

Leeds University Union Hiking Club

**The events of the 10th and 11th of February
2013, Cairngorms, Scotland.**

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Smith.

In the difficult aftermath of the tragic events which occurred in the Cairngorms, the Leeds University Union Hiking Club (LUUHC) has pulled together in an incredible way, the club has proven to be a truly strong community. It has also seemed relevant to me, to make available details of what happened. This is for several reasons. Firstly, I thought it may be beneficial for the survivors of that group to go over the events completely and in detail one final time and leave a record in writing, so as they may choose to move on from this event, but those who wish to know more, can. Secondly, it had occurred to me that organisations such as the Students Union and LUUHC may require a record of what occurred as the official police reports may not be available to them. Thirdly, those who are grieving from the loss of our good friend and dedicated member Graham Connell, may achieve some element of closure by having these details revealed. Finally, there is always something we can learn from every tragic accident, which may prevent another. Whilst I do not believe we made mistakes and Graham's life could not have been saved, those of us who had to survive the night on the mountain, could have had an easier or shorter ordeal. At the end of the document I have included recommendations for improvements, which would be of benefit to LUUHC. Also, others who read this may identify areas for improvement, which they may not have noticed without all of the facts.

I, (E.Bianco) have written this largely in the first person and have asked the other people who were there during these events, to confirm that what I have written is accurate and that I have not forgotten any important details.

The winter hiking trip to the Cairngorms intended to be from the 8th until the 11th of February 2013 was LUUHC's first winter trip of the academic year and first trip of the New Year. After arriving late on the night of the 8th the club had an excellent day of winter skills training and hiking on the 9th, during which the weather was good but visibility was low at some points. That evening, route planning, group leaders and groups, were organised in the usual way. As I often lead scramble routes, the outcome of that decision was that a scramble route up Fiacail ridge would be led by me, with Graham as the second leader. Once the groups had been decided the full group was as follows.

Graham Connell, Eliot Bianco, Adam Collins, Benjamin Lux, Nick Smith, Simon Montgomery & Thomas Kleiber.

On the morning of the 10th we were running a little later than intended, myself and Nick both almost forgot our water, going back into the bunkhouse to get it would prove to be a very wise choice. It was reasonable weather when we drove away from the bunkhouse and we had no feeling that the weather would be causing us any

particular issues. We drove to the Cairngorm ski centre in the 14 seater minibus with the members of another group. The wind was reasonably forceful and was blowing up plenty of spindrift and the cloud was low. The group organised itself inside of the entrance of the ski facility. Besides group members own personal kit, the group was carrying 1 group shelter (6 man size), 1 group first aid kit, 30 meters of confidence rope & 2 maps (OS - 1:25 000 & 1:50 000 size). In addition to this the group had 3 compasses, one carried by each of the leaders and one carried by Nick.

We set off from the car park at around 8.30am and made our way amongst many hikers, climbers and skiers up toward the ridge. I was navigating the group and I was using the 1:25 000 size map. We were all happy and joking around, particularly enjoying Adams lack of goggles and the orange Ray Bans he was wearing instead. To the west of the ski centre the official paths split, we took neither but continued through the centre of the split walking on a bearing that would take us slightly to the east of our intended ridge. Visibility was poor but not beyond our experience or capability, we even commented that it was excellent navigation practice weather and typical Cairngorms winter conditions.

Once we had approached the east of the ridge we turned directly into it and began a reasonably steep ascent of its eastern side. At the beginning of this ascent we fitted crampons and detached our ice axes from our rucksacks, we also all put our helmets on. The whole group managed this section well, it was led and steps were kicked in part each by me and Graham and Nick also took a turn towards the top. At the top there were numerous groups, we met two men who looked as if they may have been conducting an avalanche assessment, we said hello before moving onwards to the south. The weather conditions on top of the ridge were more challenging than lower down due to higher wind and larger amounts of spin drift but navigation was easy. We had additional visibility issues with icing up goggles. Our journey south was not too difficult and we approached the scramble section of Fiacail ridge which was the purpose of this particular hike. We were not the only people on the scramble route. We met a group of 3 climbers, one of whom was John Walker, a Winter Mountain Leader (WML) I had climbed with in Fort William the previous February. We spoke briefly, they were practicing skills for an Alps expedition, but they, like ourselves had no issues with the current conditions. As I was the most experienced climber I took the front of the group and as Nick was the least experienced I told Nick and Graham to stay close together. The rest of the group all had some climbing or scrambling experience and were competent to complete the route. The biggest challenge on the scramble ridge was the wind. The narrow sections of ridges, which were heavily iced, required crawling over as the wind speed was so high and we were totally exposed. However we took most of the ridge on the leeward side to avoid the worst of the wind. On approaching a section the group was not comfortable with in the

conditions, Graham located and checked an alternate route approximately 5 meters lower on the ridge. We never needed the confidence rope throughout the scramble. Having done this, we began to make our final ascent to the summit plateau, we passed 3 more climbers who appeared to consist of a female guide and 2 male clients. This was around 1pm and they were the last people we saw that day.

