

# Naked Flame Tests for, and Human Tolerance to, Foul Air in Caves.

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## Abstract

The paper examines the reliability of the "Naked Flame Test" for measuring the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in caves. It reviews the ways in which carbon dioxide gets into caves, how it forms pockets of high concentration and the composition of the atmospheres in these pockets. A cave air index is used to generate theoretical tables of cave atmospheres compositions for two scenarios composed of carbon dioxide from different sources. Conditions for combustion together with levels of carbon dioxide and oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) required to extinguish flames are stated. The fuel components of various combustible materials available for the Naked Flame Test are described. The paper presents and discusses the results of the laboratory tests on matches, candles and butane cigarette lighter in reduced oxygen atmospheres. It reviews the physiological effects of low O<sub>2</sub> and high CO<sub>2</sub>. It is concluded that the Naked Flame Test measures O<sub>2</sub> concentrations and is unreliable for measuring CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations. Elevated CO<sub>2</sub> levels are recognised as being the life threatening component of most cave atmospheres, however, it is also concluded that the Naked Flame Test is still the safest way for an inexperienced caver to test for hazardous cave atmospheres.

Cavers are quiet aware that if they are breathing heavily, have a headache or feel tired and lethargic, there may be a high concentration of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), or "foul air" in the cave atmosphere. For those without sophisticated instruments, a simple "Naked Flame Test" is often done to confirm their suspicion. This "Rule of Thumb" method of measuring the approximate percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> in caves has been used for many years. This raises a number of questions. They include:-

- Are CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations or low oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) concentration in the cave being measured when a naked flame is extinguished?
- How reliable is the Naked Flame Tests for measuring CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations?
- Should low oxygen concentrations be considered as the life threatening component of the cave atmosphere instead of elevated CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations?
- Can butane fuelled cigarette lighters (eg. common disposable gas type) be added to the list below?

The simple naked flame methods of testing for CO<sub>2</sub> uses the following flames as indications

of CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. (*Australian Caver, 1990*).

1% CO <sub>2</sub>	a lighted match will go out.
4% CO <sub>2</sub>	a lighted candle will go out.
6% CO <sub>2</sub>	a carbide lamp will go out.

To answer the question of how reliable are these tests, it is necessary to examine CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> concentrations required to support combustion of various materials. To find out what is the most life threatening situation (low O<sub>2</sub> or high CO<sub>2</sub>), it is necessary to examine the compositions of these gases which are harmful to humans.

## How does CO<sub>2</sub> get into caves and form pockets of high concentration?

As discussed in more detail in the article "Caves, Carbon Dioxide & You", (*Smith, 1993*), CO<sub>2</sub> is produced in the cave in two major ways.

In the first **Scenario 1**, CO<sub>2</sub> is absorbed by the ground water as it passes through surface soil containing high concentrations of the gas, due to the decay of vegetation. This water percolates through the rock strata and enters the cave system, and degasses its CO<sub>2</sub> usually taking part in the calcite deposition cycle. In this instance the addition of extra

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CO<sub>2</sub> to the cave atmosphere displaces O<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen (N<sub>2</sub>). See Table 3.

Under specific conditions, soil CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations can reach as high as 12%, however most values range between 0.15% and 0.65%. Therefore the 24% value listed at the bottom of Table 3 is unrealistic. It is shown as an example of what concentration is required to reduce the cave atmosphere oxygen concentration to a level which will not support combustion.

Halbert (1982), relates this “Foul Air Type 1” cave atmosphere to the introduction of CO<sub>2</sub> into the cave atmosphere and all other components are diluted - the source of the CO<sub>2</sub> is immaterial. An atmosphere resulting from purely a type 1 process occurs quite slowly and it requires five percent CO<sub>2</sub> to reduce the O<sub>2</sub> level by one percent.

In the second **Scenario 2**, the CO<sub>2</sub> is a product of organic decomposition by micro-organism metabolic processes and respiration by fauna such as bats or humans. In this instance the oxygen concentration is reduced in proportion to the increase in CO<sub>2</sub>. The N<sub>2</sub> concentration stays constant. See Table 4.

Halbert, (1982) “Foul Air Type 2” describes in great detail the relationship between consumption of O<sub>2</sub>, and production of CO<sub>2</sub> in the metabolic process of living organisms. Essentially the volume ratio of CO<sub>2</sub> produced to O<sub>2</sub> consumed, called the “respiratory quotient” (RQ) is not constant and can vary between 0.7 and 1, depending on organic matter involved. ie. carbohydrates, fats or protein. If fats were utilised solely in the metabolic process the RQ = 0.7, and would result in a consumption of O<sub>2</sub> with a relatively smaller amount of CO<sub>2</sub> volume being produced.

In the third, **Scenario 3**, “Foul Air Type 3”, cave atmosphere which has resulted from the introduction of other gasses, such as methane and nitrogen and the non-respiratory uptake of O<sub>2</sub> as well as CO<sub>2</sub> stripping by water. Another example is “stink damp” so named because it often contains hydrogen sulfide and the O<sub>2</sub> is

significantly more depleted than in “Type 2”. Foul air consisting strictly of “Type 3” is rare in Australian caves, although some samples collected at Bungonia do suggest a few caves contain atmospheres influenced by this mechanism.

