

Torrison Mountain Rescue Team and Torrison Youth Hostel

A special relationship

The worst disaster in the Torrison hills occurred nearly 70 years ago. In the early hours of 14 March, 1951, an RAF Lancaster bomber, TX264, was returning to Kinloss, from a training flight, when it crashed just below the top of the Triple Buttress of Coire Mhic Fhearchair, on Beinn Eighe. Aircraft wreckage can still be seen in "Fuselage Gully" and in the corrie below. The photograph below was taken by one of the rescue team. It shows the Triple Buttress, "Fuselage Gully" lies to the right of the right-hand buttress.



Five months were required to retrieve the eight bodies of the crew and it was apparent that special skills were required for mountain rescue in such locations.

The RAF Mountain Rescue Team was born.

It would be another twenty before civilian mountain rescue teams were formally established in Scotland. Again, the trigger was a disaster, the worst ever in the Scottish hills. In November 1971, a group of six fifteen year olds from Ainslie Park School, in Edinburgh, accompanied by two young leaders, were caught in a ferocious blizzard between Cairngorm and Ben Macdui. They were trapped for two nights with no shelter.

Five of the children and one young adult perished.

Charlie Rose the first leader of the Torridon Mountain Rescue Team, from 1971-1987, wrote of how the local rescue provision evolved in the aftermath of the Ainslie Park tragedy.

“When I first came to live in Alligin, in Easter 1966, Anancaun (Field Station for the Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve) was the designated Mountain Rescue Post for the area. In those days rescues were organised on an ad hoc basis with Dick Balharry, the then Reserve Warden, assembling local volunteers at the behest of the Police. Usually Sergeant Donnie Smith would appear to take over actual team leadership for the duration of the rescue. Rescues on the core area mountains were often based on the Glen Cottage (at that time run as a back-packing hostel by Dave & Liz Goulder).

Following the disaster, in November, 1971, when five children from Ainslie Park School, Edinburgh, died in the Cairngorms, Hamish MacInnes was consulted by the Scottish Office and in liaison with affected Police authorities, proposed the setting up of additional volunteer civilian mountain rescue teams in areas palpably not yet covered. Hamish asked me if I could raise a team in this area; the incentive was that the Police Budget would cover equipping and maintaining the team and we would become a part of the overall network with all the attendant benefits (access to training courses and seminars, helicopter assistance, etc).

In 1975 the Scottish Youth Hostels Association built a modern hostel in Torridon and immediately agreed it should be designated the new Mountain Rescue Post for the area, and that the team might use it as its headquarters. Neil Reilay, the first warden and his wife Irene, became enthusiastic helpers providing storage and accommodation for the team equipment and rooms for meetings, etc. Whenever a call-out occurred they would stay up all night if necessary, providing hot drinks, a phone link, and unflagging support. All subsequent wardens and their wives have been equally supportive and played a major role in the efficient functioning of the team. A further incalculable bonus to the team has been that we have always been able to recruit able bodied, and often experienced, helpers from the hostellers staying at the time.”



For the next 43 years Torricon MRT would have its base in the hostel. If the base was unchanging the organisation and expertise of the Team developed dramatically. Likewise, the number of people visiting our hills. Terry Doe, the second leader of Torricon MRT, from 1987 – 1994, writes,

“I was excited by the challenge (of becoming Team Leader) because I realised that the Torricon MR Team had to modernise in order to cope with the increase in the numbers of people visiting the local hills and going out in hostile weather conditions due to the improvements in outdoor clothing and equipment... During the period 1977 to 1987 two years went by without a single call-out. In 1993 the Torricon Mountain Rescue Team attended 13 incidents, four of them involving fatalities”.

