

Serious and funny caving incidents

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THIS ARTICLE is a compilation of caving related incidents over many years with NHVSS, which at the time were not necessarily humorous, but on reflection years later, are now quite amusing.

While they may be entertaining, there are important lessons to be learnt from other people's mishaps and mistakes. Many thanks to co-authors, Pat, Geoff and Sonia, who assisted in compiling the three main reference articles, listed at the conclusion of this article.

In some instances authors of the original articles downplayed the incident to reduce the embarrassment of those concerned; however, I have endeavoured to accurately and truthfully convey each incident.

1. While caving in Kubla Khan Cave, Tasmania in 1998, I was enthusiastically taking photos with multiple flashes set up all around, as members of our party abseiled into the Cairn Hall Chamber next to the River Alph.

In my haste to reposition a flash unit, it slipped from my grasp and landed in shallow water. My instinctive reaction was to quickly grab the flash unit to reduce the chance of water damage. Upon grabbing the wet unit, I was hit with a high voltage discharge. The instantaneous electric shock surged through my body, throwing me violently backward and the flash unit was flung high in the air to landed on the dry bank behind me. It was like being hit by a freight train.

Upon regaining my composure, I put on dry leather gloves and gingerly picked up the unit to remove the batteries. It was like handling a bomb ready to explode. Needless to say the next couple of photo opportunities were missed. That was a hard learnt lesson to find out that water entering a flash unit can short circuit the condensers through a person standing in water — the perfect earth.

Note: Despite being a short duration electrical discharge, my flash unit manual quotes 200Vac as the trigger voltage. Other general literature on camera flash units states that the first condenser output is usually between 350-400Vac and many have a second stage condenser output (which fires the flash) between 1000-3000Vac.

2. Later on that same trip, when wading down a waist deep section of the Alph River in Kubla Khan cave, I didn't notice a few cavers ahead of me carefully negotiating part of the river passage.

The water was murky with silt stirred up by those ahead. Not taking notice of those ahead was a big mistake, as the next step was well over my head and I went right under the freezing cold snow-melt water. I was told later that the only part out of the water was my dry bag containing camera equipment held at a full arm stretch above my head.

If I had only paid more attention to the movements of those ahead, I could have stepped around the deep hole in the river.

3. In November 2001, NHVSS members were invited to a property near Murrurundi to look for caves. After setting up camp, three of us left the others to hike to a nearby waterfall at the headwaters of Pages River.

It was a pleasant walking track through rainforest vegetation. At the 35 m waterfall, I glanced down at my feet to see at least twenty leeches hanging on the outside of each shoe. Panic set in — if there were so many on the outside, how many were inside my shoes?

I stuck my finger down between my sock and shoe and pulled out a slimy slithering ball of leeches, more than ten. Then on the other side of the same shoe, another slimy entangled ball. There was blood running down into my socks and leeches stuck to my legs, feet, hands and shoes.

Then I noticed that every leaf and twig on the ground around me was swaying with leeches, sniffing the air. My two companions had also realised the hopeless situation we were in.

You just can't kill or flick away so many leeches when they are stuck to everything. I took a quick photo of the falls and we jogged back along the track, with squelchy feet, obviously full of leeches.

At the first available clearing devoid of all vegetation we stopped to clean out the obnoxious, slimy, bloodsucking critters. Well, that was a job and a half. It brought back images of the old movie *African Queen*. We wasted no time in retracing our steps back to camp.

At a large deep pool in the creek, we stripped down, had a wash and did a final de-leech. Brian was the winner in the leech stakes, with blood oozing from many bites on his legs and a big sucker in the middle of his back.

4. A hand-line tape was set up down the entrance climb of GR56, Flowstone Surprise at Glenrock. Jodie climbed down the small narrow pitch, but stopped on a ledge just short of the bottom. A small snake was curled up directly below.

