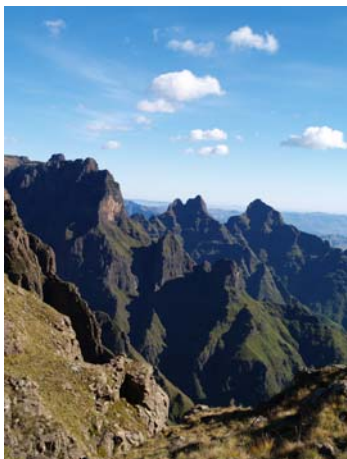


The Poulterers Company granted £750 towards the cost of an expedition for 15 Soldiers from 36th (Eastern) Signal Regiment, with whom the Poulterers have formed a close association in recent years, to travel to South Africa to trek this mountainous environment and experience its beauty first hand.

An abridged version of this article was published in the January 2007 edition of the Poulterers Newsletter. Here is the full report from Captain Cath Stephens who led the expedition.

Kwa-Zulu Tiger 8th-25th April 2006

In the heart of South Africa, the escarpment of the Drakensberg Mountains rises breathtakingly from the foothills. Sheer cliffs dominate the lush green valleys, with Cape Vultures and Lammergeyers circling high overhead. From the top, once the steep paths have been conquered, rolling grasslands of Lesotho sit at 3000m, dropping away suddenly and quite dramatically back down to South Africa below.



15 soldiers from 36th (Eastern) Signal Regiment travelled to South Africa this April, to trek in this mountainous environment and experience its beauty first hand. Flying into Johannesburg, we set off immediately for the northern Drakensberg, an area called the Royal Natal National Park.

Driving into the national park we were greeted with our first views of the Amphitheatre, a huge 600m high rock face that stretches for 5km in length. At its westernmost end plunges Thukela Falls, at 850m high the world's second highest waterfall. As night fell the skies were illuminated by streaks of lightening, and the tents pummelled by ferocious rain, as we crawled into our tents wondering what challenges the expedition would bring.



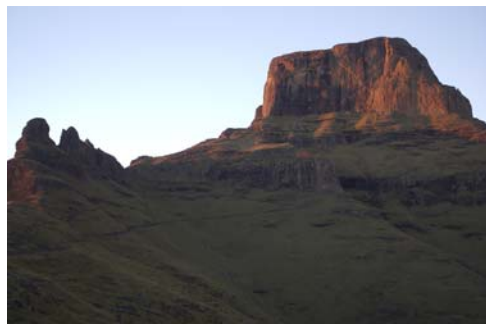
The next day the 15 people divided into 3 groups of 5, with two of the groups travelling to an area further south, called Cathedral Peak National Park.

Various days of acclimatisation walks followed for each group, trying to habituate the body to the thinner air of 3000m before we set off for real. The valleys were of mixed glory, many of the marked paths on the map proving impossible to locate on the ground, many being so over grown that your feet rather than your eyes found the trail, and river crossings so plentiful that all got their feet wet at least a few times. But it was all in an area that amazed you with its beauty, and despite being in a national park saw precious few other people on its paths.



Finally, all the groups had set off, for an unsupported 6 day trek along the edge of the escarpment.

Major John Howell-Walmsley started from the northern end at 0400hrs, circumnavigating Sentinel Peak and climbing the chain ladders up to the highest mountain in South Africa, all on his group's first day.



L/Cpl Tom Burke took his group off first from Cathedral Peak National Park, fighting the dense undergrowth for 12 hours on day one before having to call a halt and camp, not yet on the escarpment.

Capt Cath Stephens, the expedition leader, set off from the south the following day, opting for the 'Bell Traverse' rather than the jungle as the ascent route for her group.



Day 2 saw Major Howell-Walmsley's group making slow but steady progress from the north, leaving the edge of the escarpment to move through the high undulating hills of Lesotho.

L/Cpl Burke's group finally made it to the tops, and breathed a sigh of relief as the dense undergrowth was replaced by the open hills, with the world dropping off to one side as they tentatively peered over the edge.

Capt Stephens' group, after having been beaten by the failing light so close to the summit of Cathedral Peak, continued on the Bell Traverse, still a full day from the escarpment. The second day for this group proved even more challenging than the first, with an ascent then descent of a loose gully pass, then progress marred on the continuing narrow mountain path by rocky terrain, making the day adrenaline fuelled for all.



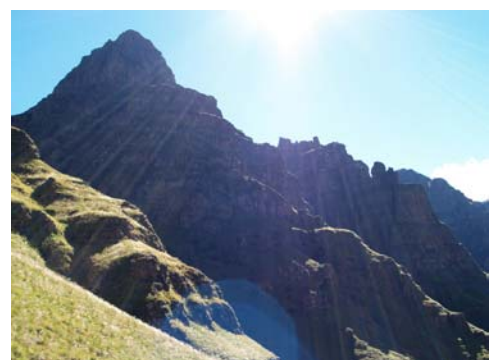
With the first 2 groups now making steady progress, Capt Stephens' group spent a second night off the escarpment. Making good use of the many caves dotted around the mountains, her group spent this night in Twins Cave, and sat watching the sun set in the distance, clouds gathering below.

