River, could—while under some circumstances a comparatively easy trip—be fraught with extreme difficulties in the event of bad weather in the vicinity of Gungartan. From the north, the difficult country of Happy Jack has to be negotiated, with the chance of there being insufficient snow to provide quick progress, while the western route, although a comparatively easy one, as proved by T. W. Mitchell's party of 1935, must be considered out of the question for parties travelling from N.S.W.

With these factors in mind, it was decided during the 1935 season to ascertain by personal experience the possibilities of the eastern, or Snowy Plains, route. A party consisting of V. Napier, A. Hatchman, J. Woodhill, J. McFarlane and the writer was organised, valuable assistance being obtained from Mr. Mould, of Berridale, who supplied full details as to huts and conditions *en route*. Unfortunately, the members of the party who were at Kosciusko were held up by the "famous" blizzard at Rennix Gap and did not arrive at Berridale until late Saturday night. During the evening, plans were discussed with Mr. Mould and the car drivers as to the possibilities of proceeding by car. Packs were overhauled and surplus goods discarded, equal distribution of the balance being made. An early start was made on Sunday morning and an uneventful trip brought us to the bridge across the Eucumbene, where chains were put on and the car forced its way up the Nimmo Hill for about two miles. Final instructions were received from the car drivers as to the direction of the track. This was essential as the very heavily timbered country prohibited the use of a compass for obtaining bearings. Once the track was found, no difficulty was experienced in following it, as the timber made it impossible to go astray. Soft new snow prevented fast travelling and a frequent change of leaders had to be made, as breaking trail proved most exhausting. By about two o'clock the timber had been left behind and the open country reached. Much valuable time was lost in locating Fletcher's Hut, which is in one of numerous small groups of trees, some distance out on the plains. In normal snow conditions this difficulty would not be experienced, as a well-defined track leads right to the hut.

As Snowy Plains House was the objective for the first night, no time was wasted at Fletcher's. Icicles hanging from the roof provided water for a quick cup of tea and the party pushed on to the banks of the Gungarlin River, about half a mile away. The map shows a river crossing just below Fletcher's Hut, but unfortunately this crossing was too wide and open to be attempted on foot, so a more suitable place was sought; valuable time was wasted in searching and eventually, when a likely-looking spot had been found, it was too late in the evening to push on, so Fletcher's Hut was the camping-place for the night.

Monday morning broke very clear and a steady barometer made the trip look very inviting. Had the party known the conditions to be met later in the day, they would not have been quite so cheerful when setting off that



A. Ford.

North from Mt. Townsend. In the top left corner is the northern end of the Grey Mare's Ridge, with the Geehi Valley below. Jagungal is on the skyline and the Main Range in the top right corner.

morning. Some excitement was experienced during the crossing of the Gungarlin River. One of the party, in throwing his ski across the river, misjudged the distance and was rewarded by watching it slide back into the fast running water. He was faced with the unenviable job of having to jump into three feet of icy water, fully clothed, to prevent his ski being carried under an ice bridge some hundred yards long, where recovery would have been doubtful. A brisk rub down and an issue of rum all round soon had the party warm again after the crossing, and the journey continued across the plains in the direction of Naphthali's Snowy Plains House, which, standing well out from the timbered country is very easily located. The party was surprised to find Bill Naphthali and his mate in residence in the hut, in fact more surprised than they were to see skiers in that section of the country. Bill Naphthali accompanied us for about a mile from the hut and pointed out the way to Spencer's Peak Hut, where we hoped to spend the night.

A sharp climb of about two miles up Teddy's Creek led to the open and undulating country of the Snowy Plains; the main range itself being, by this time, clouded over by fog, a dead compass course north-west was followed. At 3 p.m. a halt was called for refreshments and two of the party set out to try and locate either Turner's or Wallace's Hut, on Bull's Peak Creek. They were unsuccessful, but were rewarded by getting a good compass bearing on the prominent Bull's Peaks to the south-west. Conditions by this time were bad and, after a conference, it was decided to turn south and, if possible, push right through to Mawson's Hut some 10 miles distant. The western bank of Bull's Peak River was followed and eventually the steep eastern slope of Bull's Peak reached. The climb from here to the top proved most exhausting, especially to those members of the party who were on ski for the first time for 12 months. The very heavy snowfall of the last few days made the eastern face of Bull's Peak an avalanche slope; in fact in many places the cornice had fallen, taking with it immense blocks of snow; further progress was impossible, so the party turned north to attempt to get on to the tops through a pass about a mile north of Bull's Peaks. Eventually the top was reached, and the full force of the wind experienced.

The trip along Bull's Peaks, I think, will long live in the memory of members of the party. It was an extraordinary sight to look around and see the men as they struggled through tunnelled snow and ice, occasionally having to drop on to their hands to prevent being blown over. Visibility was getting worse and extreme caution was required to prevent numerous fatiguing falls over small cornices. After about an hour, only about a mile had been covered, so we decided to make for the sheltered eastern slopes of the Peaks to spend the night. Turning east the party were literally blown off the range, on one occasion the leader causing some consternation by disappearing from view, having dropped over a cornice some 20 feet deep. His main worry whilst falling, was not as to what would happen to him when he hit the bottom, but exactly what would happen if the remainder of the party followed after him. Fortunately, the next in line stopped and edged very carefully forward to find out what had happened. The timber was soon reached and a sheltered position picked. Some set about digging a hole some 6 feet by 6 feet in the snow, whilst other collected fire-wood. Reviewed in retrospect I do not think any of the party regret that night out. Having once faced with a night in the open and safely weathering it under extreme conditions, lends a wonderful sense of security in the event of an objective

not being located by night-fall. For those who have yet to try their first night in the open in snow the experiences of this party are worth recording. The position picked for the camp was on a steep slope, so the dug-out, whilst about 6 feet deep at the back, ran away to nothing at the front. A rough structure of ski, branches and water-proof sheets made the top quite weather-proof, the floor of the dug-out being well covered with small green branches. At first an attempt was made to light a fire in the front of the dug-out, but little warmth was obtained in this manner, and the smoke made conditions unbearable. Eventually, a small fire was lit in one of the back corners, the water-proof sheets on the top being pulled back to allow the fire to draw. This proved very successful and although a big blaze could not be maintained sufficient warmth was obtained to dry out wet clothing. The night was divided into sections and as we had five sleeping bags, each of us was able to get about one and a half hour's sleep.

