



Power on the Peaks

The main objective of the club is to promote walking and climbing at all levels in the Scottish mountains, in an atmosphere of responsibility and companionship, with particular emphasis on safety, not only in winter, but also in so-called "summer" when wet grass on a steep slope can be as treacherous as consolidated snow. Instruction in navigation techniques and skill development is given on each fortnightly outing by our most experienced members, some of whom have been professionally trained, and this summer will see an increased programme of leader development.

Statistically, most mountain accidents can be attributed, either directly or indirectly, to navigational error. When weather conditions deteriorate and visibility is limited, accurate navigation is essential - even more so in winter when the snow covered ground can be the same colour as the sky.

Scotland's winter mountains - a climbing challenge relished by the members of the joint Scottish Power/Scottish Nuclear Mountaineering & Hillwalking Club. Also the focus, this year, of much media attention because of the increasing number of accidents, many resulting in death.

EMA member, Dave McCulloch, had his moment of media glory in January but it could all have ended so differently. Andy McGowan from Scottish Power's Distribution and Supply Division, explains what happened.

With more people being attracted to the mountains, and with this winter's snow conditions being better than for the past half-a-dozen years, but with weather conditions being more severe than in recent winters, the number of accidents has risen dramatically.

And the second-biggest cause is known locally as the "Surrey syndrome". I've driven all the way to Scotland overnight on Friday and a little thing like appalling weather conditions isn't going to stop *me* climbing.

Accident

One very capable mountaineer and club member is Dave McCulloch, a projects engineer with the Glasgow District of Distribution & Supply Division of Scottish Power. Dave was in a party of 7, including myself, who set off on Sunday, January 23, to climb West Gully of Sgor na h-Ulaidh (p. Skawr na hooly) a 3,300ft mountain in the north Glencoe area. The day was mainly dry and clear with some sunny intervals but with squally showers forecast and wind speeds of around 30mph from the west. Another club group was engaged in a less serious climb on a neighbouring peak and a third party were traversing Rannoch Moor on the West Highland Way track.

After an hour's walk-in to the mountain, we fitted crampons to our boots to begin the ascent. The snow in West Gully was well consolidated and the short, Grade 2, climb brought us out on the summit ridge in glorious sunshine, with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains. As we lunched below the summit cairn, a

	1989	1991	1992	1993	1994 (end apr)
Total incidents	215	354	297	n/a	-
Total injuries	157	176	146	n/a	-
Fatalities	24	21	19	44	20

These frightening figures must make all mountaineers, whether local or from more distant parts, consciously reassess their own experience and capabilities before undertaking a serious winter route. Particular attention to route planning, timing, weather forecasted, snow conditions and navigation is given on all club outings - but, even so, the unexpected can happen.

dark cloud came in from the west, reducing visibility and showering us briefly with some nasty hail. The customary summit photograph was taken, then the descent began at 2pm in a northeasterly direction.

About 10 minutes into the descent, another fierce squall suddenly hit and Dave apparently tripped and disappeared from view. Since we were crouched over our iceaxes with hoods over heads, we had to work out in which direction he had slid, because if you fall on an icy slope, you immediately become a sledge as on the Cresta Run. His iceaxe, which is used to arrest a slide, was found stuck in the snow. It had obviously been wrenched from his grasp! And his likely line of descent would have taken him right over the very steep and craggy north face of the mountain!

I decided to make a descent much steeper than that planned, to take us down the side of the crags to their base - both to look for Dave and to get the members of the group off the hill quickly in the deteriorating weather conditions. No trace could be found. Arrival at the mountain rescue post took the time to 4.30pm. Both darkness and temperature were falling rapidly.

Survival

Sixteen members of Glencoe Mountain Rescue Team immediately set off and conducted a thorough search using powerful lights. Again, no trace at all could be found and the search was abandoned at 10pm. With heavy hearts we settled down to wait until first light, when an RAF helicopter was promised.