Once on the plateau, conditions worsened dramatically. The wind speed was very high and made walking incredibly difficult. Visibility was extremely low with large amounts of snow, cloud and spindrift. I and Graham decided that we would no longer follow our original longer route which would have turned west and had a very long loop over the mountain back to the ski centre. Instead we decided to turn east and attempt to return to the ski centre much quicker. Nick expressed an interest in the navigation as I was taking a bearing and pulled his own compass out. I thought it was a good idea for Nick to also take a bearing, as I feel practicing navigation is always good and having two compasses working on the same bearing in those conditions would also be beneficial. We made very slow progress; we took numerous bearings and gradually made our way around the plateau until we were attempting to travel north along the narrow plateau parallel to Fiacail ridge. The very strong wind, which we later learned was in excess of 70mph, was hitting us from the east and made maintaining our bearing almost impossible. We were being knocked over by the wind and forced more to the west of the plateau, increasingly close to the edge. I and Nick were at the front of the group, Nick was ahead of me. The wind caused me to stumble and I looked away to steady myself for a second and then Nick was gone. Although I did not see him fall Simon and Adam both said they saw him fall through the ground, as if through a trapdoor. Both I and Graham instantly knew that sounded likely to be a cornice and I made them tell me exactly where he had fallen at. This occurred at approximately 2pm.

We pulled the group together, I left Graham and the rest of the group to organise getting the group shelter out and preparing to call mountain rescue, whilst I took Tom so we could look and check Nick was not just on a slightly lower ledge. As I approached the location at which we had last seen Nick, all I could see was white in every direction, it was impossible to tell ground from sky. I felt myself slip and drop, I twisted and managed to slam the pick of my ice axe into the ground and hold on, with my lower half hanging in space, but I could feel I was continuing to slip. I was incredibly lucky that Tom was there and that he was strong enough to grab my arm and pull me up and back onto the mountain. I am incredibly grateful to Tom for this.

We returned to the group, who had removed the group shelter from one rucksack and Graham had removed the rope from his bag. However, after going to the edge with Tom, I knew there was nothing we could do for Nick with that length of rope and lack of anchor points. We encountered significant difficulty using the group shelter. Our first attempt to get into the group shelter was hampered by the high wind, our full winter equipment and our rucksacks. Also, when we practice in the calm, a 6 man group shelter can fit 6 grown men but in reality and in those conditions this was challenging. Adam and Ben couldn't even get in the shelter on the first attempt and we nearly lost our grip on the shelter until Graham pushed it down until it was anchored. With rucksacks out of the shelter, we managed, with the windward side firmly wedged under me with Tom to my right and Simon next to him and Adam to my left with Ben next to him. Graham was opposite me and it was incredibly difficult to keep the leeward side of the shelter down. We were totally exposed on the summit and I don't believe the shelter was designed to withstand those sorts of conditions. There was a lot of wind and snow still getting blown into the shelter. I think a lot of it was coming in behind Graham and Ben. We got out phones and began trying to call mountain rescue. The touch screen smartphones would not work in those conditions, they were too cold and damp. However we were very lucky that Adam also had an old Nokia phone with buttons, as this could still work. We made an emergency call on 112. I was on the phone and the noise of the wind made it incredibly difficult to hear the operator. I shouted the information that I thought was necessary, as I couldn't hear the questions being asked. I did manage to hear some information, such as mountain rescue would call me back within 15 minutes. Waiting in the shelter for those 15 minutes felt like forever. The wind and snow continued to blow in as we waited. I could see a layer of ice building up on the groups clothing and faces. Adam opened a flask of coffee and passed it round which I think helped a little. Mountain rescue called back, I had asked Graham to provide me with a grid reference from the 1:25 000 map of our position. I repeated this to mountain rescue over and over again. It is still firmly stored in my memory, 999 035. The call failed, possibly due to me not being able to hear, we waited for them to call back again. Adam started passing around cold onion bhaji and biscuits which prompted me to ask him if he understood the seriousness of the situation, this made at least the two of us laugh, which probably slightly lightened the mood. The food was probably also good for everyone's morale but Graham and Ben did not accept any, they had definitely become the coldest. However they did take some coffee and chocolate. Mountain rescue called back and after some more questions, I managed to hear them tell me that they would search for Nick and that we should get ourselves down to the ski centre. I was pleased with this as I could see the cold was getting to the group, we had now been in the group shelter for about an hour and had become significantly frosted up. In addition to this we had all began to cramp up and we had several unintentional crampon kicks which ripped clothing. I could see the guys were shivering; cold must have got to Grahams hand as he was putting a lot of effort into warming up his fingers. As we made ready to descend, we left the shelter; we had managed to move from our original spot by more than a

