

The Cuillin Ridge, My Longest Day

By: Ken Brown (1992)

4:30am, Glen Brittle campsite, Skye: Kenny Harris and I set out in the cold early morning light. Our objective, to traverse the Black Cuillin's main ridge in one day.

This had been an ambition of Kenny's for some time but, as people who know him well will testify, when ever he went to Skye there was always high winds, rain, mist etc. and his ambition remained unfulfilled. This trip was part of a program of routes to prepare us (especially me) for a trip to Chamonix to go climbing in the Alps later that summer and the Cuillin was the nearest thing in our Scottish hills to what we would find over there. The three of us, (Watson Peat elected to come along to get his first experience of Skye), had driven up to the campsite of Friday evening (29th May) and off to bed after a couple of beers (carbohydrate loading of course). We'd had much discussion about this. Kenny originally favoured a Friday evening ascent followed by a bivvy on the ridge to get started at first light. I, being the driver, thought it was all too much. Five hours driving, an ascent onto the ridge in the dark, followed by what I was sure would be an uncomfortable and sleepless night and all in preparation for what I was sure was to be the hardest day I had ever had in the hills. In the end we agreed to spend the night at the Glen Brittle Campsite and ascend the ridge via Coir' a' Ghrunnda to Bealach Coir' an Lochain, thus missing out the easy hill walking part of the ridge between Gars Bheinn and Sgurr nan Eag.

It looked like a perfect day with the sky devoid of clouds as we started up the hill. However, we had not gone far when we felt the need to strip to the waist, which was an ominous sign so early in the morning when it should have been cool. Our ascent went quickly. The enormous boiler plate slabs of rock in Coir' a' Ghrunnda offering an easy route up. (None of your horrible scree slopes here.) we filled our water bottles at the highest practical point, about 600m, in the Allt Coir' a' Ghrunnda. Now I was carrying two litres of water and 0.75 litres of orange juice. The question was 'would it be enough in this heat'? so we reached the ridge about 6:30am and had our first proper rest while we got the climbing gear organised.

Some easy scrambles got us to the infamous Thearlaich-Dubh (T-D) gap. A cleft on the ridge, our first real difficulty and technically the most difficult part of the ridge, being graded V-Diff. a thirty foot abseil takes you down into the gap and a climb up an eighty foot chimney takes you out again. Kenny led the climb. He led all the rock routes as my climbing was not yet good enough to lead mountain routes. A lot of huffing and puffing as his sack got in the way convinced me that I should climb without mine. So Kenny hauled my sack up on the rope and then I could start upward. A few strenuous moves got me over the crux then easier climbing and scrambling led to the summit of Sgurr Thearlaich.

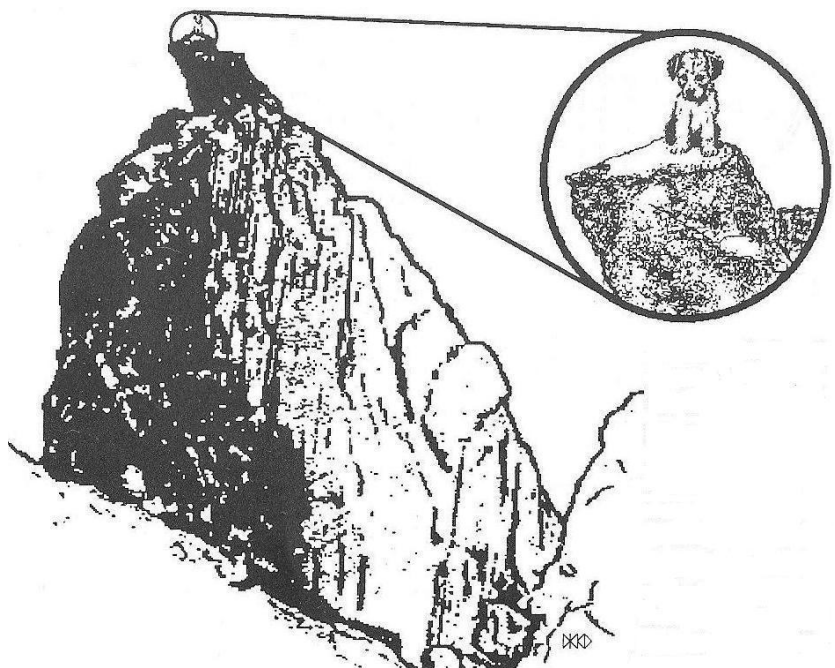
Without thinking, I descended toward the top of the Great Stone Chute to climb Sgurr Alasdair. This is not part of the main ridge and therefore was not necessary. However, it was nice to include the highest peek in the Cuillin and Kenny didn't object, even if we then had to retrace our steps back up Sgurr Thearlaich to resume the main ridge.

