
FRANK CARD

The Triumphs and Tragedy of Doc Graham

(Plates 45–47)

When rescuing climbers and walkers, there are three enemies: time, weather, mountain. When rescuing aircrew, there is a fourth: the aircraft, which can cause physical injury on impact, explode, or catch fire; quite often all three. These risks were compounded in the early 1940s by the cruel irony that many of the Royal Air Force's flying training schools were in such places as North Wales and the Peak District. Natural hazards presented by mountains faced inexperienced crews flying underpowered and/or obsolescent training aeroplanes.

Initial responsibility for dealing with a crash falls upon the nearest RAF station. At three such stations in the '40s, the medical officer realised that it was not adequate to take untrained and ill-equipped search parties into the hills, and gradually the beginnings of recognisable mountain rescue teams started to appear. RAF Millom (covering the Lake District) was led by Sqn Ldr G A Van-Someron and later by Flt Lt David Lloyd, himself a climber, with the support and guidance of Cpl Scottie Dwyer, later one of the BMC's first mountain guides. At RAF Harpur Hill (Peak District) was Flt Lt David Crichton, not a climber but keen to learn. And at RAF Llandwrog (North Wales) was Flt Lt Desmond Graham, with pre-war climbing experience. (He and John Ryle believed they achieved a first ascent on Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh on 26 August 1938.)

All these men saw a need and worked to fulfil it. But Graham saw the broader picture: the need for an overarching service with common standards, equipment, training. He gave his team mountaincraft training, although greatly handicapped by unsuitable equipment and vehicles. Each callout provided him with an opportunity to develop his ideas. There were many such incidents¹ between early 1942 and late 1943: two examples will suffice.

Sgt Mervyn Sims was the pilot of a Boston from 418 Squadron. On 17 October 1942, flying in cloud, he hit Carnedd Dafydd at an altitude of over 3000ft. Badly injured, and his crew of two dead, he survived for two days and two nights in the cold and wet, the wreck being found only by chance by two walkers on the first sunny morning; only then was Graham's team brought in.

Over a period, and with scant regard for RAF protocol, he had been writing to the Air Ministry pointing out the deficiencies. Eventually, Wg Cdr Ruffell Smith was asked to find out what Graham was up to, and

ascertain his real requirements. After a long talk, Ruffell Smith agreed, to Graham's and the Air Ministry's surprise, that the demands were justified. More suitable equipment followed. By the end of 1942, Graham's team had attended 11 crashes, rescuing 12 aircrew and recovering 35 bodies. In January 1943 he was made an MBE for 'Services to Mountain Rescue'. But the first of several incidents on Foel Grach demonstrated to him that more development was needed.

In an Anson from Llandwrog piloted by PO Ken Archer on 14 January, the trainee navigator, Sgt Patterson, could not get a fix. They were icing up, and hit a gully at about 2400 ft on the NE slopes of Foel Grach at about 8.45pm. Archer and Patterson were injured; the other two crew members were dead. It was the next morning before Archer was able to get himself together sufficiently to reach Rowlyn Farm near Tal-y-Bont. Another night passed before Graham's team could locate the wreck and rescue Patterson, who had to be taken down the mountainside on a 'Stretcher, General Service', a heavy wooden structure, a world away from the sophisticated and purpose-made Bell stretchers that MR teams have now. Listen to John Lloyd, describing a 1944 incident:

I have a horrid memory of being one of eight carrying two heavily laden General Service stretchers from the top of Aran Fewddwy to the farm at Eagair Gawr, a distance of three miles involving a descent of 2400ft. There was one man to each corner of the stretcher and nobody to relieve us when we were tired. The evacuation of those casualties took seventeen hours.²

Early attempts at creating a mountain rescue stretcher often involved asking the engineering department to butcher some old beds and bolt the bed-irons, suitably reshaped, to the bottom of the General Service stretcher. It could then be used as a sledge and dragged over grass, heather or snow. Though Graham's techniques had improved greatly, the Archer crash revealed yet more deficiencies: unsuitable vehicles and lack of radio communication, the length of time taken to raise a search party, and difficulties of searching at night or in poor weather. Graham put forward proposals, all accepted, on radio communication, the raising, constitution and working methods of search parties, and training methods.

