



SOLDIERING ON SKI

By Lieut. R. John Pratt

IN ALL branches of sporting competition, mobility ranks as one of the greatest single factors. Races, for instance, are nothing but tests of the comparative mobility of the contestants, and it is a well known fact in the boxing, wrestling, and fencing worlds that speed can defeat strength. Needless to say, if the competition happens to be the most deadly of all forms, mortal combat, then mobility becomes a matter of life and death. Granted that individual mortal combat is not the popular sport that it used to be, yet today the man-in-the-street never knows when he is going to find himself embroiled in the "gangs-all-here" variety commonly known as war, and it is pretty well accepted that if and when we do get another war it will be a very mobile one and everybody will be in on it. That old Frankenstein, "Modern Science" has developed high explosives to the extent that one either moves quickly in a chosen direction or still more quickly in a great many unchosen ones.

Since the last war, much thought has been given to the mechanisation of the army and to the movement of large bodies of men from one area to another in as short a time as possible. In fact, as far as ground transport is concerned, the British War Office has just about carried this work to the limit of peace-time theory, but naturally they have not given much thought to the problems of winter transport as understood in this country. Of course, the reason they have not done so is because the possibility of a war being fought on Canadian territory is extremely remote, but the possibility does exist and therefore these problems should be of some interest to those concerned in the defence of this country.

Before starting any discussion on this subject we should realize that Canada's winter has always been her greatest defence, just as Russia's winter kept Napoleon out of Moscow. An army may march on its stomach, but not in a snowdrift. However, snow is not quite the insurmountable obstacle that it used to be. Modern mechanised transport has overcome it to some extent, but the greatest threat today is undoubtedly from the air. Aviation has conquered Canada's vast Northern wastes in the service of Mining, and it could do the same in the service of War. En passant, we might mention that such minerals as nickel, of which we have plenty, are of supreme importance in the manufacture of arms.

Nevertheless, air forces cannot exist without ground forces, and are not much use against ground forces except in very "open country." Aircraft are rather helpless when operating in "closed country" such as wooded slopes, etc., and in such localities, of which there are many in the more settled portions of Canada, decisive action would depend entirely upon the use of the foot soldier. Now at present these men are absolutely road-bound in winter, and it is not difficult to see the decided advantage that would accrue to the side best able to operate independently of snowplows, and capable of deploying over deep soft snow. Granted that mechanised vehicles would have to stick pretty closely to well defined roads, yet dismounted cavalry and infantry need not, if equipped either with snowshoe or ski.

Both of these means have their respective merits, and which to employ is largely a question of the type of tactics likely to be found necessary in any particular engagement. One maintains a more uni-

form speed when travelling on snowshoes. Ski are a little slower uphill, but much faster down. Snowshoes are better in short movements and in skirmishing. Ski are more useful over greater distances and in the guerrilla type of warfare. Personally we are inclined to think the snowshoe more fitted for the bulk of the army, i.e., the infantry, which usually sticks pretty close to the main arteries anyway. The snowshoe is also easier to carry when marching than the long narrow ski. Extreme speed is not particularly necessary for the bulk of the army because the mass speeds are always slower than those of the reconnoitring groups, and when the larger bodies have to move quickly they will usually do so by some mechanized means. The ski seems to us to be more suitable for scouting and reconnoitring purposes, work which the cavalry is usually called upon to perform. Cavalry advance "screens" are always well off the road, with the various members widely separated, and here the ski with its greater speed and quicker getaway from high points of vantage would seem to be the ideal solution. Furthermore the long narrow ski fits in very well with the present cavalry drill, but just try to get an infantry platoon to form fours with ski on and see what happens! Besides, the ski is a much more difficult thing to master than the snowshoe, so we may take it as a foregone conclusion that the vast majority of the army (the P.B.I.) would be equipped with the simpler snowshoe. The ski, on the other hand, is essentially a matter for a small, highly trained group of specialists, whose duties would consist of scouting, reconnoitring, gathering information, getting out of places quickly, showing-off in peace-time, and generally annoying the enemy in war-time which are the usual prerogatives of a cavalry regiment.

