

The Midnight Hole rescue: insights into Tasmania's first vertical cave rescue

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In July 2017 an international visitor fell down an 8-metre pitch in Midnight Hole, one of Tasmania's most popular through trips, and broke her femur. This resulted in a large call-out including Police Search and Rescue, cavers of the Southern Tasmanian Caverneers, paramedics and the State Emergency Service. About 12 hours after call-out, after a stretcher ride up ~100 vertical metres, the casualty was in a helicopter on her way to the Royal Hobart Hospital. This talk will outline details of this rescue and discuss what went well and what could be improved for similar scenarios in the future.

Midnight Hole cave rescue

Andreas Klocker (STC Search and Rescue officer)

photos by Ola Lofquist and Gabriel Kinzler (used with permission by the casualty)

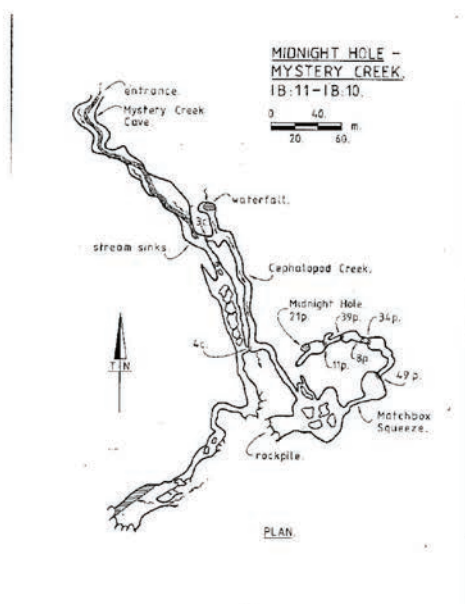


Another trip, another rescue

- July 13 2017, before the ICS congress in Sydney, Janine McKinnon and Ric Tunney, joined by STC members Gabriel Kinzler and Serena Benjamin, lead an easy through trip to Midnight Hole with overseas visitors Ola Lofquist (Sweden) and Isabelle Chouquet (France).
- All in the group have done a substantial part of vertical caving before.
- This was meant to be a very easy trip to get Ola and Isabelle used to caving in Tasmania – famous last thoughts!
- This cave is a classic, easy, well-bolted through-trip.
- At the beginning of the trip, Janine explained carefully a single rope on a pull down setup.
- Ropes were 9.5mm and were rigged with alpine butterfly knots with a carabiner clipped through the knot loop and across to the abseil side of the rope.



The accident



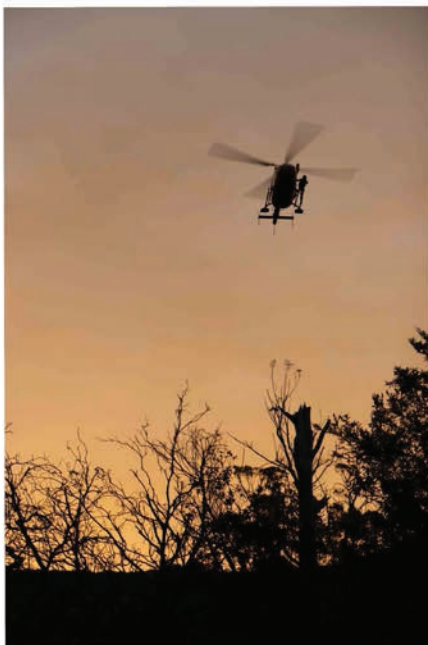
- Isabelle fell at 12:47.
- After giving Isabelle half a minute to adjust from her shock, Janine asked her a series of questions to ascertain her physical condition.
- Isabelle's assessment (she is a nurse) was that her right femur was broken.
- Serena and Janine started an external examination.
- It was decided that, as far as their current assessment could determine, she was unlikely to have any serious injuries other than a fractured right femur.

- Ric and Ole exited the cave, rigging the bottom two pitches, to raise the alarm. The ropes were left in-situ for the rescue. Gabriel stayed with Isabelle as well since he spoke fluent French and Isabelle's English was not great.
- The group used three emergency insulation blankets and several packs to keep Isabelle warm.
- At 13:25 the call went out, a text to Alan Jackson who was the call-out person that day, a call to 000 to formally advise Police, and a call to Damian Bidgood (Taspol SAR). It was also made clear to ambulance that Anna Ekdahl and Han-Wei Lee should be sent, both paramedics very capable at SRT.



Mobilisation starts

- At 13:52 Alan Jackson rings Damian Bidgood to ascertain what the Police response was.
- Damien suggested that helicopters would be the fastest way to access the site.
- Alan and Andreas, the paramedics Anna and Han-Wei, and Taspol SAR were going to fly to Ida Bay. Michael Packer and Stefan Eberhard drove to Ida Bay. Amy Robertson drove from Geevston.
- Loretta Bell (Alan's partner) drove Alan, Andreas, and lots of gear to Rotorlift.
- Alan and the paramedics went on the first helicopter, Police on the second, and one was going to return to get Andreas and more Police.
- The pilot and crewman instructed us on how to disembark the helicopter (hover landing).
- Landing procedures involved lots of circling and chacking; the second helicopter had some concerns with weight/power and decided to land in a paddock at nearby Southport to ditch a person and some gear.
- The first two helicopter arrived with some daylight remaining, while the last one arrived in the dark. Luckily those pilots are damn good....
- ~4.5 hours after the accident Alan and the paramedics arrive from above, and at the same time Michael and Stefan arrive coming up from the lower pitches.
- In the mean time Amy supports people at the quarry with warm food and drink.



