

A Trilogy of "What ifs...?"

On the basis that the wise learn from their mistakes and from those of others, Club Office-bearers were asked for accounts of their hill walking/climbing mistakes. What is striking about the three which follow, in order of increasing gravity, is the ordinary, even trivial, nature of what went wrong and how narrowly huge inconvenience or worse was avoided.

An Interesting Experience!

Anne Pinches

Many years ago around Easter, with snow on the hills and a very definite chill in the air, Derek and I set off to climb Ben Vane, south west of Loch Sloy near Loch Lomond. As I had driven the car I locked it and then thought about putting my keys in the top pocket of my rucksack, zipped and safe, unlike my breeches pocket which didn't have a zip. However I did as usual and put the keys in my pocket.

We were equipped for the day with the usual bits and pieces but also had crampons and ice axes. The day was going well and up we walked, making good progress and we weren't very far from the summit. We'd eaten some food and had some hot tea and were enjoying the day when underfoot conditions and weather deteriorated. It was time to stop and put on the crampons. Unlike the procedure followed at the start of the walk with the car keys, I deviated from my normal practice. Instead of finding somewhere to sit before taking my crampons out of my rucksack, I took them out, closed my sack and then found somewhere to sit, leaving my sack a short distance away. Part way through putting on my crampons a light gust of wind blew and I noticed that the sack moved a little.

I finished my task and had both crampons safely attached. At this point a stronger gust picked up my sack and it was on the move! Instinct told me that I should not run wearing crampons and all I could do was stand and watch as my rucksack was trundled to the edge of a steep slope and duly disappeared. I peered over the edge but there was no sign of my old, red, faithful rucksack which had been my friend on many Munro trips.

Derek and I looked at each other, looked again over the edge; definitely no sign of the red rucksack. At this point I mentioned to Derek that some people I knew kept their car keys in their rucksacks. He looked horrified and said "But you don't, do you?" I assured him I didn't, and after a moment we looked at each other again and said, almost simultaneously, "Let's get down."

So there we were, luckily fully dressed in waterproof jacket, hat and gloves with crampons fitted. Map and compass were in my pocket, ice axe in hand, and car keys in pocket! We descended as quickly as conditions allowed and were pleased to get to the car. As soon as we found a 'phone box I spoke to the police telling them that if anyone reported finding a rucksack then there was no need to look for a fallen and thus injured walker. I often wonder about the quality of the rucksack and if it's still there waiting to be found. The yoghurt will have gone off but the lunch box, flask and Goretex trousers may still be there.

I decided to make an insurance claim for my rucksack and its contents. After submitting the relevant form I received a letter from the insurance company asking what attempts had been made to retrieve the rucksack. I wrote a fairly long letter describing exactly where we were and what the weather was like. They sent me a cheque by return!

Moral of the story would seem to be, no need to change habits without very good reason! There is, however, perhaps a good reason for us both to have keys for the car we are using!

My Walking Mistake

Alister Macdonald

This is a very odd mistake to recount. I frequently walk alone, which means that there is only one person responsible for navigation, so the title is accurate. The walk was to the Munro Beinn Mhanach which, with its lower partner, Beinn a Chuirn, lies on the eastern side of Rannoch Moor. I started from the farm at Achallader, just off the A82 by Loch Tulla. The ruined castle by the farm is particularly interesting, but I did not dally long. The sky was grey, although not

threatening, and I wanted to get into the hills while the going was good.

The route for the entire walk approximated, very roughly, to a "T", with the initial ascent up the Allt Coire Achaladair being the vertical stroke. At the top of the ascent I was to take a left turn, down into a valley. To the right lay other valleys, of which more later. So up the the Achaladair I went and it was very pleasant. At the top there is, on the map, the Coire Daingean, but on the ground it was more a bealach which gave way to a huge grassy valley, the far (eastern) side of which is the flank of Beinn a Chuirn. I had in mind that I was leaving a V- shaped valley at its right-angle intersection with a bigger valley, through a sort of notch. I descended into the big valley and headed round the flank of Beinn a Chuirn to ascend Beinn Mhanach. (I was now off the end of the left-hand bit of the "T"). The top was not spectacular but typical of the huge grassy hills in those parts, giving a wonderful sense of space. It was a grand place to be.

