

Peter Barron



As Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team celebrates its 60th anniversary, its longest-serving volunteer turns 80

Searching highs and lows

WHISKERY, weather-beaten, and worldly-wise, Gari Finch grimaces as he's reminded of his 80th birthday next week.

It's not a milestone he's particularly looking forward to. He has a "knackered" knee these days, and he's struggling with the onset of arthritis, but he has no plans to step down from the Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team.

The magnificent team of volunteers is 60 years old this year, and Gari has been a member for 54 of them. That makes him one of the country's longest-serving mountain rescue volunteers – but he's far from over the hill.

"I'll keep going as long as I can, and as long as I'm of some use," says the down-to-earth grandad, speaking over a pint in The King's Head, at the foot of Roseberry Topping.

"In my head, I still think I'm 20, but if it ever got to the point where I thought I was a hindrance, I'd stop."

The retired geology and geography teacher has seen it all in his time – from terrible tragedies to life-saving triumphs – and the team has become "like a family".

"I've loved the camaraderie," says Gari. "You form the strongest bonds when you're out in all weathers, searching for people at any time of day or night."

This is National Volunteers' Week, an annual celebration of the army of people who give their time and skills for the good of others.

And Gari – a man who has devoted more than half a century to searching and rescuing – is a towering example of that selfless spirit.

Ten years ago, his dedication was recognised when he was presented with the MBE by The Queen at Buckingham Palace, though he's quick to insist: "It was on behalf of the team – not just me."

Born in Stockton, and raised in Acklam, Gari loved the outdoors from childhood: hiking with his parents; or spending hours with pals, climbing the likes of the Eston Hills and the sandstone outcrop, known as The Wainstones, near Great Broughton.

When he met a group of rock climbers at sixth form, he quickly developed a passion for the sport, and that inspired him to become a search and rescue volunteer.

"Luckily, I didn't have any accidents, but it struck me that if I ever fell off a crag, I'd like someone to come and rescue me," he recalls.

He joined Cleveland Search and Rescue, as it was called then, in August 1971, having settled in Great Ayton with his wife, Sandy, three years earlier.

Since joining, he's taken part in an estimated 1,500 callouts, serving



TOP BLOKE: Gari Finch against the dramatic backdrop of Roseberry Topping

PICTURES: CHRIS BARRON

as callout officer for 25 years, secretary for a decade, and he's into the fifth year of his second stint as chair.

He still vividly remembers his first callout: "A climber had fallen from The Wainstones – it was heavy mist that day, but we got to him."

There was also the time, in the early days, when a cow had to be hauled out of a disused mineshaft. To this day, the farmer shows his appreciation by giving the team quick access to the hills across his land.

Another time, blood had been found near the top of Devil's Hole, the remnants of an old mine, near Great Ayton.

It transpired someone had killed a dog and thrown it down the shaft.

"As an animal-lover, that hit me hard," he admits. "I can still see that poor dog."

But mainly, it's people who are the subject of callouts, and they can come at any time.

As well as dealing with all kinds of accidents, there is also the grim task of retrieving bodies after suicides.

"We see some horrific things but, if we don't do it, someone else has to," says Gari.

Perhaps the most memorable



Still a dedicated member of Cleveland Mountain Rescue team at 80

callout of all came in December 1988. Gari was having a drink in The Buck pub, in Great Ayton, when news came in that a passenger plane had exploded over Lockerbie.

Search and rescue volunteers from all over the country were mobilised, and Gari was among three Cleveland team members, plus Woody the search and rescue dog, who headed to the Scottish border.

"Our job was to search for evidence that had been spread from Northumberland to Lockerbie: body parts, mail, and all kinds of debris," he recalls.

"The worst thing was the Christmas presents – Americans were going home for Christmas. That always sticks in my mind."

While working in schools, Gari was always afforded flexibility by headteachers, so he could respond to callouts.

He also enjoyed the unerring support of his wife, Sandy, who passed away suddenly five-and-a-half years ago.

An honorary member of the team, Sandy was known for answering emergency calls to the landline in the kitchen of their bungalow when Gari was the callout officer. She became known as "The Lady In The Kitchen" to the emergency services.

On Christmas Day, one year, when Sandy was cooking the dinner, a call came in while Gari was walking their dog. A farmer had suffered a heart attack and couldn't be reached by ambulance because of thick snow.

Christmas dinner was put on hold while the ambulance crew was taken to the farm in a Land Rover by Gari and fellow team members.

"Sandy was brilliant at getting things moving," says Gari, shedding a tear. "I couldn't have done it without her."

HER passing has clearly left a huge hole in Gari's life and, on the wall of the Great Ayton flat he's moved into since she died, there's a Lifetime Achievement Award from North Yorkshire Police in recognition of the couple's commitment to mountain rescue.

These days, due to a snapped tendon in his leg and the arthritis, Gari is no longer what's known as "on the hill".

However, he still performs a vital role as a radio operator, and remains proud to be part of the team, comprising 38 search and rescue members, and ten support volunteers.

"They're magnificent people from all walks of life," says Gari, who also worked as a long-distance van driver, taxi controller, and chauffeur for ICI bosses after he took early retirement from teaching.

"We've had doctors, nurses, paramedics, teachers, steelworkers – even a butler. Ironically, the only profession we haven't had is an undertaker!"

Recently, a man fell 60 feet from Roseberry Topping, and an undertaker wasn't required thanks to "a great team effort" by Cleveland Mountain Rescue, the police, paramedics, and the air ambulance.

"He sent us a nice message from hospital," adds Gari. "When it works out like that, it's the best feeling in the world – but it's just what we do."

They all deserve our thanks because it would be very hard indeed to find volunteers as dedicated as Gari Finch and his fellow lifesavers.

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