

A passion for cave and technical diving

By Don Shirley

Dark caves and specialised equipment, high technology and mixed gasses, total self-reliance and self-confidence – all this is part of the passion. The other part of the enjoyment is the actual divers. I habitually watch people and get great joy from teaching divers diving skills and giving them the “keys to my universe”.

Now take that and imagine true exploration. Imagine spending every available hour – day and night – on a quest to extend the line in caves that have never been seen by a human. Imagine discovering a place where no human has been before and unfolding the mysteries, like one of the stories from *Tomb Raider*. Imagine that this all happens where thousands of people have dived before you – yet you are the one to find the new section. Well, Agnes did it!

I met Agnes Milowka at the 2010 EuroTek conference – a young slip of a woman from Australia. Before she even spoke, you could see that she was full of life and personified the fresh spirit that I see in the underwater environment, and the joy that I see in people as they open new personal frontiers.

Her foremost passion is cave diving. It showed in the vibrant joy in which she told every one of her recent adventures. She had just returned from completing a mind-blowing bit of exploration. On her website, she talks of “deflowering virgins” (the caves) and this she does in style. She spent a year in the USA, in Florida’s cave country working with Dive Rite, and in that time, she spent every waking hour (when she was not working) going to places that “no man had ever seen before”. You might think – so what? But this was in Ginnie Springs and Peacock Springs – caves that are a Mecca to cave divers and over the years have been explored left, right and centre. One would think every

corner had been explored. Clearly not!

Just before she arrived in the USA, Marius Frey had pushed deep into Devil’s Eye Cave and opened up a new section by over 300m. In 2008, another diver died trying to extend the line, and as a result, that part of the cave developed a bad reputation. After spending many hours diving Devil’s, Agnes eventually found herself in the new section and she got her first taste of laying line. Clearly even the Devil’s Eye system did not stop just because the line stopped – the possibilities were endless.



This was not the end of exploring virgin territory for Agnes. There is a small hole in the back woods not far from Peacock Springs. It is named Baptizing as this was a place where baptisms were carried out in the early days of colonisation of the Americas by the Spanish.

Agnes and James Toland wanted to take a closer look at this spring and decided to go downstream and investigate. They faced a slim crack, a tiny restriction through which James couldn’t fit. After taking off most of her gear and rearranging some rocks at the opening, Agnes got through. In her own words: “At first glance the crack looked impassable, not even big enough to fit a tank through, let alone a person. However, on closer inspection I realised that to the right was a low flattener. I rearranged a few loose rocks and had a go at pushing through. Next thing I know – I was in! So I tied off the reel and off I went down the passage. At this point, I had no BC and no fins – just a tank and a light in one hand, and a reel in the other. I was roof walking for about 12m and then I reached a big pit. That’s when I thought, this puppy goes! I tied off the reel and made my way back to get some proper gear and my buddy”.

In the end, she laid over 1.8km of new line in Baptizing in just two weeks. Although the thrill of laying new line was a huge high for her, she decided to stop and survey the passage. Just as well, once the survey was drawn up, Baptizing suddenly fit into a much bigger picture.

A year later, Agnes and buddy, James Toland, descended into Peacock Springs and investigated a lead that was heading north towards Baptizing. Some 1 400m later, they found the line with her marker, an arrow marked “Ag” she previously left at the extent of her exploration in downstream Baptizing. A connection was made and they soon surfaced in Baptizing sink! This feat extends the Peacock system by over 3km, adding significantly to this already extensive 8.5km system.

To me, this is what diving is about; exploration, adrenalin, and being around passionate and committed divers. What more can one ask for? For more information on the above, check out Agnes’ website – www.agnesmilowka.com **S**

This article was written on 14 February 2011, and before time of print, we heard the profoundly sad news that Agnes had passed away during a cave dive on Sunday 27 February 2011 in Tank Cave, near Mt Gambier, Australia. Before submitting the article, we asked Agnes to read the draft and she was very pleased with it. Our condolences go out to her family and friends.

Top: Agnes before a dive. Image by James Axford.

Below: Agnes surveying inside Baptizing Spring. Image by Wes Skiles.

