

Heirs to the mountains

ON THE television news a tracking shot focuses on the tail-plane, then climbs from it along burnt ground where a fuselage should have been and pauses before lifting fractionally to bring into view the summit ridge, last clouds of the monsoon trailing across it. The debris strewn around looks ordinary as park litter. Would-be rescuers pick among it. One holds up, momentarily curious, a string of karabiners, mountaineering gear which gleams bright from the ashes and mist. Mick's? Dave's? The chief instructor from the National Mountaineering Centre, Nick Banks — a crew-cut and normally ebullient New Zealander — flashes up on screen, pole-axed, eyes downcast. The centre — Plas y Brenin at Capel Curig in Snowdonia — has lost "four very dear friends, four people whom we dearly loved."

In the staff rooms and along the corridors of the centre, groups huddle, red-eyed, conversing quietly. The shock and loss are palpable, even in a setting familiar with deaths in the Himalayas.

Among those killed on Sunday's flight to Kathmandu were Mick and Sue Hardwick, Dave Harries and Alison Cope. All four were working, or had worked, at Plas y Brenin. To Nick Banks their deaths have "torn a huge hole in the place. Its ramifications will be with us for years. These people were irreplaceable. They were the best, with that quality which made everyone else work beyond themselves."

In an institution of the size and nature of Plas y Brenin, where the comradeship and mutual respect among a full-time instructional staff of perhaps a dozen, is intense, his words are more than rhetoric.

Mick Hardwick was in charge of the Centre's rock climbing courses in Britain and abroad. Aged 33, he came from Wirksworth in Derbyshire and began climbing as a 14-year-old schoolboy on a course at White Hall Outdoor Centre near Buxton. With natural ability allied to an ideal physique — tall and light, with powerful arms — he quickly developed into an outstanding climber on the Derbyshire outcrops.

But his ambitions lay beyond them. He trained as a CDT teacher, taught in Hadfield and then turned to instructing at Crowden Outdoor Centre. In 1986 he moved to North Wales and two years later he was appointed to Plas y Brenin staff. His rare blend of joyful enthusiasm, physical ability and technical grasp of safety procedure made him an outstanding asset.

He married Sue last year. Originally from Essex and a fine rock climber, she had also worked at Plas y Brenin. A modern languages graduate, she had been employed as a translator for the Welsh television company S4C. Together with Mick she had made several notable climbs, including Norway's Troll Wall and the Lotus Flower Tower in Canada.

Dave Harries, his senior by a year and a friend from youth, was a perfect foil to Mick Hardwick. Where Mick could be boisterous or even abrasive, Dave was reticent, considered, but immensely determined. He ran the centre's Scottish, alpine and ski-mountaineering courses. He read geography at Durham (where he met his wife Caroline), trained as a teacher, qualified like Mick as a mountain guide and was appointed to Plas y Brenin at much the same time. "You could delegate anything to either of them," remembers Nick Banks. "And they could make everyone on a course feel as if they were out with good mates."

Instruction aside, Hardwick's and Harries's climbing objective this year — a two-man lightweight ascent of a route on the south face of Annapurna — was at the boldest edge of acceptable mountaineering activity. In 1982 the route had seen the death of the young British mountaineer, Alex MacIntyre.

The fourth in the group, Alison Cope, was a stocky, amiable 28-year-old from Surrey. She was frequently in demand to work on courses at Plas y Brenin. "The only person who ever underestimated Ali Cope was Ali Cope," commented the warden of another nearby outdoor centre which also vied for her time. Nick Banks added that "she was always surprised when we wanted her to work for us, yet we employed her here virtually full-time over the last three years and she held her own through adaptability and strength of personality in a staff where high technical performance is the norm. She was very calm and patient, particularly with kids, and always so keen to improve her own abilities. She and Sue were planning to trek round Annapurna while Mick and Dave were on the face. She was to have gone to college in Glasgow."

Another friend and former instructor at the centre, Issie Inglis, recalls adventures with Ali on snow-covered Corsican peaks. Nick's wife Lindsey chips in with wintry escapades on Ben Nevis's Tower Ridge. In the re-living is celebration, and the sadness dissipates a little. But in this close and supportive community, the smiles are fleeting and wan, and with the returning silence come tears. In the staff room on the mantelpiece a card of condolence — one of hundreds — simply reads: "Mick 'n' Dave. Spain, 1991."

Periodically, individuals detach themselves from subdued groups to look out from the windows to Snowdon, cloud-palled at the valley head, or to watch as squalls and flurries of rain hiss across the lake. The phone rings again. Nick goes to answer it. "It hasn't stopped for three days — everyone from a bloke who was here three years ago for a two-hour abseiling session to Lord Hunt."

