

The early years of the Groupe de Haute Montagne¹

Maurice Damesme and Tom de Lépiney

(Translation: Sir Douglas Busk)

Before 1914, the members of the Groupe des Rochassiers used to meet regularly on Sundays at Fontainebleau for climbing training, directed by the fanatics of the period: Jacques Wehrin, Pierre Le Bec and André Jacquemart, who already formed a homogeneous guideless rope carrying out high Alpine summer climbs.

In the course of the summer of 1913 some climbers met at Chamonix, and parties were organised under the leadership of the older members (Wehrin calling himself 'the noble old man'). The group was strengthened by the de Lépiney brothers who, although very young, already had to their credit a good number of expeditions with and without guides. Although no extraordinary climbs were achieved it proved a season of good Alpine training.

At this time, after getting off the last train, one left the village of Tour at midnight with very heavy sacks to climb the interminable moraine of the Tour glacier (the Albert I hut did not exist then) and arrived in the small hours at the Dupuis hut. Several days would be spent there carrying out expeditions in the Tour and Aiguilles Dorées groups. It often happened that at the end of our stay the only food we had left for four people was one tin of sardines. This despite the fact that we had reduced the weight of our sacks to the minimum without paying attention to the directions in the *Carnet de l'Alpiniste* (1911 edition), which advised carrying (among other items), a second silk shirt, a tie, slippers, face towel, dish-cloth, hairbrush, tooth-brush, special barometer, compass with clinometer, and a thermometer in a case. This same hand-book was lavish with advice. For instance, 'there must never be two parties on the same route of access to one mountain. If you are the first, claim your right to ascend first and descend last. If you are the second party, abandon the projected expedition and choose another'. The author of this prudent advice surely did not suspect that one day ropes would queue up at the foot of the Mummery crack.

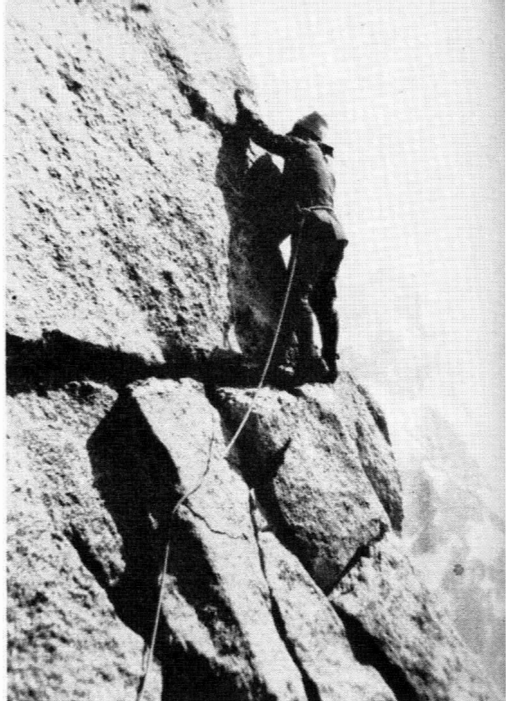
But already the taste for adventure began to waken and on 16 August, a rope led by Jacques de Lépiney opened a new route on the South-east ridge of the Index in the Aiguilles Rouges.

In 1914 the group met again, with more ambitious plans. Stopped by the war, these could not be carried out until 1919 by those who had survived the tempest. Unfortunately, the oldest animator of the group, Jacques Wehrin, whose name had already been associated with a crack on the Cuvier, did not return. Mobilised in 1914 to the 11th Battalion of the Chasseurs Alpins, he was

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69 First ascent of the Trident, Mont Blanc du Tacul, 1919 Alice Damesme and Jacques de Lépiney



70 On the Petit Dru, 1919 Jacques de Lépiney

detached in 1916 as an interpreter with the Russian troops; but learning that his battalion was due to attack in the region of Curlu, he hastened to rejoin it, and on 30 July fell mortally wounded while going through a heavy barrage which had weakened the courage of many.

The 1919 season was very fine and very dry. The good weather allowed numerous parties to climb not only important classic routes but, under the impetus of the de Lépiney brothers, to attack new routes in the Aiguilles Rouges, such as the South face of the Pouce and the East ridge of the Aiguille du Lac Blanc. From 10–13 September, Jacques de Lépiney, and Alice and Maurice Damesme climbed the Petit Dru, found a new route on the Dent de Jetoula and made the first ascent of the Trident of Mont Blanc du Tacul by an extremely difficult route. The overhanging exit of a very wide chimney 30 m high is a very hard pitch, which Jacques de Lépiney climbed without even a peg for security.

It should be noted that in those days there was no guide-book in French describing the routes, and that in preparing expeditions recourse had to be had to the *Mont Blanc Führer* (1913) of the Austrian Alpine Club.

Now a problem arose. The climbers had formed a certain number of parties fit to carry out major ascents without guides. However, their influence remained limited to a small coterie, who lacked the means to carry out any

propaganda. To extend their range it appeared necessary to form a club similar to the foreign academic clubs. But this new club, which was to take the name of the Groupe de Haute Montagne, had to enlarge its sphere of influence. This was why one evening at the end of September several climbers (among whom were Jacques de Lépiney, H. Brégeault, Paul Chevalier, and Alice and Maurice Damesme) met at Chamonix in a *brasserie*, the wooden balcony of which overhung the turbulent floods of the Arve.

While absorbing drinks each was charged with the duty of writing to someone already enjoying a certain reputation in Alpine circles a letter soliciting his support. Thus it was that on the occasion of the general meeting to constitute the Groupe which was held on 22 December 1919, we had as our Honorary President, E. Sauvage. The honorary members were G. Casella, E. Giraud, Dr Jacot-Guillarmod, J. Jarray, H. de Lépiney, L. de Bondidier, J. Maunoury, P. Puiseux and the Comte de Saint Saud.

