

BLIZZARD

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LAKE DISTRICT 18th FEBRUARY 1995

Rick and I grew up together and have a passion for climbing and mountaineering that has spanned twenty five years and has almost elbowed many a relationship with the fairer sex as a result. Rick now lives with his patient wife and two girls near Barnard Castle in the picturesque Northern Pennines and enjoying the generous hospitality there I stayed overnight, leaving my patient wife and little girl at home in Cottingham in the relatively flat Midlands. At 5.30 the next morning Rick and I set off for the Lake District.

As we drove along the Ullswater road towards Glenridding our attention was continually drawn towards the breath-taking view of the snow clad mountains ahead, and thoughts of prolonging the horizontal were thrust aside. The weather was improving as it got lighter and we knew we had almost a full day of quality climbing ahead in reasonable conditions. A bad weather front was due to pass over at about 4pm when it was due to get dark but we were intending to be well on our way to getting off the mountain by then.

Once at Glenridding we turned up towards Greenside Youth Hostel, parked, and hurriedly shared out the weight of the days' equipment, and off we toiled up towards the great white face of Helvellyn.

The wind bit through my fleece and thermals chilling me to the core but a good pace soon generated plenty of heat. The first steep section loomed down upon us and I soon realized I had once again forgotten to trim my toenails before coming away. A forced stop was necessary so the opportunity was taken to grab a couple of photos, do a quick trim of the nails and put a plaster on my now bloody toe where the nail had dug into its neighbour.

We passed over the north ridge of Catsty Cam towards Red Tarn and were met by an awe inspiring vista. The highest tarn in the Lake District was half frozen over and

looked like a gemstone cradled in the palm of the popular scrambling route of Striding Edge, Helvellyn and Swirral Edge. With the cloud capping the cwm it was like being in a massive opera house with the North Face of Helvellyn singing out to us 'climb me'.

As we trudged along past the tarn, occasionally falling through the snow covered ground into hidden watercourses underneath, our first climbing route was picked out, as the start of two gullies on Helvellyn's North Face could be made out ahead. As we approached, we watched a party of three ascend into No1 gully and traverse round into No2 gully and up out of sight into the cloud and mist. We decided to do the same but continue No1 gully if it looked any good.

We passed the end of the tarn and ascended the steep snow covered scree slopes to the base of the gullies. We soon arrived at the base of No1 gully proper and pulled over to one side onto a rock ledge just big enough to take the two of us. A slip from here would take us sliding and tumbling the couple of hundred feet to the tarn below so every move now was made with extra caution. I belayed my rucksack to my ice axe buried in the snow and commenced the precarious balancing act required to put on all your climbing kit that is the ritual at the start of icy climbs. Donning the crampons is always particularly tricky as fiddling with the fittings and straps requires the removal of your gloves and the ice cold metal saps away any heat left in your fingers in seconds making them numb and sore, which in turn makes the balancing act more precarious. The wind along with blasts of spindrift snow added to the pleasure so after a quick photo call we roped up and set off Alpine style up into the gully.

We followed the previous parties' foot holes in the slope and it was not long before we could see up the whole length of the gully to the top. It looked no more than a steady snow plod so we opted to traverse round the rock face into

No2 gully just as the previous party had done. Rick lead and after a tricky step we were in No2 gully. This gully looked narrower than No1 gully and there was at least one small step that obscured our view to the ground beyond. Off we went, the unknown appealing to our lust for adventure.

The first step demanded a belay, as it involved ice covered rock with a thin covering of snow on top of the ice. Rick lead up the step and ran out a rope length as I grabbed a quick photo. He brought me up on an ice axe belay and we were now committed to the climb as a retreat would prove very difficult without sacrificing a lot of kit for abseils. We were out of the wind now in the jaws of the gully and enjoyed the situation. There were no further icy pitches to contend with and the rest of the gully was straight forward, Rick and I leap frogging each other's belays. I ran out of rope 7 feet from the top and had to set up a sitting belay in the top snow field. I brought Rick up and he passed me and up over the rim onto the top behind me with me soon following. There was no cornice to contend with so a straight walk up onto the plateau from the face was all that was needed. A quick glance behind as I topped out revealed exposure that I would normally crawl up to and gaze down into. The gully and cliff face disappeared steeply out of sight into the mist below. What a feeling of elation, satisfaction, fulfilment and relief. I felt on top of the world.

