

We can't promise to make you bionic but we'll do our best...

Judy Whiteside looks back over five years of the Rescue Benevolent Fund

Just before the national meeting in November an intriguing email landed, from Miller Harris of the Lochaber team, representing Mountain Rescue Support Scotland Ltd. This newly-formed company is a benevolent fund, set up by the four independent mountain rescue teams in Scotland, and all of us (as mountain rescue teams in England and Wales – and indeed the rest of Scotland) are invited to 'become members'.

The response on behalf of MREW, by chairman of the trustees, Peter Dymond, was to thank Miller for his email and assure him that the membership would be informed 'but of course, it will be up to individuals as to whether they join the fund and I'm sure you will be aware that MREW has its own Benevolent Fund'.

So, first things first, here we are. Informing you. Individual teams may indeed decide to join the Scottish company (if you wish to do this, I suggest you contact Miller directly) but the ensuing discussions between various trustees of both MREW and the Rescue Benevolent Fund gave pause for thought: maybe it's worth reminding people that our now five-year-old charity (no longer 'fledgling') is very much alive and well and still in business if you need us?

But, why does mountain rescue need a benevolent fund at all?

Well, there's never a 'good time' to have an accident. And they can happen to anyone. The best prepared, the most expensively kitted-out, even the highly skilled. They even happen to people carrying maps, compasses and torches. And occasionally, they happen to team members too — in possession of all those things and a lot more besides — while they're out on a shout or undertaking training.

It might not even be a physical injury. Maybe it's a particularly harrowing incident and having a chat and a drink down the pub or cafe afterwards just isn't enough.

That's where the Rescue Benevolent Fund can come in.

If this is so vital to our wellbeing, why isn't MREW footing the bill? Why do we ask teams and other individuals to contribute?

The fund was set up by MREW, in collaboration with BCRC, and since then MREW has contributed to it finan-

cially and both MREW and BCRC are represented on the trustee board. But it became clear from the start that to 'do things right', to protect and secure any monies donated for benevolent purposes and to ensure independent, objective assessment of any possible claims, it would need to be set up as a separate charity, with its own Deed of Trust, its own bank account and its own raft of operating procedures and policies — and free from whatever other frustrations might be exercising mountain rescue minds on any particular day! And as a separate charity we need to raise our own funds.

What have we achieved so far?

Our aim is to help alleviate hardship suffered by mountain and cave rescue team members which is a direct result of official mountain rescue activity.

The number of claims we've had is still low — not least because the nature of mountain rescuers tends towards the antithesis of a claim culture! As volunteers, you don't ask for recompense when you get called out, so it doesn't come easily to ask for help — especially financial help — if you get injured in the course of 'duty'.

'We're still a young charity', says Neil Woodhead, chairman of the fund and a Kinder team member, 'so we're still growing and learning about the sort of support team members need from us.'

'Most of our claims have been for physical rehabilitation and this is where we think the benevolent fund can be a real benefit. Many of our members are self-employed. They are already giving up potential earning time when they turn out to a rescue so if they're injured on an incident and unable to work as a result, it can result in real hardship. Our guiding principle is to get people back to work and back to mountain rescue.'

Of course, there are also insurances in place to protect team members but sometimes immediate help is needed and, if it's a physical injury, often the sooner you can begin rehabilitation

with physiotherapy, the better your prognosis for recovery.

But how can we possibly help with things like physical rehab?

By covering the costs. We have agreements in place with both The Fire Fighters' Charity and the Police Treatment Centres. All their centres are residential so, one way or another, we've got physical rehab services covered across England and Wales. We've worked with local counsellors and mountain rescue TRiM personnel to help team members who need emotional and mental health support.

We've also provided immediate financial support, both on a loan basis and non-returnable, depending on circumstances and the nature of assistance requested.

Here comes the 'bionic' bit...

Patterdale team member and Lakes dog handler David Benson knows from painful experience how easily an injury can occur and how it can impact your life. A self-employed dry stone waller, when he injured his knee on a call-out, it didn't just affect his ability to respond to mountain rescue incidents — and effectively ground his search dog. More importantly, he was unable to earn a living.

It was a Saturday in October, three years ago. He'd just returned to Patterdale base, after training with his search dog Brock, when a call came in to an incident on Helvellyn. Back up the hill he went. It was a difficult stretcher carry from Swirral Edge down to Red Tarn, then to the outfall and sledging down towards Greenside.

Having taken his turn with the carry, David carried on downhill, alongside the rest of the group but, as he walked, his knee became extremely painful.

'It was just a simple walk off with a light pack,' says David, 'but my left knee went clunk clunk to the medial side and down I went.'

His old teammates from Kirkby Stephen stretched him off the hill. 'They'd been ask to support us on the casualty carry but got me instead!'

David had suffered a sprained MCL and, supported by the Rescue Benevolent Fund, undertook a week of intensive rehab just before the Christmas break. 'I was wondering how can you do rehab all day for a week. What could they possibly do with you to fill in all that time? Well they did. I wasn't expecting it to be so holistic. Diet and nutrition were covered, men's health and relaxation. Knowledgeable people who were happy to chat and answer questions, a good bunch of folk who created a calm, positive atmosphere and wanted to make you good again. Worth getting injured for!'

We think he was joking about that last bit but then eleven months after the injury he had a go at a regular run from Kirkland to the top of Cross Fell. 'Pre-injury, I've never subbed one hour to the top, despite trying. Not that day. 59.57! I just had to send the photo (see right) to the physio team at The Fire Fighters to let them know what a good job they did with me!'