Also falling into Halbert’s (1982) “Foul Air Type 3”, is an atmosphere which has resulted from a combination of scenarios 1&2 with addition of another mechanism which alters the gas concentrations. In general cave atmospheres with a mixture of Type (3+1) or (3+2) are classed as a “Foul Air Type 3”.

The CO<sub>2</sub> / O<sub>2</sub> relationship in caves has been discussed in more detail by (Halbert, 1982) and (Osborne, 1981).

The two major gases in the atmosphere are oxygen and nitrogen. Table 1 shows the density, molecular weight and % in a normal atmosphere for these gases and carbon dioxide. At a given temperature, a volume of CO<sub>2</sub> is 1.57 times heavier than the same volume of N<sub>2</sub> (43.99/28.01 molecular weight ratio) and CO<sub>2</sub> is 1.38 times heavier than the same volume of O<sub>2</sub> (43.99/31.98 molecular weight ratio).

Gas	Density 25°C gL <sup>-1</sup> at 1 atm.	Molecular weight	% in normal atm.
CO <sub>2</sub>	1.931	43.99	0.03
O <sub>2</sub>	1.404	31.98	21
N <sub>2</sub>	1.229	28.01	78
Rare Gases			0.97

**Table 1. Statistics of gases.**

### Properties of Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>).

Even though CO<sub>2</sub> is 1.57 times heavier than nitrogen and 1.38 times heavier than O<sub>2</sub>, it will have a tendency to disperse in an isolated volume of air, due to molecular diffusion. In other words a mixture of gases will not separate into layers of various density gases if they are left for a long time in a still chamber. On the other hand various gases purged separately into a closed container will become uniformly mixed over a period of time. A possible explanation of the high concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in caves with a

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relatively still atmosphere, is that CO<sub>2</sub> is being produced metabolically or entering the cave via ground water at a greater rate than the gas can diffuse into the cave atmosphere. This would explain why foul air, with a high CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is found in pockets at the lower sections of a cave. Frequently there appears to be a definite boundary between good air and foul air. This would indicate that dispersion of the CO<sub>2</sub> was occurring at a relatively slow rate compared to the gas production. These atmospheres can be attributed to ‘Foul Air Types’ 1 or 2, or a combination of both, however the CO<sub>2</sub> is being introduced into a relatively still cave atmosphere and molecular diffusion is not sufficient to disperse the gas with an even gradient over the vertical range of the cave.

Another possible scenario in caves with relatively still atmospheres, is that CO<sub>2</sub> is being produced faster than it can diffuse into the rest of the cave atmosphere (by molecular diffusion) and it sinks to the lowest point in the cave thus building up in concentration.

It should be noted that foul air will not build up in caves with two entrances at different elevations, as temperature gradients cause a flow through affect which flush the cave atmosphere. Long branch passages in these caves may not be cleared of foul air by air movement between entrances.

Carbon dioxide is “regarded as a ‘hot gas’ due to its low thermal conductivity, heat is not conducted away as rapidly as in normal air, so a person standing in it feels warm about his lower limbs”. (*Strang, 1990*)

### Calculating the Gas Concentrations in a Cave Atmosphere.

In dry air the total pressure (of a mixture of gases) is equal to the sum of their partial pressures. The atmospheric or barometric pressure of dry air = pN<sub>2</sub> + pO<sub>2</sub> + pRG + pCO<sub>2</sub> (RG = Rare Gases).

However since a great majority of cave atmospheres contain high humidity, a water vapour (H<sub>2</sub>O) component should be included in the equation.

$$\text{Barometric Pressure} = pN_2 + pO_2 + pRG + pCO_2 + pH_2O.$$

Water vapour constitutes about 0.5% by volume of a saturated cave atmosphere at 20°C and is 0% in a dry atmosphere. *Halbert (1982)* uses the Cave Air Index (CAI) to characterise gas mixtures found in caves on a dry atmosphere basis. The water vapour component in the calculation, slightly changes the concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>, but did not affect the arguments derived from the data. For simplicity cave atmospheres may be considered to consist of O<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, and a Residue Fraction (RF) composed of rare gases, N<sub>2</sub> and water vapour (H<sub>2</sub>O).

$$\text{Cave Air Index} = \frac{\text{CO}_2 \text{ Concentration}}{\text{O}_2 \text{ Concentration}}$$

$$\text{CAI} = \frac{\text{CO}_2 \text{ Concentration}}{\text{O}_2 \text{ Concentration}}$$

Table 2 shows the relationship between possible mixes of the scenarios described in this paper, Foul Air Type and CAI.