During the early stages of digging in, a rum issue was suggested; it has yet to be proved whether it was the altitude or the lack of solid food during the day that was responsible for the extraordinary effect that rum issue had upon all members of the party. On Tuesday morning, as can be imagined, a very early start was made. The wind had dropped and in its place a thick fog enshrouded the entire country, so a dead compass course south-west was set for Mawson's Hut. Although foggy, the weather was extremely cold, gloves being covered in white frost crystals. McFarlane was leading and, in the bad visibility, led the party under an overhanging cornice. Making away from it, we had proceeded only a short distance when a dull roar was heard and we were amazed to see the whole cornice for about 200 yards sliding down the hill, completely obliterating our tracks. The peculiar red discolouration of the snow noticed during the season made this sight all the more extraordinary, as it slid over the top covering of white snow. At last an open valley was reached and much discussion took place as to whether or not it was the Valentine. Fortunately, at this stage the tops cleared of fog and bearings were obtained on Jagungal from the top of the Kerries, which placed us well south and past Mawson's Hut. Running down into the valley again we soon picked up the fence round Mawson's Hut and after some little searching found the hut itself.

The following morning we hoped to climb Jagungal. High cloud obscured the tops, but conditions were not bad and we set off west in the direction of Grey Mare Mines, which we hoped to visit *en route*. On leaving the



From the door of Seaman Hut

hut we met Gelling and Telfer who appeared from the direction of Jagungal on their trip across from Kiandra. During the morning conditions improved somewhat and we decided to cut out the visit to the Mine and make straight for Jagungal. We were well rewarded by the magnificent panorama from the top. The western face of Jagungal drops practically sheer to the headwaters of the Tumut River, with the Toolong Range standing up most impressively beyond. To the north, the whole of the Happy Jack country with its numerous small creeks and hills lay spread out like a map. To the east, Bull's Peak marked the edge of the visible snow country; away beyond, one looked out over the grazing country of Dalgety, while to the south the range beyond Gungartan, with Townsend, in the far distance, formed a most impressive contrast to the rugged and impassable Geehi country. Unfortun-



On Etheridge Range. Seaman Hut below.

A. Ford.

ately, the run off Jagungal had to be taken with the utmost care, as the snow was badly rutted by wind. As we looked back on Jagungal we congratulated ourselves on having pushed on, as thick cloud gradually obscured the whole of the top. A quick run back brought us to Mawson's Hut by four o'clock.

On Thursday morning a falling barometer advised us that we would be wise to get through to the Chalet before bad weather isolated us in the hut. A course slightly west of south was set across the Kerries, a cold biting wind preventing us from examining the surrounding country. Owing to the extremely heavy snow, some difficulty was experienced at White's River Saddle in climbing up to the Rolling Grounds. Owing to the wind we had to make our way along the eastern side of the range, where cornices had brought down large rocks and we were very glad when eventually the doubt-

ful security of the higher country was reached. Once again, we experienced the conditions existing at Bull's Peaks some nights previously, although, fortunately, this time were not faced with a night in the open. In many places snow was supplanted by hard rutted ice, with numerous deep wind-scoured furrows. Consett Stephen Pass was eventually reached and a short stop called; we looked forward with eagerness to the run down the Guthega River to the Snowy. This run, which, under good conditions, should be one of the finest on the range, unfortunately, was marred by a heavy thaw and, in consequence, we pushed the whole way down. Crossing the Snowy at the junction of the Guthega and the Blue Cow Creek, Pound's Creek Hut was eventually reached. The hut is visible for about a mile down the Snowy; it is most exhausting after a strenuous day to see it so close and yet, push as hard as one may, apparently never getting any nearer. After a rest and a billy of tea at Pound's Hut, the trip to Spencer's Creek began. This section was the climax to bad weather, heavy rain by this time having turned the snow into slush; the party pushed on with much muttering and cursing. At Sugar Loaf the party divided, three of the members deciding to go right through to the Hotel that night, the other two returning to the Chalet. The sight of the Chalet looming up through the fog was one of the most welcome on the trip.

Those of the party who returned to the Hotel must, I think, have put up almost a record for endurance at Kosciusko. Some thirty miles had been covered during the day under the most trying conditions of ice, wind, rain, thaw and fog. The fact that some of them had had only five days on the snow during the year makes their performance all the more creditable. The trip, as a whole, had been successful, although we had not accomplished all we had wished to do. Huts on the Bull's Peaks Creek had not been located; we had been unsuccessful in reaching Spencer's Peak and bad visibility and conditions had forced us to push on quickly, whereas under normal circumstances we would have been able to take stock of the surrounding country for future reference. Nevertheless, our main object in proving the value of the eastern route had been accomplished—subsequent summer trips having shown that, given normal conditions, Mawson's Hut could be as accessible as the Chalet. Jagungal had been climbed and an immense amount of invaluable experience and confidence gained by all members of the party.