I turned my gaze away from the depths and looked toward the summit shelter and saw a group of hikers there huddled up out of the wind. I thought they would be surprised to see Rick and I appear from the face but they were more concerned with keeping out of the gale force wind and spindrift that was driving across the summit plateau.

Today, this was not a place to hang around so Rick and I shook hands, looked at the climbing guidebook for some more routes and then we scampered off up to the summit and then back down to the top of Striding Edge. We had decided

to head off down into Nethermost Cove to see what was on offer there. As we stepped through the small cornice onto the decent to Striding Edge I looked over towards the top of Nethermost Cove and could see an enormous cornice straddling the gully there. It was jutting out about 15 or 20 feet at the middle of the top snow field of the gully. It petered out at the edges of the snow field to about 3 feet.

Once at the bad step on Striding Edge we turned off to the right and down into Nethermost Cove. As soon as we could we skirted the base of the buttress at the head of the cove and made a tricky entrance into Nethermost Gully. Once in the gully we stopped for lunch and watched a group of mountaineers practicing fall arresting with their ice axes several hundred feet below us.

A man and a girl who said they were from Manchester arrived, had a quick chat with us and they went off up the gully taking the left route past a small rock buttress in the middle of the gully. Urged on now, we kitted up and kicked foot holes in the snow passing the easier right side of the rock buttress and belayed. The route proved more tricky and difficult requiring a very awkward manoeuvre involving using a single crampon spike to step up to gain some purchase on the ice with the ice axe, followed immediately by a cowardly crawl swimming type manoeuvre across some ice all of which did not instil any sense of security in me at all. It is amazing how all those nice ice axe placements disappear at the opportune moment. I suppose if it was that easy you would not get any sense of achievement but there is a lot to be said about doing it in good style.

I noticed the couple from Manchester had strayed off route and had ended up amongst the buttress to their right rather than come left to where we were. They must have retreated as we did not see them until much later. Rick and I continued up tackling more ice steps and belaying. This gully was much steeper than those on Helvellyn but held some good

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ice and snow. Rick lead most of the way and as he did so he commented on the spindrift that was continually flowing down the gully like small polystyrene balls which formed tiny rivulets. It was really strange as it hissed as it slid past us in its channelled out course. Occasionally a blast of wind that blew across the summit plateau and dumped large quantities of spindrift down the face and it would channel into the gully and shower down upon us. All you could do when this happened was bow your head and wait for the mini avalanche to pass. Conditions were certainly different in this gully.

At the last step, Rick lead off up it, over the lip and out of sight and sound into the oblivion above. It seemed like an eternity I waited, getting showered by spindrift avalanches coming down upon me from the buttress to my left. The rope paid out and out and out and then after a while started to come back in. What was Rick doing, I could not see or hear him, was he back climbing? Was the exit which must be near by now, too difficult, was passing below the big cornice to the smaller part of it to the side too difficult? I looked back down the gully pre-empting a retreat back down it. I could see a small party of climbers coming up the gully way down below me. I hoped they would not catch us up.

Eventually I got a tug on the trope to climb up and as soon as I topped out the ice step through the now torrential spindrift, I could see the top snow field above and was confronted with Rick's problem. The cornice was massive, it looked more like something you would see in the Himalaya's. Rick had climbed up to a small rock that was sticking up out of the snow in the middle of the snowfield some 20 feet below the big cornice and placed a big sling around it as a running belay. He had climbed up to the cornice but found the ground too steep below it so had retreated back to the rock belay and had then commenced a rising traverse rightwards towards the smaller part of the cornice. He was below the small cornice

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and was standing on an ice axe belay bringing me up, it had been his turn to run out of rope.