On the notice board by the door is the year's activity programme, courses already blocked in for a few weeks' time against names who will not now be returning.

Jim Perrin

Helen Pickles writes: Deborah Leon, who also died in the Kathmandu crash, aged 33, was women's officer of the TGWU, northern region. An accomplished mountaineer, squash player and runner, she was on her way to a mountaineering trip.

From her teenage years, when she elected to leave her private school for the local technical college, Deborah displayed the independence of spirit and inquiring mind that infected everything she did, whether at work, arguing with friends or tackling one of her many sports.

With a degree in local government and administration, she was director of the Northern Region Low Pay Unit for five years, before moving to the TGWU in 1990. She had an unshakeable sense of natural justice that had nothing to do with party politics or doctrinaire beliefs; she just sought to change things for the better. As such, she could motivate quite disparate groups of people and encourage the most inarticulate to form an opinion.

A natural leader, she loved nothing better than organising impromptu weekends of walking and long, bibulous nights under canvas in the Lake District or Scottish Highlands. If she had a fault, it was that she became involved in too many things to which she insisted on giving herself one hundred per cent. Consequently she was never on time.

Her parents, Colin and Sheila, her three brothers and sister and her many many friends love her and miss her.

Mick Hardwick, born January 15, 1959; Sue Hardwick, April 4, 1964; Dave Harries, June 29, 1958; Alison Cope, November 28, 1964; Deborah Leon, born May 25, 1960. All died September 27, 1992

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Inquest hears of problems naming bodies in Nepal

DNA tests identify air crash victims

AN INQUEST into the deaths of 15 Britons killed in an air crash in Nepal was yesterday told that genetic testing was used to identify the remains of four of the victims.

All 167 people, including 37 Britons, died when a Pakistan International Airlines Airbus hit a mountain near Katmandu on September 28, 1992.

Dr John Burton, the coroner at the inquest at Hammersmith, west London, heard that some of the Britons were never formally identified, others were buried in Nepal, and the remaining 15 were flown home.

Dr Ian Hill, a pathologist at St Thomas's Hospital, London, was at the scene on October 1.

He said the bodies were recovered from the mountain before arrival, taken to Katmandu airport and put on view for relatives before being put in a cold storage, and finally moved to a temporary mortuary.

Dr Hill said the remains of the victims had been identified by detailed forms giving information about the bodies which was matched to the bodies recovered, but

during the move Dr Hill said the numbers on the bodies had been lost and property separated from them.

Of the 15 Britons, 10 were identified through dental records, one from her clothing, and four through DNA testing.

The court heard John Carswell, aged 22, of Edinburgh, Darius Bejon, aged 34, from Windlesham, Surrey, Michael Hardwick, aged 33, a climbing instructor from Capel Curig, Gwynedd, and Deborah Leon, aged 32, of Newcastle upon Tyne, were identified by DNA tests.

Dr Hill said: "It is only the second or third time DNA testing has been used in a disaster."

There was a delay of around three months before the tests. Dr Hill said: "If we were organising it in this country we would have done it straight away."

The hearing heard that the plane had been travelling at around 180 knots when it had hit the mountainside.

Dr Hill said few of the bodies were found at the impact site

and most had been thrown forward. "A large number had their seat belts on and they were restrained by these to a degree but the forces generated were far above what the belts were designed to sustain."

Explaining how the victims died, Dr Hill said: "If you are going forward very fast and suddenly stop, the organs inside the body do not stop so quickly and they are thrown forward."

Huge internal damage was caused by the organs hitting the body. The victims had injuries such as tears to the heart.

He added: "The initial phase of the accident is so fast, taking a millisecond, and the forces generated so intense they would die instantaneously."

The inquest continues today into the deaths of Mr Bejon, Mr Carswell and Caroline Cliff, 23, of Bracknell, Berkshire — three climbers from Snowdonia; Alison Cope, 27, Mr Hardwick, and his wife Susan, 28, who was also a climbing instructor; Sharon Duhig, 28, of Shepperton, west London; Patricia Gill, 48, of Wallington, Oxfordshire; Caroline Jones, 31, of Harrogate, North Yorkshire; Peter Jones, (no relation), 34, of Bridlington, Humberside; Deborah Leon; Josephine Mills, 50, a nursing director in Abu Dhabi; Pam Nuttram, 33, of Whalley Range, Manchester; and two Leicester University students, Louise Peate, 31, and Katherine White, 26.