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Pib: A Memoir of Colin Pibworth

Like any other organisation, a mountain rescue team needs not only its courageous innovators, like Flt Lt Des Graham¹, but equally those who, over the years, provide the structure with a focus and continuity. Whilst they do not necessarily achieve the commanding heights, their contribution is very often just as valuable. One such was Colin Pibworth ('Pib'), who died in 2001 after an extraordinarily long career in the RAF Mountain Rescue Service. In those thirty years he never got beyond the rank of corporal, though for several periods, as a team leader, he was made up to sergeant. But his influence was enormous.

During my researches² in 1992, my wife Jo and I visited the Mountain Rescue Team at RAF Valley. 'You must go and see Pib,' said one of the lads. By this time, I had certainly heard of Colin Pibworth, but had no idea where he could be found. But some of the team knew him, and visited him from time to time. We were directed from RAF Valley into the hills behind Caernarfon and up a steep narrow lane. Eventually we came to a tiny cottage, its roof bristling with CB aerials. A smiling man in his 60s met us at the door, cradling in his arms a cat called Tenzing.

'Why Tenzing?' I asked at some stage.

'Because he's a bit of a climber,' came the reply. Ask a silly question.

There followed an enthralling hour or so of stories ranging from blizzards and avalanches in the Highlands to Desert Rescue operations with the Sharjah and Masirah Mountain and Desert Rescue Teams (MDRTs). Gradually, I managed to steer him further back, to what has become known in the RAFMRS as Black Easter, the Easter of 1951.

At that time – and bear in mind this was before formal recruiting or training regimes had been installed in the Service – Pib was a 25-year-old airman at Valley, with the modest rank of SAC. He and Flt Lt Mike Mason, the station's medical officer, were the two most experienced hillmen there. The only decent gear was that owned by enthusiasts like Pib and Mason; the Air Ministry, at that time, did not believe in posting mountaineers into MRTs.

Coincidentally, the events of Black Easter happened in parallel with the Beinn Eighe operation, when the aftermath of a Lancaster crash on the summit, and the actions of the RAF Kinloss MRT in recovering the bodies, led to enormous changes in the Service's recruitment and training policies. That Valley showed up so well at the same time can probably be credited to the training skills of Mike Mason and Pib.

By 1949 the team formed by the pioneer Des Graham at RAF Llandwrog in 1943 had moved to Valley when the Americans moved out. Activities tended to be in a minor key. The matter of driving standards came up, not for the first time, on the night the Jeep took a bend a little too wide in Bangor and ended up in the window of a grocery shop. MR folklore has it that sardines enriched the MRT's diet for some time afterwards. 1950 had seen only five callouts, of which four had been climbing or walking mishaps; all four, as it happened, on Lliwedd, though on different occasions. But things took off in 1951, and in one short public holiday Valley MRT was to see as much action as it had seen in the whole of 1950.

January 1951 started with a bang on New Year's Day, when an avalanche on Y Garn, started by two parties tunnelling through the cornice, killed one climber and injured four more. Less than a fortnight later, six walkers went missing on Snowdon, but were found safe, sound and warm in the Summit Hotel. In February, four climbers went missing somewhere in the Snowdon area, but could not be found. The same happened to a walker on Cadair Idris in the first week of March. RAF Valley MRT was called out to all of these, and as can be seen, in the few years since the end of the war, the emphasis on RAFMR work had largely shifted towards climber, rather than aircrew, rescues.

For many the moveable feast of Easter is the first opportunity to get out onto the hill for a prolonged period. When the holiday falls early in the year it can catch the dying throes of winter. For the year-round climber, of course, that is not a problem, more of a challenge. But for the climber whose boots are hung up in the shed throughout the winter, the natural hazards of the mountain are multiplied.