I belayed to the lonely rock and stood on a small ledge below it I had dug out in the snow. Rick was impatient to move on so I attached his rope to a belay device on my harness. Before I told him to climb on I looked round and back down the gully. The exposure was breath-taking, it looked almost vertical straight down the gully below me. I hoped the rock belay was a good one. The monster cornice above me showered me with spindrift and an atmosphere that spelt “HELL”.

Then all “HELL” broke loose!..... Literally!

I heard a shout from above saying “I’m off” or “I’m coming off”. I took this to be Rick falling from his stance and I immediately tensed up and prepared to hold a massive fall. I loaded up the belay (removed any slack between me and the rock by leaning back) and locked off my belay device. There was about 60 or 70 feet of free rope between me and Rick and he would fall down and pendulum across the buttress face and into the gully below me. My job was to make sure I held him to stop him going any further. I remember taking hold of the sling round the rock with my free hand. Then BANG! I was hit with a full body blow with what felt like a train from above and I was now tumbling downwards. I remember clearly my thoughts as I fell.

“I’m surrounded by snow and falling, tumbling, banging, being buried. I’m in an avalanche and being swept down the gully. White all around me. I’m upside down going headfirst. I’m stopping. The pressure of the snow on my whole body is building up, getting heavier, I can’t breathe, the pressure is too great on my body and chest, is this it, am I being buried by the avalanche, is this what it is like. Quiet, heavy, not able to move, I can hear the snow crunching as it compresses around me, crushing, heavier and heavier. What a crap way to die. Not like this surely. This is crap. Will I get

found before I die? The pressure has eased, I'm moving again, I'm falling through the air still enveloped in snow, now I start desperately swimming for the surface and trying to create some sort of air space around my chest to stop me being crushed if I get buried again, I am still on my back going down head first. I am now groaning and moaning to myself as I fall and bounce down the gully in anticipation of that sudden blow of hitting rock and dying but no, I'm free falling again, it must be the steps in the gully I'm going over, how much further to the bottom, when is this going to stop. Sliding and falling, I'm stopping again, the pressure is building up again, this is it, no I'm off again, swimming desperately again, I must be close to the bottom of the gully now, am I going to get buried in that final snow cone that forms at the bottom of gullies in avalanches, the place where most avalanche victims end up, desperately swimming now, I don't want to die like this, it will take at least half an hour for me to die buried in the snow if not longer. No, this is not for me, swim up, swim up, swim up.

Suddenly I'm sitting upright in the snow facing down a snow slope. There is an elderly man about 30 feet ahead of me facing the same way. We are sitting on a slope the whole of which is rumbling down the scree slope at the bottom of the gully. There are rocks and huge lumps of icy snow rolling along all around us. I'm holding myself upright with my arms behind me. I remember the feeling of euphoria. I've made it, I've survived.

As we rumble down the slope I look down at my legs ahead of me. I can see my left foot is pointing down at the 7 o'clock position and is aimlessly hinging freely up and down at the ankle as it passes over the snow, ice and rocks rumbling down the slope. 'That's broken then', I thought, and then I felt it was sore. The slide seemed to take an eternity but all of a sudden the whole slope shuddered to a halt. All around me the rumbling had stopped and there was an eerie silence.

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The seriousness of what had happened and the danger I was now in came home to me with a vengeance. I could not walk, I was getting cold at an alarming rate and the weather front was clearly upon us bringing blizzards and sub-zero temperatures. I would need the help of the Mountain Rescue Teams (MRT) to get me off the mountain and deep down inside I could feel fear. Would I fall to the effects of shock, was I bleeding inside my gaiters, had my bone ripped open my skin, could I survive the long wait for the MRT to get to me, how long could I fight off exposure in my condition, I knew it could be up to 6 hours before help arrived. I was afraid of the unknown.

I shouted down to the elderly man “Are you alright?” He did not answer but slowly got to his feet, he was dazed and clearly in shock, he did not look injured though.

I could feel I was still tied into the rope and it was taugth, Rick must still be on the other end, the rope leads away behind me, I hope he is not buried in the snow cone behind me. I felt helpless.

