

A Mountain Life - a Conversation with David (Heavy) Whalley

by Mark Norris

[A word from the Editor: David (Heavy) Whalley was one of Scotland's best known characters in the world of Mountain Rescue. I had the privilege of interviewing David at the end of 2024, when he was terminally ill. A poignant meeting.]

MN: Many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed David.

DW: Good to see you - apparently I should be a goner by now - they gave me to October, but I am still here!

MN: Oh, well, I'm glad we're having this interview then!

DW: But I'm charging you double the fee - so that means it's gone from nothing to nothing!

MN: If we could start with your upbringing - you grew up in South West Scotland, is that right?

DW: I was born in Ayr, and my dad was a minister at Castle Douglas. I was the only child born in Ayr - there were five of us and from our home we often went up the Merrick and the surrounding hills. It was just great because my parents gave me a love of the outdoors. I was quite wild as a youngster, so I think my parents were glad to see me getting out to the hills and the like.

RAF Mountain Rescue

DW: Because there were no jobs about in the early 70's, I joined the military. I had no intention of getting into the military but I saw the adverts and I thought, can I get into this? I joined just after the Cairngorm Disaster, so that would be 1971. And when I applied to join the RAF Mountain Rescue team they took me in even though I was too skinny. I was seven stones or something.

MN: I guess that's where the nickname (Heavy) comes from?

DW: True! I was just 17. But then, you know, the minute I was on the Mountain Rescue team, I was out every weekend going to different places across Scotland each time. After I joined the team and once they

knew I was in RAF catering (which means you can do the rations and logistics) I went on all the expeditions - about 40 in total, including Everest. That was magnificent, you know. I planned and managed all of the provisions from advanced Base Camp, which is the same height as Denali in Alaska - 21,500 feet. It's bloody high. But we'd been building up our altitude capability and gone to various mountains in Pakistan over 20,000 feet beforehand. So we had an apprenticeship in the big mountains.

MN: Wow I didn't know that you'd done so much overseas as well as in Scotland. You must have been super fit, then, for many years.

DW: Aye. We also did loads of trips to the Alps and then Canada in winter, and we were one of the first groups ever from Scotland to climb on the frozen waterfalls there. We had a great bunch of mountaineers.

MN: And is that what ultimately became your main passion, then? Mountain Rescue within the RAF?

DW: Yes, and there were many young lads who joined the RAF and Mountain Rescue at that time. They were often a bit wild, but after three months in the team they soon learned and we became friends as well as colleagues. The military and mountain rescue gave them life skills. And years later we had a reunion, and they gave me a painting (of Ben Nevis) that is on my wall. Which was lovely.

You worked Monday to Friday, and then you were out on the weekends. You know, it was a huge commitment when you think about it. We would go and train in a different location in Scotland every weekend.

When I became team leader in the 80's we covered all the aircraft crashes in Scotland.

And it's the anniversary tomorrow (7th December) of the F1-11 that crashed on the most beautiful mountain in Skye, Sgurr na Stri, which is only 1500 feet. There are still family members of the aircrew who get in touch, because they want to know what happened. And I'll take them up the mountain but I won't stay the night because I can't handle the night - it's too much. We flew in at 7pm, it was pitch dark and we were in a snow blizzard when we were dropped by helicopter at the Camunasary bothy. There were some folks staying there for the night - including Geordie who

is a good friend now. They had come out of the bothy when they heard the impact and were covered in white residue from the crash. The air was full of a mixture of snow, fuel and smoke.

Eventually we found the crash site. It was really tricky getting there - steep with wet snow on every ledge. The F1-11 has an ejection pod you know, like the space shuttle, and we found the pod with both pilot and navigator killed.

It was the hardest night of my life.

MN: What other high's and low's have stayed with you over the years?

DW: There have been many hard rescues. On one late night call out we got dropped off on Ben Macdhui in the Cairngorms, to look for a family of three, and the conditions became so severe we had to rope up to get back. Crawling, at one point. That particular call out did not have a happy ending.

On another time, we joined a big search on the Ben for a young guy, must have been 16. It was Christmas time and he was wearing a pair of plastic boots which were a thing then, and went up the Ben and got lost. My team had just come back from Glencoe dealing with fatality after fatality. There were multiple mountain rescue teams involved in the search and I was helping organise things from Fort William police station, with Pete Kirkpatrick who was Team Leader at RAF Leuchars in charge on the ground. We'd been away for about nine days back and forth, and when the call came in I said to my team - I know we all want to go home, but there's a wee boy missing. And the whole team stayed. And it was on the last day of the search that they found him, and he was still alive.

And, you know, he ended up becoming a nurse, which was great. But he wouldn't have lasted another night - he'd ripped his plastic emergency survival bag and he was done in. And, you know, and it was only because they spotted a hand. Waving. And well, when they found him and the news came over the radio, you should have heard the shout back at the police station. Everybody was cheering.

Getting folks out alive, particularly when the conditions were bad, was just wonderful.

Lockerbie

MN: Can we talk a little bit about Lockerbie?

DW: There were four teams, plus all the local civilian teams and their dogs. Some of us were there for three months, accommodated in the high school gym. After we arrived at the school gym, the next minute it was full of ladies cooking for us all. Fantastic. It's such a strange thing where you get such horror like that happening how all the community pulls together. We found the black box on the first light search. And then eventually all 164 bodies. You couldn't move in or do anything. It was like, honestly, a scene from hell.

There's a book called Trauma written by Professor Gordon Turnbull, and he was the guy that came to talk to us all to counsel us on how to deal with what we had seen. We didn't know about post-traumatic stress and stuff like that, and I became a big pusher on that after the Lockerbie business, when all we needed help. I had a breakdown after it, because colleagues were all coming to me with stress, which added to my own. Most of the Lockerbie team were just young lads, which was tough for them. But many years later we did a big cycle to Syracuse, where 30 odd students killed in the Lockerbie crash came from. That helped clear the demons a lot.

