

Snow and the rumble of water

The safety mechanism in my subconscious flipped a switch, instantly plunging me into the icy recollection from many years ago.

I had left behind the twin cross-country ski grooves on the main back-trail between Banff and Canmore and was now climbing steeply upwards with just one set of snowshoe tracks ahead of me, studded grips strapped onto my winter boots at the turn-off. A low wooden bridge crossed the snow-covered stream, a vertical rock face towered a hundred feet on the right, narrow ledges picked out by snow. I could see high above a much larger wooden bridge crossing the canyon towards the crag. My pulse quickened, partly with the exertion at altitude, partly because the snow of deep-winter has always excited the child in me.

Then as I approached the steepest climb I heard the rumble of water below.

I was suddenly a young teenager again, standing up to my waist in icy water in the centre of the plunge pool of a waterfall on the flanks of Kinder Scout in the Peak District. A snow-roof arched some 20 feet above, blue sky visible through the small hole at the highest point directly overhead where the thin crust had failed to bear my weight. Lacking experience, the growl of water did not alert me quickly enough to the danger.

No time to waste on thought. As so often, I was on my own in the mountains and mid-week there was no-one else around. No internal debate, just monosyllabic decisions: *"Get out of the water. Climb as high as you can: Only one way out. Back the way you came. No choice."* The consequence of failure didn't occur to me.

I waded towards the water cascading over the lip of the fall and started to climb up the rock through the torrent. Within the snow-hole the rock was wet and slippery but thankfully not encased in ice.

When my head reached the smooth curve of the snow I found a small ledge to the side of the tumbling water and, taking off my rucksack, I turned around and put my back to the rock. The hole I had fallen through was about 6 feet in front of me and about 3 feet above.

By unbuckling its straps I could swing the rucksack so that the old-style curving tubular metal frame reached the edge of the hole in the snow-roof and nibbled away at it. A poor substitute for an ice axe but all I had.

"Keep your back tight to the rock. Lean forward and you're back in the water face first. Keep going." Drop the rucksack. Tight hold of the straps. Swing in a wide arc upwards as forcibly as possible. Repeat. Again and again. *"Never mind tired f..ing arms. It's getting bigger. The rim is closer.. Just keep going"*.

Thankfully the rucksack frame had been reinforced after a bully of a youth leader had sat on it and buckled it. With diagonal bracing, barely 3 inches long, it was up to the job now demanded of it. As the hole became larger and closer the depth of snow which had

to be removed became significantly deeper, harder work, slower progress, diminishing returns for effort.

"OK that's about as good as it gets. Now for the tricky bit".

Holding the straps close to the end I flung it as hard as I could out of the hole, curved frame onto the snow above my head. I pulled on it to check whether it had lodged. It had. Swallow hard. *"Never mind the 'what ifs' Go for it! NOW!"*

"Transfer weight from feet on rock to straps of rucksack. Gently! Don't want to shock-load it, might jerk the rucksack free." I swung out dangling over the pool below. As quickly and smoothly as possible I did a pull-up on the straps, reached up with my feet and rammed them into the snow on the far side of the hole close to the surface. *"Let go with one hand and grab hold of the body of the rucksack. Move feet up again and to the right. Roll over onto your back and down the side of the snow bank. Made it!!"*

Half a century later and I wasn't about to make the same mistake again. The instant I heard the sound of water below me on the way up Sundance Canyon I moved over to the side of the gorge. I could have been under that snow in the Peak District another month before it cleared. In the Rockies it could be another five months before I emerged. . You never forget the lesson learned from a genuinely narrow escape. Recall is instant.