

The FLOWSTONE

Vol 18 Issue 03

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GOING UP??



A Monthly Newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE

March 2011
Volume 18, Issue 03

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The Cullman Grotto will exchange by request with any publishing grotto. Republication of items within *The Flowstone* is allowed provided credit is given to author and source.

Membership to the Cullman Grotto is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year for individual or twenty dollars (\$20) per year for family. Dues are payable at the first grotto meeting of each year (January) and includes subscription to *The Flowstone*. Subscription rate for non-members is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year.

The Cullman Grotto meets on the first Tuesday of each month unless the first Tuesday falls on a holiday or otherwise noted. In those cases the meeting will be held on the second Tuesday. Meetings begin at 7:30 p.m. and are held at the old L&N train depot, Arnold St., Cullman, AL. All visitors and prospective members are welcome.



Front Cover:
The cable route up Half Dome...in case you forget your climbing gear.

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ECHO)))) CHAMBER

Deaths at Ellison's Cave

As reported by Tim White

Here is the information that I promised. It has been approved and release by Walker County, GA EMA. It is not complete but due to the fact that there has been so much speculation and so many questions it was felt this might help to at least let cavers know the basic facts of the event as currently known. Walker County Emergency Service still does not have the medical examiner's report to allow for a full report at this time. WCES does not normally release (nor do many other Agencies) their incident reports. It's possible that the final information may only appear in the American Caving Accidents Report at some later date.

As someone who took part in this rescue, I will refrain from adding any more details and especially speculation on this event. As Moderator of this Forum I am going to lock this thread for 48 hours. I hope that this time will give all of us a chance to read the information and think about it before hastily responding. If after 48 hours you still feel that your comments and opinion will benefit the caving community as a whole, then by all means...post it. If you find what you want to say is not so important now, 48 hours later, then maybe it's best that you keep that post to yourself.

**ELLISON'S CAVE CALL-OUT
FEBRUARY 12, 2011**

On February 12, 2011 rescuers in Walker County, GA recovered the bodies of two men suspended in a waterfall at a 125 foot pit in Ellison's Cave. The men were members of a party of 5 men and 5 women who had come to visit the cave from Florida and to practice rappelling.

The first man, Mr. Grant Lockenbach, aged 20, rigged the drop in the waterfall rather than using the standard rigging point for the 125 foot drop known as the Warm Up Pit. He was reported to have rappelled into the pit to recover a pack that had been accidentally dropped to the bottom. Some time following this Mr. Pirie also rigged the waterfall and rappelled down in an apparent attempt to aid Mr. Lockenbach.

When the rescuers arrived they found the men were stranded on rope approximately 40 feet from the bottom of the drop near a ledge and directly in the waterfall. Rescuers did not measure Lockenbach's line, so it is unclear exactly how close to the bottom this rope came.

The first man down, Mr. Lockenbach was dressed in shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and tennis type shoes. He was wearing a military style self-tied seat harness. An auto lock carabiner held his ATC type rappel device, which was rigged to the main line. The main line was a soft black 3-lay rope. A handled ascender was clipped directly from his harness to his main line with a carabiner. An additional handled ascender, with no sling, was hanging from his harness by a carabiner. Mr. Lockenbach was not wearing a helmet or gloves. No light was found on his person.

The second man, Mr. Pirie was also dressed in shorts, a short-sleeved shirt, and tennis type shoes. He was wearing a commercially sewn harness with an ATC type device for rappelling. A yellow/black accessory cord (approximately 5 millimeters or less) was rigged through the ATC device. Both ends of this cord were dangling below Mr. Pirie. One end of the cord had a 2 foot loop tied in it. Mr. Pirie had no ascending equipment with him. His helmet was suspended on a string underneath him, chin strap open. He had no gloves, and no light was found on his person.

A headlamp was found turned on lying on the ledge they were near, and an LED Mini-Mag was found turned on at the bottom of the pit.

It took a team of 35 persons to complete the recovery operation. WCES was dispatched at 2:24 p.m.; rescuers reached the caving party at approximately 3:58 p.m.; and command was terminated at 11:00 p.m. that night.

Foul play is not suspected by the Sheriff's office. Although the medical examiner's report has not been released it is believed both men died from hypothermia from being suspended in the cold water of the falls.

Be safe,
Tim White <>< NSS 26949 RE FE
Editor, Nylon Highway

Southeastern Region Coordinator-
National Cave Rescue Commission,
NSS

TAG Calendar

Mar 12
Grotto / Scout Trip
Graves or Talucah Meet @ library at 8am

Apr 5
Grotto Meeting
7:30p L&N Train Depot, Arnold St

July 18-22
NSS Convention
Glenwood Springs, Colorado.
[Visit NSS 2011.org!](http://VisitNSS2011.org/)

Oct 6-9
TAG Fall Cave-In
TOTM, Lafayette, GA

My Most Memorable New Year's Eve

By Dale Douglas

Sunday 12/26/10

On December 26th, I began the biggest adventure of my life. The snow falling that morning was like confetti being thrown by Mother Nature herself, wishing us a safe journey. I was picked up by my traveling companions at 9:30 a.m. at the Target in Hoover, AL. We were on our way to Mexico, where I was going to be bouncing the giant pits around Aquismon for the first time. Three of my new friends were from Ohio and had begun their long journey at 1:00 a.m. Tammy Otten, Amy Hill and Brandon Eldred met Mark Ostrander and Larry Foreman in Huntsville, and they caravanned down to pick me up in Hoover. From there we were on our way to the New Orleans Airport to pick up the seventh member of our group, Bubbles Michalek, who was flying in from Buffalo, NY. We picked up Bubbles at the airport at about 3:30 p.m. and headed for Brownsville, TX, with Bubbles, Mark, Larry and me in Larry's Buick Park Avenue and Tammy, Amy and Brandon in Tammy's S10 pickup. The Ohio trio had somehow found room in the bed of the truck to make a fairly comfortable bed among all of the gear, so they took turns sleeping during the long trip.