Foul Air Type (after Halbert 1982)	Possible Mixes	Cave Air Index
1		$4 \leq \text{CAI} \leq 5$
1+2 combination	1+3	$1 < \text{CAI} < 4$
2	2+1, 2+3, 1+3	$0.75 \leq \text{CAI} < 1$
2+3 combination	1+3	$< \text{CAI} < 0.75$
3	-	CAI = 0

**Table 2. Possible mixes of cave air scenarios and correlation with Halbert’s “Foul Air Type” & Cave Air Index.**

The “Foul Air Type 3”, where CAI = 0, is rarely in caves. In general cave atmospheres with CAI of < 0.75 are regarded as falling into the Foul Air Type 3. *Halbert (1982)* gives the example of “Foul Air Type 3” atmospheres containing 1% CO<sub>2</sub>, 17% O<sub>2</sub>, and 82% RF and another with 4.5% CO<sub>2</sub>, 10.5% O<sub>2</sub>, and 85% RF. He points out that a low absolute O<sub>2</sub> concentration does not need to be present. However in practice “Foul Air Type 3” atmospheres likely to be encountered in caves will have low O<sub>2</sub>. In addition this type of foul air may have deceptively low CO<sub>2</sub>. Some readings at Bungonia suggest a “Foul Air Type 3”. They include atmospheres in Grill Cave with a composition of 1.4% CO<sub>2</sub>, 12.0% O<sub>2</sub>, 86.6% RF which gives a CAI of 0.16 and readings in Odyssey Cave of 2.8% CO<sub>2</sub>, 14.5% O<sub>2</sub>,

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80.3% RF which gives a CAI of 0.43. (Halbert, 1982)

The following table 3, and 4, illustrate the changes in oxygen and residual fraction for atmospheres with elevated carbon dioxide sources as in scenario 1 and 2.

CO <sub>2</sub> %	O <sub>2</sub> %	RF %
1%	20.75%	78.25%
2%	20.50%	77.50%
3%	20.25%	76.75%
4%	20.00%	76.00%
5%	19.75%	75.25%
6%	19.50%	74.50%
10%	18.50%	71.50%
12%	18.00%	70.00%
24%	15.00%	61.00%

**Table 3. Calculations of major gas concentrations in a cave atmosphere using scenario 1 with a CAI of 4.**

CO <sub>2</sub> %	O <sub>2</sub> %	RF %
1%	20.00%	79.00%
2%	19.00%	79.00%
3%	18.00%	79.00%
4%	17.00%	79.00%
5%	16.00%	79.00%
6%	15.00%	79.00%
8%	13.00%	79.00%
10%	11.00%	79.00%
13%	8.00%	79.00%

**Table 4. Calculations of major gas concentrations in a cave atmosphere using scenario 2 with a CAL of 1, i.e. RQ =1.**

### Conditions Required for Combustion

Before combustion can occur, three conditions must be satisfied.

1. There must be a fuel or substance which can be burnt.
2. The fuel must be heated to its ignition temperature. That is the lowest temperature at which combustion can begin and continue.
3. There must be enough oxygen to sustain combustion, either in the surrounding air or present in the fuel.

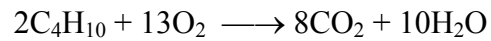
### Levels of O<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> required to extinguish a flame.

When fighting a fire, the aim is to dilute O<sub>2</sub> to a concentration which will not support combustion and this is the main flame

extinguishing mechanism of CO<sub>2</sub>. The same effect can be obtained by adding an inert gas such as nitrogen, argon, neon or helium, to an atmosphere at about 17% concentration by volume. By the addition of these gases O<sub>2</sub> can be diluted to a life threatening level. (Safe Handling of Compressed Gases, 1992).

The Le Chatelier's principal states that "any system in equilibrium shifts the equilibrium, when subjected to any constraint, in the direction which tends to nullify the effect of the constraint". Using butane (cigarette lighter) as an example, then:

Butane + Oxygen → Carbon Dioxide + Water



Simply this means that if the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is raised and /or the O<sub>2</sub> concentration is reduced, then the reaction will slow down and eventually stop. Increasing the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration will have a much lesser effect than decreasing the O<sub>2</sub> concentration. The experimental data in this paper and that of Kuchta (1985), indicate that a 1% increase in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration will raise the O<sub>2</sub> concentration required to support combustion of a given substance by less than 0.05% O<sub>2</sub>.

In the majority of cave atmospheres it is the low concentration of O<sub>2</sub> which combustion, not the high concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Vapour	CO <sub>2</sub> to air	The resulting atmosphere from addition of CO <sub>2</sub> would consist of			
		%O <sub>2</sub>	%N <sub>2</sub>	%CO <sub>2</sub>	Rare Gases
Carbon disulfide	1.59	8.11%	30.12%	61.40%	0.37%
Hydrogen	1.54	8.27%	30.71%	60.64%	0.38%
Ethylene	0.68	12.50%	46.43%	40.49%	0.58%
Ethyl ether	0.51	13.91%	51.66%	33.79%	0.64%
Ethanol	0.48	14.19%	52.70%	32.45%	0.66%
Propane	0.41	14.89%	55.32%	29.1%	0.69%
Acetone	0.41	14.90%	55.32%	29.1%	0.69%
n-Hexane	0.40	15.0%	55.71%	28.6%	0.69%
Benzene	0.40	15.0%	55.71%	28.6%	0.69%
Methane	0.33	15.79%	58.65%	24.83%	0.73%