Two other rescues were in progress at that time and the helicopter didn't arrive until just after 10am. He picked up 6 members of the rescue team and flew past the north face twice, with no visible signs again reported. He then passed behind the mountain to drop the rescuers and, within minutes, the best words I've ever heard cracked across the radio ... "He's alive. He's sitting up blowing his whistle. Report to follow."

A good recovery

Dave was flown directly to Belford in Fort William for initial treatment for his broken right femur and slight frostbite in three fingers. He was then transferred by road to Raigmore in Inverness to have an internal splint fitted by orthopaedic specialists. Six weeks later he was back at work, catching up on all the paperwork he does not normally have time to do.

The reason he landed round the other side of the mountain and baffled everyone, was due entirely to the force

Dave's story

Of course, Dave saw things from a slightly different point of view:

"We had stopped for something to eat and had moved off, with Andy in the lead and me following up the rear. After only 30m, I noticed that one of the party was having difficulty getting over an obstacle. As I reached out my hand to help him, the wind picked me up and I was suddenly floating through the air. Then the slope caught me and I was travelling down it face first. I tried to slow myself with the sharp edge of my iceaxe but I was going too fast for it to make an impression.

I tried the flatter edge but the force of it nearly pulled my arm out of its socket. I somersaulted, free fell, somersaulted again and thought my time was up, though there was no sense of my life "flashing before me." My thoughts were focused on the rocks I was sure I would end up hitting. Fortunately, I hit a snowbank and stopped. There was no pain, no panic, just a hope that this wasn't a temporary halt. When the immediate danger is over, training and past experience begin to take over, and the first thing you do is check methodically for injuries. It was then I realised I had broken my leg. The next thing you do is to look and listen for any help on its way. From above, I heard Janet say that she could not find a way down. (Janet Morrison of Energy Trading was referring to the rocky north face where the group estimated Dave had fallen). Then I assumed they had gone for help, which was exactly the right thing to do, because the conditions were treacherous. This was about 2.30pm so I reckoned there wasn't enough time to mount a search in the daylight remaining. I began preparing for a night out on the hill!

Pictured right:
Dave McCulloch

Firstly, I looked around at what was available to help me. The bivvy bag and most of my food was gone and my jacket was ripped to pieces but I had a spare one. Then I crawled across the slope looking for a place where I could keep a better lookout and dig a snowhole. The procedure is to dig a little and slowly, eat a bit, huddle for heat as best you can, dig a little deeper, eat a bit and so on. I used poly bags and the internal bag of my rucksack to keep warm in the snowhole. You must use all that you have.

The tactics were to make sure I was conscious next morning so I could watch for rescuers and then blow my whistle. If you lose consciousness, you could easily become covered with snow and not be found. I felt pretty calm, there just wasn't time to panic. You are always doing something. The nearest I came to worry was next morning when no-one came up the trail I had expected they would be using.

Instead they came from the other side and by helicopter. I could hear the chopper, and one of the rescue team heard my whistle and must have radioed my position to another, who set about finding a route. They contacted the pilot who flew round and flashed his lights at me. Their ground man was first to reach me, and I can't really remember what he said, but it was something like "And how are you?"



of the wind. The strangest thing is that Dave thought he was lying where the group and the rescue team thought he was lying! Fortunately, Dave has studied survival techniques and has been on expeditions to the jungles of Borneo and other remote locations as well as the Scottish Highlands!

And the media had a field day. After all the gloom of reporting fatalities on the Scottish mountains, here was someone who had actually survived

after coming to grief! Ward 3B at Raigmore resembled a TV studio at times and the nurses were forever taking calls from newspapers seeking his advice on mountain survival - and from his many friends and colleagues.

But the moral of the story? Even though the sport is handled responsibly, to high standards of professionalism and safety, the unexpected can happen. And, yes, you can live to tell the tale.

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