Monday 12/27/10

We had originally planned to cross the border at Laredo. We had been told it would be safer, but Tiny had called Mark the night before and had been told that it would be OK to take the shorter route and cross at Brownsville. We stopped at about 3:30 a.m. at Denny's in Brownsville to get some breakfast before we made a run for the border. The Hispanic restaurant manager seemed surprised that we were on our way into Mexico on a pleasure trip and

advised us to stay close together and on the main roads and said if we saw any sort of commotion to keep moving. We were pretty much the only ones crossing the border at 5:00 a.m., but it took us about two hours to get across because they were having computer problems. As we were driving through Matamoras, we turned down a side street where a troop transport truck was stopped across the road with armed men jumping out. Needless to say, we quickly backed up and found another route.

As we traveled through northeastern Mexico, I was surprised to see how flat it was. There were no mountains in sight for the first several hours. The few houses along the road were small brightly painted cinderblock buildings, most no larger than a two-car garage. For some reason, the local people would tie their goats, sheep, horses and mules within ten feet of the roadside to graze. At about 10:00 a.m., we stopped at a Mezcal Tequila Distillery for a self-guided tour and some souvenirs. Mexican highways are a little different than U.S. highways. In Mexico, there are about 1-1/2 lanes on each side of the center line. So, when tractor trailers are coming toward you and need to pass another vehicle, they are about 4 to 5 feet across the center line. It is up to you to get out of their way. The first few times this happens are pretty eye-opening experiences. Another interesting business aspect is that there is only one brand of gas station, all of them are full service and you are expected to tip the attendant. This reminded me of growing up in the 60s.

At 12:30 p.m., we reached the Tropic of Cancer, where we stopped, took pictures and stretched our legs. We stopped for our first Mexican meal in very a small town at a taco stand. It was the equivalent of a hot dog cart in the U.S. Brandon went across the street to a little store and bought Coronas for everyone while we

ordered and watched the owners make our taco shells and filling from scratch. It was delicious, and we all stuffed ourselves for about \$3.00 or \$4.00 each. As we were leaving, we caught up to the S10 on the side of the road with a police SUV behind it and policemen at the car window. Much to our relief, we found out that the Police had just stopped to make sure there was not a problem, because the S10 had stopped on the shoulder to wait for us.

We arrived at Mike Walsh's house in Aquismon around 6:00 p.m. TinY and NikkY, PD Drennan and his wife Jane, Jeff Dunn, Jon Mnich and Mike Wolfe were all expecting us. They had all come down a week earlier. After a quick tour of Mike's house, we went to TinY's favorite seafood restaurant for dinner. There are only about three restaurants within 30 minutes to choose from. After dinner, we came back, settled in and began getting our gear together for our first day of Mexican pit bouncing.

Tuesday 12/28/10

We were all up by 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning, anxious to get into the jungle. Most of us had paid the extra \$5.00 for the buffet breakfast. Mike charges a very reasonable \$12.50 per night, so you can have the full B&B experience for only \$17.50 per day.

We had been told that the caravan would be pulling out at precisely 8:00 a.m., so all of us were loaded and ready to go by 8:00. Since Larry's Park Avenue did not have 4-wheel drive or adequate clearance, five of us climbed into the back of the S10 for the journey to the pits. We were packed in like sardines, but we were so excited nobody seemed to notice. As the week went on, we called ourselves the Mountain Taxi Crew because the main mode of transportation was by mountain taxi. A mountain taxi is a pickup truck with rails mounted on the bed where

the occupants stood, during their trips to and from work or town.

TinY and NikkY had planned for us to do three pits in one day. They had hired two guides to carry our ropes and help us locate the pits during the week. We paid them \$20 per day, about four times their regular daily wage. To get three pits bounced by 12 people in one day, we divided up into groups of four to rig all of the pits at the same time. After we bounced one pit, we would move to another one less than 1/4 mile away. TinY blazed a trail through the jungle to help keep us from getting lost between pits. We had a great day, and everyone got to bounce all of the pits at least once. The pits, ranged from 100 feet to 419 feet. These were all large open-air pits, so the bottoms were covered with varying degrees of vegetation. One pit was relatively level and covered with moss, ferns and other small plants, while another was very rocky and hard to explore with large boulders and 12- to 15-foot trees growing in it.

On the way back to Aquismon, we passed out candy to the local children, who were very shy. Some of them, along with their parents, would not even acknowledge our presence. Others would cautiously approach the vehicles and take some candy, with big smiles on their faces.

Back in Aquismon, we decided to go to the favorite taco restaurant, Gringas, for dinner. After stuffing ourselves with tacos and beer, we walked down the street to the only bar in town that women could enter without tarnishing their reputations. Most of us headed back to Mike's house around midnight, and I believe we had all called it a night by about 1 a.m.

Wednesday 12/29/10

The next morning, the talk around town was that the gringos drank the bar out of tequila. Despite the consumption of adult beverages the

night before, we were up for our buffet breakfast and in the vehicles by 8:00 a.m. to head for Cepillas. We hiked for about 30 minutes through some rocky, mountainous farmland, passing coffee trees along the way.

We rigged at both rig points and all had a great time bouncing Cepillas, a pit with the smallest entrance of any we did but a very respectable 422-foot drop. This pit was pretty dark at the bottom with no vegetation to speak of. It did have some very nice rimstone dams and flowstone formations along with some good sized pools. We got back to the cars at dark and all stood around drinking Victoria beer, stargazing and talking about the day, while TinY inflated a flat tire on his Jeep.