I started my return, retracing my outward route. So there I was, in the relaxed state known to all Munro baggers, walking steadily along that huge valley. I was now back onto the left-hand stroke of the "T". I was looking for the right hand turn to take me down the Achaladair burn, the vertical stroke of the "T". It would appear as a V-shaped notch, high up on the northern (right-hand) side of the valley, wouldn't it? As ever there was some uncertainty about inter-converting distance walked and time, but I was still quite relaxed as I began to wonder why the right hand turn seemed a long time coming. It was obviously higher up the valley wall. So I ascended, well aware of the tendency to drift down rather than up hill when intent on simply walking ahead. I laboriously ascended and spent a long time looking for a connecting valley, which I knew to be there. There was a great deal of height and ground to cover, but nothing presented itself. I began to be perplexed and double-checked the map, matching it as best I could to where I had come from and to my surroundings. It was not easy to do. The huge void of the valley, on whose side I was perched, gave no specific clues. I was encouraged, however, by the fact that the gross topography matched the map. The flank of what I took to be Beinn a Chuirn, facing me, led to big sweeping valleys heading to the west and south west, (the right hand

stroke of the "T"). If that was right then the valley I needed, remembered as a V-shaped notch intersecting the valley I was presently in ...well it should be above me. But I had just searched there and it wasn't.

Perplexity intensified. I felt at a loss. I was not yet short of daylight but I was getting weary, and distinctly short of ideas. The valleys heading west and south west could provide an escape route, the right-hand stroke of the "T". Either one would lead me, eventually, to the A82 where I could hope to get a lift, either north towards my car or south to my base near Tyndrum. But if I was correct about the escape routes then the valley I was looking for had to be above me, V-shaped notch or not. It would therefore be illogical to follow an escape route (a putative escape route). I had to find that valley somewhere above me. So I ascended again, up over the shoulder of the valley side, onto the extensive flank of Beinn Achaladair, which seemed far removed from a plausible search area. After plodding around for ages, suddenly, as I rounded a hump in the ground, my line of sight uphill to the north opened up and I found myself staring down a V-shaped valley. I was in the Coire Daingean and I was looking down the Allt Coire Achaladair, the upstroke of the "T". All was resolved !

The walk down to the farm was light hearted and relaxed, even though I was two hours later than anticipated. The gloaming was verging on darkness but I would be "off the hill" just within the arranged time; there would be no alert.

That evening I worked out how on earth I made such a mistake in so simple a walk. There was no V-shaped notch and the valley did not cleanly intersect with the valley from which I was escaping. That was my schematic memory of the route at the junction of the "T". The smooth, featureless and extensive expanse of ground there gave me little option. Should I have made a cairn or two, which would have probably disappeared in the vast scale of the landscape? There were a few stones about and perhaps the effort might have paid off. Somehow I should have made some special effort to indicate that my "T" junction was nearby and that I should proceed no further along the big valley. Perhaps there were some memorable clues available but of course, in retrospect, I could not recall them. For those who advocate using GPS this is clearly a case where it might have served

me well. However I prefer to navigate by map, compass and a running dialogue with the terrain around me.

So my main conclusion is that I should have been more alert and in tune with the vast smooth and featureless topography, especially around the junction. It is a simple conclusion but difficult to put into practice. I will try harder next time!

I was lucky. Visibility might have deteriorated and then my search for the schematic notch-junction would have probably been unsuccessful. Either of the two escape routes would have been a grim salvation. If somehow they had proved false options then the details of my intended route, which I had left in safe hands, would have, probably, eventually guided a search party to me – but oh the shame of it!