meter, as that is where we had left our ice axes. The weather conditions had worsened further and it was a challenge to get out of the shelter and not lose it. Some of the group couldn't get out at first and I was patting their heads to encourage them to get out. I put the rope in my bag and we stuffed the shelter into Graham's bag.

Once back out in the open, the weather was so forceful and the navigation so challenging, combined with the emotions and stress of having lost Nick, I asked Graham to take over the navigation. We were already somewhat disorientated and Graham told me his compass was in his bag, we wanted to get moving and get down as quickly as possible. I gave my compass to Graham. After a short difficulty with reorienting ourselves we set off with Graham leading. He changed direction several times in the process of navigating. Just moving was incredibly challenging and the wind speed was still increasing. Visibility remained at the worst I have ever encountered, looking down I couldn't see my boots and there was no visible difference between sky and ground or mountain and edge. Graham was still in the lead, Simon and Adam were closest to him and I had Ben and Tom behind me. I saw Graham slip down, initially onto his right side with his head uphill toward me. He slipped on a very steep slope and accelerated quickly. He rolled onto his front into the correct ice axe self-arrest position, by this time only his chest and shoulders were still visible on the edge. I think he had already fallen too far over the edge and the snow was too soft for his ice axe to stop him. He continued to slide and fell out of view. The last I saw of him was the top of his helmet. There had been lots of shouting, from me to tell Graham to self-arrest as he had done and to the group to tell them to get back. Graham fell incredibly quickly but it also seemed to be in slow motion, Simon and Adam were very lucky not to fall with him and had to run clear. Adam, who was closer than me, said he saw Graham falling straight downwards. There was nothing we could do for Graham. Graham fell at some time between 3.30 and 3.45 pm on Sunday afternoon.

The remaining group was extremely shaken. We huddled close together in the full force of the weather and I summarised our position to them. I told them, we have lost 2 men, including our most experienced and we have no idea what condition either of them is in. We have lost all three of the group's compasses and the group shelter. We are in the worst conditions I have ever seen and they are still getting worse. We have lost all visibility and we no longer know our position for certain. We cannot navigate. We don't know where the edges or more cornices may be and there is a very real possibility that we may fall as Graham and Nick have. But we cannot stay on the top as we are totally exposed and will be killed by exposure in a very short time if we don't move. I also stated that we are now outside of our experience and I didn't really know what to do except that we must get off the top by

any way possible, any idea of getting to the ski centre via Cairn Gorm was short lived. It was really from this point that I felt I lost my ability to lead for a while. It did come back but the loss of Nick and Graham had shaken me very badly. Our continued survival on the top has to be put down to Simon. He bravely took up the front and began searching for a route off the top. We were all in fear of being the next to fall over the edge and all expected our own turn to fall would come. We were constantly probing the snow with our ice axes to check that there was rock beneath. Sometimes there was no rock; it was difficult even to determine the angle of the ground we were on. I believe we continued in this fashion for around 40 minutes. We discussed the possibility of constructing a snow shelter; Ben and Tom were keenest on this idea with nightfall almost being upon us. However there was nowhere on the tops that had a suitable build-up of snow that could have served as a 5 man shelter, also the snow was incredibly powdery which would have made that task even more challenging. We could possibly have dug a large hole to protect us from the worst of the wind, but without the group shelter this would still have left us fatally exposed. At this point, our survival was still dependent on getting lower and out of the worst of the weather. We continued and were lucky to find a fairly steep but useable gully. We decided to descend this gully. I am certain this gully had a large positive effect on the mental state of the whole group. It certainly had a good impact on me. My confidence to lead came back and I'm sure we all felt we had gotten out of the worst of it at that point. The Gully offered us some protection, although we still had to shield our faces from the wind but we were able to joke and raise our spirits. Ben suggested staying out of the middle of the gully in case of snow covered streams and I suffered from cramps on the descent and was at the rear but we made good progress. Simon was still at the front and called out he could see something that looked like roofs, when we looked where he pointed it certainly looked like some roofs. But as we got closer they turned out to be boulders. This would not be the last time we imagined we could see help close by.

