

The Last Call-Out

By Alan Laing

The pine-panelled room was an Aladdin's Cave, filled not with silks and satin and silver but with kermantle, Goretex, steel, titanium, fibreglass, carbon fiber. Hard stuff. Sharp, pointy stuff. Beautifully utilitarian things, made for sending you up rocks, along rivers, down snow-slopes. The room was what young Sean's Aunt Shena called "the bourach" and his uncle Martin called his gear room. The accumulation of equipment was testimony to forty years of outdoor activity, twenty years of it in a Mountain Rescue team. In his thirteen years Sean had already done a respectable number of Munros with his Mum and Dad but he knew that Uncle Martin had walked every Munro, climbed in the Alps, canoed in white water, and still skied, as his Sean's dad put it, like an avalanche waiting to happen.

When Sean visited his aunt and uncle in their cottage outside Kingussie he liked to explore the room, taking in the mountain photographs from Scotland and more remote places; picking up and hefting chunky, immensely *practical* looking bits of equipment; imagining himself using those crampons, ice-axes, or the collections of chocks hanging from slings like a jailer's keys. Best of all, if he could persuade his uncle, he liked to hear stories about expeditions or mountain rescues.

"Uncle Martin, what was your best rescue?"

"I don't think I'd say "best" about any of them, son. Any time we went out it meant someone was in trouble and you never wanted that."

"Even when they were numpties? Even when they didn't have maps and compasses and things?"

"Even them. You hoped they'd learn something from the experience and not need you again."

"Bet you still thought they were numpties though."

"Aye, well, sometimes that thought did cross your mind. But they usually got enough criticism from other folk. I mind one poor guy actually getting slapped by his wife when we brought him in. Then she gave him a big hug."

"So what was the last rescue you did before you left the team?"

"The last call-out? That was a strange one. Maybe the strangest one I ever experienced. Still not sure what to think about it."

"What happened?"

"Ach, you don't want to hear about it."

"Uncle Martin, stop teasing and tell me."

“O.K. Just to stop you mithering me. At first it seemed like an ordinary call-out. It was winter-time, 1998. Hadn’t been a really bad winter but some heavy late snow and strong winds caught out a few folk that maybe hadn’t paid enough attention to the forecasts. Sometimes better to have a really bad winter. People know what to expect. Three walkers were reported missing: a father and his two teenage sons, both a bit older than you Sean. They’d done the right thing – left a note of their route at the hostel they were using, so we knew the rough area they should be in. But by the time they were posted missing it was getting dark and the weather had deteriorated. The snow was heavier and the wind would have been blowing into their faces if they were trying to descend. And what do people do, Sean, when the snow’s blowing in your face?”

“They put their heads down.”

“And where are they looking?”

“At their boots.”

“Exactly. Instead of making sure they’re keeping in the right direction. I’m not saying they were doing that, but it’s a possibility.”

“So where about were they?”

“You know that corrie we went to last year with your Dad. The one with all the mountain hares?”

“Yeah, where Bonnie tried to chase them?”

“Right, that was where they had headed to. Safe enough area in good weather but could be tricky in bad visibility. If you didn’t find the right way out of that corrie you could end up in some dangerous places. Anyway, we worked out two of the most likely areas they might be and divided up. I was in a six-man team doing a sweep search of the ground they might have got onto if they’d missed the safe route down.”

“So you were all in a big line, yeah?”

“Correct. Covering as much ground as possible but still in contact with the guys on either side. Not an easy job on rough terrain. It wasn’t quite a white-out but visibility was down to about ten metres, sometimes less.”

Tiring job walking in line. Physically, and mentally too. Keeping guys in your peripheral vision left and right at the same time as watching the ground in front. Working hard to keep up when your bit of ground had deeper snow, slowing down when easier going tried to push you ahead. Breaking up your normal hill-rhythm. Eyes focused and ears alert. Hoping you would find them but fearing what you might find.

“And did you find them?”

“Hold your horses and get back in line. After about an hour we’d found nothing. We were in radio contact with the other team and they hadn’t found

anything either. Then Jimmy Robertson – he was on the left-hand end of the line, outside me – he gave me a shout and pointed. I could just make out a figure - hard to tell how far away in these conditions – and he was waving us towards him. Jimmy shouted for him to come across but he didn't seem to hear, just kept waving us in his direction.

The spindrift narrowing his eyes to defensive slits. The twin head-torches, wavering cones, casting the figure in an eldritch light as it turned and moved away. Knowing the danger of the search-line being broken so sending a message along the line to mark their stopping point, then follow Jimmy and himself. Keeping the figure in sight but never managing to catch up; stumbling then re-calibrating as a hollow camouflaged by banked snow altered his balance; seeing faint patches of darker colour assembling themselves into more solid shapes...then seeing that they were just rocks; looking ahead again for their silent guide...

“Uncle Martin, why are you stopping? The man was waving. What happened next?”

“Ach, well, he led us on you know, Jimmy and me and the rest of the team. Down into a wee gully right at the edge of the corrie. We wouldn't have known it was there unless we had been looking right down into it. And there they were, in their survival bags, legs in their rucksacks, dug into the bank of the gully.”

“Had they not been shouting?”

“They were well past that, Sean. Even stopped shivering.”

“Stopped? Is that not good?”

The bodies were so cold that the brains had stopped sending messages to the nerves to make the muscles contract and relax at speed. They'd stopped creating warmth by expending energy. But breathing, definitely breathing, shallow as it was. Both of them.

“No, shivering helps heat you up, Sean. Helps stave off some of the umbles.”

“The what?”

“The umbles. Kind of a short-hand for what happens when you're too cold – *really* too cold. Mumbles, stumbles, tumbles, grumbles, fumbles. Come to think of it, that describes you when you were a wee rug-rat.”

“Very funny. More like you and Dad after a night in the pub. Now, get back to the story. So you found them?”

“Found two young lads there, but not the father.”

“So was that their Dad showing you where they were?”

“That would have seemed logical. Nobody else would have been likely to have been on the mountain at night, in that weather, but our team. He had

even been wearing what we'd been told the father had on when he left the hostel. Blue mountain jacket, black hat – and the kind of black over-trousers that most walkers would have put on when it rained or snowed. Jimmy and I both agreed on that. So yes, it looked like it. But he'd disappeared. Like snaw aff a dyke as they say. Which was strange, whoever he was. More than strange.”

One moment looking down at the half-buried bodies, then looking up to speak to their strangely uncommunicative guide. Just blackness, a ragged hole cut in it by the beam of the head-torch, and sleety, swirling, lunatic parachutes of snow. No human shape. And looking back, two sets of tracks leading back to the following team, tracks already being softened round their edges. Two sets.

“We got busy on the two lads: checked vital signs, got them talking to us, worked on their core temperatures. Then a message came through from the other team. They had found a body, about two kilometres away. Knew it was the father as he had some identification on him. And a blue jacket, black hat, black over-trousers. And dead. They reckoned he'd tried to walk out for help but collapsed and died before he could make it. If he'd stayed with the boys maybe he would have made it. They were already showing signs of recovery and getting strapped into stretchers so we could evacuate them.”

“So who...”

“Who was our guy?”

Back at base, going through the records. Something lodged in the memory. Three or four years back, father and two sons, lost for two days. The boys found dead, father never found, even after the spring thaw. Described as wearing blue jacket, black hat, black over-trousers. Showed the entry to Jimmy, who'd looked at it, then shrugged. Jimmy believed in straightforward stuff: the snow-plough turn, accepting what your compass told you, the healing power of whisky. Anything more complex he left others to think about.

“The guy that led us in? Depends son. Depends what you believe in.”