

EX ROY'S DRAGON 2015

Summary

Spr Ager

After exhausting the entirety of my French language on the dear fellow sat next to me on the chairlift (my name, my dog's name and my favourite colour) I had ample time to think. Why on earth was skiing invented?! Well apparently the Norwegians are to blame wanting to move on snow efficiently.

14 Geographic Squadron of 42 Engineer Regiment, with additions from 13 and 135 travelled to picturesque Risoul in Eastern France. A week of skiing lay ahead of us. We departed from RAF Wyton early Saturday morning. It is customary to wait a minimum of 8 hours before the actual flight is set to depart; anything shy of that would be considered utter madness! The coach transfer was long, hellish and all under the cover of darkness. Little were we aware to the beauty of the scenery that lay just outside those windows. It would make for a nice surprise the following day. As we finally reached our hotel we were greeted by friendly faces, a warm meal and beds that would fit in at a prisoner of war camp – bunks! However, at this point after all our travelling and transfers I'm sure the majority of us would have slept on the very slopes themselves?!

Mixed abilities gathered at the steps of the first slopes; those experienced strode gallantly with skis over shoulders conversing with locals as they passed, exuding coolness effortlessly. My group however were complete ski crows; skis hanging perilously from limbs, winter sport fashion faux pas and boots too large to clip in to name but a few. One skier even decided to wear a hideous jacket which was a cocktail of headache inducing colours and patterns; insisting they borrowed it from a friend!

The aim of the week's adventurous training was to qualify each group to their proposed ski foundation qualification. Additionally to place soldiers in harsh and challenging circumstances, to get us thinking and be pushed beyond comfort zones. Those on SF1, adequately named "The Banter Group" were completely new to skiing so were learning the complete basics: moving on level surfaces, manoeuvring around obstacles, stopping (trying to) and the correct fashion to carry one's skis. Generally speaking we spent most of the time in a heap on the snow marvelling at the SF2 group blasting passed us and wishing it was us. Later having discussed the days activities with the SF2 group it would appear the impression we had of them racing around the slopes was a mere illusion. They had been able to develop more advanced skills such as digging snow holes and, bizarrely, trekking up the slopes. Perhaps SF1 wasn't such a bad place to be, we definitely had more coffee breaks! Added to their aches and pains the SF2 group must have picked up some dodgy scran as one or two, who shall remain nameless, became quite ill quietly suffering strange hangover like symptoms such as dehydration, headaches and vomiting. I'd been told not to eat yellow snow but is it alright if there are diced carrots in there?

As “The Banter Group” grew in confidence and skiing ability we left the safety and comfort of the green slopes behind and ventured into new territory – the daunting blues! These posed a much greater challenge; steeper, longer and requiring us to exercise much greater control and judgement. A long way from our casual bimbles down the previous greens. Spr Quilliam in his usual style of not deciding to steer but rather gather as much speed as possible became what can only be described as a wrecking ball on skis, soon learned the importance of changing direction after losing control often in the early stages. With the absence of fresh snowfall the slopes became burdened with ice. This made less than ideal conditions and skiing became a lot more challenging.

After each hard days skiing we would all meet at Risoul’s finest Après Ski venue – Yeti bar! Where drinks would be shared discussing the days antics. From these shared experiences away it never fails to amaze me just how diverse the lad’s skill sets are! Little did I know that in our midst we had a highly skilled barber and it just so happened one evening that Spr Campbell was overdue a good trim. As any good barber does they wait until the customer is unconscious in their bed before carefully or not so carefully “going at it” with a trimmer. Not much was needed to give the desired look of a bald patch. Some say it took years off him?!

Skiing is an exciting but arduous activity, especially if you have to ski uphill (SF2!) which throws many obstacles in your direction; whether it be the ever changing weather conditions, avalanche risk, other skiers or be it getting separated from the group, under no circumstances continue down the mountain. Wait exactly where you are! Otherwise the ski leader will be forced to spend hours searching for you, the ski lift will happen to be closed due to high winds and you may just possibly have to wrestle 70 hot-headed Europeans over a single seat on a bus only to be told to get the next one. You know, this is purely hypothetical?!

In summary we all obtained our ski foundation qualifications after a very successful and enjoyable week on the slopes. I’m just very grateful nobody was hurt! I couldn’t imagine breaking something, like an arm for instance on the second day after carelessly losing balance and saying goodbye to the slopes for the remainder of the week. I’m sure Spr Whelan would agree?! A special thank you is in order to SSgt Wiggins for making the trip possible and all his hard work ensuring it ran smoothly. WO2 Haslope for his never ending patience with ‘The Banter Group’ and ensuring we all left Risoul with at least some form of skiing ability! We also say thank you to the two Paul instructors who led their groups professionally and offering their expert ski knowledge. Last but not least to the catering staff at Club Le Morgan for their impeccable soup and speed of delivering meals! All in all, a great week had by all. We can’t wait for the next one.