

THE SIGNALKUPPE

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I hope my readers will forgive me for beginning with a reflection on the circumstances which have led to the writing of this article.

Norman Cochran's tragic accident in the Dauphiné struck a singularly personal chord in my memory because in the preceding years I had frequently climbed with him and was planning to consult him on his return about an account of our route up the Signalkuppe. I am glad to write it now because it typifies the kind of route he revelled in and which I have learned to enjoy in the same way.

If you stand in the Macgugnaga Valley to the north-east of Monte Rosa and look south and west at the colossal eastern ice slopes of the mountain, your eye will light on a shapely ridge to the south which runs westwards, first level and then steeply up to the summit of the Signalkuppe. The level portion is at about 3,800 metres and the summit at about 4,560 metres, and there is a similarly spectacular view of this ridge from Alagna, the village to the south of Monte Rosa.

This ridge is the Cresta Topham. It is the east ridge of the Signalkuppe and provides one of the most interesting but less well known major routes in the Alps. It has the very special virtue of leading to the Rifugio Margherita which sits on the edge of the southern precipices of the top of Monte Rosa at an altitude of 4,500 metres.

We were camping at Alagna, Norman Cochran, Ralph Goldsmith and I. The altitude of Alagna is about 1,200 metres and we planned to climb first to the Resegotti refuge on the level lower part of the ridge at an altitude of about 3,000 metres and enjoy a normal day on the steep climb to the summit. The general outline of the climb is that it takes half-an-hour (and half-a-mile) to reach the Col Signal, then another five to seven hours up the ridge.

Unfortunately, Ralph felt ill on our walk up from Alagna, so we rested in the highest chalets at Vigne and finally stayed there the night. The prospect now was a climb of about 2,500 metres in one hop if Ralph recovered. The event had its amusing side, fortunately. We were offered the most primitive accommodation—in the barn with the animals, but we were also offered vino, bread and cheese. In return, we ministered to the sick—rather like missionaries I thought. Norman prescribed our own Codeines and a dentist for the shocking toothache of Mama. She in return explained that it was doubtful if the Resegotti refuge, which is unguarded, was open.

Next morning we left at 12.30 a.m. and began a dreary ascent in the dark of a step boulder-strewn slope to the tongue of the Glacier de Loccie. Fortunately it was light enough to see by 3.30 a.m. and, with crampons on, we hurried across to the base of the Cresta Topham and after six hundred feet of mixed rock climbing reached the refuge at 6.00 a.m. It was open—a great relief. Ralph was still off colour but obviously improving. We agreed he must have been suffering from low altitude nausea. I then prepared breakfast (we had brought a stove, as there was no fuel in the refuge), Norman wrote up the hut log and cleared some of the snow out of the hut whilst Ralph rested.

We pressed on at 7.00 a.m. and three-and-a-half hours later were at the Col Signal at the foot of the steep part of the ridge. Our schedule was now even more awry so at 11.00 a.m. we ate again and gave the guide book very careful study.

This is perhaps a convenient point at which to say a little more about the ridge. The book describes the route as including an easy section (half-an-hour) to the Col Signal, then an ascent of a steep ridge of which the main characteristics are several large gendarmes, the first blocking the ridge, than a *grand ressaut* which may be climbed direct (hard) or dodged (hard), then a snow and rock ridge to the summit plateau and finally a *grand gendarme monolithique* constituting the Signalkuppe proper.

Our low altitude start at Vigne made it a possibility that our climb would take from fourteen to sixteen hours, for such was our guess at second breakfast. We had also by this time begun to understand the true scale of the mountain. Unfortunately our impressions of the mountain in the flesh, so to speak, were bigger than "on paper".

The easy level bit of ridge had taken three-and-a-half hours against half-an-hour because of appalling snow conditions—waist high stuff in a variety of states, some very prone to avalanching. At second breakfast, or was it the third, at 11.00 a.m., we persuaded ourselves that the snow on the steep part of the ridge must be less in quantity and in better condition. In any case, as this was the first day of a circuit of Monte Rosa we pressed on with the thought that we should reach the summit hut easily by dark.

The steeper section of the ridge proved to be more like a wide buttress with ridge-like sections, and the first part brought continuous climbing which varied from easy to Grade Three. We crossed and recrossed the ridge, the major difficulties being by-passed on the Macgugnaga face. After another three hours we had become puzzled

by the absence of the "large teeth" the book had promised. It dawned on us that the scale of these was such that they were perhaps to be measured by the hundred feet and that in our natural meandering route we had turned them without setting out specifically to do so.

We were soon faced with the *grand ressaut*. This was quite unmistakable and with its snow-covered ledges probably only climbable with great difficulty. We discovered the orthodox leftward traverse but it was neither level nor along a very obvious series of ledges, and a gently descending line, partly forced on us by the face of the ressaut and over boiler plates, boulders and ledges brought us to where the face merged with the slope of the mountain to form a subsidiary ridge. This ridge was wide and steep and covered in many places with snow and ice. As it was 4.00 p.m. and we judged it needed another three or four hours to reach the Margherita refuge we had no time to spare. The subsidiary ridge presented local technical difficulties, especially where step cutting was needed, but the major problem for Ralph and I was the letting out and reeling in of surplus rope as we caught up or fell behind Norman when on easier or more difficult pitches, and all still desperately trying to continue moving in unison to beat the clock.

As the slope eased we climbed rather more rapidly towards a final short buttress which stretched like a wall across the south and east faces of the mountain immediately below the main summit plateau on which the final *grand gendarme* stands. We found a thirty-five foot chimney filled with powder snow which enabled us to breach this final defence and at last, after hours in the shadows, we stood in the sun on the summit plateau. Our shadows were very long on the snow as it was nearly 8.00 p.m. and the bite of a chill wind made us rapidly put on crampons and press on towards the gendarme. I took a few pictures for the record, however. We soon found that the gendarme could be passed by a traversing route to a higher snow slope which led to the Margherita hut some one hundred metres above.

The guardian asked us if we were the party who had been climbing the Topham Arete and, to our wild pleasure, said he was surprised to see us before dark in view of the poor conditions. We were the only climbers in residence; apparently the poor snow conditions had kept other climbers away from the long routes on the north faces.

We had taken about twenty hours from the chalet at Vigne; quite a good day, but not the longest by any means that I have enjoyed. A good meal and a large bottle of Chianti put us in the right mood for bed, even to ignoring the cold during the night when the temperature fell sufficiently to freeze my trousers solid. Fortunately I was not wearing them at the time. The next day we ambled down

to the Bétemps hut in heavy cloud, but it was a relatively pleasant relaxation.

As a postscript, a year or two later the Secretary of the Alpine Club confirmed that our ascent was the first post-war ascent of this ridge by a British party. I can recommend it.

