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River deep, mountain high

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The Swaledale Mountain Rescue Team, which has been involved in a number of dramatic rescues in the Yorkshire Dales, marks its 40th anniversary this year.

As families head out to the country over the Easter holidays, Ruth Campbell joins the team on a training session

IAM lying on my back, unable to move as someone carefully places a support brace around my neck. I can only stare straight ahead as faces and voices appear and disappear.

Members of the rescue team are constantly talking to me, reassuring me and explaining what is happening as an oxygen mask is put over my face and they prepare to put a splint on my leg.

Thankfully, I am only taking part in an exercise with the Swaledale Mountain Rescue Team. My injuries are not for real. But it does give me just a taste of what it might feel like to be a casualty, immobilised, unsure of what is happening and totally reliant on the strangers around me.

Any casualty lucky enough to be rescued by these volunteers is certainly in good hands. Their operation is calm, swift and professional.

The 30-strong team - celebrating its 40th anniversary this year - is called out on real life search and rescue operations in Wensleydale and Swaledale about 25 times a year.

Most involve missing or injured walkers, hill climbers, mountain bikers and cavers, or searches for vulnerable people suffering from dementia or depression.

Their patch covers both high moorland areas, rising to 2,000 feet, and deep underground networks of caves, potholes and old lead mines.

Some rescues are more dramatic than others. In one memorable incident, the team was called out in the middle of the night to rescue a caver who suffered two broken legs after a mine above Gunnerside collapsed.

It is a story that unfolds rather like a particularly nailbiting episode of the TV hospital drama, Casualty. Stone from the roofs and walls of the extremely unstable tunnels were falling in on top of the rescuers as they attempted to drag the badly injured caver along on a stretcher.

There wasn't time to stop and secure weak points with wooden stays, as they would normally, and, at one point, there was a risk they were about to slip down a 300ft hole. After two hours, they emerged from the

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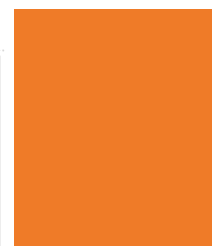
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entrance to the cave, high on a hill, bringing the casualty safely to the surface in a gale, where a helicopter was waiting to rush him to hospital.

One of the team, medical engineer Graham Brown, 53, plays down their heroism. "It is an unwritten rule that the casualty always dies first. No team member would ever put themselves or others at risk," he stresses.

Formed in 1968, the highly respected Swaledale Mountain Rescue Team (SMRT) has also been called upon to help in national emergencies, such as the Lockerbie plane crash in 1988. More recently, the group was out on exercise near Catterick in August when an RAF Puma helicopter, with 12 people on board, crashed nearby instantly killing two people. Police said several of the other casualties would not have survived if the SMRT hadn't been on hand.

The team includes a headmaster, Army officer, doctors, a vet, lorry driver, shopkeeper, harbour master and a BT engineer. Rescue Controller, engineer Paul Denning, says: "At one point we literally did have a butcher, a baker and a candlestick maker."

What brings all these disparate people together is a desire to help others. "Most join because they want to contribute to society. We are all walkers, climbers, mountaineers or cavers," says Graham.

James Foxwell, a 37-year-old headteacher from Northallerton, says: "I'm interested in the outdoors, it's a chance to help people."

Army officer Tim Cain agrees: "It seems a good thing to do."

But the role requires intense commitment.

Training sessions, held twice a month, cover everything from rope work to casualty care, searching skills and caving.

Additional specialist training is carried out at centres in Wales and Scotland. Members also give up free time to raise funds. As a charity, SMRT gets no government funding and costs about £20,000 a year to run. The team also needs to raise £95,000 over the next three years to replace two emergency vehicles.

"Lots of people think they will be driving an ambulance with blue lights flashing and jumping out of helicopters.

Our work is not difficult but you need a lot of tenacity. Anyone who joins has to endure an awful lot," says Paul. "It is not glamorous, often it is cold, wet and tiring.

You can get called out at 3am and trudge around in the pouring rain. You may never even get to see the casualty."

Volunteers can be called out any time, day or night, 365 days of the year. Last summer, 30 volunteers spent two days searching for the body of a 17-year-old soldier washed away as he tried to cross a swollen beck.

And members have spent many hours searching in Swaledale for the missing teenager Jenny Nicholl.

They must be prepared for a range of eventualities.

Everyone is trained in basic life support with some qualified in more advanced medical care, allowing them to administer drugs and put up drips. The team now also has its own Swiftwater Rescue Unit to cope with the increasing number of rescues in floods and swollen rivers.

They have to train for at least a year before they can be called out as part of the team: "About half fall by the wayside,"

says Paul.

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Victoria Brocklebank, 25, a doctor at Darlington Memorial Hospital, joined 12 months ago and has not yet been called out on exercise. A keen walker, originally from the Lake District, she is determined to follow it through. "I always fancied joining a team. I want to use my medical skills," she says.

Back home, mountain rescue teams are stretched to the limit by inexperienced hikers without proper equipment.

But this is not an issue in the Yorkshire Dales, she says.

There are cases where people are unprepared for the worst, such as the two families from Darlington who got lost in the dark off-roading in 4x4 vehicles in December. Unable to explain where they were, they were eventually discovered, in freezing temperatures, on a road marked unsuitable for vehicles.

But none of the rescue team I talk to are judgmental or critical. "Occasionally, we might grumble between ourselves, but our main concern is people are safe,"

says one.

At least once a year, they have to search for people in the dark. "If I could give people one single piece of advice it is to carry a torch," says Graham. After that, a map and a compass - and knowing how to use them - are useful. And don't forget a decent waterproof jacket, good footwear and a hat and gloves.

Building surveyor Peter Roe, 50, has been involved in a number of dramatic underground rescues. "I never get cross, whatever the situation. At least people are trying, not sitting at home in front of the computer," he says. "There is always an element of risk, but you try to minimise it through good practice."

One team member, Danny Phillips, knows what it is like to be on the other side of a rescue operation. He recently fell 20 feet, landing on his back on a rock, in a climbing accident near Catterick.

Unlike my experience during the training session, Danny's was frighteningly real. "It wasn't good, it was touch and go," says the 47-year-old printer, whose injuries were so serious there were fears he could be paralysed. The team arrived within half an hour and he was flown to Teesside's James Cook Hospital by helicopter.

"Everybody was there, all the team were encouraging me," says Danny, who has now made a full recovery. "I now know what it feels like for others. It is scary but the whole operation was so slick and unpressured. I felt really safe."

And you can't get a better recommendation than that.

* SMRT, Hipswell Road West, Catterick Garrison, North Yorkshire, DL9 3EH.

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