

Cutting Goretex

By Graham E Little

There is one broken step on the high stile over the new deer fence. The pain in my legs and pelvis doubles in intensity as I step high to cross it. I ease my body down the other side of the stile, then slump against the rough wood, racked by violent spasms of shivering. The delayed shock of the accident has clocked in. I am cold but sweating profusely. It is just after 1400 and I've spent the last two hours sliding, crawling and shuffling from the final point of impact to this place. Now there is a good chance of enlisting help to get me off the mountain.

Soloing allows little margin for error. Over a period of 35 years good luck has compensated for occasional lapses of judgement, but not this time.

I know that the tool placements are poor - scraggy heather rather than solid turf- but I step up onto a narrow schist edge to 'have a look'. The move above doesn't look good so I ease back down - one tool pulls -I pivot round - the other tool rips - all is not lost - I jump for the ledge below - crampon points rip into fleece -I pogo on one leg into space - such incompetence - a soloing disgrace! The first impact is at the base of my spine (a not so metaphorical kick up the bum) - the next my knee - then my thumb. I await the soft snow landing but it's more like ice (a bad entry at Acapulco) -I try to breathe - sliding head first - when will I stop? - when I hit a rock? My helmet takes the impact. There is pain everywhere, my limbs and slings arranged in a macramé web. I flash back many years to my brother's knee filling with fluid like an inflating balloon. Amidst all the pain and anger (at my own stupidity) one thing is clear - I must cross to the other side of the corrie to have any chance of being found before darkness. My anger keeps the pain at bay as I remove crampons and harness and pack them into my now rather battered sac.

An attempt to stand sees me crumple to the ground in agony. Interconnected snowfields allow a slow, numb-bum, slide to the floor of the corrie. At least the morning mist has cleared and I can see the 'A' of the stile on the far ridge. Crawling is painful - walking is just as painful. I eventually settle for an old man's shuffle, where one foot moves just in front of the other, with no torsion on the knee joints. It is just bearable but painfully slow, the odd hidden hole and sun-softened snow patch conspiring to break my rhythm and weaken my resolve. I watch a 'Red Indian' line of figures descending the far ridge but my cries for help are blown back into my pale face. Sun-gold hollows of dry grass try to seduce me into bed but I shuffle on, the 'A' slowly, oh so slowly, getting bigger and bigger. I'm there and then painfully over.

My whole body is in a state of (delayed) shock and suddenly feels drained of all strength. I barely have the energy to shout and wave at two figures descending the ridge above me. I sense their moment of doubt - am I some mad, axe wielding, murderer to be avoided at all cost? They hesitate, then branch off the main path to join me. Alan and Rob are father and son, with Rob (aged 14) on his first Scottish winter outing (to become a memorable one!). As with all teenagers, Rob has mobile phone and at his father's prompting, phones 999 and communicates a perfect position statement including a full grid reference. The rescue swings into action - or so we believe. In reality, although an ambulance, a Landrover and a helicopter are mobilised, little real progress is being made. Alan and Rob get me inside their yellow bivi tent and ply me with hot coffee - they really are well prepared!

I curse and groan as the hours slip by. Freezing mist slips down the mountain and a rising wind plucks at the bivi tent. Various return calls to Rob's mobile tell of missing people, missing equipment and of a grounded helicopter (bits dangling off the back of the helicopter threatening to fly off into the tail rotor).

I'm close to despair and tears when three paramedics loom out of the gloom at about 1830. In passing, they mention that it's their first time on the hill. However, when it comes to drugs, they know their business and I'm soon mainlining warm fluid and morphine. They try their hand at

mountain rescue but the 'flat-board' isn't really up to the task and we are forced to wait for the mountain rescue. When they arrive, en masse, at about 2000, the rescue moves up a gear. Before long I'm off the hill, loaded into the back of an ambulance and on my way to Stirling Royal Infirmary.

"Now Graham, where were you walking?" I explain, for what seems like the tenth time, that I was climbing. "Not on your own?" is variously a question, a contradiction and a condemnation. The neck-brace prevents any lateral vision but I'm aware, in a woozy kind of way, that something is happening to my arms and legs, starting at my wrists and ankles and working up - it sounds like scissors cutting material: Gore-Tex, thick fleece, thin fleece and new ACL skin-wear. "You can't do that", I shout but they can and they have - every item of clothing has been cut off!

"You are very lucky Mr Little," the consultant informs me the following morning". Apart from damaged ligaments and bruising, you've only sustained a broken thumb and a cracked sacrum. It's very uncommon to see a cracked sacrum - lots of nerves down there at the base of the spine - should be very painful. Could also give you problems with the waterworks and waste disposal". I reflect upon the truth of his words (and much later on, in the toilet, match his euphemisms - the tap is labelled 'skin cleansing system').

As his entourage moves on to the next bed, I ease my battered body into a marginally less excruciating position. Some vague memory of Gore-Tex being used to replace human tissue enters my still morphine-mellowed mind. As I slip into restless dream- sleep, I consider all the recycling potential of cut off climbers clothing. Sadly they are gone when I awake.