On 26 February 1943 a trial was held near Tal-y-Bont. In July the team was officially launched, along with that at RAF Millom, and by the end of 1944 there were ten. Now, in 2000, teams remain at Stafford, St Athan, Kinloss, Leuchars and Leeming.

Graham went on leave in November 1943 to see his wife Ann through her second birth. When he returned, the team was searching for a crashed aircraft in the Carneddau. One of the crew staggered into Bethesda police station after two days in the elements. A further search revealed the wreck and the rest of the crew, injured but alive.

Graham's overseas posting was a great contrast. He arrived at Dum Dum, India, in March 1944, to be medical officer to 357 Squadron, which was dropping supplies and agents to the Burmese guerrillas. On 14 March a Hudson went out over the Sino-Burmese border but failed to return. Later that day an agent called in on the radio to say that it had crashed in the target area at 3am; two of the crew were seriously injured, the others dead. A doctor was needed.

Graham volunteered to parachute to the crash scene, though he had never parachuted before. A parachuting instructor, Flt Sgt Tom White, offered to go with him, and gave him some parachute training in the very limited time available. The two men drew special kit and escape money. Taking off at 10.30pm, they had an hour's flight to Chittagong, where they had a meal whilst the Hudson was checked and refuelled. Over the dropping zone, at 5.45am, they prepared themselves for the descent. The rope holding the first container of medical supplies was cut, Graham steadying it. As the red light changed to green, White shouted to Graham who pushed the first container out, then followed it. A second container was followed by White, shouting instructions to Graham as to when to spill air by pulling the cords. White's personal account afterwards said:

We drifted slightly off the target area and made rather a fast, but safe, landing on a slope leading to the DZ. The MO narrowly missed a tree, hitting his head slightly as he went into a 'rugby roll' on a mound of earth, but he was quite blasé about his first descent.³

At the target area, a 6000ft ridge, they were met by the blue-uniformed Kokang guerrillas under Col. Yang Yan Sang, who had been asked by the British intelligence officer, Maj. Leitch, to take the two men, on mules, to the crash, some four miles away. In a hut near the wreck they found FO W Prosser RCAF, now the sole survivor, with a fractured skull, a fractured right ankle and various burns and bruises.

Whilst White learned about the crash and the burial of the dead, Graham attended to the delirious Prosser. He cleaned up the head wound and filled it with crushed M & B tablets, covered by Elasto-Plast, and made a plaster cast using bamboo splints for the leg from the toes to the knee. Graham and White then got some sleep, with Leitch watching over Prosser. The night vigils were taken in turn, the only illumination a wick burning in a saucer of pig-fat. Several days of treatment followed, during which they were joined by an American doctor, Capt. Hookman, who arrived by mule after a five-day trek. Readings were taken of the aircraft's instruments, and documents burnt. On the 28 March came a message that enemy troops had crossed the river at Kunlong, four hours' march to the south. It was decided that if they came any closer, Prosser would have to be evacuated, bad though his condition was. A litter was built, supplies got together, and bearers and mules made available by the guerrilla chief.

On 1 April the party moved out, a very slow journey in the heavy rain; mules were constantly slipping off the narrow mountain tracks, taking men with them. They reached the first village, Pahntang, at about 6pm, took over the headman's hut and laid out their clothes to dry. On their second day, they started at 9am, crossed the Chinese border, and stopped at a compound. An earlier start on the 3 April enabled them to cover 30 miles before resting in a village schoolroom at Meng Peng. Their much-needed sleep was abbreviated at 6.30am: the schoolroom was needed for the children's lessons.