That was the situation at Easter 1951 when Good Friday fell early, on 23 March. Precipitation through the winter had been high, with heavy snowfall on high ground. In North Wales and the Lake District, the snow was unusually deep; in addition, the post-war explosion of activity in the mountains was really under way. However, many of the people who escaped out of the cities into Snowdonia that long weekend were ill-prepared. Those who were not well-versed in climbing or hill-walking often underestimated the wrath of the hills in the apparently cosy British Isles. Equally, they were liable to dismiss or forget the warnings of experienced people. The British Mountaineering Council, in its journal *Mountaineering*, described the situation in North Wales vividly:

The continued snowfall meant unusual cornices and dangerous ice slopes, which ordinary fell-walkers were quite unable to cope with; even with ice-axes, some of the slopes, quite safe under normal conditions, had become very dangerous.³

Pib himself did not disagree.

Writing to me, he remembered:

It always has been regarded as the Black Easter in Snowdonia – as far as hill accidents are concerned. There ... was a fair amount of snow on the ground – not in condition for hard things but more than enough to cause problems for an ever increasing number of hillwalkers (who did not have the correct gear or common-sense).⁴

It was fortunate, therefore, that Mason had recently taken over as team officer at Valley. He had climbing experience before joining the RAF and had found the state of readiness at Valley to be appalling. Rather like Des Graham eight years earlier, he instigated an effective training programme and made himself unpopular in the Air Ministry by pestering for equipment; he did not see why his team should be expected to buy their own gear or go without. He and others had tried on more than one occasion to get the RAF Mountaineering Association involved in the MR training, but had received the cold shoulder every time. The Air Ministry feared that if 'real' mountaineers were allowed into the service, it would be taken over as a cheap means of indulging a hobby at the taxpayer's expense.

Mike Holton, an RAFMA member and a civil servant, brought into the Air Ministry after Beinn Eighe to strengthen the hand of the mountaineers in the MRS, recalled:

[RAF Valley's] contribution to the life saving on Snowdon at Easter 1951 was phenomenal – if overlooked. Even the ... account of accidents that holiday taken from *Mountaineering* Vol. 1 No. 10 does not pay adequate tribute. Yet, by November that year, their strength had declined and they had only two experienced men: Flying Officer Bill Brooks ... and SAC Colin Pibworth. Incidentally, I remember very clearly from Michael Mason ... that the work over Easter on Snowdon had been done by using the team members' own clothing and climbing equipment because the service issue at that time was inadequate. The stretchers used above the snow line were borrowed from the mountain rescue posts, and casualties were transferred to the heavy modified service stretchers as soon as this was practical so as to release the civilian stretchers. As a result of this experience it was Mason who began to press in particular for better equipment....⁵

Those outside the RAFMRS, of course, could be unaware of these problems. Describing one of the incidents handled by the legendary Chris Briggs and his team, the *Mountaineering* article refers to 'the splendidly trained and equipped RAF Mountain Rescue Unit'. Whoever wrote that had not realised that that splendid equipment, for the most part, had been bought by the airmen themselves at the suggestion of Mason and Pibworth; not easy on a ranker's pay in 1951. Chris Briggs was landlord of the Pen-y-

Gwyrdd Hotel, and a pioneer in civilian mountain rescue. He had set up a mountain rescue post at the hotel, and often worked closely with the Valley team. Pib himself, recalling that Easter so long ago, commented:

Briggs at PyG would have been involved of course – and he is to be congratulated for turning out any time and anywhere not with a ‘trained’ team of alpinists but *ad hoc* volunteers from his hotel and bar!⁶

These untrained, volunteer non-alpinists achieved much that long weekend, assisted at one point by Jack Longland.

That weekend the Valley team was on exercise under the Team Leader, Sgt Charlie Staff. Base camp on the Thursday was near the bridge, just off the A5 outside Bethesda, where in one of our photographs Mike Mason is demonstrating a Tyrolean. In the early hours of Friday they were searching for two of the team who were overdue. A party led by Colin Pibworth was dropped off at the east end of Llyn Ogwen at 2am, and ‘stumbled off into the night,’ as he recalled, a black, windy and very wet night. They checked Cwm Lloer and Cwm Llugwy, then, returning to camp by road, stuck their heads through the tent flaps to find the missing two back in their sleeping bags, asleep. They had returned just after Pib’s party had started up the hill, but with the inadequate radio equipment of the time, the recall had not been picked up.

