

ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN

John Chisholm braves the Norwegian winter to look into NATO cold weather training

It was summer 2001 when Brigadier Stroemberg, Inspector General of Infantry for the Norwegian Army, invited me to cover a winter exercise, which the Norwegian Army runs for allied officers. It was my rash acceptance of this offer that found me miles from civilisation, totally exhausted and wondering whether my instructor was going to shoot me in order to put me out of my misery.

I was taking part in, or at least trying to keep up with, Exercise White Woods, part of the Allied Officers Winter Warfare Course run near the town of Elverum. I had been briefed the day before the exercise began by the course co-ordinator, Captain Jann Millnar Eggen, and his second in command, Captain Aksel Kohl. "This is a very intensive course, both physically and psychologically," Captain Eggen pointed out. Both officers were very friendly and we were quickly on first name terms.

As Jann described the six-week training period, I could not do anything but agree with him: almost as soon as they arrived, students were being introduced to practical aspects of surviving and operating in the harsh winter conditions. Also included in the course were three exercises, each lasting a week; White Woods, a more

tactical exercise taking place below the tree line, is the final one.

Jann went on to describe how the students were organised: "The students are divided into four sections, each with a Norwegian instructor. Gradually leaders emerge from the members of the section and the instructor begins to take a back seat."

As the course contained at least two majors, wouldn't more senior officers find it difficult being commanded by their juniors?

"Well the first thing we do is remove rank and everyone is on first name terms. This can cause problems, particularly for sergeants, but we find it works well."

It transpired that the Norwegian military structure was a straight progression. There was no real jump from sergeant to second lieutenant, rather it was considered a straightforward promotion. Saluting and other forms of "bull" were refreshingly absent; the more time spent with Norwegian officers, the more I warmed to this egalitarian approach.

White Woods was a tactical exercise for the students. The four sections would be dropped off some 24km from their objectives on the Monday morning. They

would march on skis cross-country, forming into two platoons at a given point, and then continuing into the military training area where they would establish patrol bases. The patrol bases would be their first opportunity for sleeping, and were to be established by Wednesday before first light.

Throughout this period, patrols by OPFOR would monitor the roads to encourage the students to operate in a tactical manner. Various phase lines were set throughout the march to allow Jann to keep track of the sections as they moved towards their assembly areas. Much of the march led through civilian areas, meaning that no firing was allowed if OPFOR and the students ran into each other. Once the students entered the military area and established their patrol bases, they would look for targets designated for them by Jann. They comprised OPFOR command posts and the challenge would be to find the enemy and then conduct an "attack by fire" followed by a successful withdrawal on Thursday morning. Thursday evening would be the night the students would spend alone, in a shelter of their own making.

Prior to setting out into the tundra, I had a short meeting with Brigadier Stroemberg before he left for Trondheim. After a brief discussion on Norway's hopes for the Winter Olympics, he asked me how I was feeling about the course, and quizzed Jann as to how I was to be moved around during the exercise. He wished me luck with the march; I began to wonder what I had let myself in for.

As the students were dropped off at their start points on Monday I had a chance to look at their equipment. Overall they were equipped with Norwegian clothing and each carried the elderly, but rugged, AG3 automatic rifle. Each section also had a pulk, a small sled upon which the section carried its heavy equipment, which was pulled by two men with a third pushing from the rear. It soon became apparent the pulk was the focus of hatred for every



A BV 206 in its natural habitat © Defence Review



The Instructors: left to right - Aksel, Ralf (hidden), Morten, Jan, Espen and Frode
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student. It is hard to manoeuvre over difficult terrain and especially treacherous downhill. One Dutch student wondered why the Norwegians bothered with it; when his unit was deployed to Norway they carried all their equipment for themselves. The answer lay in the heavy weapons usually attached to a Norwegian section: one 0.5 calibre heavy machine-gun and one 7.62 medium machine-gun plus all the ammunition. A Carl Gustav or Eryx launcher may be attached as well. I could see why the Norwegians stuck to the pulk; even if it had few friends, it seemed infinitely preferable to lugging the 50 cal around (plus its ammunition).

The Norwegian kit seemed old-fashioned but serviceable: cotton and wool predominated for much of the clothing with white nylon trousers and jacket, which went over everything else, and rubber overboots. This was a good example of how the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" rule applied in the Norwegian Army – and of course wool and cotton are cheap to procure.