The first four hours of 4 April brought them to Er Tai Pu, headquarters of Col. Wong. There seemed to be no fresh coolies as they had been promised, and their Kokang coolies, afraid of conscription into the Chinese army, were not keen on going further. Argument, rum, money and aspirin persuaded them to continue as far as Meng Bawn. This involved crossing a 6000ft pass, and brought the marching time that day to nine hours. Graham found the British maps very inaccurate.

Fresh coolies and mules were engaged on the 5th, and the Kokang, when paid off, rapidly put distance between themselves and the Chinese unit. After crossing their highest pass the group descended to the fertile valley of Tetang. They located Hookman's unit, which he rejoined, at 6pm, and they took a day's rest when Prosser, given more treatment, became rational for the first time.

White's account says that on the 7th, the Chinese refused permission for a landing strip to be built so that Prosser could be flown out, but there is no mention of this in Graham's report. They started out with fresh coolies, and in six hours reached Cheng Kaung Ba, though White says they needed the encouragement of a .45 Colt. In a letter to Ann afterwards, Graham said: 'We had many adventures, though I never had to shoot anybody. Sometimes things were a little sticky, but I was very well armed. I can't tell much more, not till the end of the war ...'

On the morning of 8 April, they found that their bearers had deserted them, leaving the muleteers and baggage. Finally four were produced, with four more promised for later. White went ahead to Mengway with the mules, Graham travelling more slowly with the four coolies he had. Three hours later, he was overtaken by the Chinese interpreter, who told him that the second four could not be found. Graham and the interpreter diverted to villages off the road in a desperate effort to find more coolies, as their four were suffering badly from the heat. Graham managed to force them to get the litter down to a river so that Prosser could be cooled down. At a Chinese army post at Menteba, two fresh soldiers were engaged and the party fed. By the time this was over, it was 10pm and quite cool. They returned to the road, and carried on to the destination, Mengway.

After reaching Mengway, White had walked back for three hours looking for Graham, descending some 5000ft, waited for two hours, then reascended the pass to Mengway. At 1.30am came Graham's shout, 'Chalky! Chalky!'

There is some confusion in Graham's report at this point, and White's account is vague on dates. Graham says that Lt Warren, US Army, engaged Chinese soldiers and mules, and they then proceeded on a seven-hour journey to Ypankai on the 8th. This suggests that they carried straight on, overnight, after their horrific Cheng Kaung Pa-Mengway journey, and this I find unbelievable. I am assuming, therefore, that Mengway-Ypankai took place on 9 April, not the 8th. If so, they left Ypankai on 10 April for Gkypai, but after nine hours and climbing an estimated 7000ft, they found they had bypassed it. The coolies were unwilling to re-climb the mountain, and had to be encouraged by Graham's revolver. The last day's march, 11 April, took them to Shunning, the US 'Y' Force headquarters, and this was the toughest day of all: very mountainous, with extremes of heat and cold and a violent storm. But then, in the valley, they were given a warm welcome by the Americans.

A day's rest here was followed by a drive by weapons-carrier over three days: to the US-Chinese Field Hospital at Yunshin, across two mountain ranges and the Mekong river to Medu, and on the Burma Road to Yunnanni Airport. Finally came a flight, over two days, across the hump to Calcutta, where Prosser went into hospital on the 17th.

Graham received the Distinguished Service Order, White the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Prosser returned to Canada, married, and raised a family. He died in 1990, when Mrs Prosser wrote to White thanking him for giving her a husband and a family.⁴

Graham took some leave on 30 May, before the Kashmir monsoon:

1500 miles by air then 2 days by bus up the Jhelum valley to Srinagar, and on to Tangmarg. From there by pony to Gulmarg ... 8500 up and beautifully cool ... and clothed with tall spruce. Above lie the alpine meadows of the Pir Panjal range, whose snow-covered tops lie between 12,000 and 15,000. Between the trees and the snow these buttercup-strewn meadows lie. I darted about examining the profusion of flowers on the Killanmarg – crimson red primulas, purple dwarf irises, white marigolds, blue gentians, and then walked somewhat slowly up a snow gully to the plateau of Arphawat 12,000. At these heights oxygen lack is noticeable when on the ground much more than in an aircraft.