Our position now did seem less precarious. We had all needed to go to the toilet very badly and the conditions up top had prevented this. Regardless of the protection the gully had offered us this was still a very cold uncomfortable task right throughout the rest of the hike, although it became less frequent as our water supplies dwindled. The mountain was now sheltering us from the worst of the wind and we had descended out of the thickest cloud. Whilst it was still snowing steadily, visibility had improved substantially. It was now also possible to talk to one another without having to yell over the wind. It was approximately 4.30 pm when we descended the gully. We were now in a position to begin trying to call for help again. At some point on the top, mountain rescue had attempted to contact us again but now, none of the phones could receive a signal. We were also unable to get through on 999 or 112 as we hoped we might and it was frustrating, not being able to raise the alarm on Graham's behalf. It was also difficult to try for long, as removing gloves

very quickly resulted in painfully cold hands. With the improved visibility, we could see we had come to the edge of a large lake, although we had lost our compasses I still had the 1:25 000 map and was able to identify our approximate position as being on the northern shore at the south western end of Loch Avon. We could now make a more complete assessment of our position and supplies. We each stated our position in terms of clothing/equipment, food and drink. Between us our food supply was very good. We knew that although we would have to run on a lot of sugar we had plenty of food including chocolate, cereal bars, flap jack, nuts, fruit, some pasta, a pie and a pasty and some other similar items. Our drink supply was also reasonably good, with all of us still carrying more than a litre each in the form of water or in flasks as tea and coffee. Our good supply levels certainly put us in a better position. I did have some concerns regarding clothing and equipment, some of which was already frozen solid, such as Adam's buff. We did have 4 head torches but of the 5 of us, 2 were already wearing all of their layers. We only had 2 survival bags and 1 survival blanket between us. Fortunately we all had a reasonable windproof layer on, in the form of waterproofs or soft-shells' and a fleece layer beneath for warmth. This wind proofing was crucial, as we were to find out later that although the air temperature over our time on the mountain was between -6 and -10 degrees C, the wind speed was in excess of 70mph and wind-chill brought the temperature down as low as -30 C. I knew I was carrying a synthetic belay jacket in my pack but I was also aware that I was the only one who had anything of that level of insulating quality. Although I knew if it got cold enough I would put this on, I had 2 simultaneous thoughts. 1, I didn't know if me putting this on would do further damage to the groups already poor state of mind. 2, the only way out of this was to get out together, or not get out at all. I knew that at least for now I was fine managing in the same sort of kit the rest of the group was in. It stayed in my pack. More worryingly to me was that only I and one other were carrying a survival bag. It was obvious to us all now that no shelter we could construct in those snow conditions, could ensure all of our survival with the equipment we had left with us. Still, we were very well prepared to continue hiking so we continued.

Having re-established our position, eaten, drank and now in the knowledge we were prepared to continue, we decided to make another attempt to reach the only place in walking distance – the Cairngorm Ski Centre – or if we missed that the road leading to it. We were well aware of how big a challenge this would be, in the conditions and without a compass. We identified a route marked on the map which involved walking along the northern shore of Loch Avon, before turning northwards, always keeping the mountain of Cairn Gorm to our left, essentially following it around before re-ascending the mountain on a steep gully, in the hope of being able to pass over the mountain, onto the northern slopes and descend toward the ski centre. We began to walk again as dusk was setting in around us, we continued to check, unsuccessfully, for phone signal approximately every half hour. Our walk along Loch