The active members comprised Mmes Bailly Lereins and A. Damesme; MM P. Bosviel, H. Brégeault, Paul Chevalier, R. Dalley, M. Damesme, F. Desmarais, A. Duval, J. Escarra, M. Galichon, M. Gripon, Hadley, E. and C. Jérôme, Landry, P. Le Bec, Lejosne, J. and T. de Lépiney, G. Liégeard, P. Logeais, Marion, E. Monod Herzen, R. and P. Puiseux, Repiton Preneuf, Dr Th. Thomas and Vetillard.

To become an active member the following conditions had to be fulfilled:

- 1 To be a member of the C.A.F.
- 2 To be approved by the Committee.
- 3 To achieve a total of 1000 points calculated as follows:

Routes on the guides' tariff 1914	Third Class 30-49 fr.	Second Class 50-99 fr.	First Class 100 fr. +	Exceptional routes. Hard first ascents
With guide	25 points	50 points	100 points	150 points
Guideless	50 points	100 points	200 points	300 points

Included in the 1000 points there had to be at least three first-class expeditions, and if active membership was to be maintained a total of 200 points had to be achieved each year. At this time expeditions with a tariff over 100 fr. could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the traverse of the Grépon or of the Drus were considered 'exceptional expeditions'.

There existed also a category of candidate member for those who had not yet achieved the number of points necessary but who were confident that they would acquire them in the future.

A badge was necessary so that an Alpinist seeking a companion could, on seeing it, be sure that the wearer was an experienced mountaineer. The first badge worn by members of the G.H.M. was that of the C.A.F. surmounted by a blue enamelled ribbon on which G.H.M. stood out in relief.

From 1920 the G.H.M. developed rapidly. New honorary members were nominated: His Majesty Albert I, King of the Belgians, and famous foreign climbers such as Guido Rey, the Gugliermi brothers, Captain Farrar and Prof. Norman Collie.

Young active members full of enthusiasm (P. Dalloz, J. Lagarde, Jean Morin, de Ségogne, the brothers P. and R. Tézenas du Montcel, Savard, and the brothers J. and G. Vernet) joined the older ones, and during the years to come extremely difficult expeditions, new routes and major first ascents were carried out. We may mention among others the south-east side of the Col du Caïman by J. de Lépiney and Paul Chevalier; the Pointe de Lépiney by J. and T. de Lépiney; the Argentière side of Mont Dolent by T. de Lépiney and R. Richard; the traverse of the famous Col de la Brenva by the Lépiney brothers and A. Migot; and the first ascent of the Pointe Carmen on the Aiguilles du Diable by H. Brégeault, Paul Chevalier and J. de Lépiney.

In 1924, J. Lagarde, T. de Lépiney and H. de Ségogne achieved the second ascent of the Aiguille Verte by the Couloir Cordier. The North face of the Aiguille du Plan, which had been vainly tried by Baumann and Mummery, was conquered by J. Lagarde, J. de Lépiney and H. de Ségogne. In the Dauphiné, the Vernet brothers did the second ascent of the Barre des Écrins from the direction of the Glacier Noir. It can be said that at the end of this year French mountaineers could compete without fear with their colleagues of the foreign academic clubs.

In the 20s the climbing equipment was far from reaching its present-day perfection, and the possibility of a bivouac in bad weather with only a balaclava and a spare sweater was contemplated without pleasure. For this reason we attempted to make extremely rapid times, and to achieve this kept our loads to the minimum. We knew comrades who as their sole food carried with them only a piece of bacon, its weight varying with the presumed length of the expedition, nothing to drink, only a little flask of gin 'to cut' the water which it was hoped to find on the way. A party of two often used a rope 50 or 60 m long, 8 mm

in diameter. This was used for roping down, which of course had to be done unroped, and then doubled to serve as the climbing rope.

The statutes of the G.H.M., drawn up in collaboration with eminent jurists, provide for the coexistence of three categories of members. Apart from this classification, related essentially to the Alpine activity of the members, there existed another category very difficult to define but nevertheless entirely clear: at the conclusion of meetings which were held in the Rue du Bac in the old premises of the C.A.F., in the course of which some devoted member showed slides which he had taken during the climbs made the previous summer, the audience divided itself into two categories. Some returned quietly home, at least that is what we suppose, the others proceeded to the Brasserie Lipp where, surrounded by noted names and large dishes of *sauerkraut*, they discussed politics, as subsequent generations do, but *their* politics were Alpine ones.

One day each year the G.H.M. dinner brought together carefully picked members of the second category. We have known valiant climbers capable of struggling for hours on a rock wall or on an ice-slope who could not stand up to the heady wines of Dagonno.

The important role taken by the G.H.M., its rapid development and its successes did not fail to provoke jealousy. Some peevish spirits, scared by the daring of these young lunatics, attacked the G.H.M. violently during the Annual General Meeting of the C.A.F. in 1923. Some members of the committee bravely rallied to our defence. However that may be, the G.H.M. was requested to design a special badge 'if it thought it necessary to have one', because it had not the right to modify, even by an overlay, the C.A.F. badge which was common to all. It is from this period that the present badge dates, designed by Edouard Monod Herzen. It was first made in bronze and then in white metal. The design has been completely maintained (except for moving the letters G.H.M.) in the modern badge on a smaller scale.

In the years that followed, difficulties arose on the committee of the C.A.F. between younger and older climbers, to such an extent that at an Extraordinary General Meeting on 4 November 1930, the G.H.M. decided to split off from the C.A.F., but, as in any dispute, there are always to be found in each camp men of goodwill. By a protocol of 6 January 1931, cordial relations were re-established between the two committees. Loyal and fruitful co-operation was thus established, which still endures.