Continued in Jodie's words: 'I called out to the guys at the top, "There's a snake, but I think it's dead". It wasn't moving but it seemed to have its head up looking at me. "What's it look like?" Brian asked from the top. I replied, "It's small, around 30cm long, light brown with a slender tapered head". Brian stuck his head in to try and look while I had my light on it. "That's a tiger snake", he announced. "Is it poisonous?" I asked. "Deadly," was the nonchalant reply. I wasn't deterred though as it hadn't moved at all, so I decided to throw a rock at it to see if was really dead. The first rock missed but it didn't even flinch, the second hit home and it moved. I had the two boys above in hysterics as I exclaimed in my best Steve Irwin voice, "Crikey! Look at her go... oh she's bigger than 30 cm ... oh, she's angry now!"

But then I had the problem of climbing back out without slipping, otherwise I would be delivered straight down to the angry beast I had just thrown rocks at. I had wobbly knees coming out.'

5. While crossing the very cold, swiftly flowing Yarrangobilly River to reach Carcase Cave (Y80) in October 2003, a strong handline was strung across the river to assist those crossing the strong waist-deep current. Brian stripped down to his jocks and began crossing with his dry clothes in a plastic bag held well above the water. When halfway across he lost his footing and grasp on the bag.

The bag went floating down river at a great rate of knots. Those still on the bank set off racing downstream, trying every vantage point to reach the bag of 'dry' clothes. After some time the bag of now very soaked clothes was retrieved. So much for having dry clothes to walk the many kilometres back to the car park.

6. Paul, a Californian caver, joined NHVSS for a two-week caving trip around NSW in 1999. This included a trip to Cliefden when the Belubula River was too high to cross with the 4x4s. Paul volunteered to paddle over the swollen river on an airbed to set up a haul line to get people across safely. Halfway across, a dark object bounced to the surface next to his airbed. In shock and yelling 'Crocodile!' he paddled frantically to the far bank.

Everyone was in hysterics, as he had had a close encounter of a rare kind — with a platypus.

7. Upon returning to the vehicles from a trip into Mammoth Cave, Jenolan in May 1998, the cavers were confronted by a very annoyed wombat, intent on defending its newly established territory near the car park. The cavers were chased around their vehicles by the marauding beast.

One caver with overalls half down was bulldozed over and had several distressing minutes with the snarling wombat partly entangled in the overalls and pinned between his legs. The wombat's chomping teeth were just millimetres from his bare legs.

Somehow the partly undressed caver managed to struggle free and leaped onto a car's open tailgate. Other terrified cavers jumped on to the top bar of a solid pipe gate as the out of control wombat charged back and forth beneath them.

To read all about this story and find out who was involved, refer to *Attack of the Killer Wombat, Newcaves Chronicles* No.11, p.58-59

Footnote: We later found out that this particular wombat had been orphaned as a baby after a road accident, then raised by Jenolan staff. Consequently, when it was released into the wild, it was unafraid of humans.

8. Our group was digging out the Eyrie Cave at Timor during October 2008. There were people below ground madly shovelling dirt into buckets, then hooking them onto haul ropes for the surface gang to pull up the entrance pitch and dispose of.

The weather closed in and looked rather threatening; a large tarp was erected over the entrance so work could continue when it started to rain. The only trouble was that the tarp wasn't tensioned properly, so the rainwater couldn't run off. The water just collected in the middle of the tarp until there was a huge dam suspended overhead. An unnamed member of the surface party tried to alleviate the problem, but only made it worse, with the full contents being discharged down the shaft and on to the workers below. What a drenching!

9. In October 2004 NHVSS members visited Glass Cave at Wombeyan. Toward the bottom of the cave one of our members squeezed down through a deep vertical shaft and eventually dropped into a bell shaped chamber some 3 m high.

Another caver passed down his camera so a couple of photos could be taken of some huge cave pearls in the chamber. There was a lot of communication back and forth with instructions how to operate the somewhat dated SLR camera. Once photos were taken it was time for the caver to exit the chamber.

