

Mechanical Mountaineering

T. W. Mitchell

THE party consisted of Bill Littlejohn and Ossie Rixon (in the latter's jeep); and Elyne and I (plus Roley, the sheep dog) in "Iris" (our jeep). We had planned to go from here (Towong Hill Station) to Charlotte's Pass, partly to see the much discussed catchment area, and partly out of devilment because some of the local bushmen said it could not be done.

Our first job was to get from the Bringenbrong Bridge (850 feet a.s.l.) up to the top of the Broadway Top (5100 feet) in the Dargal Mountains. The first trouble happened at about the 3000 foot level on a steep siding above the 250 foot almost sheer drop into the gorge at the bottom of the Khan-coban Falls. Here Bill slipped sideways with Ossie's jeep which fortunately stuck sideways against a tree. A shower of stones disappearing into the tree tops below indicated where we might have gone. He was pulled back to safety by means of our short wire rope that was taken from the front of the stricken jeep straight up the hillside and

then turned through 90 degrees round a tree and fastened to "Iris's" pintle-hook. Elyne then drove "Iris" forward with two of us riding on the uphill side and leaning out, like the crew of an eighteen-footer, to keep the top wheels on the earth.

We struck our next snap at about the 4800 foot mark on the Long Spur. Here the jeeps would not face the final 20 degree slope up into the snow gums. A good deal of cogitation and head scratching followed before the solution was found. This consisted of taking everything, food, clothes, tins, spare petrol, out of "Iris" and, with Elyne driving and we three men pushing, rushing her up to the top. We then secured a pulley to a stout snow gum. The long wire rope was then fastened to the front of Ossie's jeep (left fully loaded down the mountain) and brought up through the pulley and the other end fastened to "Iris's" front bumper bar. An inspiring spectacle was then provided by Elyne rushing backwards in "Iris" down through the mountain ash and pulling Bill

upwards in the other jeep. The two missed each other, I suppose, by about four inches; Ossie and I meanwhile trying to act as traffic cops, at the same time jumping like derbies to avoid being run down. This performance had to be repeated again before both jeeps reached the summit of the Long Spur on to the snow grass of the Broadway Top. Well after 2 p.m. we halted the jeeps on the edge of the Broadway Top's eastern fall and ate lunch looking out over the khaki-green ridges stretching out towards Jagungal.

We spent the first night camped on and beside the hut at Pugilistic Point where the Tooma River emerges from an intriguing gorge. Next morning we had to deal with a pretty awkward climb up the range behind the hut. Fallen trees, "Iris" boiling, a puncture and thick sub-alpine scrub all played their part in making progress extremely slow and laborious. It was not until late in the morning that we finally ran out on to the wide open expanse of the Bogong Swamps and halted to enjoy the unequalled view of Jagungal's dominating western flanks. That afternoon, after various vicissitudes on Strumbo and in the dark monoliths of the Rocky Plains River, we crossed the Big Bend of the Valentine and arrived at Mawson's Hut.

Next day we set off in the delicate light of the very early morning and proceeded gaily along the Kerries. But not for long. We had untold trials and tribulations getting down off the back of Gungartan on to the saddle at the head of White's River.

The events of this section were just a succession of frantic reconnaissances amongst moss-bogs and rocks; and of searchings and re-searchings of the jumbled surface of the mountain side for a possible route. We shovelled in the banks of creeks; we chopped trees; we used one jeep to pull the other out of I don't know how many slimy bogs; we built rock causeways; we shoved; and we tugged.

At long last we contrived to get down into the valley of the Dicky Cooper Creek and drove back, feeling definitely weary, up to the saddle. Here we bumped into real trouble. We could not find a route up the scarp on to the mountainous plateau lying between us and the Consett Stephen Pass. With engines roaring, time and time again, we tried all that long weary afternoon and early even-

ing. But all to no avail. Every slope that seemed practicable always ended in a short sharp lip that the jeeps—noble little triers—simply could not handle. A matter of only feet away lay the broad, gentle slopes of the range top, but we could not make it. Even Bill, our super-optimist, got depressed.

We had settled in to White's River hut for the night feeling very depressed and thoroughly frustrated when, of all people, Ray Adams rode in from a patrol after cattle. We plied him with questions especially about the one possibility that remained—the long ridge running down on the western side from the summit of Dicky Cooper on the southern side of the Dicky Cooper Creek. Ray's weather-beaten face was creased in thought in the flickering light of the hut fire. First of all he said he thought we could; then he thought we couldn't; then he thought we could; then perhaps it might be too much for us; but finally, good fellow that he is, he volunteered to drop what he was doing and come and have a "look-see" with us in the morning.