We got back to town and decided to go back to Gringas, the taco restaurant we had eaten at the night before. It was the only place that did not require a 15- to 20-minute drive. We all ate as much as we could hold and most had several beers for about \$7.00 per person. We were all in bed by midnight to get ready to bounce GuaGuas the next day.

Thursday 12/30/10

On Thursday, we were not leaving until 9:00 a.m., so a few of us decided to walk down to the main street to look through a few stores. There were small kids selling freshly squeezed orange juice every 100 feet or so, so we all bought some and enjoyed it. About 9:00, the caravan rolled through town and picked us up, and we were off to GuaGuas.

GuaGuas is one of the two big tourist pits in the area. The tourists come and hike down to the pits to see the huge pit itself and to see the swifts return in the evening. There are thousands of swifts that nest on the walls of the pits. As they return in the evening they dive like miniature dive bombers to get into the pit fast enough to escape the conures, or parrots, that are trying to catch them

for dinner. This is an amazing thing to watch and hear. They dive past you so fast you can hear them cutting through the air. At times it almost sounds like a waterfall.

As we arrived at the parking area for GuaGuas, we noticed they had installed a brand new billboard since last year. As we got closer, we realized that the main feature of the billboard was a very attractive blonde climbing out of the pit. It was our very own NikkY Manke! TinY and NikkY were caught completely by surprise. Can you imagine pulling up to a huge tourist attraction and seeing your face on the billboard? After Nikky posed for about a dozen pictures with her billboard, we began the hike to the pit.

After we got the ropes rigged, one on the high side and one on the low side, TinY, Nikky and Jeff Dunn did the first-ever triple rappel at GuaGuas. TinY and Nikky had a requirement of bouncing both sides of GuaGuas to qualify for Golondrinas, the next day. This was a perfect trial run for those of us who had never climbed out of a 1200-foot pit, because the two sides combined equaled the 1200' of Golondrinas. The three of us that needed to qualify did so with no problems except for one heart stopping moment. As Amy Hill and Brandon Eldred were tandem climbing up the low side, the rope rolled off a rock at the rig point and dropped them about 4 feet. They had no idea what had happened but it definitely got their attention. After letting them know, by radio, that everything at the rig point was secure, they finished their climb. After they got off rope, TinY secured the rope to a tree so no one else would soil themselves and risk getting the rope dirty. TinY, Mark Ostrander and I did a triple climb out of the pit to put TinY's rigging modifications to the test. We finished up the climb just in time to watch the swifts come back to the pit.

When we got back to town, we treated our guides to dinner at a very good restaurant. Most of us dined on what we loosely translated from the menu as “pile-o-meat”. It was pretty much fajitas, with three different types of meat, served on their own little grill. We had a great meal with beer and margaritas and headed home to rest up for the granddaddy of all pits, Golondrinas!

Friday 12/31/11, New Years Eve

Everybody was up very early and very excited on Friday. We were in the cars by 6:30 to start the journey to Golondrinas. This was the pit I had been dreaming about bouncing since seeing BASE jumpers diving into it on National Geographic’s Planet Earth episode on caves. This pit is big enough to engulf the Empire State Building! We reached the parking area and negotiated a reasonable fee to have all of our gear and ropes carried to the pit. The people that manage Golondrinas and GuaGuas require rappellers to wait until the swifts leave in the morning to begin rigging and to finish derigging before they return. This means that, depending on how many are rappelling, you could have a pretty tight window to get all of this done. By the time we reached the pit, the swifts had left and we could begin rigging our three ropes immediately.

With the ropes rigged we began our rappels. I was able to rappel the high side, and it was a fantastic rig point! NikkY rigged it high so you could almost walk up, rig your rack, and step off into the abyss. It was a beautiful rappel, and I savored every minute of it. The bottom of the pit is about 7 acres of rolling terrain and very easy to explore. We each had at least an hour to explore the pit and to sign the log. The pit is so huge that, on a few occasions, I could not find my way back to the ropes. Unless someone was standing near it or on the first few hundred feet of their climb, they were very hard to see. When it came time to climb, I asked

Amy Hill to be my climbing partner and she kindly accepted. We had climbed together on the first day and, although I slowed her down quite a bit, we had a good time. During our climb we were able to talk to Bubbles and Larry on the other climbing rope and we had the best seats in the house to watch TinY, NikkY and Jeff do another triple rappel in preparation for El Cap in 2012.

Everybody made it out of the pit on time and, while half of the group made their way back up the mountain to the cars and Coronas, the rest of us stayed to watch the swifts return. By all accounts it had been a fantastic day.

We got back to the house and had a wonderful buffet dinner prepared by the nice lady who had made our breakfast each morning. After dinner, we sat around Mike’s third and fourth floor patios talking about the great week of pit bouncing. At midnight, we set off some crazy bottle rockets TinY and Jeff had bought in town. They looked like a stick of dynamite that had been cut in half and tied, with string, to a tree branch.

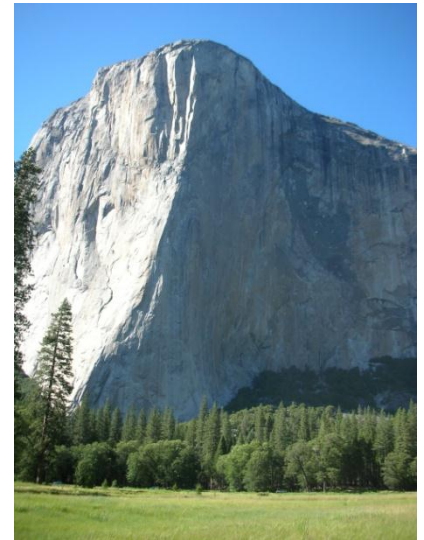
Saturday and Sunday 1/1/11 and 1/2/11

I won’t bore you with the long trip home. The only excitement was when two of our four vehicles got partially searched, at the border, and a purchase was partially confiscated! Most of us had bought honey at a roadside market and Jeff Dunn bought some with the comb inside. Turns out that the comb can carry a disease that can be transmitted to other bees, so the comb was confiscated.