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**Table 5, Minimum volume ratios of CO<sub>2</sub> to air (column 2) which are required to prevent burning of various vapours at 25°C (Column 1) and the composition of the resulting atmosphere resulting from addition of CO<sub>2</sub> (columns 3 to 6). (After Friedman. R.,(1989). Data calculated from tabulations by Kuchta (1985.))**

To calculate the final volume percentages of each gas from the (volume ratio) of CO<sub>2</sub> added to air.

$$R+V = Y$$

Where  $R =$  Volume of CO<sub>2</sub> needed to give CO<sub>2</sub>/ air volume ratio. (from table No.5)

$V =$  Volume of air which CO<sub>2</sub> added to (=1)

$Y =$  Total volume of gases when CO<sub>2</sub> and air is mixed.

To find the percentage of gases in the new atmosphere (which will not support combustion of various vapours because the O<sub>2</sub> has been diluted). The known percentage of gases in air are used. ie. O<sub>2</sub> = 21%, N<sub>2</sub> = 78%, CO<sub>2</sub> = 0.03% and Rare gases = 0.97% It should be noted that R must be added to air CO<sub>2</sub> of 0.03%

Gas % (fire retarding atmosphere) = % of gas (in normal air) ÷ Y

Example.

To calculate the O<sub>2</sub> % in an atmosphere which will not support combustion of propane vapour, CO<sub>2</sub> / air ratio is 0.41 (Table 5).

Therefore  $Y = 0.41+1$

$$Y = 1.41$$

Gas % =  $21 \div 1.41 = 14.89\%$  in the new atmosphere.

From Table 5, it can be seen that the addition of CO<sub>2</sub>, to dilute the O<sub>2</sub> concentration, will result in a CO<sub>2</sub> rich atmosphere which will not support human life. (see Table 8). For this purpose much higher concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> are present, than would be found in the majority of caves.

Nitrogen can also be used to dilute the O<sub>2</sub> concentration. However since N<sub>2</sub> is less dense than CO<sub>2</sub>, a comparison of Table 5 and Table 6 shows that almost twice the volume of N<sub>2</sub> is required to extinguish flames from the same fuel.

Vapour	N <sub>2</sub> to air ratio	The resulting atmosphere from addition of N <sub>2</sub> would consist of			
		%O <sub>2</sub>	%N <sub>2</sub>	%CO <sub>2</sub>	Rare Gases
Carbon disulfide	3.0	5.2%	94.5%	0.0075%	0.243%
Hydrogen	3.1	5.1%	97%	0.00732%	0.237%
Ethylene	1.00	10.5%	89%	0.015%	0.485%
Ethyl ether	0.97	10.66%	88.83%	0.015%	0.492%
Ethanol	0.86	11.3%	88.17%	0.016%	0.522%
Propane	0.78	11.8%	87.64%	0.0169%	0.545%
Acetone	0.75	12.0%	87.43%	0.017%	0.554%
n-Hexane	0.72	12.2%	87.21%	0.0174%	0.564%
Benzene	0.82	11.54%	87.91%	0.0165%	0.533%
Methane	0.63	12.9%	86.5%	0.0184%	0.595%

**Table 6, Minimum volume ratios of N<sub>2</sub> to air (column 2) which are required to prevent burning of various vapours at 25°C (Column 1) and the composition of the resulting atmosphere resulting from addition of N<sub>2</sub> (columns 3 to 6). (After Friedman. R.,(1989). Data calculated from tabulations by Kuchta (1985.))**

## Flame sources for the “Naked Flame Test”

### Matches.

There are two main types of matches, “Strike-anywhere” and “Safety”. This paper will only deal with “Safety” matches as they are the only type readily available in Australia. In general, “Safety” matches can only be lit by striking them across a special surface on the side of their box or packet. The head is made of a mixture containing potassium chlorate, sulphur and other components, which will ignite at a temperature of approximately 182°C. The coating on the box is made of amorphous phosphorus and sand.

Wooden “Safety” matches are generally made of poplar wood, which is dried to reduce moisture content to below 7%, then the “splint” is treated with an anti-afterglow solution (*retardant*) which prevents embers from forming after a flame is blown out. The second stage in production is dipping approximately 10 mm of the tip end into paraffin. This provides a base to carry the

flame from the head to the wood. Then the tip (sometimes called a bulb) is added. Some match manufacturers add a final chemical coating that protects the match from moisture in the air.

When a match is scraped across the box striking surface, it begins a chemical reaction between the potassium chlorate and amorphous phosphorus which in turn ignites the sulphur component of the head. The heat generated in the head vaporises the paraffin coating on the splint and the flame is drawn down from the head. Moisture is driven out of the timber, the retardant is burnt off, allowing the wood volatiles to vaporise and ignite. The head will fizz and not burst into full flame when there is a lack of O<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, as it's partial burn is due to the O<sub>2</sub> in the potassium chlorate contained in the head.