As the students started to make headway

on their march I could see how unforgiving the terrain could be, even though we were traversing a fairly easy part of the march. Some of the students were also not yet fully adept at cross-country skiing, and I was not the only person who fell over. The march had a fairly regular rhythm: 50 minutes

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marching plus ten minutes resting. After around four km Espen, the section instructor, and I peeled off to head for my pick-up point, which was still a good four km away. Although the instructors were not in command of the men, they had a supervisory role, especially when it came to safety issues.

Espen was not worried: "It will do them good to be alone for a while," he assured me. Indeed this emphasis on allowing the

students to make their own mistakes and learn from them ran throughout the exercise. It was on this walk that Espen summed up the essence of the course: "it is about making the snow and winter conditions your ally, not your enemy". Still far from the military area, we began to run

in to a few local people. One woman asked if we were hunting wolves, an unusual question, as neither of us was carrying a firearm: perhaps we were going to wrestle them to death. Or rather Espen was. By this stage I would have had difficulty fighting my way out of a paper bag.

Eventually we reached the jeep that acted as Jann's mobile Command Post (CP) and huddled inside. I was then given a practical lesson in the problems raised



OPFOR opens fire on 1st Platoon © Defence Review

communicating in this sort of terrain. The hills and trees made it very hard to maintain any form of regular contact with all of the sections from a single point, despite that point being the highest hill in the area. We drove around attempting to gain contact with the sections in order to arrange their re-supply. Jann fell back on the trusted mobile phone to call the instructor of 1st Section and discover what was happening. Eventually they called in, only to be ticked off by Jann for not guarding the radio during the specific communications windows.

By Tuesday morning all sections except the 3rd Section had hit phase line Amber between 0600 and 0700 as expected. So it was over to visit OPFOR HQ to see what their take on the exercise was. Whilst on the snowmobiles we passed Major Gule, the Commanding Officer for OPFOR, out on his morning 12km run in sub-zero temperatures. He told Jann that he had been looking for ski tracks to see if any of the sections had crossed the road. Major Gule arrived at his CP some five minutes after us, and promptly gave me a PowerPoint presentation on the Norwegian Home Guard – without being short of breath. Wondering what sort of military environment produced such wiry individuals, I asked the Major what his background was before joining the Home Guard.

"I was in the Rangers and Norwegian Special forces from 1982 until 1993;

currently I think two of the men I trained are on duty in Afghanistan." This explanation cleared up a lot about Major Gule, who not only ran the NCO training course but also was responsible, with his Home Guard battalion, for the defence of Oslo Gardemoen airport.

I took the opportunity to talk to some of the young men and women of the NCO training school, some of whom had been patrolling that night. Whilst half the platoon was testing weapons on the firing range, a group gathered around their tent eating their Drytech rations. They had all started their course only six weeks before, but on completion they would be NCOs when their National Service came up. The course also provided considerable credits towards a degree. The trainees all seemed to be enjoying their course, and even at this stage had developed considerable field craft skills.

A rumble around the Norwegian countryside in the Bv 206 all-terrain tracked vehicle gave me some indication where this came from: Major Gule's sharp eyes flickered across the road as we drove looking for tracks across the road. The high banks of snow on either side of the roads were hard to traverse on skis, especially with the pulk, and deep tracks would be left on either side of the road. The primary reason for the drive was to identify positions for the OPFOR Command Posts, which were to be the "high pay-off targets" for the attacks by the students on Thursday morning.

Gule was, in one sense, luckier than he expected. We ran into a section, which was marching parallel with the road. The tiredness was palpable. Despite the fact that we were "the enemy" no effort was made to hide or perform tactically in any way. The emphasis was on keeping moving and keeping awake.

Driving back with Captain Aksel Kohl from the OPFOR HQ, we again ran into more students, in fact sections one and two, trying to make their way to their patrol base area. Aksel tutted under his breath, "They are staying on the roads...not good, not good at all." It was becoming clear that in the rigours of keeping going with little rest, tactical sense had gone.

