

## A Mountain Rescue

It was just after mid-morning when a vehicle arrived at the mountain rescue centre. In it was a clearly distressed woman called Sandra, who told the people at the centre how she and her husband, Ralph, had been hiking in the remote and trackless terrain of a river gorge up on the mountain slopes. They had set up camp for the night on a ridge and Ralph had gone off into the dark in search of water. He had not returned. Sandra said she had remained in the tent on her own and, after searching for him at daybreak, decided to walk out of the valley to seek help; it was there she had been spotted by a ranger who had driven her to the centre.

Sandra was unable to point out on a map where she thought the camp was, but she told the people in the centre she could remember the route to their camp which was on a narrow ridge. So the ranger, Richard, and Freddy, Tom, Sophie and Ranjit from the mountain rescue centre set off with ropes and mountain rescue equipment to find the camp. They drove to the nearest point they could reach by vehicle and then set off on foot through a few miles of scrubland and up onto a high ridge where Sandra had left the tent and all her and Ralph's belongings in the hope that Ralph would have a place to return to.

When they arrived there, Ralph had not returned and though they called out his name many times, there was no response. The tent was pitched in a small clearing on the ridge; about two metres away on one side they could hear a stream tumbling into a narrow chasm, too deep to make out the bottom. On the other side of the ridge there was incredibly steep ground but no stream. As Ralph had gone to find water the night before, it seemed most likely he had gone towards the sound of running water. Tom and Ranjit searched the upper reaches of the stream and Richard and Freddy searched the ridge while Sophie stayed with Sandra to keep her calm while the searches went on.

The searches produced no results. It became obvious that Ralph had most likely gone to the sound of the running water, lost his step in the darkness and slipped into the chasm below the stream; clearly time was of the essence as he could be badly injured. Freddy, Tom and Ranjit set about establishing a fixed rope and safety line so that one of them could abseil into the chasm and search down there. They had hand held VHF radios so they could communicate with each other.

Freddy volunteered to be the one to abseil in. He disappeared into the depths and it was only a few minutes later Tom's radio crackled into life with a request to join Freddy in the chasm. Tom set about abseiling down and could soon see why Freddy had called him. There on a rocky ledge just above the pool, which the stream descended into, was Ralph. It seemed his fall had been broken by some bushes and he had landed on this ledge before reaching the pool below, but he was motionless and pale. Tom and Freddy feared the worst; but when they reached him they felt a weak pulse. Ralph was still alive but he was clearly very weak; they thought he would be unlikely to survive another night on the ledge. He would probably die of hypothermia if nothing else. He must certainly have sustained some damage in his fall and his landing there. They needed to get him up from there quickly.

So Freddy and Tom radioed up to their comrades above; they explained what they had discovered and asked a stretcher to be lowered. The stretcher soon appeared; they very carefully managed to put Ralph on it, trying not to make any damage he might have suffered worse; then Richard and Ranjit slowly and carefully hauled the stretcher up. With the aid of the abseil ropes, Freddy and Tom climbed back up to join the others. A fire had been made from brushwood to keep both themselves and Ralph warm as night was now fast approaching. They contacted the mountain rescue centre and explained what had happened. There was no hope of reaching them that night, but they hoped to mount a rescue as soon as it was light.

The group spent an anxious night on the ridge. Ralph appeared to have a leg broken, possibly the

thigh bone. He may have suffered other damage, so they left him on the stretcher and put blankets on him to keep him warm. Sophie tried to get his blood circulating and Sandra kept talking to him in the hope he could hear her and keep alive and, indeed, if possible regain consciousness. But Ralph remained in a coma.

Soon after daybreak the thudding sound of a helicopter was heard. The helicopter crew had spotted their fire and came to hover about ten metres above them; two lines were dropped from the helicopter and two crew members abseiled down them. They quickly assessed the situation; the stretcher with Ralph was carefully fastened to one line and was hauled back up with one of the crew members. The other crewmember took hold of Sandra and the two of them were hauled up on the other line. Then the helicopter went off, leaving the rest to make their own way back.

Freddy, Tom, Richard, Sophie and Ranjit made their way off the ridge and through the miles of scrubland to their vehicle and drove back exhausted and tired to the mountain rescue centre. They were told that Ralph had been flown to a hospital in the nearby city and was in intensive care. They understood that Sandra was there with him. They knew no more.

All that Freddy, Tom, Richard, Sophie and Ranjit wanted to do was to rest and catch up on lost sleep, and that was exactly what they did do after they had showered, changed and had had a bite to eat. Later that afternoon, however, Sophie did make contact with Sandra, who was still at the hospital. It seemed that as well as some minor injuries, Ralph had suffered a broken thigh bone, as they had suspected, and a fractured skull. He was also badly dehydrated, but they had put him on a drip and his body fluid level was now almost normal; they had to keep the drip on as he remained in a coma and the only way they could feed him was intravenously. There did not appear to be any internal damage, but the doctors were concerned what trauma his brain may have suffered when his skull was cracked.

Sophie contacted Sandra again a few days later. Ralph was showing signs of coming out of his coma and the doctors were hopeful that Ralph would make a recovery though they were still concerned about possible trauma to his brain and his bones would take time to mend.

Almost a year later to the day, those at the mountain rescue centre were surprised by a visit from Sandra and Ralph. They were happy to see them and wanted to know how Ralph was.

"I'm fine now," he said, "but it took the best part of six months for those bones to heal properly; and I needed quite a bit of physical therapy to get those thigh muscles flexible and working again. But I'm OK now, as you see. Fortunately the doctors have discovered no serious brain trauma, though at the moment they want to see me once a year for a check up."

"Come on, Ralph," interrupted Sandra, "we haven't come all this way to talk about your health."

"No, indeed," said Ralph. "Look, if it wasn't for you chaps finding me and rescuing me I'd have been a goner. I can't thank you enough. Me and some of my friends got together to raise cash to thank you. I'd like to give you this cheque for £5 000."

The people at the mountain centre were taken by surprise and didn't know what to say at first and then they were thanking Ralph and Sandra profusely. One wit said, laughing, "We'd better hope to rescue again."

"No fear of that," rejoined Ralph. "My climbing and hiking days are over now! I'll be a nuisance to you no more."

There, dear readers, we leave them amid their mutual thanks, chatter and merriment.