The rescue begins

- The paramedics, Anna and Han-Wei, start looking after Isabelle. One of them were always on front/behind Isabelle on her way out.
- In the mean time cavers and Police start rigging the cave for the stretcher.
- The fourth pitch was rigged by cavers using a counterweight, the third pitch was rigged by police using a conventional mechanical advantage haul system, and the second and first pitch were rigged with one continuous counterweight lift. Guess which one was more efficient...
- A SKED stretcher was used, and minor difficulties were encountered packaging the casualty, and some improvised solutions were found.



- The lifts went relatively smoothly with no issues other than one redirect which required some fiddling.
- All lifts were done in vertical position.
- The conventional mechanical haul system was tedious, in particular with little space available on the pitch head for people to haul.
- The passage between the fourth and third pitch was very narrow, with ultimately two cavers (Anna and Alan) lying face down in the keyhole-shaped passage (maybe that even stopped Alan talking for a minute – thank god!) with the stretcher being dragged over them.
- The anchors at the entrance pitch were relatively low which made it hard to get the stretcher out, but at this point several SES and Police were available to use brute strength to get the stretcher the last bit.
- Isabelle in the SKED stretcher was then placed in a rigid basket stretcher for easier carrying down the hill.
- The casualty reached the surface approximately 00:30-01:00 and was airlifted to Hobart at 02:00.
- The cave was derigged, including all temporal anchors, and most people arrived back in Hobart around 4:00.

The end of a successful rescue



Postscript

- Isabelle arrived safely at the Royal Hobart Hospital approximately 20 minutes after leaving the rescue site.
- She was operated on at approximately 10:00 on 14 July 2017. The operation was successful with a pin placed inside her right femur, with no complications. She remained in hospital until Monday afternoon, 17 July.
- She was discharged to the care of Janine McKinnon and Ric Tunney, with whom she stayed and recuperated until Friday afternoon 21 July, when she flew to Sydney where she managed to attend two days at the UIS congress.



X-ray of Isabelle's break (before) and repair (right)



The reason for success

- Almost every person present knew a majority of the rest of the team and were on good personal terms – the whole thing was like an in-cave reunion.
- Many of the caver/Police/SES relationships exceeded 15 years. This was the result of a large of number of cave rescue exercises (almost annually since the late 1990s).
- The relaxed, confident and trusting nature of the team allowed for seamless organisation and execution of the extraction – we all knew that everyone else involved was competent and confident.
- Having two paramedics available who are both capable of technical vertical caving is an enormous luxury.
- There was even a lot of time for general banter, from which no one was excluded. The whole process was a delight to watch and be a part of and left one with a very warm inner glow.
- It is clear that we need to continue running inter-agency rescue exercises and make sure that the next generation of cavers, SES and Police SAR get to reap the rewards like the current generation just did.
- A massive thankyou to all those involved and all those that were on standby. It is a testament to the strength of the caving and professional rescue community that we are prepared to drop everything and help a friend or even a stranger in need.
- Despite what fun it all was, let's hope we never have to do it again!



GRATEFUL: Isabelle Chouquet, who broke her leg in Mystery Cave, thanks police rescuers Damian Bidgood, left, and Josh Peach who came to her aid. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

PATRICK BILLINGS

IT was always going to be a trip to remember.

But for one French caver the memories of Midnight Hole will be about the people she met in the crisis not the crevices.

Isabelle Chouquet fell five metres, breaking her leg while abseiling Midnight Hole at Mystery Creek in the South-West last week.

An experienced caver and nurse, who also volunteers with Swiss Rescue in her adopted homeland, she knew she was in trouble.

"I think I am so stupid to do that because it will be so complicated to get me out," she said.



DRAMA: Isabelle Chouquet is treated and airlifted from the remote site. Pictures: OLA LOFQUIST

Midnight Hole has five descents ranging from 8m to 59m. Luckily, Ms Chouquet fell down the shortest of them.

Nevertheless, rescuing a seriously injured caver 100m down a black hole was never



going to be easy. It would be more than 12 hours before Ms Chouquet was admitted to the Royal Hobart Hospital. She was overwhelmed by the support and care.

The paramedics [Han-Wei

and Anna] who came to help me in the cave, did an amazing job to lessen my pain, which was almost unbearable," she said.

She commended the other cavers and police "who came to

me to help me along the way to the exit".

"Each of them has gone crazy for everything to go well," she said.

"I also do not forget all these people outside, including some SES people, waiting for me in the night and the cold to get my stretcher down through this steep and slippery forest. Also, the helicopter crew who worked in difficult conditions."

She also thanked the team of cavers she was exploring with and RHH staff.

"For all of you I have a lot of admiration, the population of this island is very fortunate to have such a hospital," she said.

Ms Chouquet left Tasmania yesterday to attend a caving conference in Sydney.

Mercury article from 22 July 2017.

Main photo taken on Spiel editor's balcony. Other photos supplied to Mercury by Ola.