Climbing Characters

MN: You must have met a few other characters over the years as well. One of your long standing good friends was Hamish MacInnes?

DW: What a great guy Hamish was. I still miss his calls. He was such a good man and was also astoundingly clever. He also rescued me when I was a boy when my dad and mum and I were coming off Bidean nam Bian one summer and he was up there photographing. It was poor weather, and the weather came in. He could hear us and knew that we were coming down the wrong gully by mistake. And he got us, took us for tea in his house. And later in life when I met him properly for the first time, I said, you won't remember me, and Hamish said, no but I remember your dad! And I said, well I remember you - because we prayed for you every week in the church!

MN: Of course! Hamish was a Castle Douglas man wasn't he. What a great story.

DW: Yeah, and my Dad always did a sermon on Hamish every year!

MN: I remember when Hamish's documentary, Final Ascent came out. My wife and I were in London at that time, and we went along to the premier, and we met one of his other very good friends, Michael Palin. We went up at the end of the film, and had a chat with Michael - what a lovely man he is. He clearly loved Hamish, and talked about his E-type, flying around the roads of Glencoe.

DW: Aye, Hamish designed the first all-metal axe, the Terrordactyl - and sold 5,000 of them to the MOD and NATO. That's how bought his E-type! I think it was yellow, if I remember correctly. Beautiful car. He was revolutionary in some of his thinking.

More recently I've just done a film with Robbie Phillips, who's been out to St. Kilda putting new routes up. He's a great guy - I met him in Skye where we've done a thing too. The Skye film comes out next year (2026). His St. Kilda one has just finished its tour. And the thing about St. Kilda is you can't really get out there unless you're all properly organised - I did three rescues out there.

MN: Really? What kind of rescues?

DW: Bird watchers - believe it or not. Slipping on the goo - they don't realise everywhere's so slimy!

MN: Looking at today's climbing world, what do you think about the 'Red Bull' dimension, where particularly a few of the younger climbers are doing pretty risky stuff. Is extreme climbing and mountaineering something that you think is a good thing or not?

DW: Oh I think it's the way people are, and I don't think you'll ever change it. It's also very hard to make a living out of the mountains, so I understand why good climbers push the boundaries sometimes. I'm very lucky because I've got a military pension, and it's great to see the likes of Robbie who make their living from climbing and sponsorship. I've always thought that young people are the future. And some of them have a great ethos you know. There's a runner and climber - Uisdean Hawthorn if I

remember correctly. I did a big chat with him in 2018 when he'd just done the Skye Cuillin ridge in 5 hours - in winter. I mean it would take me that time now to get up onto the ridge! Anyway we did an event for his local Scouts. It was mobbed, hundreds at it. And it was great listening to his thought processes as he talked about his achievement. And after our chat I said to him, have you got any of your family here?

And he says well my granny's here with me. And I said to her - what do you think of what Uisdean has just done? And she replied, well I've just done the Highland Cross* - and I'm nearly 75! So I said to her - it's obviously the genes then!

**The Highland Cross is a 50-mile duathlon (20 miles on foot, 30 miles on bike) traversing the Scottish Highlands coast to coast, west to east from Kintail through Glen Affric and Strathglass to Beaulieu.*

And Now

MN: And what did you do after you eventually left the military?

DW: Well, I went on tour in America speaking and working with Yosemite Mountain Rescue, which was great, and also a couple of smaller tours to Morocco and elsewhere. I have also spoken often at outdoors and mountain events, and written a lot over the years about my experiences and stories on my online blog (<https://heavywhalley.wordpress.com>).

But more recently you know it's been quite special the number of people I've met since I have been terminally ill, and also received hundreds of letters, saying how much I had affected their lives. You don't realise that at the time.

I walk every day, but I miss the mountains. Because the mountains are my life - I just love the solitude. Along with my dog, Teallach, we did the Munros in the 80s. Him and me on the hill together, when I was very fit. You know, it was a different world. I get a lot of solitude out of the mountains, and peace. I love the mountains, they're just part of me.

MN: How long did you have Teallach for?

DW: Twelve years and twelve days - he was just great. He was able to get up on even the craggiest mountains, and did the Skye ridge with me, over

two days. We did it on our own - he was a better climber than me! We often went climbing in the Cairngorms for 8 or 9 hours, and he was always waiting ahead.

MN: So, I guess the last question is as you mentioned, you've got a terminal illness. Are you managing to handle that okay?

DW: Yeah, I mean it's a bit of a mind game at first to take it in. I got the diagnosis in March so I wrote an article - 'No deid yet!' But I'm surrounded by loving people.

MN: That's great. Do you ever hear the voice of your father, the minister, in the back of your mind?

DW: Aye often when I was having a bit of an epic! And the answer always came back - follow the dog, follow the dog! For me when it comes to religion, I've been in places like Tibet, India and Pakistan, and there is clearly something there. It's the spiritual dimension, isn't it? You know, you can have your religion, black and white, but you can also have your spirituality, and you can't not have that - especially if you are in the mountains.

DW: And of course, my mum. I think my mum taught me a lot, as well, because she was very kind. She gave me a way of being, and I think the communication, looking after people, came from my mum.

MN: Well David, what a life you have lived.

It has been an absolute pleasure to listen to you today.

I feel we could have gone on so much longer. Thank you so much.



Footnote: David Whalley passed away in 2025. His ashes are scattered near one of his favourite bothies - Shenaval.

Rest in Peace, Heavy.