

Mountain Writing Competition 2022:

1st Prize

Return to Creag Meagaidh

By Willie Munro

Willie Munro has enjoyed the Scottish mountains for half a century and the Scottish Mountain Writing Competition has acted as prompt to write about some of his experiences.

I had vowed never to return.

Now, 27 years later, here I was, with my son who was about the same age and just as enthusiastic as I had been on my previous visit.

On the walk in, we stopped as Coire Adair opened up. There was no way that I could stop myself from surveying the grandeur and all the lines on the snow clad coire. Also, I had to prepare myself.

Then something really surreal happened. A small group caught up with us, also pausing at the same point to survey the coire. Astonishingly, it was two of the people that I had been with on that fateful day so long ago and hadn't seen since. They too were returning for the first time since then. They too were apprehensive about it. They too were staring at the cliffs, no doubt visualising it all again. We spoke about the incredible coincidence, our recollections, our plans and then walked on.

I felt spooked. Was that uncanny coincidence trying to signal something?

Trying, to put these thoughts out of my mind, we carried on to the loch and pitched the tent in the same vicinity as the igloo we built back then. Opting for a not too challenging afternoon, we headed up Easy Gully, pausing at the foot of the South Post to look at the ice on the first pitch, and for me to reflect. After resting at the top of the gully, we took a bearing and headed off into the spindrift, past Mad Meg's Cairn to the summit of Creag Meagaidh, returning by the atmospheric Window.

Once back at the tent, I sat looking out at the cliffs and allowed my mind to take over. The memories came flooding back, as clear as if it had just happened...

Passing through villages of Strathspey on a dark Friday night, the aftermath of the Great Highland Blizzard of 1978 was evident with snow stacked up to first floor windows. The walk into Coire Ardair the following morning was perfect, peaceful, extremely cold and still, sunny with clear blue skies and dazzling whiteness. The coire looked superb in its mantle of white which made it easier to spot the various climbing parties.

Finding a place that looked suitable for an igloo, we dumped kit that we didn't need until night-time and headed up towards The Window, to the gully Cinderella which we intended to climb. There was so much snow that it was a fairly straightforward climb and we didn't use a rope until we were confronted by a huge cornice that had to be tunnelled. Once on the plateau we absorbed the view which was basked in alpenglow, with different hues of orange, grey and white as far as we could see. After a while, the permeating cold prompted us to head back down to the coire via The Window. I was quite excited at the prospect of building an igloo for the night and we set to work on its construction. We all kept looking up at the climbers who were still on the face, but now all close to

completing their routes. One of our group wondered where his brother was and concluded that he must be one of the two parties still on the South Post.

The igloo was starting to take shape, it was hard work. As I paused for a breather my heart skipped a beat. "They're falling" I screamed. All eyes instinctively zoomed in on the South Post. A pair of climbers were sliding and tumbling down the steep snow. Something was happening above them as well, but our eyes followed them, still roped together one slowed, the other tugged him off again. They reached a rocky patch, the rope snagged and was severed. One climber hit a rock with a crack and was thrown, summersaulting up into the air, clear of the near vertical ice pitch at the start of the climb, free falling the rest. The other climber was sliding out of control towards the edge of the ice pitch where, inevitably, he took off into mid-air. There were two thuds followed by a swish of snow that they had swept down with them.

Then silence, broken by someone, "Dead".

"Sleeping bags, first aid - hurry" cried another as he set off at speed to Easy Gully. I tipped out my rucksack and stuffed it with what we would need. "I'll volunteer to go down for help" said one of our group, he jotted down the details, asked for my compass, told us to take ice axes and crampons as the name Easy Gully is misleading, then set off for Aberarder.

With badly packed heavy rucksacks, two of us headed across the frozen loch and started to ascend Easy Gully as fast as possible in the deep snow. Waves of nausea were coming across me from the combination of shock, exertion and anticipation of what we were going to find.

I knew that one of the casualties was alive as I had seen him get up briefly before falling down again. Worryingly, someone who had got to the scene was on his knees pounding up and down. CPR I thought. As we got closer, two other people joined us having traversed over after climbing Staghorn - one of them was our colleague's brother. "Thank goodness" I called, "we thought it was you".

One person came away from the casualties and started to descend "One's bad and the other's worse - I'm going down with more details" he shouted as we passed, neither of us breaking our rhythm. At least they're both alive I thought.

