

## Reflections on a mountain rescue – Beinn Sgulaird

I thought a lot before posting this. Not because it's embarrassing to get rescued (it is) but because we put folks' lives at risk to look for us and caused others worry because we hadn't come home. Both of which are inexcusable. If we have any defence, I think we did a lot right: left details of where we were going, stopped when it was too dangerous and had plenty clothes and shelter to last a winter's night. But we didn't get down safely as planned and couldn't contact anyone due to the mobile phone masts being damaged; others came out get us. Which is regrettable and not something I want to repeat. Writing down what happened helps me learn from it but also gives the opportunity to thank publicly the people that helped us. Hopefully the additional observations on the kit we had offer some real life experience on the realities of modern day 'emergency' gear.

Last weekend, a friend and I descended steep, snow-covered slope on a 937m (3074ft) Scottish Munro. After climbing down through a number of steep crags, we hit a dead-end as night fell. Realising it was too dangerous to continue or reverse our steps in the dark, we spent a winter's night perched on a small snow ledge before being unceremoniously plucked from the mountain 12 hours later by an RAF Sea King helicopter, call-sign 'Rescue 137'.

This is what happened.

6.15am

It was snowing when I left my house in Edinburgh before dawn and walked to the main road to meet Andy. We were headed south of Glencoe, and west of Tyndrum, to a Munro called Beinn Sgulaird. Only just above the Munro qualifying height of 914m (3,000ft), Beinn Sgulaird sits high above Loch Creran, just inland of the west coast Scotland. I've walked up the mountain before, in summer, and was happy to do it again with Andy and bag it in another season.

10.45am to 5pm

Beinn Sgulaird from the farm at Druimavuic is an easy walk, even in snow, and 2pm saw us at the south-west top and the start of summit ridge. The weather had closed in and a strong wind whipped clouds past us as we picked our way along the broad, rocky ridge. The wind was cold enough to bite the skin and it jostled us about as we walked over the snow-covered rock and ice on a compass bearing to reach the summit.

From Beinn Sgulaird's north top, there is a known route west into Glen Ure.

The ground was steep and convex but easy at first and nothing out of the ordinary.

When we came upon some crags we would traverse the top of them until we found a break and then we would either crampon down sideways or face in and kick steps if it was steeper.

Nine times out of ten, I think we'd have found a way down. But there were a lot of crags and a lot of traversing and this took time. Without us realising it, the light had faded dramatically and it was almost dark when we came to the top of a crag we couldn't see down. Facing in, we traversed the wet snow above it left and right, then left and right again, then right one final time to confirm what we both realised: it was too steep and dangerous to continue without ropes.

The preference for both of us was to go back up and try again. But the complex ground we had just descended would be dangerous to reverse in the dark.

Realising this, and not being comfortable on the steep slope, we spent the last few minutes of daylight scrambling across and down to a small ledge that was the only flat bit of ground in sight. Triangular in shape, it measured 3m across, pitched out above the abyss and seemed destined to be our home until daylight, 15 hours away, when we could take stock of our situation and see how best to continue.

5pm to 12midnight

Once settled, we tried to text home to say we were safe but the storms that hit Scotland the previous Thursday had put out the local mobile phone masts and there was no signal. There was nothing to do but sit and wait, still with the idea of reversing what we had done in the morning and walking back to the car. The first few hours weren't too bad. Andy had a foil survival bag, marketed as having the same warmth as a 2-season sleeping bag. I had a bothy tent. We were both sitting on our rucksacks to insulate us from the snow. I was wearing a thick synthetic duvet jacket and Andy had a thin insulated top on over his fleece. It wasn't too cold, around freezing, but later the wind and rain picked up and whipped us remorselessly, often ripping my shelter out from underneath me and billowing it into the sky. It was difficult to keep hold of and it annoyed me. Andy too. He suffered stoically throughout, with only his nose and lips visible through the mouth of his survival bag.

12midnight to 2.30am

As Andy predicted, his wife phoned the police when he didn't return home on time.

My wife had gone to bed early so was woken at 2.30am by two policeman knocking on the door. After they confirmed I wasn't there they asked for a photograph, which I'm reliably told would have been used for body identification purposes if the need had arisen. Not being stupid (unlike her husband, you might say), this upset her and she phoned both her and my parents, who came down to the house.

When Lothian & Borders Police established we were overdue, they called their counterparts in Oban. Two policewomen from Oban Police Station checked the road at the base of the hill and found our car still there. They notified Oban Mountain Rescue, who mobilised a team and headed out to search for us. Two runners were sent up our ascent route and the rest of the team headed into Glen Ure where they thought we may have descended.

2.30am to 5am

Stiff and cold, nine and half hours after we first sat down, I glanced out the 'window' of my shelter and saw blue lights in the glen below. "Andy, I think that's mountain rescue. This is going to be embarrassing." We flashed the standard SOS signal of six flashes and received three in return. Now we knew they knew where we were, all we could do was sit and wait and guess how they were going to reach us.