**Book matches** are a type of "Safety" match made of heavy paper (called *paperboard*) and the row or rows (called *combs*) of matches are bound into a paperback cover. The paperboard is also treated with an anti-afterglow solution and paraffin as with wooden matches. (*The World Book Encyclopedia, 1992*).

### Candles

A candle burning in an area without draft will produce a steady flame. The flame's heat vaporises just enough candle wax to keep the flame burning at the same height. This is influenced by the length and type of wick and the type of wax. The wick serves as a place for the flame to form. When lit by another heat source, the heat from the burning wick melts the wax at its base and the liquid is drawn up the wick to the flame by capillary action. The heat in the flame vaporises the molten wax which then burns. Most candles today consist of beeswax or paraffin. The latter being the most common.

Paraffin is a wax obtained from petroleum and is a mixture of hydrocarbons which melt between 32 to 66°C and vaporises at between 150 and 300°C.

### Cigarette Lighter (Butane type).

Butane is a colourless, flammable gas which can be readily kept in a liquid state while under pressure at ordinary temperatures. Once the pressure in the lighter reservoir drops below 265 kPa at 25°C, the liquid butane begins to vaporise until the pressure increases to an equilibrium point and further vaporisation ceases. When the lighter is operated, gas from the reservoir is liberated through a fine jet and a hot spark from the flint easily ignites the gas. Ignition temperature of butane can vary between 482 and 538°C, however the hot flint spark is sufficient to begin combustion of the gas. At atmospheric pressure the normal vaporisation point of butane is -0.5°C.

### Interesting phenomena with cigarette lighter in O<sub>2</sub> deficient air.

A cigarette lighter when lit in an atmosphere which will support combustion of butane will burn with the flame extending directly from the jet. When this lit cigarette lighter is slowly lowered into an atmosphere that will not support combustion (lower O<sub>2</sub>, higher CO<sub>2</sub> concentration), an interesting phenomena occurs. The flame will magically stay burning where the atmosphere will support combustion, just above the interface between the high and low CO<sub>2</sub> concentration, while the lighter is several centimetres below this interface.

In the CO<sub>2</sub> Pit of Gaden Cave (WE-2) Wellington, NSW, Mike Lake demonstrated the above phenomena. When a lit butane lighter was gradually lowered into Pit, the 25mm high flame stayed burning just above the oxygen deficient interface. The lighter body continued to be lowered until the 25 mm flame remained burning some 75 mm away from the lighter, in other words, the base of the 25 mm flame was 75 mm away from the cigarette lighter jet. Clearly at this depth in the Pit the O<sub>2</sub> was now insufficient to support the combustion of butane as it issued from the lighter but 75 mm higher there was sufficient oxygen. This phenomena

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can not occur with the solid fuels, such as matches and candles, as the heat from the flame is required to vaporise the volatiles which then burn. When lowered further into the CO<sub>2</sub> Pit the butane lighter flame was totally extinguished.

A cigarette lighter which does not have adjustment for the flame can also be used to some degree to check for low O<sub>2</sub> concentrations. A subtle change in the flame height occurs as the O<sub>2</sub> concentration decreases - it becomes longer as the O<sub>2</sub> concentration decreases. This test is environmentally more desirable than the matches or candle method as unpleasant odours are not produced. However this method is not recommended for the novice as it requires some experience for reliable interpretation of O<sub>2</sub> concentration.