We then descended toward Sgurr Mhic Choinnich and the next graded climb, King's Chimney, Diff. Once more we resorted to sack hauling rather than take the chance of our sacks getting in the road. This climb goes up a corner then you step out into a seemingly smooth wall but as Kenny is fond of saying, *'it's all there if you look for it'*.

We now hurried along the ridge to get to Sgurr Dearg and the Inaccessible Pinnacle before the crowds formed a queue. We spotted some people ahead so Kenny sprinted on to reserve a place. As it turned out we didn't have to wait very long at all. When Kenny led the second pitch without any runners it gave us the interesting sight of our rope billowing out about six feet to the side in the strong breeze which was now blowing. Despite this I was

very glad of having the rope above me since I was very aware of the exposure although the climb is graded Moderate.

At the top there was a man with a dog he must have carried up. His dog was running about barking much to the consternation of the man who wasn't to happy about trying to catch the dog without falling over the side. Eventually he got hold of it and perched it on a rock whilst shouting down to his friends to take a picture of the dog at the top of the In-Pin. He wasn't too pleased when



Kenny appeared standing on top of the real summit, which he was obviously too scared to do. We then took advantage of his preoccupation with controlling the dog to abseil off first. At the bottom there was now a huge crowd of about thirty folk sitting in an arc as if in a grand stand, watching people abseiling. I had the distinct feeling they were all willing someone to make a mess of it and fall off for their entertainment. I resolved not to give them the pleasure.

We decided that we could take a well earned rest and have some food and water. As we sat chatting, the opinion grew between us that we were now past all the major technical difficulties and were ahead of schedule. Our weather was brilliant, sunny, warm (perhaps too warm although there was a breeze) and this ridge was now a piece of piss, easy. We were going to finish early. No problem. Wrong!!!! The Cuillin Ridge was not going to be won so easily.

Sgurr na Bannadich, a' Ghredaidh and a' Mhadaidh followed without difficulty further reinforcing our opinions but by now we were out of all liquid and it was getting very hot, the constant breeze sapping much needed moisture from our bodies. We stopped at Bealach na Glai Moire where an apparently V-Diff scramble barred our ascent from the Bealach to Bidein Druim nan Ramh. This was the first part of the ridge that neither of us had been over before. We sat about eating and consulting our guide books for a mention of this obstacle.

Either we couldn't find it or it wasn't mentioned. Eventually we went round the side but probably ended up going too far and making it more difficult for ourselves. All of this wasted a lot of time.

There followed a period of sustained scrambling, often exposed which, combined with tiredness and dehydration, was beginning to have an effect on me although I was totally unaware of it at the time. It was at this stage we kept running into other parties who were also going for the ridge in one day. A kind of mutual respect and camaraderie developed between us.

At this point I think I reached my personal crux of the ridge. Would my fitness be enough?

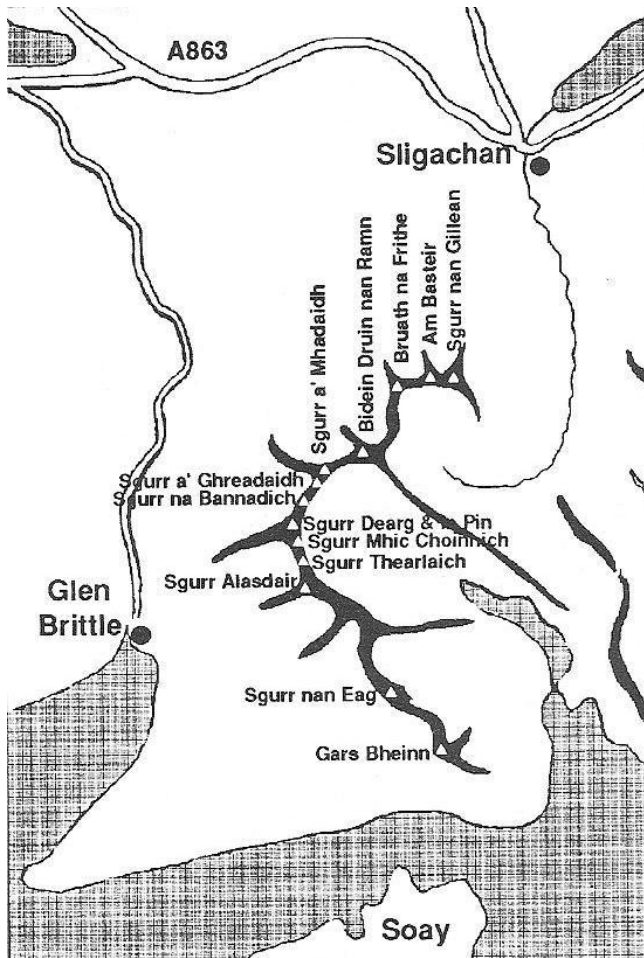
After reaching the summit of Bidein Druim nan Ramh an Englishman and an American, who had been scrambling along side, passed and descended ahead of us. Kenny, who was not showing any signs of the tiredness I was, raced after them. He was obviously enjoying himself and confident he could overcome any obstacles in the decent, which the guide book and the presence of in situ' slings suggested should be abseiled. I was not so confident. Everything came together at this point. The continuous exposure to unroped scrambling, where in many places a fall would mean death, creates a nervous tension which drains the energy of those not so confident in their scrambling ability, such as myself. The tiredness of a long day in the hills along with the heat proceeding bad dehydration combined to make me much more nervous and less confident than I would normally have been.