See, they made him bionic!

...and we've helped deal with emotional health issues too...

Dion and Sue Llwyd Hopcroft had an entirely different experience. Shortly before midnight, in late February 2016, the Aberglaslyn team were asked to assist in the search for a young man missing in their patch. But this search was particularly poignant because the missing 18-year-old was Josh Llwyd Hopcroft and his father, Dion, was the Aberglaslyn team leader.

Alongside Aberglaslyn were members of the South Snowdonia team and SARDIA Wales search dogs, searching through the night. At first light, Dion himself went out on foot and sadly it was he who found Josh, who had taken his own life.

Hard to imagine the impact such tragic circumstances might have on any family, let alone one so involved with the entire incident, and both Dion and Sue struggled. With the team liaising with us on their behalf, we were able to support them both with separate counsellors, local to them, over the course of a year, to help them come to terms with their grief.

'It's still raw,' says Dion, 'but the counselling helped me a lot. Sue too — though hers was a different experience. I've been in MR for 21 years. I've seen horrific things and I've always been offered counselling but I've just got on and dealt with it. I wasn't sure what to do at the time but it's the best thing I ever did. Definitely helped me move forward and we've got to the

stage now where we counsel each other.

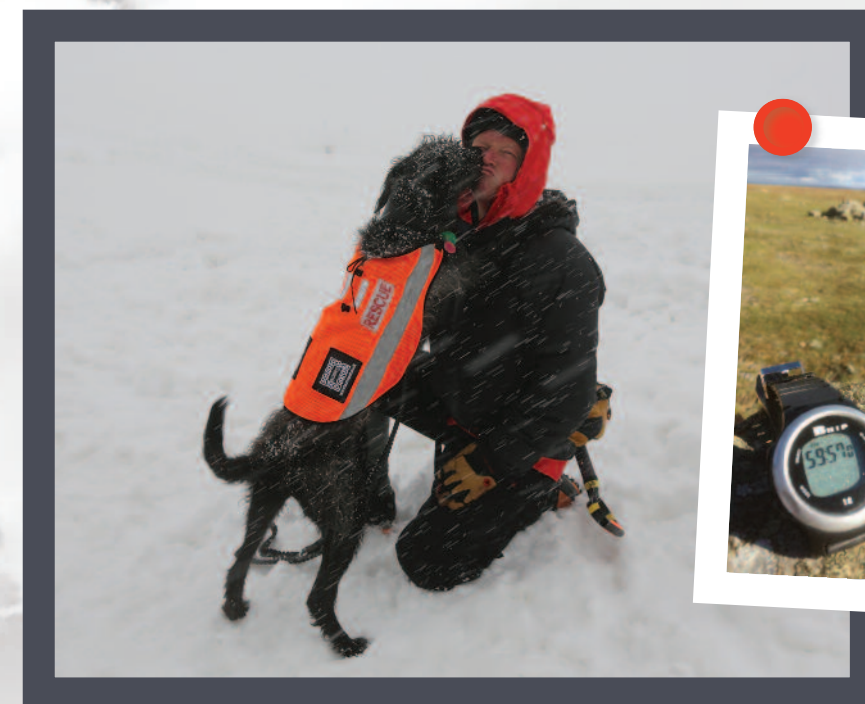
'Initially, I said this is my last call-out but Sue made me aware that Josh was so proud of me and my involvement with mountain rescue so I got back into it. It wasn't long after that I was called out to the helicopter crash in North Wales — the first team on the scene. That was pretty horrendous but I'll never see anything worse than seeing my own son that day.'

Almost three years on, Dion is able to talk about it in part because Josh's death has inspired the family to help other young people in similar situations. Determined to turn their devastation into a positive force for good,

So how do you claim?

It's simple. If you've suffered hardship as the result of injury, get in touch. Your claim will be considered against strict criteria ('official mountain rescue activity' being a key phrase) but if there's genuine need we'll do our best to help. Any information you give us related to your claim will be treated with utmost confidentiality so we perhaps should make clear that David and Dion are happy for us to tell their stories to a wider world.

To start the process, speak to any one of the trustees or your local regional rep (see page 62) or email me



Dion and Sue, supported by friends, family and team members, have forged ahead with plans for 'Josh's Lighthouse Project'.

An idea which started with a memorial garden has expanded to creating a safe space in the shape of a glass-fronted log cabin overlooking the sea, where young people can go for counselling, group chats and education about mental health and wellbeing. The name derives from Josh's request, just before his eighteenth birthday, to have a tattoo. He'd even designed his tattoo, in the shape of a lighthouse. He never did have it done but Sue, Dion and Josh's brother have, in his memory, and their cabin project continues the theme.

They already have planning permission on an old school property, ground works have begun, fundraising continues, and the hope is it will be up and running in 2019. We wish them luck.

at secretary@rescuebenevolent.fund for an application form. Indeed, email me if you have any further questions about the Rescue Benevolent Fund. I'm always happy to chat.

How do we raise money?

Anyone can give the fund, as an individual, team or region, as well as the national bodies — again, email me for details. A question we're regularly asked is how teams can give, as one charity to another. What we have been advised is that teams should look at whether their constitution specifically prevents them from spending money in this way and, if in doubt, consult your team's solicitor or legal adviser.

Finally, stay safe out there and be well. And, if you think the Rescue Benevolent Fund might be able to help you out in any way, please don't hesitate to get in touch. ☺

Above: David Benson with Brock © Ion Sanduloiu of Romanian Search Dogs; Evidence of recovery © David Benson.