Once all 3 groups were on the escarpment the landscape changed dramatically, from soaring cliffs to rolling hills, the cloud at times so thick as to limit visibility to 50m. With no paths to follow, and the magnetic rock making the compass swing through 90 degrees, navigation was challenging! There's always the GPS to rely on, if it doesn't pick the same moment to loose all its satellites.



The groups were all getting used to their diet of couscous and pilchards by this point, even if the decanted pilchards did find their way out of their bags into a few people's rucksacks. Two of the group leaders had been switched on enough to check their group's kit before departure; to ensure they were not carrying unnecessary weight, so had to endure the reduced calorific intake. One, however, was not so inspired, so has to bear the burden of eating all her group's extra chocolate that they produced at regular intervals.

Finally, after 6 days each at 3000m, the end of the journey was nigh. L/Cpl Burke's group made it safely down the chain ladders and past Sentinel Peak, at which point, seeing the fatigue of his group, he and another embarked on a half marathon sprint back down to the campsite to collect the vehicle. They then drove back up to meet the



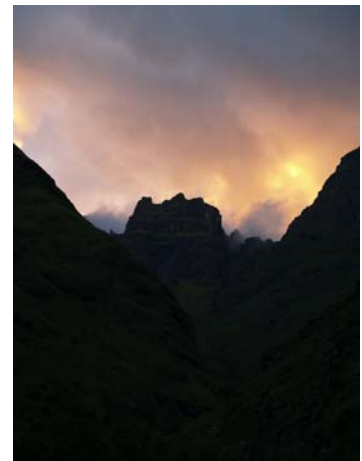
group, who were more than happy to throw their bags in the bag and finally breath a sigh of relief.



Capt Stephens' group, after the excitement of the first 2 days on the Bell Traverse, had not been able to recoup sufficient time to make it all the way to the north, so had had to turn around. A glum faced group retraced their steps of a few days earlier, at least moving with spectacular views this time, rather than the pea soup of before.

Major John Howell-Walmsley's group moved not far behind, stopping early to camp, basking alone in the sun, watching the birds circling overhead and listening to the mountain stream gurgle past.

The following day Capt Stephens' group battled their way down through the jungle experienced by L/Cpl Burke on day one, finally getting to the car park as the weather broke. Major Howell-Walmsley's group were not so lucky, and battled through both jungle and storm for the last few hours. But all were safe, none were sorry and all appreciated the food and comfort of the restaurant that evening. Apart, that is, from Lt Col Mark Smith and L/Cpl Richard Hazelton, who decided their long john clad legs were too much to inflict on the delicate constitution of two groups just down from the hills, and opted for cold porridge in their tents rather than the baked golden fish served in the restaurant. Hmm...



The next day, the security of the rich national parks were left behind as the two southern groups drove north to reunite with the third.

An oasis of wealth, the national parks were the preserve of white South Africans, staying in the luxury hotel or villas tucked away in the trees. Once past the gate barring entrance to those lesser-favoured guests, the landscape changed, with children carrying water on their heads, from the distant stream back to the comfort of their mud hut. The roads were potholed and sometimes washed away, with electricity prevalent only in the luckier of habitations.



Secure in our hire vehicles, we observed as we drove through, the distance from these people being only metres at times, but a lifetime away in terms of experience. Problems back in the UK seemed insignificant in comparison, but these people were never without a smile and a wave. Maybe it is us who have got it so wrong...

To finish off the experience of South Africa, the group went on a battlefield tour to Rorke's Drift and Isandhlwana. Although the battlefield tour is the subject of a different article, it must be said that after 10 days of camping, 6 of them wild camping, the luxury African bunkhouse and fantastic hosting of the missionary family was second to none, and their generous barbeques and beer were appreciated by all!

Finally we returned to Johannesburg and had a meal on the town before doing the tourist thing the next day. Most of the group ended up visiting Soweto, an intense and sobering experience.

Wandering into a church that had been one of the scenes of the anti-apartheid troubles back in 1976, a man introduced himself and began to explain a little about what had happened. As a boy

of 11, he had persuaded his elder brother to join him in a peaceful demonstration against the oppressive Afrikaans government. Demonstrations being against the law, the police moved in to break it up, opening fire on those before them. People fell over each other in their panic, and the two brothers got separated in the force of the crowd. His brother died that day, a victim of the struggle for the freedom that these people finally attained. For those of us in the military looking for examples of moral courage, look no further. This sort of courage is an example to us all.

So the expedition was over, and back to the UK we flew that night. A rich and varied experience had been had by all, and will no doubt be the talk of the Regiment for many months to come, at least until the next hapless volunteer comes forward to organise the next one. Good luck to you, who ever you may be...!

