

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford

Brave volunteers still saving lives 23 years after they saved mine

IN 2002, long before I ever even remotely considered becoming a politician, when I wasn't long out of university, and when being nearly 50 years old sounded ancient, I went for a long weekend of walking in the Scottish Highlands with a group of friends. We travelled to Fort William, with the aim of hiking to the peak of Ben Nevis, the UK's highest summit.

Now, I am absolutely not superstitious, but I will tell you that we travelled to Scotland on Friday, September 13, and there were 13 of us in the group, so maybe I should have guessed that things might not necessarily turn out as we planned.

On the Saturday morning, we set off early with a good supply of packed lunches, water bottles, walking gear and maps, and headed off into the mist. Visibility improved rapidly and the day quickly turned sunny and beautiful – in fact, it was unseasonably warm for September, in the low to mid-twenties.

Several of our group were experienced walkers, and I had not long returned from a six-day, 100k charity trek in Nepal, so we were fairly used to the terrain.

We stopped for lunch at a beautiful spot high up with the most beautiful view over the valley below. Just before we stopped, we'd passed another group who we'd chatted to briefly. Like us, they were enjoying the gorgeous weather and making the most of a rare sunny weekend.

After lunch, the only thing that lay between us and the peak of Ben Nevis was something called an arête.

A geographical feature of many mountainous regions, an arête is a narrow ridge of rock that separates two valleys.

This one, had scree (small, loose stones) on one side, and larger granite boulders on the other – both sides sloping steeply down to the valleys below.

Making our way across the ridge was slow-going, and it was taking a lot longer than we had anticipated, so some of us decided to pick our way off the ridge down to the valley, rather than continuing to the peak. I was one of the first, and as I made my way down past one rocky outcrop, I noticed



Marie Goldman is airlifted to safety by a helicopter off the side of a mountain in 2002
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP

that a couple of the boulders next to me were loose. I turned to the person behind me to warn them, but the next thing I knew, one of the boulders was fully dislodged and flying through the air towards me. It hit me squarely on my right hip and simply knocked me off the side of the mountain.

I won't give you all the details – but feel free to ask me about it if you see me. The bottom line is that I tumbled, head over heels for about 150 feet (50 metres) over the rocks below. I ended up sliding on my front, shredding my clothes, but slowing down, and finally came to a halt in a little crevice.

In short, I should have died, and if I'd hit my head as I fell, I wouldn't be here to tell you about it, but I didn't, so here I am.

I knew straight away that I'd broken my right ankle, and done something to my left wrist, but other than that, I was pretty sure I was OK. I was, however, quite stuck. There was

no way I was going to be able to walk out of there on a broken ankle, and I don't mind admitting that I was pretty shaken up – both literally and figuratively.

But it turned out that I was incredibly lucky for many reasons. Lucky to be alive, without a doubt, but also because the group of people that we had passed at lunchtime included a Scottish Mountain Rescue Team Leader – one of the amazing volunteers who give up their free time to train to rescue people just like me. If I remember correctly, his name was Andy, and it's really quite remarkable how quickly he got to me.

Not only that, but a bit further around the arête were two other mountain rescue team members, practising abseiling. And as if that weren't enough, they also had a radio with them and were in contact with the RAF rescue helicopter that was currently on the east coast of Scotland, but which got to me within 45 minutes or so.

I, and another member of my group who had bravely made their way to me, were airlifted off the side of the mountain and taken to hospital in nearby Fort William where the lovely doctors and nurses placed my

ankle in a cast and checked me over to make sure no other real damage was done. Nothing more than some spectacular bruises.

It's hard to overstate how lucky I was. Without a shadow of a doubt, I owe my life to the amazing, dedicated, brave and incredibly professional volunteers of the Scottish Mountain Rescue team, who made sure that a horrific accident had a happy ending. I simply can't thank them enough.

So why, you may be wondering, am I telling you all this?

Well, because I had the enormous privilege last week of visiting the Scottish Mountain Rescue (SMR) Teams as the next module of the Parliamentary Knowledge Scheme for Frontline Services.

Regular readers will remember my previous article a few weeks ago when I described my visit to meet the fabulous team at the RNLI in Poole.

Visiting SMR, I could see a lot of parallels between the RNLI and mountain rescue – not least that the wonderful individuals who come out at any time of the day or night to help people in trouble are volunteers. It's important to underline that

The mountain rescue volunteers aren't paid for what they do, yet they put their own lives on the line to save others



they aren't paid for what they do, yet they put their own lives on the line to save others, over and over again.

There's something truly awe-inspiring and humbling about that and I wanted to tell you about my own personal experience with them because although I live here in Chelmsford, most of us travel to other places when we go on holiday, and I think it's important to know what's in place to help you should you ever need it.

But the team at SMR told me that many people they rescue think they're paid to do it. They're not. They do it because they care and want to help. How many of us can truly say we care enough to put ourselves in harm's way for others like that?

As I heard someone say recently: people rescue people. Meaning we can have the best kit, the best processes, the best plans, but at the end of the day, what really matters is the people.

Well, those people are amazing, and they certainly saved my life. From the bottom of my heart: thank you.

Keep safe.

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