

## Torridon & Kinlochewe Mountain Rescue Team

When I first came to live in Alligin in Easter 1966, Anancaun (Field Station for the Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve) was the designated MR Post for the area. In those days rescues were organised on an ad hoc basis with Dick Balharry, the then Reserve Warden, assembling local volunteers at the behest of the Police. Usually Sjt. Donnie Smith would appear to take over actual team leadership for the duration of the rescue. Rescues on the core Area Mountains were often based on the Glen Cottage (at that time run as a back-packing hostel by Dave & Liz Goulder). Following the Feith Buidhe Disaster in November, 1971, Hamish MacInnes was consulted by the Scottish Office and in liaison with affected Police authorities, proposed the setting up of additional volunteer civilian mountain rescue teams in areas palpably not yet covered. Hamish asked me if I could raise a team in this area; the incentive was that the Police Budget would cover equipping and maintaining the team and we would become a part of the overall network with all the attendant benefits (access to training courses and seminars, helicopter assistance, etc). At about the time the team was being formed, the Scottish Youth Hostels Association built a new modern hostel in Torridon and immediately agreed it should be designated the new MR Post for the area, and that the team might use it as its headquarters. Neil Reilleay, the first warden and his wife Irene, became enthusiastic helpers providing storage and accommodation for the team equipment and rooms for meetings, etc. Whenever a call-out occurred they would stay up all night if necessary providing hot drinks, a phone link, and unflagging support. All subsequent wardens and their wives have been equally supportive and played a major role in the efficient functioning of the team. A further incalculable bonus to the team has been that we have always been able to recruit able-bodied, and often experienced, helpers from the hostellers staying at the time. Initially, the team was composed primarily of local crofters, stalkers and foresters from the surrounding sporting estates as well as the personnel of the Beinn Eighe nature reserve together with some older stalwarts who, while no longer able to go on the hill, did sterling work manning the base radio and providing a courier link between it and the nearest telephone - frequently an all-night vigil.

There were relatively few team members who had previous sport-mountaineering experience but the outstanding strength most could bring to any rescue was their intimate knowledge of the local hills and their fitness; they knew the best route to take under any conditions and were undeterred by the vilest weather. In addition, the team benefited from the wholehearted co-operation of our local general practitioner. Over the years the incumbent has changed several times but all have been universally supportive, coming on the hill when the occasion permitted, running first-aid courses and always on hand to field casualties the moment they were brought off the hill.

In the early days facilities were limited. We had few radios and helicopters were scarce. I vividly recall one search situation where the Wessex we had been allocated successfully terminated the operation by flying low over widely scattered groups of searchers with the winchman sitting in the open door displaying a large piece of cardboard with "GO HOME" written on it ! Over time steady progress was made. Police liaison improved, courses were held at Glenmore Lodge in first aid and dog handling. Exercises were held with RAF MR Kinloss and with Helicopter Wing, Lossie. Improvements in basic equipment, especially in numbers and performance of walkie-talkies and the allocation of a MR Band together with the introduction of Sea Kings gradually altered the entire MR scene and speeded up reaction times. Compared with some other teams we had a very sleepy wee corner of the Highlands. For many years we averaged about four full-scale rescues a year with perhaps twice as many alarms which did not, in the end, necessitate calling the whole team out. However, in the seventeen or so years I was the team leader we encountered a dozen fatalities, many broken limbs and assorted injuries and many lost individuals, together with the usual crop of bizarre incidents - individuals or even groups of people who inexplicably 'vanished' from their companions wandering round the back of Beinn Alligin, Beinn Dearg, or Beinn Eighe because they had been busy blethering, didn't have a map, or had caught sight of Loch Maree in the distance and thought it must be Loch Torridon!

I sometimes wondered whether we weren't in the business of rescuing mountains from the more zany behaviour of the human race. At the end of it all, however, the real reward comes with the elation we all feel when we have succeeded in rescuing someone who was in serious trouble and we can say, "Yes, it WAS worthwhile". And I wonder if anyone ever spares a thought for our wives and families who have to spend days and nights worrying about us in the most appalling weather?

Charlie Rose

### Addendum

How nice it is to report that since these early years the team still consists of very keen and dedicated folk who will immediately give their time to helping those in difficulty on the mountains. Early concerns regarding communications and perhaps the provision of equipment have been seriously improved, and the local crofters have now been joined by team members living up to 50 miles away. However, at the end of the day it is down to efficient teamwork and common sense and the total commitment to getting the casualty off the hill as quickly as comfortably and as safely as possible. My grateful thanks go out to all those team members, both past and present..... and equally importantly, to all those who have given us support over the years.

Neil Hinchliffe