Thanks to TinY and NikkY for planning it, Mike for providing a great place to stay, Larry for allowing me to ride with him, and all my new friends for making it one of the greatest vacations of my life.

EL CAPITAN

By Gary Phelps



Ever since I had climbed and rappelled El Capitan back in June 2001 I had wanted to go back and do it again. I made some attempts to get another trip started but there was not enough interest at the time (some Cullman grotto members which included me had a brand new 3000 foot rope and haul line that never got used because we got in with another team due to a scheduling conflict). Then finally at the beginning of September 2009 I was informed by Kuenn Drake that another trip was in the works. It didn’t take me too long to decide to go.

I hadn’t done a really long drop for years so I needed to attend a September 26 practice session down at Whiteside Mountain in North Carolina. After a 17 1/2 hour drive from Oshkosh, Wisconsin to Highlands NC, much of it at night, through rain, fog and on windy mountain roads not to mention five hours of bad traffic up north I was shot to hell and just wanted to go home. But after sleeping in my car all morning I felt a whole lot better and was just curious enough to see if anybody was really up there (it was still raining...). Much to my surprise, there were dozens there, many on

their way down the trail. Lots of new people to meet including one of the trip leaders, Tiny Manke (his wife Nikky being the other). Looking down from the top of Whiteside, low lying clouds filled the valley below as far as you could see - it was like being at the edge of the world. There was some lightning and many of us did not feel so safe up there. Fortunately they had put up some tarps to stand under because the rain would not let up. A roughly 50 foot rappel down a slope to a stand up area and then another 25 foot rappel down a pig tail took me over the lip (not so easy with a 30.5 inch long rack!). At that position I could start to make out the bottom of the drop.

After switching over to the soaked main line I had a nice 650 foot or so rappel down to where another team member was. For some reason he gave me his radio to take back up to the top which we both completely forgot about afterwards. Climbing back up to the top on a different rope (there were four there), I realized that my legs needed some conditioning if I was to do El Cap again. It was getting dark and I could see lights far below shining up through the clouds. The last hundred feet was a lot of trouble - tangles, hardware and rope pads to go past and a pack that hung up (tether too long!). After I took notice of a pig tail and got on that, things went better.

Coming down the trail, I had a nice chat with Tiny. Chilly and wet (my raincoat was not completely effective) I had my heater on all the way back to town. We stopped at a pizza place and ordered several 26 inch pizzas - I frankly can't remember eating pizza better than that! We had a great time at our campsite which included a miniature bonfire. We never did manage to burn all of the truck load of wood someone brought. A nice starry

night - the non-stop rain had finally quit. By then, I had been accepted into the V Bats El Cap team. The next day I stopped in Gatlinburg and had a great steak dinner at Howards Steak House (if you haven't been to Gatlinburg you are missing something).

Forward to 2010. The last couple of weeks before the trip out west did not



Looking down Half Dome cable route

go well. I had to have my Taurus transmission rebuilt (\$2,500 plus another \$300 in repairs), I lost my poor kitty Dusty due to kidney failure and we were told by Nikky Manke that two other El Cap rappel and climb teams had gotten in trouble with the park service because they had been determined to be for-profit groups. One had their ropes and other rigging items confiscated and the other was told not to come. The park service was taking a fairly strict view of their rules - even liability forms or paid sherpas could ruin our trip. We had planned on using one of the other team's ropes after they were done with it (and do the derigging for them) but now we were on our own. Fortunately, Tiny and Nikky had thought ahead and made sure we had our own ropes and hardware just in case we could not use the other teams for some reason. In fact, they had secured the Cullman

grotto team rope I mentioned earlier. Everyone realized that the V Bat team members would have to be careful what they said to park personal if we didn't want to end up like the other two teams.

With the car stuffed with everything but the kitchen sink I started towards California on Monday night about 9:25 PM CT. Most of the others (30+ people) flew out there then rented an SUV or something. Much of the team gear was hauled across the US in a small trailer or by other means (Greg and Barb Matulionis drove there in a camper which proved to be very handy). This was a big and complicated operation and two years of planning and much effort went into it. I drove all night on into the next day. At Aurora, Nebraska I had a two plus hour nap in my car. What great scenery out west! If you are ever in Rawlins, Wyoming, do stop at Penny's Diner. Sometimes I was tired and other times I was wide awake (a few "No Doz"

tablets helped). When I finally got to Salt Lake City (about 1,500 miles from Oshkosh), I said Gary, you are getting a hotel room now! You can't just keep driving! To a Super 8 at 1:40 AM MT. The next day I stopped at The Bonneville Salt Flats then continued on. After a long drive far into the night and lots of wearing mountain roads I made it to Yosemite. Far into the park I passed the pay station (closed) at an elevation of 9,945 feet. When I got to a sign that said Yosemite Creek, I pulled off into a parking lot about midnight (PT). Having gotten no map at the closed pay station I didn't know where the Yosemite Creek campground was but this seemed like a good place to be. I walked over to a lot across the road and found a couple of vehicles that looked like they could be part of our group and left a couple of notes before crashing in my car.