Jann had also run into some students. "Many of the weapons are useless, removing the magazine would be very difficult," he said. "Many of these guys have been on postings to more countries than I have been on holiday to – yet they have quickly lost their basic tactical sense." The impression given was that this was not totally unexpected. As Jann sat down in his permanent CP I asked him why, as all the sections had been spotted by OPFOR crossing phase line Amber, and later in the military area, this could be considered a tactical exercise.

"What you have to remember is this is a 'one way' tactical exercise. Major Gule has had much more information than he would have done regarding the sections' line of advance and their approximate

dispositions,” he said, “OPFOR has no free play, it is the students who are being tested.”

By Wednesday morning the temperature had dropped to a refreshing -18°C and only clawed slowly upwards as the day wore on. This was the first opportunity for the instructors to meet Jann and Aksel to discuss progress so far. In general, morale and team spirit remained high in the sections, and they had made good time to get to their designated patrol bases. On the down side, basic infantry disciplines had fallen off, and they were still pretty noisy on the march, with no agreed hand signals, for example. 1st Platoon, which was composed of first and second sections, came in for particular criticism for the disposition of their patrol base.

As I wobbled unconvincingly towards the patrol base of 1st Platoon, I was given an instructive lesson on field-craft from Frode. Ordinarily, he explained, the march would take the form of a “fish-hook”, with a camouflaged run-off and a tripwire on the way to the base. If the run-off is well-camouflaged, any pursuers will carry on around the fishhook and lose the trail. It was clear, according to Frode, that the section had been very tired. A stop had been ordered, as we could tell by the

churned-up snow, and the brown (rather than yellow) urine stains indicated a section dehydrated either due to a lack of water or poor training. No flank guards had been posted away from the halt position. Frode said, “This group just sat down on their packs and took no precautions.”

Approaching the patrol base we found a poorly disguised run-off and an even more poorly disguised tripwire. Frode was already muttering under his breath when he saw two upright sentries, the sun bouncing off their faces.

Arriving at the patrol base, the tents remained uncamouflaged and the platoon commander was still in bed, having not done a check in daylight on his base or the approach to it. A few pointed questions from Frode and Ralf, the other instructor present, started a flurry of activity to make amends.

Jann telephoned Frode informing him that within two hours he would unleash Gule’s men to undertake aggressive patrolling in that particular square kilometre. Tactical sense was clearly still lacking, as the section members did not know what their specific positions were if the base was attacked. No alternative patrol base had been physically scouted, although a nice-looking spot had been selected on

the map. I was beginning to feel somewhat uneasy, and felt I wanted to be far away from this lot before OPFOR arrived. Returning to the road with Frode via a roundabout route for my ride back to the CP, we spotted the first OPFOR team closing in on the patrol base. It seemed we had left just in time.

I was spending the night with OPFOR at one of the target CPs as a guest of Lieutenant Westerberg, a veteran of the Norwegian peacekeeping effort in Lebanon and another experienced infantryman. I learned from him that an attack from OPFOR upon first platoon had been beaten off. The attacking OPFOR troops had now become the hunted and were now attempting to give their pursuers the slip: which they succeeded in doing at the price of getting lost in the snow.

A beefy OPFOR sergeant and his men turned up several hours later, having been denied a vehicle pickup by Gule who told them they were “learning the hard way”. Having found the run-off and tripwire easily they attacked, retreating when they ran out of ammunition. According to Frode, who was with first platoon as the attack came in, the expected chaos had been fully realised, with 90 minutes taken to break camp. The guys sat around eating rather than responding to the OPFOR attack.

We were rudely awoken at midnight as a patrol from 2nd Platoon bumped into our CP (it was captured by OPFOR, who then let them go). The main attack was due at dawn on Thursday morning. It was -28°C in our position. Westerberg told me that this was dangerous “...because you don’t notice it until you start to freeze”. As we waited outside for second platoon we could soon hear and see them moving some 350 metres from our position. Suddenly they fired upon us, although the Bv 206 and the OPFOR platoon were still in the dead ground on the other side of the hill. A series of flares went off which gave the whole scene an eerie yellow look whilst 2nd Platoon surged up to the brow of the hill, exchanged fire with the now alerted OPFOR and then washed back down the hill again, all under the gaze of Jann, Morten and Espen.