Avon went reasonably well but we did suffer from some cramping, most likely a mixture of factors, from fatigue, to stress and minor dehydration as we hadn't drank whilst on the tops, we did drink and we continued through it. As we ascended and night fell, we climbed back up, into the worst of the conditions. We switched head torches on, the slope became very steep and I felt some of the group worrying even more about this, I would put some of this down to their inexperience in winter conditions and winter gullies. We also had to keep Simon in the middle as he did not have a head torch. Our positioning on the mountain became increasingly risky and the reflection of our lights off the steep snow just in front of our faces, was causing glare on our goggles, which left us all but blind. The strong winds we were returning too and blowing snow into our faces, encouraged us to keep the goggles on so this blindness, combined with the steepness of the climb, ensured progress was slow to get back to the top. After a very long time we reached a plateau section, we were fully back in the worst of the weather conditions and being hit hard by wind and blizzard. Visibility was once again minimal. We knew we did not want to remain in this area any longer than necessary, but our thoughts were still dwelling on Nick and Graham falling and being back up high we were once again scared of falling ourselves. We found an opposite slope and began to descend, hoping that we had walked far enough, to be descending in the direction of the ski centre. We descended on the slope at a diagonal, partially as a way of going further toward where we believed the ski centre to be but the thought also occurred to me that some of these slopes looked as if they may be avalanche prone. We had no choice but to descend over them as our position was only approximate and with having lost visibility again, it seemed best to take the descent route we had found. By moving as swiftly as possible over different types of slope, I hoped we would minimise our exposure to avalanche risk, although this worry persisted for some time. Eventually the slope flattened out.

It is difficult to say what time we reached the plateau. I would estimate somewhere in the area of 8.30 pm on Sunday night. We decided to continue, hoping that our bearing was still approximately right and that we were heading in the direction of the ski centre. We had tried to use the compass app on an iPhone, but this proved to be totally useless and more of a problem than a help. Our water had now significantly begun to freeze in the bottles, further reducing our supplies. Visibility was still quite poor, largely as it was now a very dark starless night, but we were out of the worst of the cloud and whilst the snow continued to fall steadily, we were no longer caught in blizzard conditions. The wind speed had also decreased, whilst it was not challenging to walk in any longer, it was still necessary to keep our faces covered most of the time, as the icy gust were still powerful enough to sting. Over a lot of the time, I could see ice on the guy's faces, particularly in Ben and Simons stubble and our clothing had large amounts of ice on it, particularly where the moisture in our breath had frozen to our buffs and the neck and hood areas of our jackets. The

conditions remained largely like this for the rest of the night. We walked in the direction we hoped would allow us to find one of the ski slopes, the talk at this point was reasonably optimistic, as we were hoping we might be back at the bunkhouse with the rest of LUUHC by around midnight and be able to ensure searches were being conducted for Nick and Graham.

We decided to try and save the power in our head torches, we had 4 with us so we switched 2 off. We had Tom lead as he had the most powerful light and Adam at the back to light where we were walking as the only way to turn his light off was to remove the batteries and this was difficult in the cold. We switched lead around over time but kept using Toms light as it was impressively powerful. After walking for quite some time we found a set of tracks in the snow that appeared to be leading up the mountain. As winter mountaineers always walk in the footsteps of the man in front it is difficult to know how many people were in this group. It was also difficult to determine the direction of travel. We were looking for anything which could give us hope, as it was still snowing we knew the tracks couldn't be very old. We hoped it may be mountain rescue going in to find us. We reasoned even if it wasn't mountain rescue, everyone who walks on this area starts and ends at the ski centre and that by following the tracks downhill we should find our way back. There is a navigational theory that if you are in a featureless space without a compass you will be unable to walk in a straight line but you will walk in circles. We proved this theory and soon realised we were following our own tracks. I'm sure it was from here that we each began to become increasingly despondent as the hopelessness of our situation seemed to increase. For the next several hours we walked in random directions each time more away from our other tracks. We used our ice axes to write LUUHC and an arrow in the direction of travel frequently. It told us which ways we had gone; we hoped it may help anyone who was searching for us. This continued until the plateau as far as we could see was crossed and re-crossed with our tracks. We were completely lost. We made an agreement to only walk downhill, which was difficult to find, and to never stop walking until the end and then all banged our ice axes together. It sounds kind of cheesy now but at the time it seemed quite powerful and important. This was the time where we acknowledged that it was going to be a long night and we would have to walk right through it and we said the toughest part would be later at around 2 until 4.

The exertion of the day was beginning to take its toll. Tom, who had been at the front a long time, was struggling. Ben took over from him to break trail. We started to stop more regularly. We made some kit changes, dry gloves & hats, the odd extra layer if we had it. We kept passing around food. Everything was shared. Adam even laughed that the pork pie he handed around never got back to him and he didn't get a bite. Our water intake was less than I would recommend on a normal

hike but I think we rationed it well. We were beginning to feel the onset of exhaustion. It would be very easy for us to sit for a rest, fall asleep and freeze in our sleep. I'm not sure whose idea it was but a stroke of genius was to push our ice axes into the snow until the end of the shaft hit rock and then sit on the flat top of the head, so that when we fell asleep we would fall off the axe and this would wake us up. This also provided a few humorous moments when the axe had not hit rock and we fell right off it when it sank.