Thursday, Myrna Attaway woke me up and helped me with my radios - the ones I had purchased were not sophisticated enough to use with the rest of the group but the one I still had from Whiteside worked just fine. I spent much of the day down in Yosemite Valley surrounded by giant cliffs, huge pine trees, a roaring river and 2,700 foot high Yosemite Falls. The 35 plus mile winding drive back up to our campground (just opened due to recent snowfall) took over an hour, the last 4.7 miles of it on a bad dirt road. Pretty easy, though, when you consider that much of the camp gear had been hauled back to the site on foot before the dirt road was open! We had a special wilderness permit that covered all of our activities but the rangers did not seem to know anything about it so we ended up being interrogated by a half dozen of them over the course of the event (not to mention Tiny and Nikky's videotaped interview with the park service). Dozens of people (not part of our group) camped across the bridge in what was obviously part of the campground only to be told that they all had to leave a few days later. With no other sites available in the park for the holiday (and \$100+ hotels outside the park, mostly filled no doubt) they were not very happy! A sign saying no camping past the bridge should have been put up as soon as the campsite opened, not after they were all back there. The rangers were all nice enough but they didn't seem to have their act together at times.

Friday, Bubbles Michalek, Charles Mock and I proceeded down to the valley by the meadow across from 3,600 foot high El Capitan and waited for Myrna, Greg and Barb and gear to appear - others there included Kelley Cassidy, Will Strobridge, Amy Hill, Madison Krieger, Tammy Otten and Mark Ostrander. Our 3,000 foot long rope was divided into five rope bags



Gary Phelps on rappel: El Cap

After we got some kinks out of it we proceeded on up to the bottom of the drop, a strenuous 45 minute hike when carrying a heavy load in hot weather. This was nothing compared to the several (10?) mile gear hauling hike many people made from our campground to the top of El Cap! Somewhere along the cliff face I handed my bag to a willing volunteer and carried someones pack. The thin haul line, weighted by a sand bag, was finally on its way down (I had a pair of 12x60 binoculars to watch it, being very careful not to point them at the nearby sun). Greg tied the ends of the two lines together just the way Tiny (at the top) instructed him to do so. Then it was time for the crew at the top to haul up the rope ("Georgia Haul System" - just a straight pull). I fed the rope from the bottom while Bubbles and Will uncoiled it - it was a lot of fun making waves on a rope one half mile long and feel the wind pull on it. I'm quite sure a stiff breeze could have lifted me right off the ground!

With that job accomplished, Madison, Charles, his two children and I took a "short cut" back down to the road (best to stay on the trail!). Everyone went inside Greg and Barb's airconditioned camper which

served as a very handy base of operation during the climbs and rappels. Pizza with Bubbles, Charles and Madison then back to our campground.

Saturday was a bright blue sunny day. I walked back to where most of the group was camping and met Sherron Ostrander (helped her with her water filter, a very handy thing to have when far from potable water) then got my stuff ready for the next days climb. The Cullman grotto people (Harold Calvert, Kuenn Drake, Scott Murphy, Perry and Sharon Clayton) showed up that afternoon. Later it was back down to the valley for a snack at Curry Village then to the camper for some sleep.

Sunday morning, I got up in the middle of the night and got ready to hike up to the bottom of the drop. Like the last time in 2001, I had trouble following the trail in the dark. A couple of rock climbers appeared out of nowhere so I tried to keep up with them (in their early 20's - a lost cause). I had trouble with my light and tripped while crossing over a log which resulted in a bleeding thumb tip and time lost fixing that up. Fortunately, I didn't run into a bear like a few of our other members did (not sure how effective my pepper spray would have been!). By the time I made it up to the rope it was starting to get light out and I was really concerned about getting roasted by the sun during the climb. I got all my gear on and attached my tethered pack, filled only with what I really needed - fluids, food, sun screen, some light pieces of clothing to keep me warm once at the top, my rack, etc.

Well, there I was, ready to go. I pulled lots of slack through my rope walker then was on my way up the 2,650 foot ascent. At first the cliff seemed to arc over me. Everyone else on the team climbed in tandem, something I didn't care for. For the first several hundred feet I seriously wondered if I was in good enough

shape to get all the way up to the top, even after all my workouts on my Nordic Track. But I figured I could always come back down so I kept climbing. An interesting thing happened at that point - my muscles got warmed up or something like that and the rest of the climb went just fine. I used both my arms and legs to make progress, sliding my Petzl safety up the rope almost two feet then pulling on it while making several small steps. After moving the safety up 15 times or more I would take a rest before continuing. Wow, what a magnificent climb and view! It sure beat climbing El Cap at night which is what I did in 2001.

About half way up the sun came peeking around the far side of the cliff and it was absolutely blinding at that altitude. Off came the helmet and on went my cap. There was a nice cool breeze and I was pretty comfortable all the way up wearing a T-shirt (but you could really roast in the afternoon). Barb called from down below and wanted to use my car (someone had a serious abrasion and needed medical attention). What a great place to take little cat naps! Way up there it became apparent that I had wrapped gauze around the wrong leg so I had to fix that (this was to keep a constantly rubbing Croll from injuring my skin). For some unknown reason, my back seemed to prefer facing the wall, close to it or not, a phenomenon noted by other climbers as well.

How was it climbing a half mile up a rope? Long and strenuous with a super view of Yosemite Valley and Half Dome way off in the distance and some very tiny little vehicles on a road far below. With the pig tail in sight I knew I was going to make it. Finally to the pigtail (about 20 feet below the lip) 3 hours and 7 minutes after I had started up - not bad for someone who would be 60 in December. After sorting out a tangled mess changing over to the short rope (attached to the main line with a carabiner so it wouldn't blow out of reach - there was also a haul

line attached to the main line with an ascender) I stood on a little ledge with Greg overlooking the valley and had a nice chat before proceeding on up to the top past the edge rollers.