Westerberg told me that the 1st Platoon attack was going to be two hours late, so I could still make it to their position. Major Gule arrived, dashed around the combat ground and started a flurry of activity to pull out the CP. I was driven by Westerberg to

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2nd Platoon at rest © Defence Review



2nd Platoon haul the pulk through "easy" terrain © Defence Review

the second OPFOR CP to await the attentions of my old friends in 1st Platoon. OPFOR were running out of fuel, so the Bv 206 was fired up to keep them warm if the fuel ran out. This meant that we lost the first advantage of being able to hear the approach of the enemy. This was helped by 1st Platoon choosing a good approach, away from where their patrol had clashed with OPFOR on Wednesday. Still, the lads around me jumped to it as the first shots rang out and they were happily blazing away from their rifle pits.

Both attacks appeared shambolic. 2nd Platoon attacked on time, but they took an easy approach and opened fire way too early. The hut and the forms of Westerberg and myself leaning nonchalantly against the jeep may have confused them. 1st Platoon appeared to do better, but in the debrief Frode dismissively remarked "We don't do attacks like that in the Norwegian army." When I tasked Jann on this he was not too worried: "The execution of the attack itself is not important: we are not here to stuff Norwegian tactics down the students' throats. Instead we are interested in them getting there on time. Are the skis pointing in the right direction for withdrawal? How much noise did they make? These are the things we look for." The expectation that officers would graft the lessons learned in this course on to their own tactical doctrine, rather than learn the Norwegian way of warfare, was very reassuring.

In the staff meeting that followed, the instructors were less forgiving. Morten, accompanying 2nd Platoon, noted that "Recce did not go as planned as communications failed. The platoon did not find the target, although this was corrected overnight." This was the skirmish that woke me at midnight. There were problems with security on the march and light and noise

discipline. Morten's opinion on the attack itself was pretty damning: "Everybody forgot everything and acted like recruits." Espen, also with second platoon, built on this theme: the concept of "brain freeze".

In the cold, the body starts to shut down, and thought processes are slower. "Poor march discipline and navigation are still problems. They are still favouring open areas," Espen said. He noted, however, that they took good care of themselves in the bitter cold and they used their clothing skilfully.

Frode listed the issues we had found with 1st Platoon. On the basis of their poor tactical response to the OPFOR attack he declared, "1st Section is dead, I'm afraid." The attack was delayed to make sure everyone had hot water, but the approach chosen was difficult. Ralf added that after they took 90 minutes to decamp from their patrol base the platoon commander's debrief was more of an "ass-kicking" exercise.

What followed was the "Alone Night", as Jann described it. Whilst the debrief took place the students were building their own individual shelters with only their personal equipment. The next 20 hours would be spent alone. A fire would have to be kept going continuously, one hot meal eaten and both thermos and water bottle needed to be full by morning. A brief tour of 1st Platoon revealed a wide variety of solutions, from some very inviting-looking dwellings to one guy intent on sleeping under a taut tent sheet on a bed of ice. The instructors were generally pretty impressed with the results. A check of feet, hands and weapons for cold-related damage was made (as it was every night of the exercise) and everyone survived the night.

The morning saw the students return to barracks, check in their weapons and

attend Jann's "hot wash-up" debrief. Many of them amounted to basic infantry skills, which fell away under the pressure of keeping going in the cold. This was pretty much expected by the instructors and I came to the conclusion that the course needed another couple of weeks, to give the students more time in the field. A good ten days out would give them time to allow basic skills to become automatic and also involve other factors such as weapon maintenance in the field. A little extra time could improve the students' experience by a significant order of magnitude.

As Jann pointed out, however, it was no longer a struggle for survival. The students had improved their knowledge of the conditions. And the goal of making the weather an ally rather than an enemy now seemed far more attainable than it did five weeks before. Some students had never been on skis before; others struggled with poor English. Nevertheless, they were going to return to their units better soldiers than when they arrived.

To say that winter warfare is a tough proposition would be a very big understatement. Clearly the Norwegians, with their wealth of experience in this field, are a key partner in training. They are continually improving their methods and techniques in order to retain flexibility and relevance. Nevertheless, some techniques have remained unchanged since the Second World War or even before. I was confident that the students who passed through the Allied Officers Winter Warfare School had received the best preparation possible for cold weather operations. It also underlined the key role of Norway in the NATO training scheme, the competence of its army and, despite its small size, the important influence Norway exerts beyond its borders. **DR**