

Mountain Rescue - Its Origins in Scotland

Eric Johnston

Climbers and hill-walkers have the reassurance nowadays that if they have an accident or get lost there are expert rescue teams which will come to their aid. This was far from being the case in the years following the war. Gill Shirreffs, who knew that I had played a small part in mountain rescue in the bad old days, kindly introduced me to some of the leaders of the current mountain rescue teams and it was suggested that a brief account of how mountain rescue developed locally might be of interest.

In 1946 a Mountain Rescue Committee was formed by well known climbers including Jack Longland, covering the whole of mainland UK. They gave advice and raised funds and eventually First Aid Posts were set up at various locations including the Spittal of Glenmuick, Derry Lodge and Braemar Police Station. At that time RAF Kinloss had the only trained mountain rescue team in our area and climbing clubs were asked to make their own rescue arrangements in liaison with the Police. The Cairngorm Club took responsibility for our area and Bob Mitchell was appointed leader. If the Police heard that someone was missing or that there had been an accident, they contacted Bob and he duly contacted other Cairngorm Club team leaders who each had a list of Cairngorm Club and Etchachan Club members who lived near to them. The team leaders then roused their team, arranged transport (not always easy in those days), a departure time and then set off. The Police waited by the phone. The teams were basically search parties without wireless or rescue equipment. This worked reasonably well for a time as there were no major rescues. George Roberts who was also a Cairngorm Club member succeeded Bob Mitchell in 1958.

During this period there were a few minor searches in our area but nothing very serious. The most uncomfortable one I can recall was on the January Club Meet to Lochnagar when, after returning to the bus on a wild day, we were told one of our party was in difficulty after a tumble and we had to get back into our sodden clothing and boots and set out to help. Fortunately we soon made contact and all was well.

However, there were also two fatal accidents involving Club members. On a Club excursion to Bheinn a' Bhuird, Donald McCulloch, who had just graduated in Medicine, was killed when a cornice collapsed under him. Later, when climbing with friends in the Club, Doris Rhind, a Science teacher and the sister of a colleague of mine, was killed on An Teallach.

My own first experience of going out with a mountain rescue team was on Skye, where the experienced rescue team leaders could quickly form teams of searchers from the climbers in Glen Brittle. It was thus that I found myself in a team with Eric Shipton who was staying at Glen Brittle Lodge. This was before he headed the reconnaissance expedition which found the route which led to the ascent of Everest in 1953. Shipton, who had climbed with Tensing and later with Hillary on the reconnaissance, was expected to lead the successful party to Everest but was replaced by Major John Hunt who, later when Lord Hunt, was a regular visitor to Derry Lodge with a group of schoolboys. Indeed when we met there I copied his practice of strapping a compass to my wrist like a watch, but outside the anorak, with an altimeter on the other wrist – but I digress !

In 1951 there was a major climbing tragedy when four climbers were lost near Ben Alder. The wife of one of the climbers who died was the only survivor. The party of five were all young, fit and very experienced. On the 29th of December they left Glasgow on the afternoon train for Corrou Station, arriving at about 7pm and then set out for Ben Alder cottage on Loch Ericht, a distance of 18km. They spent the night in a bivouac beyond Corrou Lodge and according to the survivor had a comfortable night. The weather deteriorated and after some time struggling towards Ben Alder cottage they decided it was wiser to return to Corrou Lodge where there were estate workers' houses where they could find shelter. The four men were reduced to crawling in the snow and died of exposure. The woman struggled on to reach one of the estate houses. Estate workers cut branches from birch trees and used sacking to make stretchers to transport the bodies to Corrou station which illustrates the lack of rescue equipment at the time. The local Chief of Police issued a statement which amounted to a warning to inexperienced climbers and showed that the Police had no real practical experience of climbing. This tragedy also led to speculation about the powers of

endurance of men and women in extreme conditions and it is generally accepted now that a woman is better insulated to protect the body's core from the cold.

