A Night in a Hole in the Ground

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The lightning and thunder were getting closer to each other, and therefore to us, and our ice axes were tuning up. It started to hail, so we hastily discarded the axes and slithered down the rock to be well away from them.

We were at the highest point of our walk, at Babilonia (2990m) on the rock shoulder south-east of Pizzo Bianco, which is south-west of Staffa, Macugnaga.

After the hail came torrential rain. We stood through it all. Eventually the storm moved away. We were wet and so, more importantly, was the rock. That slowed us considerably once we had recovered our axes and started moving again. We descended 575 metres, crossing from Babilonia; it took a long time.

By 10pm we were still high on the south-west side of the Val Quarazza. It was too dark to continue safely and we had to admit that our return to the rest of our party at Pecetto that night was impossible.

Jim found the hole. It was clean and dry, about eight feet long, inclined downwards from the entrance into the mountainside and just wide enough for the two of us. The entrance enabled us to slide through, one at a time. Once inside it was barely possible to sit upright. If the weather worsened during the night we should be well out of it.

Supper was eaten in the open, for the wind had dropped, and by 10.30pm we were in our shelter and lying full-length with arms wrapped round each other. 'Hypothermia is now the only slight risk we run, even at this time of year,' (early July), I had said – this was our first night out together – 'so we must keep as warm as possible.' Both of us were shivering, but after a while that stopped.

'Babilonia is certainly an appropriate name for the place where the storm hit us,' said Jim, 'but why us? We've hardly feasted from forbidden vessels, either on our way across the snow or outside this hole, and concubines are out of the question these days.' 'That was the writing on the wall, Jim. We have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting, or we wouldn't be here.'

Our climb from Pecetto up to the col near Pizzo Nero had taken slightly less time than I had estimated, which was satisfying. But the plain fact was that we should have started at least three hours earlier than we did. Fancy waiting for the Post Office to open before going on a 12-hour walk! Our enthusiasm had overrun judgement. Certainly the storm had been a major contributory factor, otherwise we would have returned to wife and friends before midnight – too late for dinner, but at least we would have slept in our own beds.

We dozed intermittently and uncomfortably on our rocky floor. Every so

often we had to change position: as soon as we separated we started shivering, which died away some minutes after we were clasped in each other's arms again.

'I can see lights,' said Jim. His position enabled him to see out of the hole – I could not. 'Must be lightning,' said I. 'Funny kind of lightning, for there's no thunder.' 'It's a long way away, that's why.' 'They're out looking for us,' said Jim, a possibility I was loath to concede. Nevertheless, we scrambled out. It was midnight.

There were lights, indeed, and we watched them for a while. They resembled sheet lightning more than anything else, but with rare bursts of light high above us. They had no obvious origin or direction and, what seemed most relevant, there was no discernible pattern to them. 'Simply a meteorological phenomenon,' I said dismissively. 'Or perhaps the Italian army is on manoeuvres with searchlights.' Jim insisted: 'If people are looking for us what should we do?' 'Stay by our hole and, if you want, blow the standard signal on your whistle, while I will find a vantage point from which I will flash the signal with the torch.' So that is what we did for half an hour. I could scarcely hear Jim's whistle for the noise made by a stream, while I shone the torch into cloud drifting below as well as above us. We soon felt the futility of what we were doing, but the issue was decided for us by the onset of severe shivering, so we crept back into our hole. This time it was quite long before the shivering faded. Before getting back I had rearranged our ice axes on a flat rock, just in case Jim was right.

'Must move again,' said Jim, 'there's water dripping into my ear.' 'Often?' was my unfeeling response. 'Just move your head.'

We spent half the night talking, of course, particularly about what our party might be thinking and doing. My wife would, rightly, be angry because I had misjudged things so, as well as anxious because of the storm, and our friends would share her anxiety. They were not to know that we were sheltered, uninjured and not lost – if only we had had a radio-telephone! So we talked and dozed and shifted our bodies . . .

'It's light,' said Jim, waking me. We shuffled out and shook ourselves, ate most of our remaining food and, at 5.30am, started walking again, though very unsteadily at first. After half an hour or so we had warmed up, and our progress was faster. Then we heard a helicopter below us. I prepared to signal to it with the torch, but we never saw it.

The Sentiero Terzaghi, which had been our route from Piani alti di Rosareccio (above the Anza valley), ends by Bivacco Lanti on the mule-track north of Passo Turlo. We reached the shelter at 7am and knew that all we had to do was walk down Val Quarazza. 30 minutes later we met three mountaineers, one of three superbly equipped teams looking for us. They told us that one of the other teams had already reported finding the few steps I had cut in the ice on our way up to the col by Pizzo Nero. The one thing we had done right before departure had been to say where we were going! After satisfying themselves that we were unhurt and could still keep going, they escorted us down the path. Within a few minutes the helicopter reached us. Our rucksacks were thrown into the cabin, the crewman pulled Jim and me in and then the team leader. We

flew down the valley and exactly five minutes later jumped out on to the public car park at Pecetto. There a doctor examined me thoroughly and declared me none the worse for our adventure. She just looked at Jim, who is young, tall and handsome. Clearly there was nothing wrong with him that a hot shower would not put right.

The appropriate flight details now appear in my flying log-book. The 'remarks' column reads 'Pronto Soccorso Alpino (after a night in a hole in the ground at 2500 metres with Jim Hart)'.

REFERENCE

Map 1: 35,000 Macugnaga e il Monte Rosa, published by Azienda Autonoma di Soggiorno di Macugnaga (1976).