He was in the area again in August, this time on duty. At Gandarbal, about twelve miles from Srinagar, the Aircrew Mountain Centre had been set up, the main centre of summer activity being at Sonamarg, 40 miles up the Sind River. It was designed to revitalise aircrew jaded after four years in the Far East, and persuade them it was worth staying on for another few months; sending them home and replacing them was seen as too expensive. In charge was Wg Cdr Tony Smyth, a pilot and a mountaineer, later to

make his mark elsewhere.^{5,6} His staff included Wilfrid Noyce. First Graham and then White were posted to the AMC; Graham describes an idyllic scene:

... I am afloat on a houseboat on the lake outside Srinagar. The greenclad mountains reaching up 11,000 feet encircle this valley and the billowing white sparkling clouds from India tower up above.

By December 1944, now a squadron leader, Graham was at Mountbatten's headquarters at Kandy, Ceylon. Further leave came in July 1945:

From the luxuriant valleys, forests and meadows of Kashmir, Ladakh is a distinct change. High, barren, rocky with glaciers and snowbeds sweeping down into the valleys; the villages flatroofed, terraced and often built in blocks of 'flats' one above the other. Here and there a small oasis of greenery, trees, poplar, willow and juniper fed from a mountain stream from a single snowbed high up. That snow has to last all summer, otherwise the village dies and everything relapses into dust and rock again so dry and hot is the air.

The Japanese collapse in August 1945 revealed PoW camps in Burma, their inmates in a pitiful state. Operation Mastiff was mounted to take food and medical help to them urgently. Graham was certainly involved in this, flying out of Rangoon, one of a team of sweating men kicking parachuted packages out of the side door of a Dakota into the roar of the slipstream as it zoomed over a jungle clearing at 500ft, but I have not yet been able to find out whether he was also one of the doctors dropped into the camps to tend the half-starved prisoners. If anyone reading these words has the answer, I should be pleased to hear.

We know from further correspondence that he was in Nepal in February 1946, apparently on leave again, fit and well. But he arrived back in the UK in March 1946, and went into Creighton Royal Hospital, a psychiatric hospital at Dumfries. Then he was moved to a hospital in Northampton, finally ending up, through the influence of his old climbing companion, Dr John Ryle, in another psychiatric hospital, Cheadle Royal, where he spent the rest of his days. Schizophrenia had been diagnosed, surgery attempted: the desperate lobotomy.

Graham left the RAF in 1947. He died in 1980, having never practised medicine again, and with no further contact with the mountain rescue service. He and Ann had had two sons: Michael in 1942, and Patrick in late 1943. Mike can remember being taken to see his father in hospital, but then Ann thought it best to keep the boys away. Many years later, when Mike and his wife Philippa had their first child, Ann felt that her husband should see his first grandchild, and then there were regular visits.

Both Mike and Pat, in their teens, were introduced to climbing in the Lake District by John Ryle. They started to get interested in the Matterhorn, and went there in three successive years from 1960. In 1962 they were on the Hörnli Ridge with two Cambridge friends when a large boulder, dislodged from above, hit Pat on the head, damaged an arm, and nearly severed a leg. A mountain guide went to get help, but it was six hours before the mountain rescue team could get there.

Mike accompanied his brother to hospital in Zermatt where, whilst the leg was being amputated, Pat died on the table. Mike telephoned his grandmother, asking her to break the awful news to Ann, and the three friends then drove home without a stop.