Regrettably, nothing was done to improve mountain rescue and it was 1959 before another mountain tragedy occurred which roused the authorities into action. This was again at the New Year, on 1st January 1959. That day five men were lost walking from Braemar Youth Hostel to Glen Clova Youth Hostel via Jock's road, a distance of some 18 miles. They were members of a Catholic Church youth group and some of them had crossed this route in summer. It appears they attended Mass in Braemar before setting out on their journey. They were reasonably well equipped but were carrying fairly heavy loads including sleeping bags, primus stoves and food, but did not have ice axes. It is clear they set out too late on the short winter day.

The group were to meet up with friends at Glen Clova Hostel but youth hostels did not have telephones in 1959 so the alarm that they had not arrived was delayed. I received a phone call from George Roberts late that night and alerted my team and we set off by car for Braemar at about 4 am. We walked from Braemar well before dawn, very much a search party without radio or any rescue equipment. At Glencallater Lodge we split in to two parties with Leslie Hay leading one which followed the usual route along the north side of Loch Callater, while I led the other along the south side of the loch towards Corrie Kander. I had a theory that they might have walked over the frozen loch but we found no sign of footsteps. I remember my party included Harry Buckley of the Etchacan Club and, reassuringly, a doctor, Sandy Lyall of the Cairngorm Club. Conditions were reasonable, but with a strong wind on higher ground. When we reached the Tolmount area we found footsteps heading towards the high ground between Tolmount and Tom Bhuide which indicated that the party was heading towards the White Water which eventually plunges steeply down a gully towards Glen Doll. The correct route ran parallel but north of this. Jock's Road has a section where there is no clear route although there are a few rusty fence poles and it can be tricky even in good weather. The conditions on the day the missing party set out deteriorated with poor visibility and a gale force wind. We joined Leslie Hay's party and eventually reached the plateau and decided there was no point



Figure 1 Photograph from the front page of the *Press and Journal*, 5th January, 1959. "The body of one of the lost walkers is brought down Glen Doll. The figures of the rescue team dark against the grey waste of falling snow and hillside" Photographer Gordon Bisset. Reproduced with permission.

continuing as it would soon be dark. We returned to Glencallater Lodge and eventually to the main road at Auchallater where we were met to our surprise by a barrage of flashing Press cameras indicating the public interest.

Similar search parties had set out from Glen Clova, including a team from RAF Leuchars, but without success. That ended our involvement but the search for the missing men continued mainly from Glen Clova, (Fig.1). A body was eventually found near Jock's hut at the head of the White Water and other bodies were recovered over a period of days. The fifth body was not recovered until mid-April.

The Jock's Road tragedy received wide publicity and a realisation in mountaineering circles that mountain rescue must be put on a formal basis and not left to a few volunteers. A Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland was formed, independent of the UK body. The North-East Counties Constabulary formed a rescue team made up of police volunteers and they received training from the RAF Kinloss rescue team. One of the police volunteers was our John Duff who was later stationed at Braemar and helped form the Braemar Mountain Rescue team. At about the same time the AMR Team and what was to become the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Association were formed, the latter with generous financial help from the Order of St. John. (See following article). The Cairngorm Club volunteers continued to help on rescues for a short period under George Roberts, but soon became superfluous as the trained and expert teams developed and thereafter any contribution made by the Club to mountain rescue was financial.

A footnote to the Jock's Road tragedy. At the time I was the Club Meets Secretary and had followed my usual practice of writing to the Factor at Balmoral requesting that the gate on Danzig Bridge be left unlocked. This would enable the Club to use the bridge on the annual January Meet to Lochnagar if the road up Glen Muick was blocked. The Factor at the time was the Earl of Caithness who was a good friend of the Club and he readily agreed. However, a few days after the tragedy I had a letter from him suggesting that the Meet be cancelled because of the terrible weather and the risk of further accidents. I gave a very diplomatic reply and the Meet went ahead successfully as planned.