I think it was at around 1 am on Monday morning when we found a river crossing the plateau; it was not easy to follow as it only intermittently appeared from under the snow but after some discussion as to if we should follow it we decided it was the only feature or navigational aid we had and we would follow it. We checked which way the river flowed and set off travelling downstream feeling that this would have to be downhill and hoping the river crossed a road or came close to some other place we could receive help.

Following this river was essentially all we did for the rest of the night. We had a few incidents. I got my foot stuck in a deep hole in the snow and the others had to dig and pull me out. We each fell asleep as we walked often waking up from the sensation of beginning to fall over. When we stopped we had to keep waking each other up although Tom also managed to demonstrate a totally new skill to us all; in an effort not to have to remove his gloves he peeled an orange with an ice axe, very impressive and it tasted so good as we were now strictly rationing water and it was the only juicy and fresh thing we had eaten. The route along the side of the river was not always ideal. We kept losing it under the snow and had to search for it, sometime we were walking on it as the valley funnelled us to where the snow covered it. This worried us as we knew if any of us fell in we were unable to deal with the hypothermia which would result. It is for this reason we decided not to risk someone falling in refilling water bottles until it was absolutely necessary. There were points besides the river which seemed very risky such as when we were funnelled under a wall of snow with a large overhang, Adam was the only one to notice it but thought it was best not to worry us all about it. At one point we had to cross the river as our path was blocked by a wall of rock and snow. We each took turns to jump, each jump caused more of the bank to crumble and float downstream. Tom got his foot wet when it went through the snow next to the river. Adam was very good at keeping positive, he sang the Wombles at one point which I'm sure Tom and Ben, being French and German respectively, did not get at all.

The walk besides the river was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Although having the river to follow gave us focus, we were well aware that there was a high possibility we were walking away from help. During this time there were long periods, particularly as the night drew on, 3 until 6, when I think we each reached our lowest point. I don't know what each of the others thought about in particular. I know we didn't talk much during this time. I'm sure their thoughts were not that different from mine, dwelling on friends and family and home, I also thought of all the time I felt I had wasted doing pointless things. During that night we each thought we would die out there. To some extent I think we accepted the inevitability of it and as much as is possible tried to come to terms with what that would mean. But we were still in a position to attempt not to, as small as our hope may be. We could choose to stop or we could keep going. I don't think any of us really considered stopping despite how tempting it was and how exhausted we had become. I think it must be true that the night is darkest just before the dawn but as the darkness ever so slightly started to lift we had our second group imaginary vision. We all thought we could see a dog in the distance, we were convinced of it. I started to blow the distress signal on my whistle but as we drew closer we realised it was a rock; it didn't even look like a dog shaped rock.

As the full dawn came we received an immense burst of optimism and energy. We could see we had a bright, much clearer day and we thought we may be seen. This became an anti-climax when we still failed to get signal. For a while we just kept on walking and checking for signal, and, although it was clearer we could still only see small hills and no significant features. Then we heard the noise of a light aircraft above us, Simon and Adam ran up the closest hill to try and spot it. The plane passed but when he got up the hill Adam got a phone signal. The rest of us went up the hill to join him. It was around 9.30 am on Monday morning and it was actually an incredibly beautiful view across the unending landscape of the highlands. It took a long time for Adam to get his messages through, he kept losing signal and then moving around the hill to get more signal. He managed for the first time to tell them that Graham had fallen after Nick, they mentioned that they had found someone but gave no real clue as to which, but they did ask details about them both. Adam continued to lose and find signal but kept at it with admirable patience. Each time, he had to recall through the operator, as the standard number mountain rescue were attempting to use would not work without signal. Simon and Adam kept wandering around hoping someone would see us, the rest of us found a hole besides a small snow drift, made it a little larger and used it to keep out of the wind. We had to wait a long time between calls working, Adam got out one of our last substantial pieces of food, a Cornish pasty, perhaps as a Cornish man he thought this was significant and passed it around, it did taste good. We did see a helicopter in the distance between the calls and assumed that would be looking for whichever of the other two had not been found. I and Ben had fallen asleep in the hole whilst waiting and got cold but

