

Ken's Watch

by Bill James

This caper – an incident that plays in elastic time – transpired on *Creagan a' Choire Etchachan*. In February 1962, my friend Ken invited me to join him in attempting a first winter ascent of a known rock climb. At the time, my long suit was multi-day climbs on high mountain routes, but I grabbed the chance of a first winter ascent – especially as he had explored the route that summer.



Kenneth Alan Grassick (pictured on sea cliffs at Rainbow Inlet at Souter Head near Stonehaven) was then a 27-year-old medical student at Aberdeen University; I was 25, an engineering graduate student. He was a respected member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, spending most of his spare time in the Highland mountains, and had many first ascents. Further, he famously climbed Aberdeen University's Marischal College tower, and nefariously, as I remember the tale, into

the Queen Mother's House at Balmoral Castle, lifting a *By Appointment* toilet roll as trophy evidence. I was merely a superfit SAfrican ("*Soufrican*") Drakensberg vagabond.

We formed a close-knit climbing group – Ken; two GPs and former classmates, Mike Taylor from Peterhead and (less often) Tom Patey from Ullapool; and a medic and graduate student in pathology, Graeme Nicol from Aberdeen. With four of the five in medicine, our conversation diffused grudgingly from the cult of evidence-based quackery to Scottish political history, to the military, and occasionally to engineering or even South Africa. Scottish and South African politics were then lively topics. This trip, however, was for just one rope: Ken and me. The climb, as planned, took place in that exceptional time of year when sufficiently icy conditions prevail on rock climbs, conditions bitter enough to qualify as a *winter ascent*. Keen climbers seize cold weather opportunities!

We hiked in from Derry Lodge, through the Caledonian pine forest, under the clucking watch of resident capercaillies, to the Hutchinson Memorial Hut. On the crags, the route starts from part-way up a gully, tracking out

across a smooth granite slab sloping at about seventy-five degrees. Critically, the far edge overhangs a vertical rock face that falls away to a considerable height.

In the photo of Ken on the route, he has progressed on crampons diagonally up and across the thin ice on smooth granite to the overhanging edge. The route follows and extends the line of the rope. He climbed then to a belay position perhaps thirty feet higher.



After leading across the slab and up the edge, Ken set up a sitting belay, while I as second followed also diagonally from lower right to upper left. When well across the slab, the adhering ice beneath the protruding front teeth of my crampons failed – it may have previously cracked under Ken's heavier passage.

Off I pendulated on an unravelling single rope across the slab and out into space, free-falling for a few seconds. Free-falling because Kenny, casually ensconced and somewhat unprepared, was wrenched off his seat – a freefalling body accelerates quickly, probably about 10,000 ft.lbs/sec in this case. It could happen to anyone. He was dislodged, the rope flew over his head and shoulder, running fast and free, coiling around his left arm, and ripping off his rather valuable gold watch. I saw it fall what seemed like several hundred feet, successively exploding into more and more components, like a multi-break aerial shell firework, but arcing not up but down, down, down, and out. I realised then, as now, that one's time on a mountain could end like the expensive watch, similarly dispersing inert bits ever-more thinly over a wild and inhospitable environment.

The standard ten-millimeter rope that was fixed around my waist in a trusty bowline – we could not afford fancy harnesses – worked its way up on my loose winter clothing. The lot ruffled together under my armpits, around my chest and shoulder blades, leaving my goose-pimpled torso exposed to Cairngorm's wintry winds. Or, since space-time was blurring, my trunk slipped down through the tangled rope and clothing. Either way, I was dangling in outer space, the rope that saved my life being fortuitously

and tightly knotted in a hitch around the fingers of Kenny's left hand. Just three of his fingers bore my 140-plus pounds gently swaying freely in fresh air. Kenny yelled in real pain. We were unsighted, but luckily within earshot, though probably no-one else was within twenty miles.

On the rock face but well out of reach, since the face was overhanging, I saw a lifesaver: a 10cm wide crack, too wide for a piton. It ran horizontally under an overhang crack and was ice-free! Ken, still painfully unseated but tied back to a peg, whimpering [sic] in agony, me swinging freely in space thirty-five feet below ... *not* the best way to spend a Scottish Sunday. "Hang on," says I, "if I move my centre of gravity synchronously, I may get this lump swinging" – which I managed though it took a wee while.