A Nasty Shock – 40-odd Years Ago, and Nowadays

Ken Thomson

We'd gone up to Glencoe – probably in November 1968 or 1969 – myself from Edinburgh where I was a graduate student and Paul from London where he was beginning a much more successful career (he became Professor of Statistics at the University of Witwatersrand in his native Johannesburg) to give a Scottish flavour to Paul's mountaineering life – which was already extensive. It was to become more so in later years when he became President of the Mountaineering Club of South Africa after a string of first ascents around the world. I think that I had already inveigled Paul to the Shelter Stone in mid-winter (we were all mad then), but Glencoe held the attraction of a SMC Dinner – which I have totally forgotten!

There was a good deal of snow about that November, and days were already short, so we decided to have a look at Coire nam Beith, thus giving Paul a chance to see a fine corrie and to stand on top of Argyll (the summit of Bidean nam Bian) at the same time. I think that we had had another route in mind, but weather conditions didn't look good, with light snow starting to fall, and there were others elsewhere, so we headed for the easy Summit Gully (or was it Boomerang Gully?), up a broad fan of firm snow to where the cliffs

closed in on either side. As we did so, loose snow started to accumulate beneath our feet, and more was coming down, but we thought that we'd make it before things got too serious.

However – as the alert reader will have guessed by now – we didn't (make it). Without the rope on – if we had one with us; we certainly didn't have helmets! – there was a sudden swish, and I was tumbling downhill quite fast. There was no sense of falling, or even starting to move, just a whirlwind of white all round, until I came to a halt, a bit winded but undamaged. Paul was not far away, with a bruised hip. Whether we had started the avalanche, or we had been both hit by a substantial fall from above, I don't know, but we'd been lucky; boulders were sticking out of the snowfield on the way down. The lightness of the new snow posed no danger of burying us (I think), but at the same time made our ice-axes (we did have those!) useless.

We looked at each other in relief, and looked uphill in case some climbers above us had come down in more thorough fashion, but really there was nothing to do but decide that the big hill and the worsening weather were against us that day, and troop down to the Dinner with a carefully limited account of our day in the Glen.

The above was submitted to the Editor only a few days before four climbers descending a snowfield were killed by an avalanche in the same corrie, in mid-January 2013. The Editor then asked for some “fuller comment on avalanches and the present warning system”, provided below: While this was being drafted, a further three people – two of whom were off-duty RAF MRT members – were killed by avalanches in the Chalamain Gap. While having second – and third – thoughts, I have not altered the views below.

I have to admit to being less than excited by the current system of multi-sponsored avalanche warnings in Scotland, where such events may be common but do not generally trouble hillwalkers who mostly keep to ridges. One learns by experience (one does not go out simply to enjoy oneself, does one?), and avalanche risk must come a good way below the probability of making map-reading mistakes, tripping over stones (and crampons!), forgetting gear or food, and simple under-estimation of the weather and terrain.

There is now a multitude of more or less institutional avalanche-related activities, from the Scottish Avalanche Information Service

(SAIS) to various semi-official courses and even a Scottish “foundation”, and of course there is gear to be bought, from an “avalanche card” at £4 through search poles at £35 each and distress “emitters” at £50, to airbag systems in an “avalanche backpack” costing heaven knows how much. In the jargon, “MRTs are nearly always outside the window of survivability”, and on-the-hill mental awareness seems cheaper! The cost of SAIS itself is not easy to find, but the Mountain Weather Information Service (MWIS), while good, costs over £40,000 per year – and how many hill trips does it discourage?!

As the MCoS website says: “Mountaineers should be independent, self-reliant and able to look after themselves”. I could not agree more. We are thankful for – and contribute to – the unpaid MRTs, and the armed service helicopters, but further taxpayer-funded assistance for mountaineering, whether through SportScotland or otherwise, seems to me largely unwarranted. Here endeth the sermon from a grumpy old economist!