got ourselves up and moving as we hoped help may be there soon. After a long time Adam got back in contact with Mountain Rescue. After the previous calls we assumed they were sending a team to us and would walk us off, however it turned out the helicopter way in the distance was looking for us. We managed to figure out a rough compass point using the sun and two ice axes and we could see a large mountain to our south which we presumed was Cairn Gorm. Using these references Adam was able to attempt to give our position. In the distance, about 7km away we could see a helicopter, this time it was not imaginary help. Adam was telling it to turn, but he said turn left and expected it to turn 90 degrees but it turned 180, this happened several times. Eventually he managed to give them a better idea of where we were and the helicopter started to approach. It was a yellow RAF search and rescue Sea King. Just as my writing isn't good enough to describe how low we felt during the night, I don't think I can express how good we felt as that helicopter approached. Simon had started running across the hill, as if to catch it, when he turned around and saw the rest of us using a bright orange survival bag as a signal flag he had to admit it was a far better way of attracting attention. The helicopter flew in, circled us, dropped a smoke marker and then landed on the hilltop. We grabbed our bags and made our way towards the man who had got off the helicopter, the whole hilltop stank of aviation fuel. We had to remove our crampons, which was challenging, as they were iced on, having been in place for over 24 hours but we were soon all on board and strapped in. We were located on a hill near Carn Tarsuinn. We are incredibly grateful to the RAF who rescued us and all the mountain rescue teams who were out looking for us. We were rescued at 12.10 pm on Monday after approximately 28 hours on the hill, almost all of that was continuously hiking.

We were flown over the hills; it is certainly a much different way to see them. We landed a short time later at Cairngorm Mountain Rescue HQ. We were transferred to a waiting Mountain Rescue ambulance, which amused us by stalling about 5 times, and driven to the building, to avoid being seen too much by the media. Mountain Rescue looked after us incredibly well, they were so friendly and they got us dry and warm and gave us tea and food. The Mountain Rescue doctor checked us all out, fortunately all the others were ok. I had frost nip, the beginning of frost bite, on my feet and in my fingertips, but was told they would be ok in time. We told Mountain Rescue what had happened, they were satisfied we had gone suitably prepared but did suggest we should all have had a compass. They told us that they had fully expected to recover 6 bodies off the mountain that morning. We were possibly a little dehydrated but during our time with Mountain Rescue and the Police we were given plenty of opportunity to rehydrate. We went on to Aviemore Police Station to make full statements.

It was at Mountain Rescue where we were told what had happened to Nick and Graham. We also learned more details later. We had accepted it was likely that they would not have survived their falls.

Nick fell at 2 pm on Sunday afternoon. He fell through a cornice and took most of it down with him. In the fall he lost his ice axe and believed he was being avalanched. He fell approximately 150m and during that he hit the mountainside and cartwheeled before coming to a stop in soft snow. He received a graze to his face, a bruised shoulder and a bang to his head, which was lessened by his helmet. He was incredibly lucky, he stood up, called Mountain Rescue and some other club members and using a basic map on his phone, made his way to where he found some other climbers and made his way with them to the ski centre. He was checked out at Mountain Rescue and was on his way back to the bunkhouse by 5.30 pm.

Tragically Graham Connell did not survive his fall. Graham fell at 3.30 – 3.45 pm on Sunday afternoon. He was not found until 12.30 pm on Monday afternoon. He had fallen down Jacobs Ladder into Coire an t-Sneachda. Post mortem revealed that Graham had died from head and chest injuries. He had certainly not survived for many minutes after the fall, the blow to the head likely having rendered him unconscious. He had no signs of hypothermia. At least this allows us to know his suffering was short.

Graham's death was a tragedy, fortunately both from our rethinking of the incident and from Mountain Rescue's opinion we did not make any mistakes. We were hit hard by the worst of weather conditions and were befallen by a series of events, which would seem almost unbelievable in fiction. Graham was one of the most experienced hikers in LUUHC history, with 13 years of club membership and hiking experience. This tragedy serves to remind us that what we do is dangerous, and even the top people such as Graham, can be caught by those dangers some of the time. We will all return to the hills as Graham would have done and as he would want us to do. However we must learn everything we can from this experience. Although there was nothing we could have done to save Graham's life, we could have done things which would have made mine, Adam, Ben, Simon and Tom's walk shorter and less dangerous. The following section contains a few suggestions for how LUUHC may be improved. Graham will always be missed and never be forgotten, by any of the countless people whose lives benefited from meeting him.

Finally I would just like to say a huge thank you to Adam, Ben, Simon & Tom. We all depended on each other 100% during that toughest of nights. I will always have total respect for each of you and I hold each of you in the highest regard.

Recommendations

These recommendations are drawn from all 6 survivors of the group.

