Influential people of the post-war years in mountain rescue in North Wales

by Chris Lloyd Ogwen Valley MRO

In 1947, the Pen y Gwryd Hotel and Mountain Rescue Post was sold to Mr William Hampson. He employed a manager by the name of Christopher Baskin Briggs. This 34 year old Yorkshireman fell in love with the area and within a couple of years he had purchased the hotel.

Chris Briggs

The Pen y Gwryd Hotel has been a honey pot for climbers since the 1800s. As mountain rescue became more organised in the mid-1900s, it was sense to site a Mountain Rescue Post here. Chris Briggs soon found himself rallying his guests and leading them out onto Snowdon to carry out a variety of searches and rescues.

Winters were harsh in the late-1940s and early-1950s. Chris Briggs was carrying out numerous rescues and recoveries for people ill-equipped for the winter conditions. The Easter period of 1951 was particularly hazardous with Chris Briggs and his volunteers, assisted by members of RAF Valley MRT, carrying out almost continuous rescues and body recoveries on Snowdon and Ogwen Valley over five days.

Unlike today, with the luxury of good electronic communications, few volunteers had telephones at home and radios on the mountains were very rare (usually just the RAF MRTs). One rescue was ‘called in’ by Scouts using semaphore!

In 1956, Chris Briggs was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to mountain rescue. He continued to rally his trusted group of friends and hotel guests to carry out rescues for nearly another two decades. Then the more formally organised and recognised mountain rescue teams took over. In addition to his BEM, he was High Sheriff of Caernarfonshire in 1963 and was a Deputy Lieutenant of Gwynedd.

Constance Alexander and Olive Pritchard

In the Ogwen Valley, at about the same time as Chris Briggs was moving into the Pen y Gwryd Hotel, Idwal Cottage Youth Hostel was run by two women, Constance (Connie) Alexander and Olive Pritchard. Similar to the Pen y Gwryd Hotel, the Youth Hostel was a Mountain Rescue Post and when the hostel was open, had a source of people to assist with rescues. As an acknowledgement of their contribution to running the Post and to organising rescues during the 1950s, both women were given the Distinguished Service Award by the Mountain Rescue Council (now Mountain Rescue England and Wales) in 1958.

Johnnie Lees

Whilst the civilians were kept busy with search and rescue of walkers and climbers, the RAF Valley Mountain Rescue Team volunteers were kept busy with downed aircraft and lost and injured servicemen.

Flight Sergeant Johnnie Lees, a physical training instructor, was one of the members of RAF Valley MRT. He trained team leaders for the RAF MRTs and was a British Mountaineering Guide and was renowned for the ‘belt and braces’ approach to safety he implanted in all his team. It was Lees who succeeded in getting the first Tragsitz imported into the UK from Austria. In January 1958, Lees was to put this to the test.

A small group from the Army Mountaineering Association were climbing on Craig yr Isfa, a cliff on the East side of Carnedd Llewelyn which gives about 1000 ft of climbing. Early on in the climb, the leader fell suffering head injuries. It took two hours for his colleagues to raise the alarm. It was dusk when RAF Valley MRT received the call and dark when they arrived at the top of the cliff. A stretcher lower from the top of the crag was impractical, so it was decided to use the tragsitz. Lees and the casualty were both big men. On a small ledge about 250
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foot up the climb, the rescuers struggled to strap the delirious casualty into the tragisitz harness on the back of Lees. Then, as Lees and casualty were lowered over the edge on a single nylon hawser laid rope, the casualty began to struggle.

Speed was of the essence if the casualty was to survive, so the lower progressed to the screes below. The casualty was taken to an ambulance further down the valley and survived to tell the tale. Later that year Flight Sergeant John Lees was awarded the George Medal for bravery. His influence and training was imparted on many a volunteer member of the RAF MRTs in the UK. But it was also imparted on civilians too.

Ron James

In 1951, a young 18-year-old from Birmingham was teaching himself to rock climb on Tryfan Bach (Little Tryfan), a small slabby crag in the Ogwen Valley. He either impressed or horrified the climbing instructor on the adjacent route. The instructor took him under his wing, gave him some proper instruction and took him rock climbing on the east face of Tryfan with the rest of his students. The instructor was Johnnie Lees. The young man was Ron James.

Ron became hooked on rock climbing. Every opportunity he could get, he and a friend would hitch hike from Birmingham, up to North Wales or elsewhere, to rock climb.

Ron was training to become a teacher, a mathematics teacher. But all he wanted to do was climb.

His dream, along with Trefor Jones, was to set up a private mountaineering school. That dream came true in 1959 when the two of them, along with a wealthy land agent, Tony Mason-Horby, bought a guest house, Ogwen Cottage. Like Idwal Youth Hostel, just a stone’s throw away, Ogwen Cottage was also a Mountain Rescue Post. As the out-going owner, Mrs Williams, was handing the keys to Ron, she said, “In the event of a rescue, fire a flare with this Very pistol. All the climbers will gather in the car park. The rescue equipment is in the generator shed. And put the man with the cleanest boots in charge.” Ron and his fellow instructors soon found themselves at the forefront of rescues in the Ogwen valley area and so Ogwen Cottage Mountain Rescue Team was born. The instructors worked hard to try to make a success of the mountaineering school, but when their main client, Birmingham Education Authority, was to pull out Ron realised they would have to sell up.

By some fortune, the BEA was looking for its own place so bought Ogwen cottage in 1963, complete with its complement of staff. In the summer of 1964 the staff were able to enjoy their first holiday for years and so all but one went to the Alps. Unfortunately, that one member of staff had a serious fall during the absence of the mountain rescue team and had to be rescued by willing passers-by under his instruction.

On Ron’s return, he realised a more permanent service had to be offered by the team and so Ogwen Valley Mountain Rescue Organisation was formed in March 1965. Ron continued leading mountain rescue in the Ogwen Valley until 1969, when he moved to Liverpool for work. During his ten years with mountain rescue he imported specialist rescue equipment from Austria such as the Mariner stretcher, the tragisitz and the steel wire and winch for use on large crags. He was influential in the first use of the RAF Whirlwind in mountain rescue. His technique for using the butter from the casualty’s sandwiches to lubricate their wedged limb has become legend. His legacy of good and regular training, problem solving and forethought remains to this day. Ron James too was recognised for his Distinguished Service to mountain rescue. In 2009, he was awarded the MBE for services to mountaineering and mountain rescue.