I gave Marilyn Smith a call (back in Oshkosh) to let her know I was all right then rested up. It was either too cold or too hot up on the top, depending on if you were in the shade or in the sun. We had a haul line with a mechanical advantage system so two or three people could pull the main line up and put some slack in it, making it a lot easier for the rappellers to get on it. Team members had hauled tents, sleeping bags, water and other supplies several miles to the site for those that had to stay up there over night (cold!). We got several people down (Bubbles, Amy, Tammy, Will, Dana Sutherland, etc.) until it was just Greg, Brandon Eldred and myself left. After some exploring, a snooze under a rock shelter and the arrival of the Cullman Grotto people it was my time turn to go.

I rappelled down one of the two pig tails to the little ledge below the edge rollers where Greg checked me out where I transferred my rack to the main line. 30 1/2 inches long (too long by maybe 6 inches), it had one thick tubular bar at the top and 7 regular bars below (everything stainless steel) with 1.5 inch spacers between the first and second and the second and third bars from the top. Not everyone used spacers but I would highly recommend them on a rope that heavy. If rappelling with a heavy load, have more than 8 bars. There was also a little ring with a set screw near the bottom of the open side of the rack frame so I could have a bar on the rope ready to slide up if I needed an extra one real fast (the ring kept it from sliding up by itself but as it turned out it wasn't actually needed to keep the bar where it was). Some people used self-belay devices or knots for additional safety but there was a lot of debate on their effectiveness and in my opinion they are more of a distraction than

anything else. You will not read too many reports about someone being saved by one that was on a completely out of control rappel. We had people at the bottom to belay rappellers going too fast but this again was something many of us questioned. How long would it take you to figure out they were going too fast in the first place (way up there, maybe hitting the wall!), how effective would it be on a rope that long and how fast can you get away from the rope if a body comes flying down at you at terminal velocity (especially if you are pulling on it with an ascender). The best safety measure was to pay attention to what you were doing and have enough bars on, properly spaced.

When I had done the drop in 2001 I found out that my harness was definitely not comfortable enough for such a long rappel (OK for Golondrinas but not El Cap!). So I used some stretchy hockey leg pads under my upper legs (with the plastic knee protectors removed) - what an improvement for five bucks!

With six bars on the main line I had to hold them tightly together until the slack was released. I carefully slid down to the haul line ascender, took it off then placed it above my rack. With that task completed, I was on my way down. The view from the top was deceptive - it only looked like it was a 1000 feet or less to the base of the cliff. But I guarantee you will believe it is a half mile to the bottom after you do this rappel! There was no wind to blow me around like the last time in 2001 (a slight breeze can send you 50 feet sideways and a strong one can actually lift you up). After I had my bars spaced just right I was able to control my speed just with the friction of my glove below my waist. My leg pads made for a comfortable 19 minute ride. Smooth sailing all the way down - the best rappel I can ever remember. With a few hundred feet to go, I put on a seventh bar. Before I landed, someone pulled me

away from the cliff which curves outwards at the base.

After relaxing back at the camper with a beer I went into Curry village with Amy and Brandon for groceries then headed back to the camper where I had a chat with Tiny. I was so tired driving back to the campground that I had to stop at the gas station and crash. I spent the next few days at the campground, hanging around the camper, going into Curry village and visiting the Ahwahnee with Bubbles and Dean (if you want to stay in that place, save your money up!). At night there was the Milky Way above us, shooting stars, lots of planes overhead and a coyote passing by.

Wednesday, I hiked up to the top of Half Dome with Barb and Greg, a round trip walk of about 16 miles from Curry Village. The hike was quite scenic, much of it along the Merced River and by spectacular waterfalls but we had to gain 4800 feet of elevation and I had a tough time keeping up. The ascent up the second dome (the last 400 foot gain in elevation) was the most interesting part. A pair of vertical pipe mounted steel cables ran up to the top and you hung on to these for dear life as you made the climb. The slope was steeper than 45 degrees by my estimation - fortunately they had a two by four about every 10 feet or so across the base of the pipes to rest on. I was only up there about 20 minutes before I decided to go back down. A storm was off in the distance and I knew that several people had been killed by lightning up there. I thought it was pretty easy going back down the dome but many found the descent intimidating. I managed to get back to Curry Village just before dark (raining...hungry and worn out) and had the best ice cream sundae I could possibly imagine!

I later learned that Harold and Kuenn got caught in a storm while climbing up the rope to the top of El Capitan - Kuenn just happened to notice a piece of rock climbing hardware

attached to the wall that they could clip on to so they wouldn't be blown around and smacked against the granite cliff. After about 45 minutes they were able to proceed on up and finish their climb, one they will not soon forget!

On Thursday I visited the giant Sequoia tree Mariposa Grove and ran into Dan Quinlyn who went on many long Mammoth Cave survey trips when he was between 12 and 18 or 19 years old. Friday night the group had a pizza party back at the campground. Saturday it was time to pack up and head out. What a great experience it had been and nice people to work with too! Many thanks to all, especially Nikky and Tiny.

Those who participated include: Amy Hill, Bob Ausdenmoore, Jeff Dunn, Dana Sutherland, Gary Phelps, Kevin Mulligan, Mark Ostrander, Myrna Attaway, Scott Murphy, Tammy Otten, Anya Crane, Dean Wiseman, Greg Matulionis, Kathryn Burgess, Koda the dog, Michael Hrizuk, Nikky Manke, Sharon Clayton, Barb Matulionis, Bubbles Michalek, Gudrun Hrizuk, Kellie Murphy, Kuenn Drake, Paul Drennan, Sherron Ostrander, Tiny Manke, Charlie Mock, Harold Calvert, Kelly Cassidy, Madison Krieger, Tony Pugh, Tyler French, Will Strobridge, Perry Clayton and Brandon Eldred.



STEPHEN'S GAP

By Harold Calvert

It seems we can hardly wait until hunting season is over every year to get to our favorite caving spots, and this year is no exception. One of the first places we head to is usually Stephens Gap.