Approaching the site, sweat dripping off me despite the freezing temperature, thighs burning and lungs bursting, I gasped "sleeping bags, mats, first aid, ice axes" - "Great, set them up there" I was told, then I realised that the pounding motions had been my colleague digging out a shelf for the casualty. Once the mat was in place and a sleeping bag set out and opened, we gently lifted the casualty onto it and then got him as comfortable as possible. I then went a bit further up the gully to the second casualty who I had seen moving after he landed. He was constantly groaning and occasionally roaring with pain. His injuries had generated quite a lot of blood and we did our best to apply dressings. He persistently kept asking where his glasses were. We tried to get some sense from him and asked him his name. He then seemed to keep asking us how he was, by his own name! It took a while until we realised that both casualties had the same name!

Once we got them as comfortable and warm as possible, we could see that some other climbers coming from the first aid box with stretchers. We decided to wait. At this point, much to my astonishment, as I had always been told to reassure a casualty, someone decided to tell the more compositis casualty that he was very lucky to be alive as he had fallen over a thousand feet and the temperature was minus 20 degrees!

"Stop, listen" called someone and we all fell silent. The sound of a helicopter could just be heard. It gradually got louder until we could see its lights at head of the glen, around Aberarder. It passed by,

both the lights and the sound disappeared. "It must be heading to the Ben" said someone. I felt huge disappointment and dread. It looked like we were going to have to do our best to keep the two casualties alive until morning in the freezing temperatures. "There's a howff by the loch, we should go there" suggested someone who was familiar with the area.

Slowly, and as gently as possible, we lowered the stretchers pitch by pitch, until the snow levelled out near the loch. It was as we stepped onto the frozen loch, to head across it to the howff, that we heard the helicopter again. This time we could see its lights heading straight towards us. As it approached, the coire was lit up like daylight and its rotors threw the snow up around us hitting our frozen faces like needles. Its lights were illuminating clouds of spindrift, a fantastic sight along with the noise and the smell of aircraft fuel, a paradox in this cold, dark, hostile environment. It came down alarmingly close to us so we knelt over the stretchers trying to protect the casualties from the downdraught. I hoped the pilot knew this was a frozen loch and didn't put all the weight of the helicopter on it. As if it was a drill we had practised a hundred times, the door opened and the winchman signalled us forward, the other group went forward and lifted their stretcher through the door. We were then signalled forward, but our stretcher wouldn't fit alongside. The winchman signalled us to go back and then he made some adjustments and called us forward again. It slid on, but a very tight fit. A second later, the noise increased and the helicopter lifted off again. The winchman waved and closed the door as the helicopter tilted and turned away. I felt a wave of emotion and relief as the great yellow Whirlwind headed off, its lights and sound fading away to be replaced by the intense cold and darkness. We had done all we could, now they were with the professionals.

By now, there were a lot of people around. We all headed across the loch to prepare and consume some warm food and chat about the experience over a whisky. Then, some people realised that two of their friends were missing. We had heard shouting earlier from high up on the South Post but assumed it was climbers checking if things were under control, so we had just shouted back that the casualties were alive and we were taking care of them.

The missing two turned up a bit later and recounted their story. Ropes of the two parties had crossed. They too had been pulled off by the falling climbers but luckily their rope snagged and held. They were unharmed but needless to say, very shaken.

The Mountain Rescue Team arrived and checked that everyone was alright and congratulated us on our rescue before heading down again.

Next, our two colleagues returned from the valley having coordinated things there with the emergency services. The helicopter had landed to get all the details, so we were wrong to think it was ignoring us for another incident on Ben Nevis. So, here we were, high up a mountain, minus 20 degrees, middle of the night, six people, four sleeping bags and half an igloo! Three of our group headed down to find a warm bed somewhere and the rest of us completed the igloo and settled down for a fitful sleep.

The next morning seemed surreal and peaceful. As I surveyed the snow covered coire, it was difficult to envisage the drama that had unfolded on that serene scene just a few hours before.

That evening, when I got home, I discovered that the front page of a Sunday newspaper had carried the story in a very dramatic style. I was greeted by two very worried parents who had seen the paper

and feared the worse. Now that I am a parent, I can start to imagine the torture that I put them through...

My own son now pulled me back to the present, offering a cup of tea.

I learnt more about leadership, teamwork and resilience that night than in all years since. Gazing again at the beauty, I realised that although the incident had been a trauma that had stayed with me for years, I was wrong to have said that I would never return to Creag Meagaidh.

Like any mountain, Creag Meagaidh was to be revered, not feared.