Pib noted in his diary that on 24 March, the Saturday, there were three incidents on Snowdon, with three dead. Over that weekend the team recovered three bodies and four casualties, the results of three accidents, then were stood by for a fourth accident which was resolved by a civilian team. They were probably responsible for preventing other tragedies by giving advice, and helped another party without ice axes on the Snowdon Horseshoe trying to cross an icy stretch. On the Sunday and Monday they remained on standby at Ogwen where they would be fairly certain to see any further action. Pib recalled wryly that ‘little or no reliance [was] given to the box of radio parts that we were obliged to carry!’ He commented a few years ago: ‘Nowadays it seems ridiculous that there could be three deaths on Snowdon in a twenty-four hour period.’⁷

At this time, two of Pib’s frequent climbing companions were Professor T Graham Brown, Professor Emeritus of Physiology at the University of Cardiff, and Gordon Parish, an RAF officer. Graham Brown was the noted alpinist, most famous, with Frank Smythe, for first ascents on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc. His importance to this story lies in the fact that, as a senior member of the RAF Mountaineering Association, he had considerable input to the changes that were to take place to the MRS after the Lancaster crash on Beinn Eighe.

Fast forward a decade, and Pib, having just obtained his team leader qualification, was sent out to RAF Khormaksar to lead the Desert & Mountain Rescue Team there. Back in 1943, a Bristol Blenheim bomber of

the Royal South African Air Force operating out of Kutra Oasis had crashed, and the crew of six all died; they were buried on site. Twenty years later, on 30 November 1963, Operation Desert Blenheim was mounted by Pib, when a Desert Rescue Team from RAF El Adem disinterred the bodies of the crew, and took them back to Tobruk for burial in the big cemetery there.

After a two-year break in the UK, he was back in the saddle again at Khormaksar in 1965, and supervised the move to Sharjah. At this time, relations between the British forces and the local population were, to say the least, edgy, but Pib had got to know them well. Just before Mad Mitch went in amongst the locals, three RAF mountain rescuers, including a visiting senior officer out from the UK, fancied 'a stroll' from Tawela Tanks along the ridge of Jebel Sham San. Pib drove them to Crater, dropped them there, and drove back through the centre of Crater, his only protection armour-plated floorboards against land mines.

In 1971, the Sharjah team was closed, as part of the withdrawal plan for the Persian Gulf, and its personnel went back to the UK. It had never been called to an aircraft incident, but had been kept on its toes with such activities as arranging desert survival courses for aircrew.

After a further short gap, a new team, under a delighted Sergeant Pibworth who had grown to love the Middle East, was opened at RAF Masirah, to provide cover for the southern part of the air route from Akrotiri to Masirah. There is a story, which may be apocryphal, that someone walked into an office just after Pib received his new posting, and found him, in a burnous, the Arab hooded cloak, sitting cross-legged on a desk, singing quietly and happily to himself. If it's not true, it ought to be.

To give a flavour of those times, I quote from a recollection of one of his team, Neil 'Danny' Daniel: 'This was Aden during the troubles and the team was restricted to the camp area because of the problem of landmines. However, once we got our armour-plated Land Rovers with roll bars and big fat tyres we made daily forays into the desert around Aden.'⁸

Those enormous, under-inflated sand tyres needed a lot of torque and Pib's team became accustomed to taking many spare half-shafts with them; they reckoned they could change one in under five minutes.⁹ One of the main activities was collecting exhausted Near East Air Force Parachute Rescue Team members from the desert when they were trying to walk back to Sharjah from their dropping zone about twenty miles away.

The Desert Rescue Teams, said Pib,¹⁰ 'never were at the "cutting edge" of SAR,' but during his Masirah period he was involved in an airborne search for a commercial Caravelle 'that had wiped its [one hundred and twelve] crew and passengers out on the East Coast mountains on a flight from Karachi to Dubai in 1972'.

The armed services, even the Air Force which is perhaps more relaxed than the other two, find it difficult to tolerate eccentrics. Pibworth was certainly something of a maverick, which probably explains why he stuck at corporal.