The waterfall is always pumping this time of year, its one of our first trips

after the season ends. First things first, we always get permission, and we had the green light to go. As we find out every year, this is not always how most other groups operate. This year is once again the case, with groups showing up with no permit.

As we pulled into the parking spot and began gearing up for the hike, two cars pulled to our right, followed shortly by two more cars to our left. The first group to arrive sent someone over to speak to us.

"You guys goin' to the big pit? You got permission?"

"Yes and yes" was my response.

"Oh, ok then, I guess we will do Pipeside instead."

We didn't see them again for awhile, but the second group, who claimed to be rock climbers, approached us as we were rigging the keyhole.

"You guys gonna rig there? he said. It should have been obvious, we were feeding rope into the hole. With our yes answer, he headed back down the trail.

After getting a few rappels in, we noticed the rock climbers were back, and having a long discussion. They finally started dumping all their gear out and rigging in on the low side of the pit...the spot that you come to on the trail and first see the pit. Except their rope does not reach the bottom, and no knot. With a few yells, they changed their rigging twice, the rope never touched the bottom of the pit. We watched with anticipation as we saw the first rappeller come over the edge. They know the rope is not on bottom, what are they going to do, changeover? No they don't have climbing gear, or helmets, or gloves., only rock harnesses and figure eights.

The first one slowly made his way down to a ledge about thirty feet off the bottom. What now? Well, I will tell you. One by one all four made their way to the small ledge and got off rope. We could tell that there was now a serious discussion taking place.

They can't go down, there is not enough rope. They can't go up, they have no climbing gear. A short time later I saw a head peek up over the edge of the pedestal. There was a tiny ledge, maybe six inches wide and on a steep angle, wet, that they had clung to and walked over to a point that they could climb the side of the pedestal. Without any safety or belay whatsoever!

I think they had enough, once was enough for them. Then there was a group that arrived for a photo shoot. They enjoyed taking photos and video of us as we climbed and rappelled. Once again on a Cullman trip, a disaster nearly occurred. Sometimes we are meant to be at a certain place and time to avert problems or something quite worse. I feel lucky to know enough to be of assistance, but sometimes we are looked upon as know-it-alls. Who cares if we can stop someone from dying in a fall. It would be nice if everyone would follow the rules, be proficient at what they do, and self sufficient. That is not always the case. I am glad we were there.



A Sad Commentary

by Kuenn Drake NSS 36723

This past month (Feb 2011) has been a particularly disastrous one for on-rope tragedies. In the space of two days three individuals lost their lives in two separate on-rope incidents; two college students in Ellison's Cave, GA and another occurred in southern California, at Mildred Falls in Cleveland National Forrest (<http://www.10news.com/news/26851198/detail.html>). All three deaths were the results of exposure while rappelling in waterfalls.

There have been some valuable comments and discussion concerning these three fatalities, both on and off-line. Certainly better education and

training is at the root of the solution. However, it goes without saying, all the knowledge and skill in the world is ineffective when it's not tempered with good sense. The canyoneer fatality in southern CA is even more puzzling, considering the reported experience level. Which brings us full circle to the question of what can be learned from such tragedies?

Well, for starters I usually perform self-evaluation after learning about such events and ask myself some searching questions: What would I have done under these circumstances? Do I possess the knowledge and skill to have performed self-rescue? In a similar situation would I have recognized the compounding effect of seemingly modest mistakes leading to catastrophic failure?

In the case of the two college students, if I had been victim #1 what would I have done differently? Have I ever plunged off into a void, poorly chosen considering what I am wearing, lacking proper safety equipment and (based on the preliminary findings) lacking the proper gear for ascending 124 feet? Do I know how to do a changeover and have I practiced it recently in a stable environment? All right then, could I conceivably do it in an unstable one, in the dark, in a waterfall?

Had I been victim #2 would I have entered the same waterfall knowing that the previous attempt was in jeopardy or would I have realized the potential for compounding an already serious condition? Would I have opted for something simple and capitalize on the group's combined strengths? Can I setup a haul system or at very least, given the numbers in the group, could I have constructed a simple progress capture and brute force the haul? Do I understand the need for expeditious action in order to mitigate hypothermic risk?

One on-line poster pointed out, "Statistically the biggest threats and

dangers are posed to what are known as "YAMs" in the industry: Young Adult Males. They fit the category of 16-24 perfectly. Educating them becomes a double-edged sword. Educating students runs into serious issues of self-awareness and ego. One of the most respected options is long-term, thoughtful mentoring of novices in this age group. Colleges, scout groups, etc. all have the right ideas if the mentors are properly trained and have adequate experience." (Source: Phil - Cedar City, UT - Yahoo Canyons Group)

This all may seem too much "Monday morning quarterbacking" to some; sadly, this will be the last significant contribution these individuals will make to their respective sports. What then is our take away? Optimistically, the hope is that it may prevent a similar incident from happening again.

Certainly *history* bears out that those who ignore it are destined to repeat it. The irony of it all is this, the better trained we become the less likely we are to use the training on ourselves. On the other hand, it only takes one event to fully appreciate the vitality of all that knowledge.

So, the next time you find yourself about to blow-off an opportunity to be better educated or trained in some facet of rope skills..., think twice. The life you are protecting is your own or maybe yet... one of your buddies.

Be safe out there... and don't leave your brains at home.

SANCTUM STUNT DOUBLE DIES

Katherine Firkin, Matt SchulFrom: [Herald Sun](#), AdelaideNow February 28, 2011

The international diving community is mourning the drowning death of one of its brightest female stars.

The body of Agnes Milowka, 29, was found today, after she went missing from a group of divers in Tank Cave, South Australia yesterday afternoon.

The world-class diver and keen underwater photographer was reported missing about 1.45pm yesterday, before the death was confirmed by authorities today.