I could see a group of about five men scrambling up towards me from the cove below. It was the guys we had been watching practicing ice axe arrests earlier. They were soon with me and luckily for me they were a group of venture scout leaders on a winter training weekend. They had seen and heard the avalanche and could see there were bodies in amongst it coming down. Little did they know their knowledge of mountain rescue would be put to the test this weekend for real? What they subsequently did for Rick and I was carried out in the true sense of mountain camaraderie, skill and compassion. What they did was carried out in the true sense of the Scout movement and without doubt contributed to saving our lives.

When they got to me I told them my left leg was broken and one of them, Aidan, carried out first aid while the others searched the avalanche debris for other survivors. I sent

two of them to trace my rope to Rick and dig him out as I was convinced he would be buried. I then told Aidan he would have to straighten my left foot to allow for blood circulation to help prevent frostbite. He did not want to do this but eventually gave in to my perseverance. He slowly turned my foot back round and yes it hurt a lot. It felt like a broken pint glass being rung out in a chamois leather. Bones grated against bones. I'm not a doctor but anyone would know that this was not a good sign. It took all my willpower to block out most of the pain and stay conscious, no doubt aided by a double dose of adrenalin. I sat and panted for a few minutes.

Members of the elderly man's group gathered round and it soon became obvious that although they were not seriously injured, they were in shock as they could not follow simple instructions. They were evacuated to safer ground lower down the slope by the Venture Scouts where they could safely await help. Someone then carefully removed my crampons so I could move about more easily and stripped my harness of the climbing gear.

News arrived that Rick had been found, he had been partially buried and was being assisted down to join me on a snow ledge that was being dug out for me to lay on. This was covered in rucksacks for insulation and with someone stabilising my foot I slid down into a survival bivvy bag and onto the rucksacks. I was glad I was not being evacuated to safer ground as I do not think I could have stood the pain. I was then secured there by the use of a Deadman (a device that is buried in the snow as an anchor) and some ice axes. I was already shivering uncontrollably. Rick was put into a survival bag behind me and I snuggled down in my bag out of the wind which was getting stronger. I shouted to Rick asking him if he was alright. Judging from his slurred speech and incoherent answers I guessed he must be in shock. Spare clothing was put into my bag around me to help keep me warm and I settled down to a long wait. I heard our helpers

plot our position and list the casualties and injuries and then deploy their two fittest team members to descend to the valley and summon assistance.

The physical battle was over and now the mental one began.

It was not long before I felt really cold and started to shiver so I asked if someone could get into the bag with me to help keep me warm. Eric volunteered and remained with me until the MRT arrived. I'm sure he must have been quite uncomfortable as he was perched on the outside of the ledge but he kept me warm and reassured, chatting away about all sorts of things. He kept cheerful all along and with the help of his colleagues kept our spirits up so much it was even commented upon by the MRT when they arrived saying how surprised they were to see us so cheerful in the appalling conditions.

I soon lost all track of time as my battle against the cold took all of my remaining strength. Although Eric was keeping my right side warm, my left was pressing against the snow wall at the back of the ledge. It was so tight in the bag that all I could do was compress and loosen my folded arms across my chest to keep my circulation going. I could also wriggle the toes on my right foot to stop frost bite there. I was aware I had to keep my core up to temperature to maintain my vital organs. I remember resigning myself to the fact I was probably going to lose the bottom of my left leg due to the injury or frostbite as I eventually lost all feeling there.

I kept shouting across and checking on Rick and he seemed stable until I heard someone say they could see blood coming from his left ear. I feared he had fractured his skull and would die, I felt completely helpless.

The weather continued to worsen and after a few hours two people appeared from the gully above. We feared they would trigger off another avalanche in the unstable avalanche debris above us. There had by now already been a

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couple of smaller avalanches coming down the gully, fortunately not getting as far as our position on the slope below the gully.

It started getting dark and a blizzard was blowing up. The bad weather front was now upon us. I felt sorry for the remaining Venture Scout sitting outside as the other one had got inside Ricks bivvy bag with him.

The man and girl from Manchester then arrived at the scene, I was not sure where they had been. The girl swapped places with the Venture Scout in Rick's bivvy bag. I would bet they were glad they had retreated from the gully earlier when they did.