### Laboratory Combustion Tests

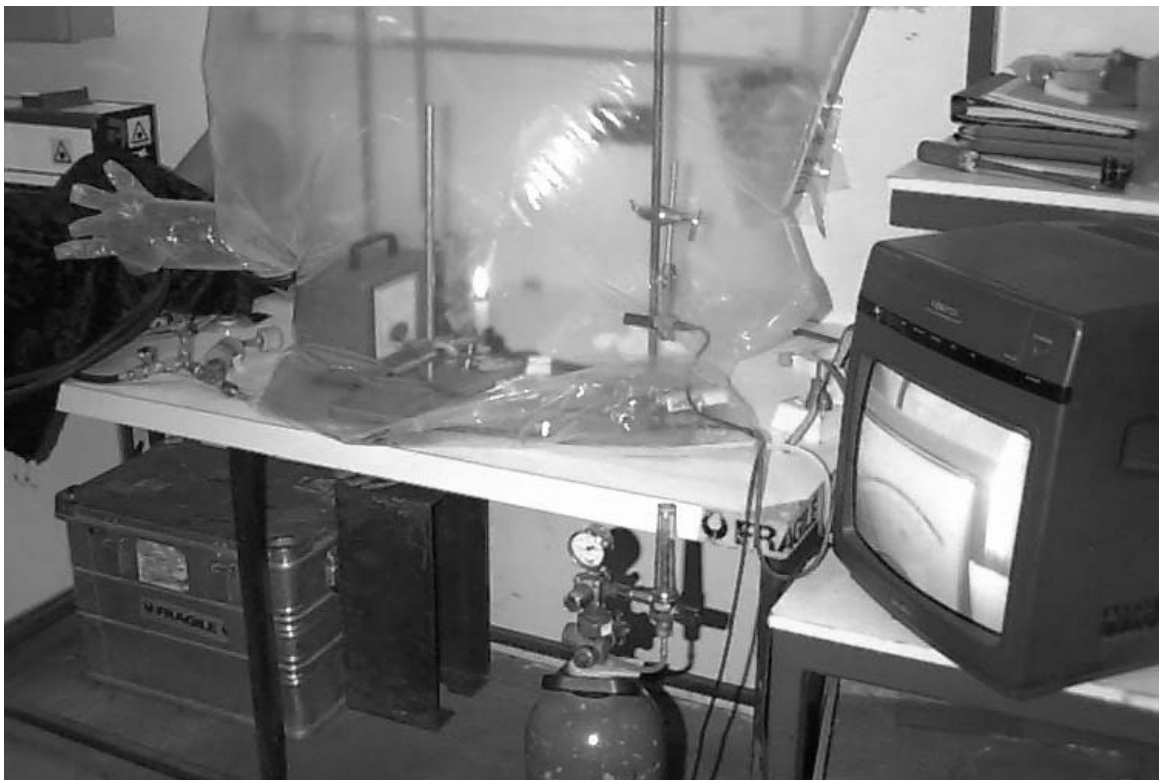
To verify the O<sub>2</sub> concentrations required to support the flames of matches, candles and cigarette lighters, a series of tests were conducted in a controlled atmosphere chamber. A large inflatable glove chamber made of clear plastic was filled with normal atmospheric air. The "Glove Bag<sup>TM</sup>" Model X-37-27, was pre-loaded with all the components required for the experiment, then sealed from the outside atmosphere. A stand was used to

hold a burning candle and another stand held a mini video camera (ELMO 120 with 15mm lens). The chamber full of normal air, was then purged with argon to reduce the O<sub>2</sub> concentration. The O<sub>2</sub> concentration (as % by volume) was measured using a Teledyne Portable Oxygen Analyzer, (Model 320). A small bleed line, vented excess hot air and fumes from the chamber as the argon gas reduced the O<sub>2</sub> concentration. At each 0.5 % drop in O<sub>2</sub> concentration, four separate matches ("Kangaroo" brand) were lit and a video recording made of their burning. The lowest O<sub>2</sub> concentration reached in the chamber was 7.5%.

When the match tests were complete, the chamber was slowly re-filled with fresh air and a butane cigarette lighter was struck at each 0.5% rise in oxygen concentration. The level at which the butane would remain alight was noted. Then the O<sub>2</sub> concentration was reduced to verify the exact percentage which would extinguish the flame. Both ignition and extinguishing of the flame occurred between 14.25% and 14.5% O<sub>2</sub>.

The atmosphere in the chamber was then returned to normal atmosphere air and a candle lit. Argon was slowly purged into the enclosed atmosphere until the candle went out. This occurred at an O<sub>2</sub> concentration of 15%.

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*Plate 1. Testing setup using a Teledyne Portable Oxygen Analyzer, and large inflatable glove chamber to measure oxygen concentrations which would extinguish various fuels. ie matches, candles and butane cigarette lighter.*



*Plate 2. Close-up of experiment.  
Note, mini video camera centre right.*



*Plate 3. Overall view of experimental setup.  
Video recorder and argon gas bottle.*

### Results of the Test.

The results are summarised in *Table 7*. On the whole the match tests were very consistent, with about half a percent variation in the  $O_2$  concentration required for the ignition of paraffin on different matches from the same box observed. The test with “Kangaroo” brand matches (made in Sweden) did not show any sign of fizzing slowly like a sparkler as has

been observed in caves. It is assumed that the matches used in a cave on those occasions had absorbed some moisture which retarded combustion of the match head or that different brands behave differently because of variations in retardant or head composition. The candles and butane lighters were extremely sensitive to changes in  $O_2$  concentrations at their critical combustion points.



Match	Candle	Butane lighter
21% - 18% easily burns all of match .	>19% normal flame.	
17.5% Burns head and flame transfers down paraffin to wooden splint on most occasions	17% - 16.5% burns with elongated flame.	
17% - 16.5% ignited head and on nearly every occasion, burns down onto paraffin coating then extinguishes.	16.5% - 16% flame begins to shrink, but candle remains alight.	
16% - 15.5% ignited head just ignites paraffin coating on splint (some matches only)	16% burns slowly with small flame	
15% - head burns briefly with whispery flame & goes out.	< 15.0%, A burning paraffin candle is extinguished.	> 15% O <sub>2</sub> , A Butane Cigarette Lighter can easily be lit and will stay alight.
		14.5% - weak blue flame with orange top, just stays alight
		<14.25% - Flame will extinguish
14% match head burns very briefly & goes out.		14% - 13% Large flashes of flame but will not stay alight.
<13% head flares & extinguishes immediately (less than 0.5 seconds)		12.5% sparks with partial ignition, small fireballs
		<10% - no ignition, only hot sparks from flint.