Daniel has a recollection of this eccentricity in action:

Like the MR sections of today, the DMRT section was our main focal point and we had some excellent times there with Colin Pibworth, the Team Leader, who would have moments of MR madness and try to kill the WOP¹¹ followed by the buying of crates of Carlsberg beer for the troops who would by then be sitting on the MR section roof for safety until Pib cooled off.

Despite this often alarming idiosyncrasy, his driving skills were legendary and respected, whether on the new Coire Cas Ski Road, or through Buraimi and over the passes down into Muscat. In 1972 he was awarded the BEM for services to mountain and desert rescue; and later that decade, was back at Valley, not as Team Leader but as a rank-and-file member.

On 23 November 1979 two Jaguars were flying south-west down Glen Orchy, intending to turn west at the main glen towards Oban on the coast. Suddenly the cloud came down, and the leader told the No 2 to abort and pull up; this he did. However, on pulling out of the top of the cloud, he could not see his leader and could make no radio contact. The two Scottish MRTs, Leuchars and Kinloss, were called out, as were the helicopters and several civilian teams.

The weather was atrocious, remaining so for the whole of the search. In the early hours the overnight parties returned soaked through to the skin, and soon had hung up their wet gear from every hook and nail in the Tyndrum Hotel's hut, a pattern that was to be repeated time and again over the next three days.

It was a civilian team, eventually, that found the Jaguar just over the north-west ridge of Ben Lui. It had impacted vertically and totally disintegrated, and it was not possible to tell at that stage whether the pilot had ejected or had gone down with it. With no further chance of searching that day, a massive sweep search would be required on the next. The team from RAF Valley was called in to provide extra manpower, and flew up that same night in a Hercules.

The next day was another of vile conditions. All teams went on the hill, and attempts were made to get the accident investigation people to the wreck, but with their lack of climbing expertise this had to be abandoned for the time being, apart from the doctor and the photographer.

Flt Sgt Alister Haveron, then the Team Leader at RAF Valley, remembers Pib at this time working like a Trojan in the base camp, taking the sodden gear off the troops as they came off the hill, supplying them with dry, and hanging up the wet stuff ready for their next return. Between times he was up on the top of Ben Lui in that appalling rain, operating the radio link; and he was then in his fifties. It is this sort of background organisation, that neither press nor public see or even imagine, that can make the difference between success or failure.

Progress was being made. A sliver of perspex was found, then a flight document. It was the Valley team that discovered the pilot's body at the top of a gully just off the edge of the south-eastern shoulder of Ben Lui. Ejecting in these wild conditions, in a white-out and strong winds, his chances of a safe landing were minimal; he had landed backwards on the rocky surface, shattering his flying helmet.¹²

Thus ended what was probably then the biggest SAR operation in the British mountains, and remained so until two American F15Cs crashed on Ben Macdui on 26 March 2001.

Four years after Ben Lui, Pib retired from the Air Force. He settled into that tiny cottage at Moel Tryfan, and that is where he died on 28 June 2001. His funeral service was held at Christ Church, Pen y Groes, on 9 July 2001, conducted by the Rev Sqn Ldr Ken Wilson, C of E padre at RAF Valley. Part of the sermon was built on Pib's own dark interpretation of some verses from Isaiah, revealing an unexpectedly pessimistic side to the private Pib. He will be remembered at every future Commemorative Service held in Silent Valley, Aden, at the same time and on the same day as Remembrance Day services in the UK. Aden veterans will read out his name and a wreath will be laid by the British Ambassador.

The sixteenth century Italian poet, Ludovico Ariosto, could almost have been thinking of Pib when he wrote:

Natura il fece, e poi roppe la stampa.
Nature made him, and then broke the mould.

REFERENCES

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- 4 Letter 8/5/92.
- 5 Letter to Flt Lt David Lofts, 1973.
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- 7 Letter 8/5/92.
- 8 Contribution to obituary, 2001.
- 9 Note from John Hinde 26/8/01.
- 10 Letter 11/11/92.
- 11 Wireless operator.
- 12 Letter from Glyn Gianelli 29/5/92; and conversation with Alister Haveron August 2001.