Time dragged on, my coldness had stabilized to just very cold now and I kept up my compressions and toe movements going while chatting about anything and everything with Eric. I was too afraid to fall asleep.

Eventually, I heard the faint sound of a helicopter in the distance below us. It was barely audible above the sound of the wind and the snow buffeting against the bivvy bag. I told Eric and sure enough it got louder and then it disappeared. The feeling of relief was overpowering and for a couple of seconds I sobbed quietly to myself.

We all started guessing what was happening in the valley below until we heard the helicopter again. This time it sounded like it had come up into the cove, Eric said he could see it below us where the cove drops down to the valley, he said he saw it drop some flares and then disappear back down into the valley again. What was it doing? Why didn't it come up and hoist us off the mountain? Eric said we were just inside cloud base where we were, capped in by the cloud which was below the surrounding ridges, it would be too dangerous for the helicopter to enter the cove due to the wind and poor visibility. What the helicopter had managed to do was drop off a paramedic and a MRT leader in very difficult

conditions, at the lip of the cove and within an hour they were with us on the ledge.

The paramedic gave me a morphine injection in my right thigh and a cylinder of entinox to suck on. (Entinox is a gas which relieves pain, particularly in child birth, and is commonly known as laughing gas!) Dome emergency shelters were erected over us and inside it I soon got warmer with the howling wind and sleet shut out. It seemed surreal inside the shelter, it felt really strange, it was as if you were not even on the side of a mountain any more, it gave me a huge psychological boost. I once again felt sorry for those sitting outside on the edge of the shelter to keep it attached to the side of the mountain. They were still exposed to the elements.

Eric quizzed me about the entinox so I gave him a couple of gulps to try. The paramedic had insisted I kept using it so Eric making the gulping sounds on the equipment kept the paramedic happy while he tended to Rick in the next shelter. I told Eric I had tried the entinox at some parent craft lessons recently and had found it had little effect on me.

I heard the MRT leader using his radio and the update was that two stretcher parties were due to be with us within the hour. They soon arrived along with one of the search and rescue dogs which insisted on sniffing everything and everyone. In the process and its excitement it knocked down more snow from the slope down filling the gap at the back of my ledge freezing my side, and also running across my broken leg, ouch! I willingly forgave the dog knowing that they are invaluable in locating casualties in these situations.

The paramedic returned to my shelter and told me that he was going to have to look at my leg. Eric's bivvy bag was cut open at the bottom and my gaiters and socks cut open too. The boot was then taken off and if you have worn leather hiking boots you will know how much tugging and twisting that takes. I soon found out that entinox does work on me, the pain was excruciating. Someone said it was alright if I swore

and yes I certainly did at this stage. Once the boot was off and the rest of my sock cut off I was relieved to be told that the bones had not punctured my skin and an inflatable splint was put on my leg.

We were told that the helicopter could not assist with the evacuation even lower down due to the atrocious conditions on the mountain so we were both to be stretchered and carried down to the rescue base where we would be put in an ambulance to travel to hospital. Rick and I were both told we were stable enough for this (not sure what other alternatives there were at this stage) and I was lifted painfully onto a mountain stretcher, zipped into a soft, fluffy, warm cocoon and strapped down. I could not move at all, even my arms. The long journey down commenced, sometimes being carried, sometimes pulled along, all the way being checked on by the face and head torch of the paramedic appearing from the darkness.

As we descended the sleet became rain and I sipped on drips of water coming onto my face from the wire hood above my head, at one point I was allowed to sip on some snow at one of the stops, as I was now very thirsty but not allowed to drink.

We passed over numerous mountain streams that sounded like they were now in spate, each one sounding larger and deeper than the last. At one point while being carried over one of these torrents I saw one of the stretcher bearers on the downstream side of me disappear and yelp, he had fell down into the water, he reappeared soaked up to his chest. I later found out one of Ricks' stretcher party had fell and completely submerged himself in the water. I was so grateful not to be dropped into one of these torrents as I could do nothing strapped rigidly into the stretcher.