From what I gather, the Oban Mountain Rescue Team leader sent a team with ropes up the head of Glen Ure, presumably with the objective of them reaching the summit and climbing down to us from the top. He had also called the Royal Air Force base at Lossiemouth and at 4.30am they reached us first. The 'clatter-clatter-clatter' of an RAF Sea King helicopter reverberated around us as it thundered past on its way up the glen. It flew back towards us, lit us up with a powerful torch beam and slowly edged into the mountainside. Hovering above us, lights flashing and beeping, the pilot held his position in the clouds as a winch operator lowered a colleague down towards us on a wire cable. Landing on our ledge, he shouted: "Are you okay?", pointing at me. I replied: "Yes". He

repeated the question to Andy who gave the same response. "Right, I'm taking you first. I'll be back for you. Stay there!"

With that, he placed a harness under my shoulders and knees and his colleague winched us into the night air and pulled us into the warm belly of the helicopter.

Quickly detaching me, the winchman headed out again into the night sky and within minutes Andy followed me into the helicopter. We both sat in a seat facing the door, buckled in, as the winchman and winch operator closed the door and the pilot banked the helicopter away from the mountain.

5am to 8am

The pilot flew the helicopter away from the crags, circled around and landed at Glen Ure farm. The police met us there and ushered us into a heated van, occupied by the Oban Mountain Rescue Team leader. He checked we were okay and one of the policewomen pressed a phone into our hands so we could speak to our wives.

Afterwards, we talked them (Mountain Rescue and the Police) through what had happened and how we ended up in our predicament. To their credit, they didn't appear critical.

When all the Mountain Rescue Team were safely off the hill, the police wanted us to get our body temperature checked. They drove us into Oban and took us to hospital where we checked out okay. Afterwards, two other policemen gave us a lift back to our car. When they left us, we were on our own again, but this time in a much more comfortable situation, fully appreciative of the fact it was with thanks to a lot of people.

### **Thanks to...**

Oban Police - for their concern on-site and the support they gave Andy's and my family through the night.

Oban Mountain Rescue - for coming out to get us, especially after not having much sleep as it was their Christmas night out the night before.

RAF Lossiemouth 202 Squadron - for obvious reasons and their professionalism and skill in flying in the mountains in poor weather.

Glen Ure farm - who I'm told helped the police and MRT through the night.

Oban hospital - for checking us out and giving us cups of hot coffee.

Lothian & Borders police - for alerting my wife and sending back the picture she gave them.

### **Lessons we learnt**

Research fully any likely descent route. There's enough information on the internet about the steepness of the crags and the NW slope to have warded us off it in winter.

Triple-check the map before descending. There's clearly not a lot of contour lines on the slope which should have raised flags to us that it was overly steep.

A route guide left with a partner or friend could be a life saver – Andy's wife was able to tell the police what hill we were on and where we expected to descend. Leaving this information with my wife too would have been better.

Mobile phones are indispensable. Not primarily for calling a rescue but for letting folk know you're fine. If we could have communicated with people there may have been different outcome.

Take a spare pair of socks (Beginner's mistake. I thought I had them).

Consider taking a stove in winter. (A Jetboil, for example, would make a huge difference and we could have filled it up with the surrounding snow).

Above all, don't get caught out needlessly in the hills. It wastes a lot of resources and if the weather was less kind it could have been an awful lot worse.

### **Kit observations**

Bothy bag (Terra Nova) – fantastic but difficult to hold onto in the wind. We would have both got into this but it would have meant us leaning back into the void and neither of us fancied this.

Survival bag (Blizzard Survival) – Andy used a Blizzard Bag and found it to be probably as warm as they say it is (a 2-season sleeping bag). However, he said it was too big around the chest and the excess space inside cost him warmth.

Survival bag (Adventure Medical Kits) – Andy kindly gave me this halfway through the evening. I used it first wrapped around my legs and then got into it later. The fabric seems very strong and I noticed a difference in heat loss. I wouldn't have wanted to use it on its own.

Insulated jackets - Both of us had synthetic insulated jackets (me a Mountain Equipment Citadel, Andy a much lighter Rab Generator smock).

Down would have been warmer but I don't believe it would have lasted the first hour. The Citadel has 200g of Primaloft insulation and for warmth is superb. My top half was never cold.

Waterproof socks - I find these great for winter walking but when we were stopped, the sweat stayed inside them and my feet got cold. Andy loaned me a spare pair of wool socks and I would have changed into these if my feet got any colder.

Pile/pertex mitts - probably great in dry weather but they got soaking midway through the night. They ended up under my legs to help keep them off the ground. Waterproof mitts on the other hand were excellent.

Neck gaiter – being able to trap warm air round your face is quite pleasant, especially when it is your only source of heat.