The only trouble was that he could not climb out because at the bottom there were no handholds and the walls were too far apart to chimney out. A handline was lowered down, but the caver could still not get through the tight squeeze at the top, so he stripped down to his underwear and had to be hauled out hanging vertically from a tape. Brute force won the day as he was pulled through the hole like a cork out of a bottle.

10. A NHVSS caver managed to get all the way into Diprotodon Cave at Conomodine NSW, but on the way out got stuck in the Armchair Squeeze. Halfway through this vertical squeeze, one is in the sitting position with almost nothing to grab hold of or push off.

The caver was eventually freed with the assistance of a person below pushing upward and a person above feeding the stuck caver jelly beans for energy.

11. At Gloucester Caves one of our bionic cavers had to use their arms to physically bend a leg with artificial knee and hip joints to get through a tight squeeze. Where there is a will there is a way. This is a real inspiration to able-bodied cavers.

12. At Moparrabah Caves in June 2005, two new club members carried their lunch through the extensive cave system in packs.

As planned, right on midday the cavers exited via another entrance on top of the hill to enjoy lunch in the sun.

Unfortunately their lunches consisted of fresh bananas, which emerged from the cave as a mushy slop distributed evenly throughout their cave packs.

13. In September 1998 at Walli Caves, a caver returned to his old-style tent just as a thunderstorm brought heavy rain. But ants had also determined that the tent, pitched earlier in the day, was a good place to get out of the rain.

They had moved all their eggs and thousands of ants into the cosy space between the airbed ridges and the groundsheet. The caver (Garry Smith) had a biting time clearing ants from his tent while being soaked in the heavy downpour.

14. The same caver and his son erected their tent four times within half an hour on Kangaroo Island.

Each time the tent was erected in a different location, an army of ants would issue from the ground and stream up the guy ropes and over the tent.

Each time a new tent location was chosen, the ground was carefully inspected to ensure there were no ant holes.

The situation was made more amusing by another NHVSS member (Jenny) sitting in the car with a laptop computer typing away at the trip report. Each time she looked up, she was startled to see the tent miraculously pitched in a new place around the campsite.

15. A NHVSS caver was seen drinking from the refreshing waters of the Tuglow Cave underground stream, only to find that upstream several metres was a dead, rather decomposed rat half floating in the water.

16. A person who has been a regular participant on caving trips over many many years as the support surface party was conned underground by Elaine Turner at Borenore with the lure that the cave was very short and a 'walk through'.

Also, going through the short cave would save a long walk over the mountain to meet the party on the other side.

Well, the cave turned into a rather long underground walk, crawl, climb, with water obstacles and bats. The non-caver vividly remembers his experience to this very day. Just ask Geoff Hyde.

17. Upon entering a vertical shaft cave at Glenrock in January 1994, the first caver down was confronted by two brightly glowing red eyes peering out of the darkness. After the initial fright he realised that it was a large kangaroo which had survived the 11 m fall down the shaft. The second caver in was told to bring down a blanket.

The first caver held the blanket out like a bull fighter and crash-tackled the kicking roo to the ground while the other caver tied all its legs together. The kangaroo was hauled out of the cave but while being carried away from the entrance shaft, it kicked violently and escaped. It had managed to free its front legs and stood erect on hind legs still firmly tied together. Without a second glance it bounded off down the hill and was soon joined by its mate hiding in a nearby bush — it seems a kangaroo can hop just



as well with its hind legs tied together. Pat Hyde is still looking for her tent rope tied around the kangaroo's hind legs.

18. In March 1997 members of NHVSS visited Taylors Hill Cave on Kangaroo Island. The National Parks ranger warned about the eight beehives in the entrance overhang when issuing the caving permit. The first caver to peer over the lip of the entrance doline was stung above his eye. A second, more cautious attempt at entering the cave by avoiding the bees' main flight path, saw another caver cover his entire head with a clear plastic bag. It was the first recorded case of a plastic bag face protection for caving.