**Table 7. Gives condition of flame in relation to O<sub>2</sub>% in the controlled atmosphere.**

### Physiological effects of reduced O<sub>2</sub>

In atmospheres consisting of just N<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>, and where the O<sub>2</sub> is at a lower concentration than the normal atmosphere, the human body would be affected in the following manner. (*Laboratory Safety Manual, 1992*)

- **O<sub>2</sub> reduced from 21 to 14% by volume.** First perceptible signs with increased rate and volume of breathing, accelerated pulse rate and diminished ability to maintain attention.
- **O<sub>2</sub> concentration between 14 to 10% by volume.** Consciousness continues, but judgment becomes faulty. Rapid fatigue following exertion. Emotions effected, in particularly ill temper is easily aroused.
- **O<sub>2</sub> reduced from 10 to 6% by volume.** Can cause nausea and vomiting. Loss of ability to perform any vigorous movement or even move at all. Often the victim may not be aware that anything is wrong until collapsing and being unable to walk or crawl. Even if resuscitation is possible, there may be permanent brain damage.
- **O<sub>2</sub> reduced below 6% by volume.** Gasping breath. Convulsive movements may occur. Breathing stops, but heart may continue beating for a few minutes - ultimately death.

These points indicates that there is very little difficulty caused by short-term exposure to O<sub>2</sub> / N<sub>2</sub> mixtures down to about 10% O<sub>2</sub>. From *Tables 3 and 7*, it can be seen that the percentage of O<sub>2</sub> which will just not support combustion is approximately 15%. This is well above the concentration which will support human life. In *Tables 3 & 4*, the theoretical cave atmospheres contain sufficient O<sub>2</sub> concentration to support life, however the CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations is sufficiently high to be dangerous to cavers.

### Physiological effects of increased CO<sub>2</sub>

Table 8 summarises the way in which the human body responds to elevated CO<sub>2</sub> in an atmosphere. Gases which create a hazard simply by displacing oxygen are called simple asphyxiants. However it is not the lack of oxygen in a cave which causes the physical symptoms or in extreme cases death, rather it is the increased concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>. For example a person can survive several hours in an atmosphere with 3% CO<sub>2</sub> and 12% O<sub>2</sub>. On the other hand an atmosphere of 8% CO<sub>2</sub> and 18% O<sub>2</sub> could result in suffocation and death within a few minutes. The exact percentage and timing will depend on the individuals physiological make-up and tolerance, however several minutes exposure to a concentration of >10 CO<sub>2</sub> will certainly result in death. For

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instance exposure to 25% CO<sub>2</sub> or greater, will result in death within one minute, even if there is 20% O<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. The “*Laboratory Safety Manual (1992)*”, quotes 0.5% CO<sub>2</sub> as the ‘Threshold Limit Value Time Weighted Average’ (TLV-TWA). This is the concentration to which a person may be exposed, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, without harm. The manual also quotes 5% CO<sub>2</sub> and above as being ‘Immediately Dangerous To Life and Health’ (IDLH). This is the concentration that will cause irreversible physiological effects after 30 minutes exposure.

Exposure to just 1 to 2% CO<sub>2</sub>, for some hours will result in acidosis, even if there is no lack of oxygen. This acid-based disturbance will

occur in the human body when the increase in partial pressure of CO<sub>2</sub> is greater than 44 mm Hg. Acidemia will result and secondary mechanisms are initiated by the body that attempt to prevent drastic changes in pH and tend to return the pH toward normal. “Intracellular buffering, via red cell haemoglobin, phosphate, and protein, exchange intracellular sodium and potassium for the excess extracellular hydrogen ion. In addition, hypercapnia leads to an increase in renal hydrogen ion secretion and net acid excretion, as well as an increase in bicarbonate reclamation. Although this response begins early, the maximum effect takes several days.” (*Clinical Management of Poisoning & Drug Overdose, 1996*).

Concentration	Comments
0.03%	Nothing happens as this is the normal carbon dioxide concentration in air.
0.5%	Lung ventilation increases by 5 percent.
2.0%	Lung ventilation increases by 50 percent, headache after several hours exposure.
3.0%	Lung ventilation increases by 100 percent, panting after exertion, headaches.
5 - 10%	Violent panting and fatigue to the point of exhaustion merely from respiration & severe headache. Prolonged exposure could result in unconsciousness and death.
10 - 15%	Intolerable panting, severe headaches and rapid exhaustion. Exposure for a few minutes will result in unconsciousness and suffocation without warning.
25% to 30%	Extremely high concentrations will cause coma and convulsions within one minute of exposure.

