

The 1971 Cairngorm Disaster

by Malcolm Duckworth

The late Sunday night telephone call in November was unlikely to be good news.

“ Hi Malcolm – Bill here, can you get to the garages with a full kit for what could be a long rescue”. This was to be my first rescue as a new team member from having agreed to volunteer in September and start training.

Bill Marshall the then leader and founder of Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team was assembling the team to travel to Glen Derry for a first light search. After gathering, Bill explained that a party of six school children and two adult leaders were missing somewhere in the Cairngorm and Ben Macdhui areas. It was conjectured that unless they had escaped to lower ground they may have endured two nights on the plateau in blizzard conditions. The group had also failed to locate a plateau level refuge known as the Curran Shelter.

The Aberdeen Team was tasked to search the upper Glen Derry, Loch Etchacan, Loch Avon basin and the Fords of Avon areas. The underfoot conditions were challenging with very deep unconsolidated snow. Progress was slower than expected and tiring. The blizzard had abated and overhead, ironically, was a clear blue sky. These search areas were selected as potential sites that the missing party may have descended to escaping the blizzard. Later that day we were stood down following the discovery of the missing party by an RAF rescue helicopter.

Five of the six children and one of the leaders had died and the tragedy became known as the ‘Cairngorm Disaster’. It is sometimes referred to as the ‘Feith Buidhe Disaster’ due to the proximity of this burn to their emergency bivouac site.

A fatal accident enquiry was held and this led to the requirement for formal qualifications being placed on teachers, youth workers and adventure organisations taking children into the mountains. In addition, wider safety and risk management structures were also implemented. It is well documented on the internet.





Blà Bheinn and the Clach Glas Traverse
from Loch Scavaig
(Peter Henry)

Within four years I found myself as the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team leader and heavily involved in the implementation of such qualification and risk management structures. It also became a period where along with my colleagues we worked on developing a high level of professionalism in Mountain Rescue.

The accident sparked pressure from various official bodies to have all the high-level shelters removed. Their basic argument being that they encouraged the less well prepared into the plateau. It was fiercely debated and eventually all the shelters were removed.

The weekend following the tragedy Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team was tasked with recovering the group's equipment from the Feith Buidhe area. An emotionally hard task. The rescue that day and the subsequent recovery of the group's equipment has stayed with me for over 50 years and very recently culminated in me writing a poem reflecting on the event.

Feith Buidhe

The darkening plateau
hides the shelter
and deceived innocents
in sheltering contours
are folded in the blizzard
Hills stepped into darkness
-a blackness beyond night
and tears lost to the snow
now burden our history
Listen, to the west
the Feith Buidhe
below an icy carapace
trickles a thousand sadnesses
to the dark loch
The mountains are still now.
The plateau silent
neath this infinite dome
with a million stars scalpel-sharp
and thoughts held in stillness
Let me sing you a Gaelic anthem
to their lost voices
Beannachtd leibh