19. In 2003 a NHVSS caver managed to get his front wheel drive Toyota Camry bogged on the mud flats of Cave Flat at Burrenjuck Dam while crossing a small stream. After being pulled out by a large four-wheel drive, he completed a day of caving in the caves exposed by the dam's very low water level. At the end of the day, he thought he could drive back over the boggy stream by travelling at high speed. The horrified passenger hung on for dear life with white knuckles, grasping the above-door safety handle as the car fishtailed across the mud flats and came to a sudden stop in the deepest mud. Needless to say, the car was towed out of the bog for a second time.

20. In June 2003 NHVSS took members of another caving club to Rebel Cave at Pilchers Mountain. It took 7.5 hours for the six members of the other club to descend and ascend the 23 m pitch. One female (lady) could be heard loudly swearing a constant stream of obscenities all the way up the pitch. She was glowing red and breathing fire by the time she reached the top. We came away from this trip with a greatly expanded vocabulary.

21. On a 2014 trip to Pilchers Mountain it was sprinkling rain as we explored for new caves on the edge of the rainforest. Geoff Hyde decided to stay at the cars to keep out of the rain.

When it stopped raining he set out in search of the others. Sonia heard a 'whoop whoop' sound and asked Garry and Pat if they had heard that bird call before. They all heard the distinctive 'whoop whoop', but none could identify the sound and dismissed it as an unidentified rainforest bird. Little did anyone know till the end of the day that Geoff had been calling out 'Whoop whoop' while searching for the group. He didn't find anyone and returned to the cars.

22. One of our members went caving in Moores Lake Cave at Timor. Her excellent caving boots disintegrated in the muddy cave water and by the time she reached the surface, each boot was in four separate pieces. Maybe in future it is better to buy real boots instead of imitation Meccano boots — they will last longer.

23. This final recollection is included so that others don't repeat this type of incident, which had the potential for a disastrous outcome. Our group was in Wyanbene Cave, NSW, during early 1999 and after several hours had reached the obstacle called Andersons Walls. It consists of a narrow rift with a 7 m vertical wall of rock blocking the passage.

Usually the first person chimneys up (free climbs) the rift to the top of the wall, then attaches a ladder and rope for the others to climb. However, this time there was a 20 mm thick rope with many knots in it already attached to the anchor point on top of the wall.

I have always been told not to rely on ropes in caves, particularly if you don't know their history. It looked like a solid nylon rope despite being covered in mud. I got three of us to put all our weight and swing on the rope. When there was no movement, I determined it was safe to use. I climbed up, using the rope as a handline. This made the going much easier, especially with the conveniently spaced knots. Everyone then chimneyed up with the aid of the knotted rope. At the top there is a small platform upon which to stand while the rope is pulled up and tossed down the other side, also about 7 m. I began the descent, but just a little way over the edge, all hell broke loose and I went plummeting to the bottom of the pitch. I landed on my backpack in a pool of muddy water; thankfully, this cushioned my impact. I was

shaken and my chest hurt a lot. I must have hit a protruding part of the wall on the way down. An untidy coil of thick rope lay in the muddy water next to me. A close inspection revealed that it was in fact sisal rope and very rotten at the break point near the top of the pitch. Our own rope and ladder were then attached for everyone else to climb down. I was very lucky that the sisal rope had not broken while I was at the very top of the pitch. I had a very painful chest for the rest of the trip and a later medical examination revealed that I had broken the cartilage from the end of one rib. This proves that the old saying, "Don't trust ANY rope which you don't know the history of", is definitely correct.

All the old sisal rope was carried out of the cave.

SOURCES

'Some Humorous Recollections of NHVSS Caving Trips and People', *Newcaves Chronicles* No. 32, p.46-47, (June 2009). Written by Garry K. Smith and Pat Hyde.

'Humorous Caving Incidents', *Newcaves Chronicles* No. 42, p.25, (July 2014). Written by Garry K. Smith and Pat Hyde, with assistance from Sonia Taylor-Smith and Geo Hyde.

'Serious Recollections, Funny Years Later', *Newcaves Chronicles* No. 45, p.30-31, (January 2016). Written by Garry K. Smith with assistance from Pat and Geo Hyde.