**Table 8. Physiological effects of CO<sub>2</sub> at various concentrations. (Strang, 1990)**

### Treatment for exposure to CO<sub>2</sub>

For persons exposed to high concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub>, remove to a well ventilated atmosphere, keep the person warm and avoid exertion. In severe cases administer oxygen if available but be aware that vomiting and nausea often follow. Persons who have been exposed for short periods, generally recover without serious after effects

### Fire fighting research and CO<sub>2</sub>

*Fields, (1992)* studies the use of a new fire extinguishing gas mixture, designed to be used in enclosed spaces. While the actual percentages are not given in the paper, the gas called “Inergen” appears to consist chiefly of argon (Ar) with some CO<sub>2</sub> added. The function of the gas mixture is to reduce

the ambient oxygen concentration to less than 15%. The study then goes into great detail about the affect on human life when the O<sub>2</sub> concentrations are reduced to between 15.0% and 12.4%, while the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is increased to between 3.1% and 4.3%. The research found that the addition of CO<sub>2</sub> was beneficial as it induced an immediate and sustained stimulus to increase breathing rates of persons caught in areas flooded with this gas mixture. It was the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> and to a much lesser extent the decreased O<sub>2</sub> which stimulated the respiratory response. For fire fighting “Inergen”, would be injected into an enclosed space at between 0.4 and 0.7 cubic metres for every cubic metre of room volume. At 40% dilution there would be 3.1% CO<sub>2</sub> and 15.0% O<sub>2</sub>, while at 70% dilution there would be 4.3% CO<sub>2</sub> and 12.4% O<sub>2</sub>. The paper

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concludes that the elderly or people with heart diseases (eg. coronary artery disease) but not heart failure would be at some risk of clinically significant hypoxia when breathing 70% Inergen mixture at sea level, but not when breathing a 40% mixture. The use of Inergen was considered at altitudes with barometric pressure down to 650mm Hg, (Sea level atmospheric pressure  $\approx$  760mm Hg). There was an overall increase in risk, however not significant enough to warrant a change in the mixture. At sea level an average healthy person would be at low risk of suffering any affects other than reducing their capacity for physical exertion, to less than half the maximum they could normally sustain while breathing fresh air.

An increase in CO<sub>2</sub> would cause increased breathing rates and could impose serious limitations on the degree of physical exertion achievable by a person with lung disease, cardiovascular disease, anaemia or carbon monoxide poisoning.

This paper fails to mention exposure times in relation to effects on humans at various concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> as would be expected after the addition of different Intergeren to an enclosed atmosphere.

Inergen in air	N2%	Ar%	CO <sub>2</sub> %	O <sub>2</sub> %	Trace Gases %
40%	70.0	11.4	3.1	15.0	0.5
70%	66.5	16.4	4.3	12.4	0.4

**Table 9. Resulting volume % of gases in an inergen air mixture which will extinguish fire.**  
(After Field., 1992.)

### Conclusion.

The results and discussion in this paper have clearly answered the four questions posed in the introductory paragraph.

- The Naked Flame Test is primarily measuring the low O<sub>2</sub> concentration.
- It is not reliable for measuring CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations. The Naked Flame Test using different fuels can reliably indicate the O<sub>2</sub> concentration in a cave atmosphere.

- Examination of the literature has shown that a high (>6%) CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is the most life threatening situation encountered underground. A life threatening low (<10%) O<sub>2</sub> concentration is rarely encountered in caves.
- Can the butane lighter be added to the following list of CO<sub>2</sub> indicators (Australian Caver, 1990)?

1% CO<sub>2</sub> a lighted match will go out

4% CO<sub>2</sub> a lighted candle will go out

6% CO<sub>2</sub> a lighted carbide lamp will go out

A butane lighter can be added to the list of Naked Flame indicators of foul air, however as already determined by controlled atmosphere experimental work in this paper, all flame tests are only measuring the O<sub>2</sub> content of the atmosphere. CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations at the levels which can be encountered in caves, have no real influence on the naked flame test. Therefore extinguishing of a naked flame is indicating a potentially dangerous cave atmosphere, which is low in O<sub>2</sub> and most likely has an elevated concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>. The exact CO<sub>2</sub> concentration can not be determined by the flame test as the cave atmosphere may have been influenced by type 1, 2 or 3 Foul Air or a combination of these. It can only be assumed that instrument inaccuracies occurred when the rule of thumb CO<sub>2</sub> test was originally determined during the early 1970's, in mainly type 2 Foul Air at Bungonia Caves, NSW.

It could be concluded that the Naked Flame Test adopted as part of the ASF Cave Safety Guidelines, 27<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1990 (Australian Caver 1990) is essentially meaningless. Without sophisticated measuring instruments, one can only speculate about the exact concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>, so if any one of these flame indicators will not burn, it is time to exit the cave.

Cavers should recognise the fact that exposure to foul air has an effect on a person's ability to function normally. The likelihood of an accident is therefore greatly increased. All care and precautions should be taken.

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If sophisticated measuring equipment is not available, the best advice is to carry out a "Naked Flame Test" when you or a member of your group experiences the first signs of labored breathing, headaches, clumsiness, loss of energy or any of the other signs associated with elevated concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub>. Ideally cavers should become aware of the subtle changes to a cigarette lighter flame associated with O<sub>2</sub> concentrations down to 13%. This will reduce the amount of unpleasant fumes emitted from matches burnt by people experimenting in the confines of a cave. The best advice is, "If in doubt, get out", in an orderly manner.

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