In September 1993, fifty years after Graham's private enterprise in North Wales was accepted, a large number of former RAF mountain rescuers from the '40s to the '90s got together and formed the Royal Air Force Mountain Rescue Association. In March 1999, at a reunion near Shap, the guests of honour were Mike Graham and his wife Philippa. In return, we were honoured to receive from Mike his father's MBE and DSO. By a neat twist of fate, the RAFMRA's President for the year was Tony Smyth.

REFERENCES

- 1 Frank Card, *Whensoever - 50 Years of the RAF Mountain Rescue Service*. The Ernest Press, 1993
- 2 Flt Lt J C Lloyd, 'RAF Mountain Rescue Service', a paper read to the Alpine Club on 6 February 1945.
- 3 Flt Sgt T E White CGM, 'Mission to Burma' in RAF Upper Heyford station magazine, December 1947.
- 4 Sadly, Tom 'Chalky' White died of a stroke in Falkirk Royal Infirmary on Saturday, 9 September 2000. He was 79. The timing of his death was particularly sad, since the RAFMRA are planning to put a memorial to Graham in Carlisle cathedral – a ceremony which Tom and his wife had hoped to attend.
- 5 Gp Capt A J M Smyth OBE DFC, 'The expedition of the Royal Air Force Mountaineering Association to Lahoul, June 1955' in the *Himalayan Journal*, 1956.
- 6 A J M Smyth, 'The Northern Approaches of Kinabalu' in *AJ* 63, 1958.



Above

45. Flt. Lt Desmond 'Doc' Graham in the RAF Llandwrog jeep, probably in 1942.
(Frank Card collection) (p200)

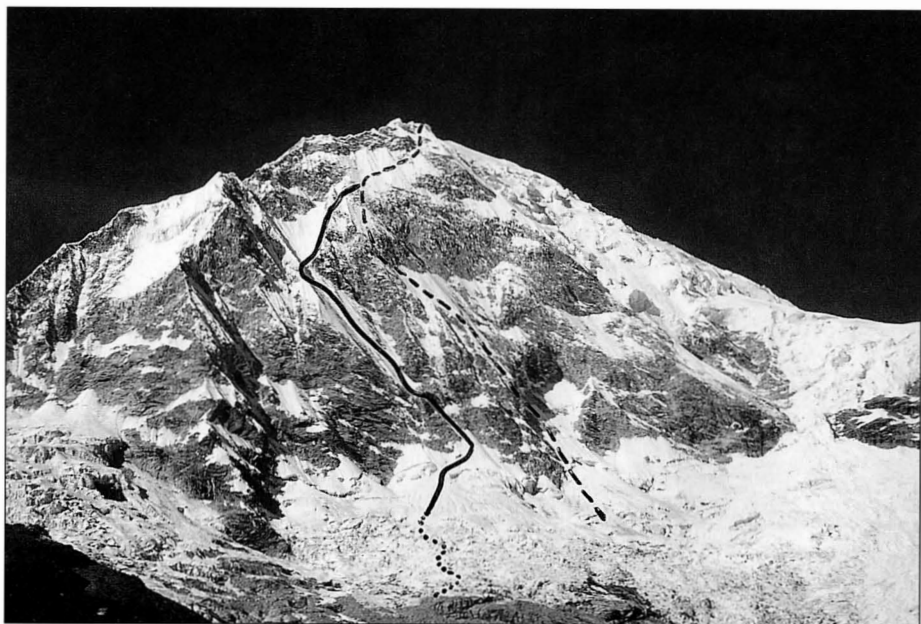


Left

46. Graham on a mountain trek in the Himalaya from the Aircrew Mountain Centre, Ganderbal, Kashmir, in 1944.
(Frank Card collection) (p200)



47. 'Doc' Graham, left, with his elder son Michael and grandchildren, during a hospital visit in 1975. (Frank Card collection) (p200)



48. The N Face of Huascarán (6768m) with Pavle Kozjek's line marked in a continuous line and the existing French route indicated by the broken line. (Pavle Kozjek) (p85)