

Going,going,gone...

By Phil Gribbon

HAVE YOU EVER STOOD by the edge of a toppling cascade spilling into unseen space and watched mesmerized as a snowy hillside is sucked swiftly and silently into the gloom of Glencoe? For years I have lived with this indelible memory imprinted in my mind. It lurks there, a bleak image with its reminder of human mortality and fraught with implications beyond my ken. Although it would have been better not happening, it was an invaluable lesson. This experience may have kept me alive for longer, and one should always give thanks for that gift.

If I had made one further little step onto the treacherous snow in the narrow runnel then my fate would have been decided. Doomed from the start, I briefly would have become a mere helpless bit of bouncing flotsam on top of a moving maelstrom of cold meringue and at the end of the ride to be swallowed in measureless mass, buried, suffocated, concreted, forever gone. These were the last moments of my companion. Time standing still, seconds without end, both above and below the churning snow, speeding ever quicker into the gully system that snaked towards the valley floor ...

Did he have time to think in his downhill career? Does life go past in pictures conjured out of memory, or does the immediacy of the moment swamp everything? Was there a sensation of tossing about on a glorious frenetic helter-skelter ride, never unaware of waiting oblivion in the squeezing compression of final entombment? Who knows, but if that false step had been mine this would never have been written.

It happened this way. We had sat in comfort in St.Andrews and hatched our plans, sipping our morning coffee and proposing our first outing together. Glencoe was always a popular choice, it was neither too far nor too taxing, and was full of challenges for a satisfying day out on interesting hills. We mooted that a traverse of the Aonach Eagach, the notched ridge along the northern flank of the main glen, would be a suitable objective; nothing definite, of course, just a possible option.

We planned to stay in Lagangarbh. Lying close to the foot of the

Buachaille and at the head of Glencoe, the hut would be our suitable base for the occasion. We wrote for the key and requested permission to stay in the revered club hut. We anticipated sampling its icebox rigours, snugly cooking close to its burning gas rings, then creeping upstairs to its mattrazenlager boards under the roof space and snuggling deep into somewhat skimpy sleeping bags. Once embedded, with more clothes added, one could lie comfortably and mentally mull over the objective for the morrow. So, the plan was to go along its length, traversing east to west, starting short side up and ending long side down..

Our visitor had little idea what was on the menu but he was game for the venture. Yes, we told him, expect a demanding day with short daylight hours to force us rapidly along the ridge so that we have sufficient light for the descent beside Clachaig Gully and towards the pleasures of a frothing quaff in the cosy cramped bar of the welcoming ancient hotel. We thought we knew it all, everything had been taken into account, and nothing could go wrong.

Way back in those bygone days the winters were always harsh and reliable, so they say. Piercingly cold north-west squalls had brought in December. Biting winds had trailed curtains of driving snow across the ridges. Up there the broken crystals had filtered into every sheltered cranny, sinking down behind every obstacle to sculpt their insubstantialness into fragile drifts that grew out over the corrie headwall.

The morning dawned fine, with blue skies and racing clouds, and a stiff boreal blast whipping spindrift plumes off the ridge. It suggested an adequate struggle ahead. There were three of us. We didn't consider an alternative objective and with carefree spirit toiled up the approach slopes picking out the most interesting route to the first summit. Once there on top of Am Bodach we paused, hunched deep in our Grenfell jackets against the chill, watching the speckled sun patterns pick out bright snow patches as they shifted along the irregular contorted gully heads and across the buttress tops above the long southern slopes. Carefully we edged down frozen ground, with no crampons for safety nor even tricouni nails on our boot edges as ice biters and scratchers. Our excuse for such barely functional footwear was that it was all the rage in those days. Who would wear

crampons, if you had them, on Scottish hills?

There were no footsteps to follow, just frozen ground and sastrugied drifts, all virgin ground without trace of other scramblers. We were treading a route along our own personal mountain world. Years later I found a lone photo that showed our promise for a joyous day ahead. Two figures, axes swinging, unknowingly walking onward, sharp and clear in the sunlight with those dappled wispy clouds drifting across the sky. Sad cuttings were there too, the unwelcome news, front page stuff, and indistinct figures coming and going outside the hotel; yes, that was his wife, my heart still bleeds. However, up on the high ridge we were inspired and motivated, alive and relishing the brilliance of the day, the future unknown.

The hours slipped by unnoticed, up and down we went, nothing too demanding, full of interest, treading the singular line along the ridge. An earlier district guidebook says the Aonach Eagach is the narrowest and most difficult of the ridges on the mainland and that in addition to the charm of the rugged and picturesque pinnacles on the ridge the climber has most wonderful views of Bidean nam Bian, the Lochaber mountains and the deep valley of Loch Leven: all true, of course, but hardly written in the modern idiom. Today the Munro book states that in winter the whole traverse is a serious mountaineering expedition that may be difficult and time-consuming. That is more like it; otherwise how to explain where did all the daylight hours go?

We were at the crawl-up step-up pinnacles when a stuck-on mass of sculptured snow showed its skittery fragility. I never touched it, honest, but a cornice cold chunk of bleached scenery churuumped off into the steep northern corrie on its own volition . We exchanged doubting glances, aware unconsciously that this was a salutary warning from the gods. However there was little alternative but to continue carefully onwards along the ridge.



'Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing...'

Edgar Allan Poe 'The Raven'. Woodcut by Helen Forde

Time had become the essence. It was growing bleakly gloomy when we reached the section of ridge sloping up towards the last summit of Sgorr nam Fiannaidh. Clouds now had shrouded all the mountains. To go over the final highest top and try to descend towards Clachaig in the gathering dark was courting benightment. Leftwards we could see an escape route going downwards across a relatively gentle open slope with bare patches of open frozen ground separated by narrow

strips of crossable snow. We were now well past the many treacherous gullies that were known to lure unsuspecting ridge escapees into trouble. We had stumbled on a clever circumvention down to the road, but we were about to be proved so wrong.

We began slanting down, stepping cautiously. Looking down hopefully and then up suspiciously we assessed frequently our choice of route. We had crossed a series of minor snow runnels, splitting up helpful strips of bareish ground. We reached a runnel that was wider, deeper and would need more than several quick steps to cross. I put a foot on it and sank in too far. I stopped, and looked upwards. Above was a contiguous innocuous broad snowfield that ran up to a ragged cliff that edged the misting main ridge. No, be careful, stop, step back, reconsider. A vital sixth sense was unconsciously lurking on my shoulder. It shouldn't be true, because guardian genii don't talk to unsuspecting humans, do they? I waited, silent, standing still on solid ground. Below me the second man plodded unhesitatingly onwards into the blameless morass. The third man was following behind in his footsteps and, hesitating, could only watch unbelievably what was about to unfold.

Without sound one sensed the surface was quivering, then moving, splitting, fracturing, breaking, building, gathering speed, sucking down a seemingly endless snowfield. Of the second man there was no sight or sign. He was gone....

Somehow we got down to the road. Broke the news at the hotel. Waited until some searchers gathered. Went and shone lights at crumpled avalanche debris. Nothing there. Vanished. Gone....

Methodically at dawn we returned, swept across the surface, looking, peering, wondering, too aware of what we could find. We humans lack animal instincts but they don't. It was a wee terrier dog that stopped and snuffled into the snow. The crofter got the shovel and dug. The dog was right.

I waited a bit. Face it, man. One hesitates to acknowledge the proximity of death.

His blanched bent arm rose stiffly out of the avalanche debris. His frozen fingers were without his gloves. His axe was away and would never wave to deride the grey heavens.

Gone, and only now the memory ...

