

# **BULMER CAVERN RESCUE**

## **South Island, New Zealand**

- Lindsay Main

On 28th December 1998 12 cavers assembled at Bulmer Lake, Mt Owen, for the 13th South Owen Expedition. Three of the group, Kieran McKay (Turangi), Marcus Thomas (Christchurch), and Rob Gillespie (USA) left for Bulmer Cavern to spend three nights at Camp 2, which was established last year as an exploration base for new extensions beyond the previous limit of exploration in the Soupmix area.

Bulmer Cavern is New Zealand's longest cave, with around 50 km of passages surveyed to date. The new extensions have given a long-awaited boost to exploration, adding 9 km during several camping trips by small teams. The cave is complex, with several old phreatic levels and a streamway interconnected by vadose rifts and shafts. There are seven entrances and the depth is 748 metres. The passage is all contained within an area about three kilometres from north to south and a few hundred metres wide.

On the first caving day those based at Bulmer Lake rigged down the Erebus Passage to The Labyrinth area, at a depth of about 400 metres, and toured around the upper levels of the cave. Most rested on the second day. At Camp 2 Rob, Kieran, and Marcus surveyed about 200 metres of passage on the first day, and on the second day headed for a promising looking area involving some small shafts. Kieran descended a shaft to the top of a second one, and prusiked back up again to swap the ropes around. Just as he was starting to descend again, a large rock bollard forming one half of the Y-hang anchor broke loose and hit him, doing little damage but causing him to lose control of the rack and fall about 15 metres, landing on rocks at the bottom.

While Marcus and Rob were re-rigging the rope and descending, Kieran crawled clear of the base of the pitch (which was dripping heavily), and apparently lost consciousness. When the others reached him he was moaning and incoherent. He was bleeding heavily from a deep cut under the jaw, which they dressed as best they could. He had severe bruising all down his left side, particularly to the wrist, knee and ankle. They suspected broken bones, but as it turned out the only break was to the jaw. After strapping his arm and splinting his leg, they were able to get Kieran back up the pitch and started the trip back to Camp 2, normally about 1-1½ hours. This took 6-7 hours, with Kieran walking most of the way and being assisted up pitches and climbs. Then they settled him for a long wait.

After a brief sleep, Marcus, who fortunately knows the route through the cave extremely well, set off for the surface at around 2 am on the morning of New Years Eve, arriving at Bulmer Lake at 8 o'clock while people were having breakfast and preparing for the day's caving. After a brief discussion we swung into action. The Police were alerted via the

Mountain Radio Service, and a few cellphone calls were made to key people to speed the process up. A team of three - John Atkinson, Julian Stone, and Andrew Matthews - was dispatched to Camp 2 to assist Kieran. Another team was given the task of trying to devise an alternative route at the top of The Lions Den, the pitch series which connects the upper and lower levels, which had been the site of major rock-falls in the past and was considered too dangerous for a rescue operation. The remaining three made preparations for the arrival of the rescue teams. Marcus was sent to bed.

The first rescue team of three arrived mid-afternoon and included Mike Brewer, a doctor who had recently been involved in exploration beyond Camp 2. After their departure to the cave a rescue headquarters was set up and another team of four strong cavers left to support the medical team, taking a rescue stretcher. The stabilization team reached Kieran and Rob mid-afternoon and set to work to treat properly Kieran's injuries, and Andrew returned to the surface with Rob. The medical team reached Camp 2 late on New Years Eve, and the stretcher team a couple of hours later.

Later, in the evening, the two cable-laying teams started - one to work from the entrance to the bottom of the pitches at The Roaring Lion, and the other from The Roaring Lion to the site of the rescue. Both teams made good progress and the two wires were linked, giving telephone access as far as the Wildwest area, at about 8am on New Years Day. The deep team continued to the Soupmix area, meeting Kieran and the rescuers about three hours later. Kieran had been dragged in the stretcher through some of the low parts, but was walking with assistance along most passages. There were enough people present to use a direct haul on any climbs. The cable-layers accompanied the group to the Awesome Aven, a forty-metre flat-floored pitch, and then returned to the surface. A feature of the communications on this rescue was a VHF link from the telephone base at the entrance to the rescue controllers at the Lake, enabling those underground to talk directly to the controllers without the need for relaying.

The Awesome Aven was a formidable obstacle which was intended to be re-rigged for the rescue, but because of Kieran's mobility and the availability of enough people and rope, he was hauled using the existing pitch rope, with a safety rope. Then the team moved on through the Wildwest-Wildcat area, arriving at the old campsite in the Octopus Room in the evening. Here they stayed the night.

Meanwhile rigging teams were working in the Lions Den to ensure that this phase of the rescue would operate smoothly. A deep rigging team was to be dispatched, but Kieran's speed continually confounded planning and none of the further

pitches were re-rigged. However the rescue team was carrying sufficient rope with them to deal with each obstacle as they reached it.

On the next day, January 2nd, a second rescue team relieved those who had stayed overnight at the Octopus Room, and started moving Kieran forward again. By now retrieval of gear was a priority, and other teams had entered the cave to carry out superfluous equipment behind the rescue team. Several such teams of "cleaners" were used during the rescue. Kieran now seemed to be walking more readily, and his increased speed meant plans were continually changed and ETAs updated. He reached the Roaring Lion around midday, was hauled up the pitch to Castration Corridor. The narrowness of the passage and the small pitches caused little delay, and the team was at the base of the two 40 metre Lions Den pitches at around two o'clock. These were set up with hauls, with a long tyrolean rigged above the upper pitch so that the very loose section there was avoided. This worked like a charm and Kieran's landing on level ground in the upper levels, along with a brief interview, was recorded by a TV3 cameraman who just happened to be there.

With the whiff of the entrance in his nostrils there was no holding Kieran back, and he made good time to Panorama Entrance, assisted by numerous

additional handlines which had been installed over some of the scary traverses and climbs. At around 3.30pm he was picked up by a helicopter from Panorama Entrance and taken to Bulmer Lake, before being flown to Nelson Hospital.

Meanwhile cleaning teams worked on de-rigging the ropes, winding the phone cable back, and lugging all the gear out of the cave. This wasn't completed until the following afternoon. A debrief was held on the morning of the 3rd, and then the rescuers were flown out. The expedition members continued until the 7th as planned, but everyone was tired and very little was achieved.

Overall, the rescue was hugely successful and things ran very smoothly. There were some minor hiccups, as you would expect on an operation of this size, but generally people worked very well and did what was required to make the rescue happen. The usual absurd statements appeared in the media, with ridiculous comments about crawling under 5 km of parked cars (there are no squeezes and very few crawls in Bulmer). There were also the usual outraged taxpayers complaining about the rescue's cost, but generally these were treated with the contempt they deserve. All in all it was a very successful operation.