Since this magazine is no place to discuss the pros and cons of snowshoes as a means of locomotion, we will leave that to be fought out elsewhere, and devote ourselves to the subject about which we were asked to write in the first place. Now, although military training on ski is an old institution in the snowbound countries of Northwestern Europe, where the Norwegians, the Italian Alpinieri, and the Austrian Bergschuetzen have carried on this type of work for centuries, yet, as far as we know, there is no record of any such training taking place, either in North America or the British Commonwealth, prior to that of the McGill University contingent of the Canadian Officers Training Corps. This unit first appeared on ski in 1914, when the Signallers used them in conjunction with their field-work. No drill was set down, however, and their movement was largely a matter of every man for himself, due to the fact that signal work did not call for any concerted movement. After this, nothing much was done until 1932 when a few McGill infantrymen, under Captain Patton, appeared on Mount Royal and, braving the remarks of an astonished multitude, went through a few "let-me-like-a-soldier-fall" evolutions. The Infantry saw the point, and kept very quiet about it for two more years. In 1934 we found ourselves with a dozen good skiers enlisted, all very enthusiastic about putting their skill to the test. Seizing this golden oppor-

tunity, our present O.C., Colonel Erskine Buchanan, decided to form an "Experimental Ski Platoon" for the purpose of going into the matter thoroughly this time, and finding out, once and for all, if the idea could possibly be put into practice in this country.

The first parade "fell in" on January 14, 1934, on Mount Royal, with the aforesaid dozen good skiers, reinforced by another dozen more or less indifferent skiers, under the command of the writer, who skied not at all. No hills were attempted, a form of drill was worked out, and the parade ended with a short march over very simply territory. Each succeeding Sunday found the platoon in the Laurentians, where service conditions were lived up to as much as possible, and each man in the platoon was invited to make suggestions concerning drill, dress, equipment, etc. Amongst other things, a drill was worked out for the efficient handling of the various equipment, puttees were discarded, slacks introduced, and a short, wide, slalom type ski found useful for breaking ground, bush running, etc.

The acid test came at Point Claire on February 18, 1934, when the ski platoon fought a rear-guard action against the rest of the contingent, who were on foot. The roads were icy and the weather extremely cold. Poling was very easy for the skiers, but the infantry found it impossible to keep their footing while marching. In the skirmishing, which took place in the village, it was found better to discard ski as they were a handicap to movement under cover, but in the open country the infantry found themselves forced to keep to the road, as the snow was at least waist-deep in the fields from which the skiers kept up a steady "enfilade" fire, forcing a clumsy deployment, at the completion of which the skiers were able to withdraw quickly and silently to the next tactical feature completely under cover.

At present, we are trying to perfect a type of "overall," in some sort of neutral colour, in order to lessen visibility against a winter background. The back-pack is another problem that is rather difficult to solve as it has to be worn in conjunction with a slung rifle. Also a headgear that is adaptable to all sorts of weather and at the same time capable of adorning the head of a normal, sane individual has yet to be found. One of last year's problems, of which we hope to be rid off this year, was the fact that none of the trained men knew a thing about skiing, and none of the expert skiers knew a thing about keeping their heads down under fire, or issuing an intelligible order.

However, the idea has been proven sound, and all we need now is the experience that time and practice alone can give us. Other local units have also taken up the idea, and there will probably be a cup offered soon for inter-regimental competition. It is proposed to give this cup to the team, composed of one officer and four men, who arrive as a "team" at the completion of a test, not only of ski-ing, but of marksmanship en route. By these means we hope to encourage the development of really excellent military skiers in Canada, who, in the event of war, would be capable of maintaining superiority of mobility over any enemy that we might be called upon to face.