Agnes Milowka, who died in one of Australia's biggest network of underground caves, was a passionate advocate of the dangerous sport

Ms Milowka performed as a stunt diver in James Cameron's action thriller *Sanctum* and her death has shocked friends and divers around the world.

South Australian Superintendent Trevor Twilley said her body had been found about 500m from the cave entrance after divers worked through the night in pitch black conditions.

"Members of Cave Diving Australia will dive first to ensure the route through the twisting water-filled chambers to the body is clear," he said today.

He said the divers would take a video of the route before police divers were

given the all-clear to enter the water and retrieve the body.

He said the dive was expected take between three and four hours.

If a dive was considered unsafe, police said they would consider tunnelling from the surface to reach the body.

Warwick McDonald, former national director of the Cave Divers' Association, said the woman had dived at Tank Cave "many, many times" and was among a group of other Victorian divers visiting for the weekend.

Ms Milowka was well-known in cave-diving circles and is highly experienced, describing her interests on her [website](#) as "exploration, adventure and scuba diving".

The Polish born expert HAS explored caves from Tasmania to the Bahamas, gained qualifications in maritime archeology and also worked for National Geographic and the Discovery Channel, before acting as a stunt diver for two female characters in *Sanctum*.

On Friday, Ms Milowka tweeted her excitement at the upcoming South Australian diving expedition.

"Another w-end of cave diving in Mt Gambier ... fabulous! Can't wait to get underground," she wrote.

Tank Cave stretches at least 7km underground near Mt Gambier, in South Australia's southeast.

Ms Milowka wrote about the Tank Cave system in December, describing it as the "crowning jewel" of the caves in the region, writing for *Cave Diving Down Under*.

At the time she believed the cave was relatively safe: "The cave is stunning, it is relatively shallow (a max depth around 20m), there is no

flow to fight and the water is crystal clear - you can't go wrong really."

But she also wrote that the system was complicated, "like a spider web gone wild" and meant divers must learn the cave carefully to navigate tight restrictions and often zero visibility.

The adventurous diver wrote she had already discovered another side passage at least 300m long in the system on a previous visit, and hoped to discover more on visits such as her tragic final one.

She said that passage was a small hole, too tiny for her buddy, but she squeezed through for a brief foray into the darkness before turning back.

On her website, Ms Milowka says she is well aware of the risks she faces everytime she submerged into the dark subterranean world of cave diving. "It would be difficult to claim that caves are completely safe" she says.

"Going into caves in general carries a certain amount of risk, and then if you add water and submerge the cave then obviously the risks increase."

Difficult recovery for emergency crews

Authorities continue assessing whether it is safe to recover her body, with specialist divers expected to be needed for the operation.

Tank Cave has been described by dive experts as "the best cave in the southern hemisphere".

The cave is on private property on the Princes Highway, halfway between Millicent and Mt Gambier, near Tantanoola, and is renowned for being a "complicated underground cavern".

March 2011

Police say they will prepare a report for the Coroner.

Ms Milowka's death is the second cave diving death in the south-east in the past year, but only the second time in 30 years someone has died in the Mt Gambier systems.

Melbourne doctor Robert McAlister, 51, died while diving in a sinkhole near Mt Schank on March 13, 2010.

His co-diver was gradually surfacing to avoid the bends when he saw Dr McAlister, an experienced diver, at a great depth below him, authorities said.

The co-diver did not have enough air to return to Dr McAlister. He came to the surface and raised the alarm, but when water operations police found Dr McAlister he was dead and was tangled in the cave's guide ropes.

There have been few fatalities despite the dangers of the sporting subculture, partly because so few people are prepared to take the necessary risks.

A recent report by [Adelaide Now](#) shows there are just 800 accredited divers prepared to risk their lives to reach a beautiful underground world, as alien as space.

The sport combines scuba diving and cave exploration, with South Australia's south east considered to have some of the best cave diving sites in the world.

Divers from as far as Russia come to visit the estimate 330 known caverns, sink holes and caves such as The Black Hole, The Shaft and Death Cave.

Tank Cave is considered one of the most spectacular, with its a labyrinth of connected passages.

The new [James Cameron 3D blockbuster Sanctum](#), which has brought the claustrophobic sport into the spotlight, was partly shot around Mt Gambier sites and was inspired by true events in the Nullabor Plains cave systems which left a crew of 15 battling to survive when a cyclone floods the cave.



Agnes Milowka during one of her many cave dives, as pictured by fellow diver Wes Skiles in an image from her website

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

February 1, 2011

The regular monthly meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society was called to order on Tuesday, February 1, 2011 at 7:38pm by Harold Calvert, Chairman. 9 people were present.

The secretary read the minutes of the previous monthly meeting. A motion was made by Tracy Calvert to accept the minutes as read. The motion was seconded by Perry Clayton.

Cullman Grotto Flowstone

A treasurer's report was given. A check has been written for \$162 dollars for Grotto hats.

The Conservation Officer brought up the Big Room Cave Clean Up taking place this month.

Old Business:

Grotto dues are now past due and payable. We still have t-shirts for sale. New gloves for Camp Hulaco have not yet been purchased

New Business:

Grotto caps are here...get them while they're hot! Patches can also be made if anyone is interested.

Announcements: Kentucky Speleofest is Memorial Day Weekend.

Grotto Cavation will be this July, consisting of a trip to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, followed by canyoneering in Moab area. Plans are on-going.

Harold has e-mailed Tammy Otten about a caving exchange between our Grottos, but has not yet received a response.

The Grotto may get together to see Sanctum.

The February Grotto trip will be to Stephen's Gap this Saturday, February 5. Meet at the Library at 8am.

Harold gave a trip report of a recent trip to Natural Well. Dale Douglas gave a trip report of Iron Hoop.

Dale Douglas gave a presentation of his trip to Mexico this past Christmas.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30pm