Whilst none of the following recommendations would have prevented the tragedy which occurred, they are all relevant to one degree or another.

Leaders should no longer be allowed to carry group shelters. Nick was ahead of the group because he was navigating on a bearing with me, it does not require much imagination for it to have been me who fell first navigating. In this scenario when Graham fell, the group would have been left shelter-less and leaderless. Leaders will always be at the front, the most exposed and the most likely to fall. Whilst I have every confidence this group would have got off the top, another may not have and the group shelter may have been their only hope. I therefore recommend that it becomes club policy that leaders no longer carry group shelters.

As an additional part to the first recommendation, the group shelter was far too small. We struggled to get the 6 it was designed for in, whilst wearing winter kit and this resulted in us getting very cold. We had started with a group of 7 and we would not have all fit. I recommend that the club makes every effort to buy more and larger shelters and that we aim to always carry a shelter one man bigger than the size of the group. It may also be worth practicing using shelters in windy conditions.

My second recommendation is direct from Mountain Rescue; all club members should carry a compass. They also suggested GPS but I am aware that Graham would probably have been carrying this when he fell. It is still a reasonable suggestion and would make a good addition to club kit. Going hand in hand with this it would be a good idea to make big efforts to ensure all club members, not just leaders, have the ability to navigate correctly. I am aware that once we lost our compasses, we would have been unable to do this but it is still a very important point which would have been tested, if the scenario was slightly different.

My third recommendation is to ensure club members have the kit they are told to have. Club members are required on a winter trip to carry a survival bag, a head torch and a whistle and if my previous recommendation is taken up, now also a compass. After we had lost our 3 compasses we were left with five people who had 4 head torches, which wasn't too bad but we only had 2 survival bags and a silver blanket. I don't know if Nick had a survival bag. Had we reached total exhaustion point or had Nick being injured in his fall, these could have been pieces of vital lifesaving equipment. I propose two possible routes to deal with this. A. the club produces kits, I have called these separation kits, consisting of a plastic folder containing a survival bag, a simple compass and a whistle and a laminated sheet with advice on what to do in the event of being separated from your group. These could be produced for around £20 each and could slide into the back of daysacks. They could be counted out and in at the start and end of each trip. The gear secretary would have to ensure they were stored correctly to protect the compasses. B. We make very clear to people that they will need to have a survival bag, compass, whistle and head torch and that they will be asked to demonstrate that they have these. I was once at a club meeting where we all agreed people were too old for us to check their kit. I no longer agree, this is too important for us to be overly polite about. Had Nick fallen more badly, a survival bag may have saved his life. Had we had more compasses, the 5 of us would not have had to walk for so long. We should also check food and water supplies, especially in winter. We were lucky but that could have been different. In addition to this at the beginning of a walk, all group members should be made aware of who is carrying which bits of group kit.

This fourth recommendation, directly from Nick, relates to route planning. When routes are explained, the level of difficulty needs to be more thoroughly explained, particularly for the benefit of the inexperienced. Once a group has been formed, all group members should meet, discuss the route, look at a map and get a feel for the local geography. It is only thanks to Nick looking at the map on the top, that he could explain to mountain rescue his position and this was with difficulty. He also struggled

to explain our route to them. Once this is done, people should be able to switch route, easily and without having to feel they are causing a fuss, if they do not feel comfortable with one of them.

The fifth recommendation, also from Nick, is hugely important and very easily rectified. Not everyone had a phone. We should all have a phone and it should have all of the committee and all of our own group's numbers stored in it. When Nick tried to make calls, he had to go via other club members, as these were the only numbers he had. In addition it was an old, button operated phone we were able to use the most, the touchscreen and smart phones cannot be relied upon in a mountain environment. Obviously we can't insist everyone has this type of phone, but these should still be recommended to club members.

Finally we make some more general comments on club operations. The club has a good record of knowing how far is too far, and I know most leaders would not hesitate to turn back if the weather worsened enough. I and Graham did attempt to shorten the route when the unexpectedly bad weather hit. However, it is important to remind people that turning back is not failure; the pub is just as good a day out if the weather is too bad. Also I know that the club this year has a good level of first aid, with leaders having done a three day course and the kits being tailored correctly. It is important we either maintain or build on this. Ensure future leaders are trained and that first aid kits are kept up to date.

I hope this report of what happened those two days is able to help those of us who are grieving and help the club move on. Graham was at the very core of LUUHC and I hope the memories of what happened to him prevent the club ever having another situation such as this again.

Eliot Bianco

Leeds, 19th February 2013.