Avalanche on Ben Nevis

John King

Five of us gathered in Fort William at lunchtime on a wet Saturday in April 1967. The other 4 were to spend the next week in the C.I.C. hut, at the Oxford University Mountaineering Club's President's meet; but I had to be back at work in Manchester on Tuesday, and so had only one full day for a climb.

As we trudged up from the Distillery it was clear that I was to be disappointed. The cloud hung low on the Ben. Before we reached its level the rain turned to snow, lying deep on the slopes; and so it continued until we arrived at the hut in the dark, wet and weary. We should be lucky, we thought, to manage an easy ridge the next day. But at least the hut was empty. We strewed our anoraks, breeches and socks around the stove, and cooked a meal to restore our spirits.

Around 9.30, as we were clearing up the mess, there was a sound at the door. I opened it to let in a climber I had met in the Alps two years before, and greeted him as one does in the circumstances. He had an extraordinary story to tell: how he had set out from the valley that morning with his cousin to climb No 4 Gully; how they had been avalanched from just below the point where the gully narrows, at about noon; how he had found himself after the fall in a deep hole, about 4ft below the surface of the snow; how he had struggled for hours to free himself from the prison just above Lochan na Ciste, and then stumbled down to the hut in the darkness. There had been no sign of his cousin, whom he felt sure would have been buried by the avalanche.

We brewed him some tea, put him in a warm sleeping bag, and rang the Fort William police on the line that had recently been installed. The rescue team and their dogs would be with us in about 3 hours, we were told. Then we pulled on our wet anoraks and boots. It was unpleasant, and more than one of us had doubts about how sensible it was for us to go—would we not simply make the search more difficult for the dogs, when they arrived? But if our meet leader Randall Williams had the same doubts he did not express them; and so we followed him out into the night.

Apart from the occasional flurry the snow had now stopped, and it was easy to follow the survivor's deep tracks from the hut to his hole on the slope just above where the lochan must have been. We fanned out and traversed the slope from side to side, scanning the smooth snow with our torches, up to where the gully walls close in; then back down to the lochan. We saw no trace of another survivor, and few signs even of an avalanche. By now it was about midnight, and we gathered together to discuss what to do next.

Before all 5 opinions had been given, one of the party gave a shout and stumbled off across the horizontal snow. He had seen a glint of light about 20 yards away; when we reached it, we saw it to be the head of an iceaxe, and the fingers of a hand were curled around it, and there was a muffled sound from beneath the snow. As we dug furiously the voice grew clearer, and soon we had uncovered enough of its owner to be sure that he was not about to expire, though clearly in a weak state. Three of the party then descended to the hut to fetch the sledge, leaving 2 of us to finish the digging. I remembered how his cousin had been sure that he must be dead; so I said 'Your cousin's alive and warm in the hut'; and suddenly, from being a rather limp subject, he became a cheerful helper in his own extrication. He told us how he had been aware of flashing lights above the snow, but had believed that they must be lightning. In no time at all, it seemed, we had him out and safely in the sledge.

Just as we reached the hut once again the advance guard of the rescue team arrived, carrying an enormous searchlight. Understandably, they seemed rather disappointed that the perfect occasion on which to use it and the dogs to good effect had been missed by an hour or so; but they generously conceded that that hour might have been the one that mattered. And so said the doctor in Fort William on that same Sunday afternoon, as he declared his patient to be recovered from exposure, and suffering only from a bruise inflicted by an over enthusiastic iceaxe.

No doubt there were many morals to be drawn, but there are 2 main things that I shall always associate with that night. First, as the rescue team said, it is *always* worth going to search if you can get there first, even though you may make it a bit harder for the dogs: 12 hours or so beneath the snow may leave all but the memory unmarked, but the 13th may be the killer. Second, if you get into a similar fix as casualty or rescuer, remember that there is more hope of a miracle than you will be inclined to believe—because hope is itself a useful commodity.

And perhaps a third lesson should be added, though I like to think that I knew it already: even 'easy' slopes can be lethal when covered with new wet snow, and should be avoided however desperate you are for a climb.

The life and writings of Ramond

Kev Reynolds

The transition to an appreciation of mountains as places of beauty, rather than hostile obstacles to trade and communication, was a protracted course. The heralds of enlightenment—Gesner, von Haller, and Rousseau—glow as candles in the dim corridors of fear and superstition, yet their eulogies were inspired principally by the 'middle view', as Ruskin's were likewise restricted a century and more later. One of the earliest men of letters to venture into the realms of eternal snow and ice and, furthermore, illumine the darkness of ignorance with an honest and elegant prose, was that worthy successor to de Saussure, Ramond de Carbonnières (1755-1827).

On his first visit to high mountains he responded to the uncharted wastes of snowfield and glacier with conscious fascination. 'Where is the source of their secret charm?' he wrote. 'What is the strange, deep, irresistable feeling that draws me to those realms over which my fellow men have never established their domain?'

Louis-François Ramond de Carbonnières was born in Colmar among the lovely hills of Alsace, and as a student at the University of Strasbourg came under the influence of Goethe—also studying at Strasbourg, and some 6 years his senior. He harboured early literary ambitions, published a few poems, a romantic novel and a morbid play; but it was not until he visited the Swiss Alps in 1777—in an effort to escape the traumas of an unhappy love affair—that he found fresh inspiration to enrich the labours of his pen. His excursions above the snow-line were modest—it was not until later that his mountaineering career adopted a more adventurous spirit—but these tentative explorations opened his eyes to undreamed panoramas, he witnessed scenes of solitude that few had ever known, and recorded the visions, and his own reactions to them, in vivid terms.