We eventually arrived at the road/track that winds up Grisedale where I was put into the back of a Landover and driven down the bumpy track to the Patterdale Mountain

Rescue Post. Rick later joined me there. While we were left on the stretchers on the floor I overheard an assessment being made of our accident and was relieved to hear that it was pure bad luck and not due to poor judgement, conditions, equipment or lack of experience.

Rick and I were eventually put onto ambulance stretchers, and after thanking and bidding farewell to the MRT and leader, Eric and his Venture Scout colleagues and the couple from Manchester, we were put into the back of an ambulance. It took an hour to get through the flooded roads to the Cumberland Royal Infirmary in Carlisle, on the way Rick and I slept some of the time.

In casualty I was x-rayed and my left tibia and ankle were smashed to pieces along with clean breaks through my fibia above my ankle and below my knee. I was covered in bumps and bruises. It was only much later when I was trying to walk on crutches that it was found that my right leg was broken too and I had a couple of cracked ribs. The specialist at the hospital said he had not seen such a bad fracture before except in textbooks and a long stay in hospital was imminent. I only found out much later that amputation was being considered but due to my father asking if a wait to see what recovery my bits of bone made a decision to wait and see was made.

The following months are another story which I will pen someday, everything is still vivid in my memory from my recovery and was in itself just as challenging as my survival and rescue from the mountain.

This account was written some 3 months after the accident and the forecast is now looking good for a recovery to be able to walk at least.

Rick suffered from severe concussion, crampon lacerations to his knee and calf and a cut to his ear explaining my false alarm about a fractured skull. He was out of hospital within days and so far made a 95% recovery. He has been

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back to Nethermost Gully twice and recovered some of our lost equipment from its base.

Rick told me he did not fall or shout at the top of our climb. I had pulled him from his stance as I was hit by the massive cornice that I surmise had been broken off by some careless people on the top. Rick had been knocked unconscious almost immediately. That day we both fell 650 feet back down the gully.

The gully still holds snow now in May along with its memory of three Venture Scouts that were killed in an avalanche there ten years previously.

<u>Time</u>	<u>Temp</u>	<u>Height</u>	<u>Comments</u>
8.04	-2.7	280	Set off from Greenside YH
8.15	-3.7	315	
8.30	-4.6	415	
8.45	-2.8	515	
9.00	-2.4	595	
9.15	-3.2	700	Red Tarn
9.30	-5.7	705	
9.45	-3.1	785	Kitting up in No1 gully
10.00	-1.1	780	
10.15	-4.4	785	
10.30	2.8	820	Climbing gullies
10.45	4.7	870	
11.00	4.1	875	
11.15	5.7	885	
11.30	6.9	940	
11.45	6.1	945	
11.48	6.1	955	Top of Helvellyn
12.00	3.3	935	

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12.15	5.0	825	
12.30	5.5	810	Base of Nethermost Gully
12.45	0.5	815	
13.00	-2.6	820	
13.15	1.1	865	Climbing Gully
13.30	-1.2	900	Top belay
13.45	4.0	895	
14.00	4.9	895	Avalanche
14.15	4.2	710	Scree slope at base
14.30	2.4	715	
14.45	1.4	725	
15.00	0.8	720	
15.15	1.2	725	
15.30	1.5	725	
15.45	1.6	730	
16.00	2.0	735	
16.15	1.9	740	
16.30	0.5	735	
16.45	0.0	745	
17.00	0.1	745	Helicopter heard
17.15	0.5	755	
17.30	1.6	750	
17.45	3.2	750	
18.00	3.6	755	
18.15	3.3	760	
18.30	2.6	760	
18.45	3.1	695	Being stretchered down
19.00	3.2	640	
19.15	3.6	600	
19.30	3.7	490	

POSTSCRIPT

I cannot put into words or deeds the gratitude I owe the people involved in our rescue. The most precious thing in life is life itself and to put your own life on the line to help save that of another is the ultimate unselfish gift you can give someone. I thank you all.



Helvellyn north face, No 1 and No gully right of centre.

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Looking over Striding Edge to the top of Nethermost Gully.