It was the first of many cautious manoeuvres I was to spend carefully planning and executing – the situation had become a full-scale timeless chess game. All moves leading to a winning endgame had to be planned ahead – a lapse in concentration meant quick defeat. Increasing the pendulations, I grabbed the crack, carefully inserted my piton hammer, if rather loosely (the very same hammer pictured) and hung a one-meter diameter rope sling over it, the two loose devices delicately if limply balanced. How could *sic a' clarty fix* hold?



With difficulty, feeling a hundred feet up, and encumbered with all my gear, I climbed into the precarious sling hanging on a loose hammer in the wide slot – *slowlee slowlee* – my head and face intimate with the cold granite face. I untied the bowline around my waist to free the climbing rope so that Ken could get himself properly anchored. Of course, that took *another wee while*, the problem being the 50% extensibility of a 100-ft nylon climbing rope (it's nearly impossible to untie an elastic cord if your 140+ lb body is hanging from it – try it!). Strange to relate, I had carried that beautiful, nautically spliced, white, cable-laid sling doubled around my neck and shoulder on many climbs in four countries on two continents for five years, and never used it, a vindication if ever there was one. Further, the climbing rope around my waist had been thoughtfully bowlined *outside* the sling – had it passed through the sling I wouldn't be writing this article.

Every slight movement had to be essential and planned in detail, probably thought out more than once, and gingerly executed. Though the view from my eyrie was probably unequalled, and photos would have been good, I disregarded my handy 1950s Kodak Retinette.

I had held onto the loose end of the rope and was able to re-attach myself to it; had I not done so it would have been checkmate for me, sitting forever in a weathered sling high up under an overhanging crag. In this way, another wee while accelerated by. In fact we were at last making infinitesimal headway – it seemed the situation might soon become promising.

Or not. When I unhitched myself from the sling hanging on the loose hammer, the rope of course pulled tight and stretched, dropping me another ten feet or so. Now it was a matter of Ken hanging onto the upper end, and me climbing up what was an uncomfortably thin rope - impossible you'd say, but sometimes the impossible happens inexplicably. Memory is fuzzy here, but probably the rope ascent was an uncoordinated combination of my legs flailing around snagging the rope between legs and feet, and Ken yanking the lump upwards systematically using both legs, two of us grunting without shame. Fortuitously, for no good reason I had practised the general technique of climbing up under the grand staircase in the entrance hall of Strathcona House at the Rowett Institute, which certainly helped. This was surely the longest of those accumulating wee whiles, but I was a super-fit rugby and ultramarathon enthusiast.



At long last the only remaining problem was climbing over the rock edge on a rope necessarily tight over the rock surface.

If you think that's easy, show me!

Eventually we were together on the summit plateau.

Resident ptarmigans in winter plumage, sounding like old tin clockwork toys reminded us that life had continued oblivious of our efforts on the very

edge of eternity. We toddled off down to Derry Lodge and home, chastened. We had shown that patience and simple Newtonian mechanics can cope with gravitational dynamics. As to the messed-up climb, *siccan a sotfar* we kept to ourselves, as is the practice, I believe, of all reputable climbers, especially if no-one is in sight or earshot.

Months later, Ken claimed insurance for the watch. Apparently in accordance with best post-war Scottish undergraduate student practice, insurance payout resulted in *two* new watches. For a good few decades it measured time from a daymare when we twice cheated that which is coming to us all: one big-time, and the second, *ye'll nae be mindin', jes a wee mindin'...*

We never wrote up that winter ascent. Had we climbed unroped, I would have simply slipped down more or less under control and landed upright gently in the soft snow-filled gully a few feet below – the slip would have been utterly unremarkable and long forgotten. In the 1960s, we felt secure when roped, *yet it was the rope that pulled me out into space and near-disaster*. The story is not without precedent: a century earlier, during the descent after Edward Whymper's 1865 successful first ascent of the Matterhorn, their rope was thought to have contributed to four members of his seven-man party falling to their deaths.

Good friends, how I miss them; alas, all are gone now. *Wha's like us?* Looking back now, I see that Ken Grassick forced our climbs; Graeme Nicol would have buttered no parsnips retelling the tale in his inimical British Commando voice; Mike Taylor, ten years our senior, would have radiated safety; Tom Patey would have composed a song. If asked, I might advise: practice climbing up a rope, carry a good sling, and wear a cheap watch.

** Ken spent six years in the Royal Air Force in Singapore, then 18 years as a GP in Newcastle, and died at 53 of acute leukaemia. He was survived by his brother (another GP), two sons and two daughters, and his wife Norma. I happily married an Aberdeen lass, had two sons, and became an engineering academic at a Canadian university.*