Accordingly, on the morning of the fourth day, we left the jeeps over near the head of the Dicky Cooper Creek and with Ray we climbed on foot right up to the summit of Dicky Cooper. We then set off down the ridge, slowly surveying, section by section, the whole length of the ridge in question. Back at the jeeps we had a long talk on whether we could get up or not; whether we should go on or turn back. Opinions fluctuated for some time, but finally we decided to go on. Enthusiasm rose at once and three-quarters of an hour later, after one or two hectic moments, we landed up beside the pile of rocks on the summit. By this time smiles were on all faces. The smiles grew broader, too, because for the first time practically since we started up into the Dargals, we were able to hit in the jeeps and bowl along, at times at almost twenty miles per hour. Thus we went to the Consett Stephen Pass, past snowdrifts with sheep camping on them, lovely green meadows, and silver beds of alpine daisies. The views over the cloud-shadow mottled expanse of the Monaro; the challenging heights of Twynam looming ahead beyond Mt. Tate; and the sudden great void below the ramparts of the Western Wall; all added to our sense of freedom and elation.

While climbing up the sides of Mt. Tate,



Mt. Jagungal

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the cooling system of Ossie's jeep broke down. Nothing could be done until the metal cooled so lunch was ordered—a popular interval except for a small matter of a tin of tainted bully beef.

After lunch the damage was repaired with gasket paste and elastoplast and we continued our bumpy passage upwards. The final climb on to the actual summit was very hard work indeed and provided good scope for the zig-zag technique of climbing we had evolved very early in the trip. This consisted of rushing up the incline forwards until the engine stalled; then backwards until it started again, and so on, each time gaining a few feet. This time on the summit of Tate a good deal of *avoirdupois* was required as well to get each jeep up, one at a time, because the surface was bumpy and the wheels often spun without getting a grip. It was, therefore, a tired band of four men and one woman who flopped down to rest beside the last jeep to roar and jerk its way up over the final crest.

Heer our friend Ray left us and strode off unconcernedly on his long walk back to White's River.

It was now three o'clock, with the weather beginning to turn dark and threatening. My

eyes went up and down the ridges of Twynam trying to assess the distance we could cover in the four hours of effective daylight still left to us. The trip down the Tate East Ridge took an hour and a quarter—much longer than I expected. But we got bogged and ran into other difficulties including "Iris" losing her silencer. Thenceforward her strident clamours woke the echoes and shattered our nervous systems for the rest of the trip.

The crossing of Pounds Creek was fair enough, but awkward, and took a lot of time. The climb up the opposite bank was really difficult and I do not think we could have managed it but for Bill Littlejohn's magnificent driving. We camped for the night in the second last clump of snow gums at 5600 feet on Mt. Twynam.

Next morning, the fifth day, broke with high wind and heavy fog. Navigating blind on maps (such as it is), compass, and aneroid, we fought our way slowly up to the summit of Little Twynam. This was necessary to get round the head of three sharp gullies running down into the Snowy. It was a frantically cold murky proceeding. As navigator, I was not so much afraid of getting the convoy lost, but that we ourselves, in the course of our frequent reconnaissances, might not be able to find our way back to the jeeps. We therefore made it a rule that one person must stay with the jeeps. If the others had not returned in ten minutes, continuous Vic Eddie signals were sent in morse code on the horn. If an answering shout was received the signals ceased, but were resumed again if the party had not been contacted at the end of another ten minutes. If no answer was received, the Vic Eddie's continued. I can still see Elyne crouching in a damp jeep surrounded by clammy greyness and pounding out morse.

Eventually we reached what we thought must be the top of Little Twynam and for over half an hour sat on various boulders watching the swirling, twisting masses of mist hiding what we hoped was the Blue Lake. If it was, then the slope dropping off on our left was the ridge down which we needed to travel. Eventually we caught a momentary glimpse of Headley Tarn and set off cheerfully only to get hopelessly yarded in the moraine down the Blue Lake Creek. We had to retrace our tracks and

eventually crossed the creek near its junction with the Snowy.

Here we had lunch. The mist cleared after lunch and we had a long and weary afternoon trying to find a way over the long spur coming down off Carruther's Peak. Eventually we accomplished this by rushing "Iris" up empty and then hauling Ossie's jeep up on the long rope. Neither driver could see the other because of the intervening crest, thus Ossie and Elyne spaced themselves out between and relayed vocal (very) and visible signals. On the other side we met Mrs. Day and Mrs. McDermott who helped us find our way down to the Foreman Crossing. The crossing was very rough and involved much thrashing about in very cold water. Then we took well over an hour to get up the 400 feet of Charlotte's Pass, but finally, almost incredulously, we changed out of double-reduction gear and sped down to the road to the Chalet.

The trip was a magnificent experience, but a very strenuous one. We were no sooner

out of one difficulty than we encountered another. We were all very tired—even the dog slept solidly for three whole days after we got home. Quite often we would only ride in the jeeps for five minutes and then spend nearly an hour walking up and down rough mountain slopes trying to find a feasible way. This would be followed by pushing and heaving and shovelling and crow-baring. The mountain tops would often be too rocky and the valleys too boggy and jeeps do not perform well on sidings. One of our hardest propositions towards the end of the trip was that low horizontally growing alpine scrub. The jeeps would sit on this high and dry with the wheels spinning and smoking on the tough stems and making no progress whatever.

The seventy-six miles took us five days and I should think that this is the first time that the high alps have ever been crossed by motor transport and as far as we are concerned it will be the last—at any rate for a while.