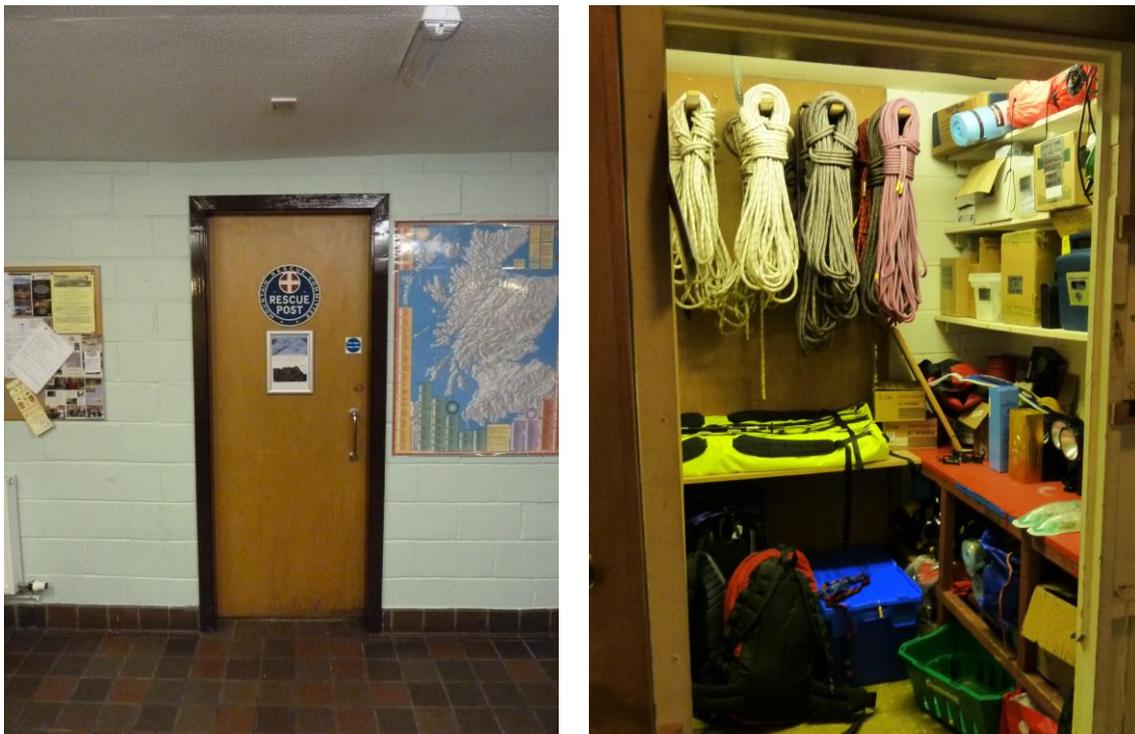
As it approaches its golden jubilee next year, the Team has had just seven leaders. Those who followed Charlie Rose and Terry Doe are: Seamus MacNally, 1994-2000, Neil Hinchliff, 2000-2010, Eoghain MacLean 2010-'13, Arjan Hendriks 2013-'19 and Ivan Jones, 2019- present. Neil Hinchliff was also Manager of the hostel. All have played their part in developing the Team into a highly professional and well-resourced unit. However, a major constraint on the functioning of the Team persisted, the lack of a base fit for the needs of a mountain rescue team in the 21st century.

At last, in 2017, after many years of negotiation and planning, the Team was finally able to start building its own rescue centre. The site is ideally situated in Torricon village, adjacent to the Community Centre and under the shadow of the Team's best-known Munro, Liathach. The building was initially planned as a one and a half storey facility with the upper level to be used as an attic storage area. This was finished towards the end of 2018 and the Team finally said farewell to the hostel. However, the response to the Team's funding appeal had been so generous that it was decided to extend the building with a fire proof stair so that the entire upper floor would be available and the working floor area effectively doubled. The extension was finished during 2020 and will provide a superb facility that should meet the Team's requirements long into the future.





Looking around the space and facilities the Team now enjoys it seems hard to believe that they ever managed to operate out of what was essentially a large cupboard.



The team would like to put on record its gratitude to the Scottish Youth Hostelling Association and successive Managers of Torrison Youth Hostel, for the invaluable support they have given. As Charlie Rose indicated the hostel has provided much more than storage space for our equipment. The various managers and staff of the hostel have been unstinting in their support of the Team and none more so than the Manager since 2008, Mat Webster.