Penrith Mountain Rescue Team

by Ged Feeney

In many respects, Penrith MRT is no different to any other mountain rescue team in the UK; we are a bunch of amateurs who try to provide a ‘professional’ service to people in difficulty. We try not to take ourselves too seriously and yet bring a mixture of effective action and humour that reassures the people we help and hopefully puts them at their ease.

The team has 39 operational members, with a working maximum of 40. At the time of writing, this figure includes three probationary members. Five team members are also members of COMRU (Cumbria Ore Mines Rescue Unit) and one is a SARDA dog handler with another two currently in training; the team is blessed with two enthusiastic doctors and an air ambulance paramedic. Thirty-one of the members are holder of the Casualty Care qualification, which is testament to the training and commitment of members and doctors!

The team’s premises are located in the market town of Penrith, close to the junction of the M6 and A66, the crossroads of Cumbria. We moved into our purpose-built base in 1990 after spending many years in a converted stable in the centre of the old town. The building is adjacent to the ambulance and fire stations and the local hospital, operating a daytime minor injuries department.

Cumbria Police HQ is only a short distance away. Lying in the north east corner of the county, Penrith MRT covers the largest geographic area of any team in Cumbria with an area of approximately 2500 sq km. It extends from the Scottish Borders, down the North Pennines and then across to the Lake District Eastern
Fells, including Haweswater, the flooded valley created by Manchester Corporation in the 1930s. Some of the features of the area include the High Street range with its complex of ridges and valleys; Shap Fells, through which crosses the Coast to Coast footpath; Cross Fell, the highest point of the Pennine range over which passes the Pennine Way; the featureless area known as the ‘Debatable Lands’, the area between the Scottish borders and the Lake District; and at its heart is the Eden Valley, which includes Carlisle and an enormous number of small communities.

As with all Lakeland teams, we are alerted by Cumbria Police control room staff. This contact is usually made to the team leader or one of the three deputy leaders, depending on their availability. Once a decision is made, team members are alerted by a pager message with the nature of the call, location (grid ref) and an RV for those members ‘going direct’.

Most members meet at base where three vehicles can be dispatched. Base is usually manned to co-ordinate communications, but rescues are controlled at the site of the incident by a member of the leadership.

Searches are often managed from base but local premises (village halls, local schools, etc) are commandeered to keep the Overhead Team close to the dispatching area. Over the years, the team has developed systems and assets to enable it to operate efficiently and independently of its base.

Since the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001, the team has an average annual call out figure of 35 calls, ranging from nineteen to 62 per year.

It is fair to say that more than ten years ago there were quiet and busy times. Winter weather usually meant a steady stream of callouts to popular areas for snow and ice climbing. These days any perceived patterns have evaporated; busy summer months are still present, related to the tourist season. However, based in a less frequented corner of the Lakes, ‘busy periods’ are relative!

We have very good relationships with the other emergency services, especially at tactical level. The team has been favoured with membership from all three statutory services. Some years ago, one of our women members was ‘stolen’ by a winchman from an RAF SAR helicopter; we have never let him forget it!

Most of the fire crews in our area are retained and, whilst contact is limited, working practices are common and ‘all mucking in’ is the order of the day. We have an excellent relationship with G-NAA (Great North Air Ambulance) as well as Cumbria Ambulance Service.

At the strategic level, the team worked very effectively with all emergency services during the Carlisle flooding in January 2005 and, more recently, with the floods in November 2009.

Representation at ‘Gold’ enabled MR to provide a non-institutional way of thinking at this level; this sometimes produced sharp intakes of breath but contributed to a unity of purpose.

When prospective members apply to join, they complete an application form. Often, prospective team members have far wider experiences, some with formal and even professional mountain qualifications. It would be fair to say that current membership within PMRT has a very broad cross section whose combined hill experience is very considerable and whose local knowledge is encyclopaedic. If it is clear from the information provided that they do not have a
broad experience of hillwalking in this area, in all conditions and times of the day and night, then they are advised to gain more experience. Besides bullet proof competency on the hill, the most important “look-for” for us is that Probationers demonstrate that they are team players – not necessarily a usual mountaineering trait – and want to bring something different to their pastime that joining a MRT can offer, but motivations for joining are different for each member.

Prospective members complete an induction programme (see Mountain Rescue Magazine Issue 16 April 2006 p11 for an account). Three separate days introduce the new member to all the basic aspects of MR and give the leadership the opportunity to see the members in the MR environment. A probationary period of twelve months follows in which they participate in the normal team training. This three year rolling programme gives all members the opportunity to reinforce their existing skills and knowledge or to enhance it.

The fundraising aspects of the team are coordinated by a committee member, usually an enthusiast and often a newish member (they always fall for this one!) All fundraising activity has been documented for some years, so the processes are very easy to pick up. PMRT relies heavily upon all team members helping with street collections, with well over 60% of its annual running costs come from these team efforts. Special projects are, however, conducted by a working group. From my contact with other teams, our practice seems common to many MR teams.

The team works well with its neighbouring teams at all levels. Our training programme usually includes at least three joint practices each year, within the county but also with colleagues in County Durham and Scotland. This joint training has stood the team in good stead many times over the past few years. We routinely assist Patterdale MRT during busy periods, especially holiday times. A number of large scale and high profile searches in the area have benefited from joint training and reinforce our view of the strength of mutual support within MR.