

A Trilogy by John Hey

Rock Face

A mountain leadership residential in Wales second year as a Saltley student sounded a good match for rocks and physical challenges. Some of our group were main PE students, others, like myself, were subsidiary PE trainees. I felt fortunate as I had only just returned from a five-month spell at Caen University.

We were quickly familiarised with the local names, Beddgelert, Plas Gwynant, Capel Curig, Tryfan Ogwen Lake and Eagle Rock.

A brief visit to the hostelry in which the Everest expedition of 1953, led by Edmund Hilary had stayed and trained, certainly had an impact on our group when we read their signatures scrawled on the ceiling of the pub.

Eagle Rock was our first encounter with key guide and instructor. Scotty Dwyer was a remarkable man. Seventy years old with various stainless-steel additions within his body and a deep scar on his neck.

Abseiling filled some of the students, including several of the macho main PE contingent, with fear. Kitting up in the requisite gear was soon followed by a real act of faith. It entailed launching oneself backward into thin air as Eagle Rock had a huge overhang. It felt better when your boots made contact with the rock face before making the long descent. Scotty controlled the activity with skilled calm.

Dear reader, there is more rock to face in the next instalment, 'Quiet Places'.

Quiet Places

Episode two of our mountain leadership course involved an overnight camp, the destination Lake Ogwen. In the way stood Tryfan mountain, a near neighbour of Snowden. From the outset the weather was atrocious, so no 'quiet places' just torrential rain and strong winds.

Scotty Dwyer had briefed us prior to our setting off. All our kit, tents, food etc had to be carried by each of us in rucksacks. Our protection against the weather consisted of yellow P.V.C waterproofs. Please ignore that last word! Although we considered ourselves fit, the ascent was challenging, the temptation to keep on stopping was strong. Keeping going was key.

Apart from the rain and wind, a major obstacle soon presented. A small stream shown on the OS map had transformed into a number of raging torrents. Options for crossing were limited- run and jump; try stepping on the boulders that were visible; wade across and risk being knocked over by the current.

Phil Elliot, one of the 1st XV rugby team, had a better idea. He removed his rucksack and threw it onto the far bank. We watched it land, wobble and roll back into the rapids. It bounced and bobbed along faster and faster while Phil sprinted in pursuit before it disappeared out of sight. Once retrieved, he checked the contents of his pack. Most of it, including a loaf of bread, was wet or just water. We made it down Tryfan and to Lake Ogwen well and truly soaked. Scotty and two of the instructors had travelled in well-equipped Land Rovers.

Tents up, rain stopped, food cooking on the primus and a pub beckoned.

More on Scotty to come. Watch this space, it's very precious.

Unsafe Places

We realised after the Eagle Rock abseiling experience and the Tryfan, Lake Ogwen adventure, that Scotty was a remarkable man. He had led us up Snowden via the Pig track. His seventy years and stainless-steel additions to his anatomy amazed us. 'Like a mountain goat' was the closest we could get in both senses! He was fifty years older than most of us. He'd taken us to the Grib Goch, part of Snowden's summit known as the Knife Edge. A very narrow path took us along its top. It was a scary experience, difficult not to look down the sheer drop of several hundred feet to the side of us. Buttock clenching was de rigueur and concentration vital. Suddenly from the back of a very slowly advancing group of PE students and aspiring mountain leadership hopefuls, a solo walker with a backpack and arms folded across his chest, strode past us, stepping on the tops of the large stones as he went. Was this to herald a new phrase in our lives, that of Risk Assessment?

After our earlier expedition over Tryfan and down to Lake Ogwen, we had spent the evening with Scotty Dwyer in the nearest pub. We had asked him about the huge scar on his neck.

In his younger days he had been involved in a Himalayan expedition in Nepal. The lead climber, one place above Scotty, fell off the rock face without warning. He was still roped to Scotty as he fell past him.

'What happened?' we asked in unison.

'I was on a rocky ledge and belayed on. I managed to hold onto the rope over my neck to my hands. It took me to my knees but he survived.'

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