After taking a long time to scramble down some of the more tricky bits, I finally caught up with Kenny, who had been waiting for me. We were almost caught up by another pair of climbers, one of whom had hurt his leg. I thought they looked a bit ill prepared, no sacks and walking trainers. Kenny climbed down threw the last bit which involved a big committing step down onto a sloping slab. The stranger with the hurt leg was impressed with Kenny's strength during the move saying '*Jesus Christ! You've got strong fingers. What do you lead, about E7 or something?*' I thought the guy was a total prat who didn't know anything about rock climbing. The pair climbed down leaving me last. Kenny was chatting to the guy, gave him a bandage for his sprained ankle and discovered that he was supposed to be going to Paisley to meet Alec who runs Summits shop. (Alec is a personal friend of Kenny's). Talk about a small world.

Alec later told us that this guy was Paul Williams, author of the rock climbing guide for Wales and one of the best rock climbers in Britain, who does actually lead E7. Rock climbing grade Extreme 7 is totally loony juice. Meanwhile I was trying to find a way down this step and wishing they would stop blabbering so that Kenny would give me some assistance. The step down was large enough that it required you to let go of your hand hold and sort of leap backwards into a slab which was sloping away from you toward a nasty looking drop. I just couldn't convince myself that the slab would hold me and my arms were getting pretty tired holding on. Kenny eventually came to my assistance trying to convince me I could do it. It was too late, my arm strength was giving out and with it my mental controlled. "*I'm going to fall*", I wailed. "*No you're not. Just step down.*" replied Kenny. Kenny realised it was too late, grabbed my rucksack strap with one hand and a rock hold with the other and shouted "*Jump!*" I jumped and down I came, no problem, and began to realise how stupid I had

been. The damage was done though, the self confidence was gone, badly needed moisture and strength were used up in nervous tension.

Bruach na Frithe followed. Technically easy enough but the additional effort drained me completely. I was on



autopilot, brain out to lunch, the only thing left, sheer determination to finish the ridge.

Kenny wanted to do the Bhasteir Tooth by Naismith's route, a Severe. I was still kidding myself and Kenny that I could do it. However we walked past the beginning of it before looking at the guide book. I couldn't bring my self to climb back up again to do it. I suggested that we take the bypass route to Bealach a' Bhasteir, ascend the East Ridge of Am Bhasteir and abseil down then climb the tooth from there. Kenny agreed.

After we got to the summit of Am Bhasteir Kenny looked at me and asked me if I still thought I could do the Tooth. I admitted the truth and we descended by retracing our steps to the Bealach. Only Sgurr nan Gillean lay between us and the end. We roped up for a chimney around about the area where the Gendarme used to be (it fell a few years ago).

Normally the chimney would have been no more than difficult scrambling but at this stage of tiredness we didn't want to take any chances. I left Kenny to coil the rope. I had to keep going or I would collapse and go to sleep.

Some easy scrambling and our final summit was attained. Kenny appeared. We shook hands, we'd done it. My mouth was so dry it was like sand paper and my voice was a croak. A party of four at the summit took pity on us and gave us a sip of water, ecstasy. Now it was just a matter of will power to keep going on the long decent to the Sligachan Hotel. The fact that it was visible for much of the two hour decent meant that it never seemed to get closer, always just out of reach like a mirage. Finally we were in the car park at 9:30pm. It had taken us seventeen hours. Watson had driven my car round to meet us on the understanding that he could sit in the bar and have a few beers and I would drive back. Someone produced a pint of fresh orange and lemonade. I drank it down greedily in a few minutes, then another. Then more pints of beer were ordered. I had a half pint of orange and lemonade. We had to have some food, a bowl of soup. (Well, I was still thirsty.) We drove back to the Glen Brittle campsite for dinner in the dark, a nourishing stew with more liquid, half a litre of water and a can of beer. It was the next morning before I had ingested sufficient liquid to need to go to the toilet. I was full up and tired, ready for bed at the end of what was surely the Longest Day.