

Rescue training in Tasmania

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An update on what Tasmanians been doing to prepare for potential cave rescues over the last few years.

Tasmanian cave rescue practices overview 2010-18

Cave rescue in Australia has undergone a rapid evolution over the past decade with the push by the ASF's Australian Cave Rescue Commission to improve cavers' ability to rescue their own.

I wanted to give this talk to show the variety of things we have practised and to mention the equipment we have acquired and the people involved in the past 8 years of the ACRC northern Tasmania branch. We have participated in all the southern Tasmanian exercises which Andreas has coordinated, so I am going to summarise all of Tasmania's cave rescue training since 2010.

Back in 2010, there was a big ACRC event with then commissioner Joe Sydney. It was at Honeycomb Cave at Mole Creek with 18 cavers from all 4 Tasmanian clubs. I wasn't there but they tried out the brand new Michie phones and a second-hand Paraguard stretcher that was donated to our gear store. Deb Hunter volunteered to coordinate the 3 Northern Tasmanian clubs to do 6 monthly rescue practices at Mole Creek.

In Nov 2011, keen new ACRC commissioners Ross Anderson and Ian Collette came over with a group from WA and conducted a Cave Rescue Orientation Program at Mole Creek. Ian brought his homemade sked style stretcher with him, which we now sometimes call the 'rescue wrap'. Three STC members, two Parks rangers as well as several northern club members attended.





We covered patient packaging, stretcher manoeuvring techniques, and ran mini-scenarios also using comms. We used the comms base station outside the cave with a non-active caver recording comms data.

Later that summer, Ian came back as we were so keen to learn. We used his 'rescue wrap' to haul a log across Abseil Hole. Again we had members from all Tassie clubs attending.

Over winter, I constructed a rescue wrap using Ian's detailed instructions at a cost of about \$400 and took it to show at the Galong conference in January 2013.

In February 2013, Deb Hunter arranged for two Police to come along and run a practice day. They brought all their heavy duty cliff rescue gear — Petzl IDs, No-Worries, ropes, rigging plates — and familiarised us with how they rescue things stuck down vertical holes. We were pleased to see their professionalism and how we all worked under them to achieve the objective of the day which was hauling Jessica Bayles and a Police barrow boy out of Abseil Hole at Honeycomb in a Police sked stretcher. We also had two cavers from Chillagoe Caving Club join us.

In October 2013, we all went back to basics, refamiliarising ourselves with the Michie phones and the different types of stretchers available — Police sked, homemade rescue wrap, and the paraguard, and did a couple of short stretcher carries in Honeycomb. We had three cavers from STC join us. We always get the Michie phones out at every practice and this shows what they look like inside the handset.

In March 2014, the SES brought along their comms bus, their outdoor kitchen setup and bathroom facilities, and we all enjoyed lunch courtesy of the Launceston based SES volunteers. We took them all underground, some for their first caving experience, and later that day, three of their keenest joined us for the short recovery scenario including comms and an official entrance controller counting the ins and outs. We will be working with the SES again in March 2019 and focusing on protocols and communications.



In October 2014, we were invited to Hobart for their first four days of vertical rescue training with Al Warild and about 15 members of STC. The format was two days at the Fruehauf quarry in South Hobart to learn the basics of counterbalance lifts and tyroleans, then two days in the Junee Florentine. The theory is detailed in Al's eBook *Vertical Cave Rescue Techniques*. David Butler and I travelled down to learn about this European lightweight way of removing a stretcher-bound casualty from the depths with a separate access line for the accompanying paramedic. We had a great time taking in the practicalities of transitioning from one lift to the next, and placing temporary anchors popularly known as 'concrete screws' for the first time. We went to Owl Pot and Growling Swallet and used a vertically rated stretcher that Al borrowed from NSW Cave Rescue Squad, which did the job better than anything STC had at the time. There were also two cavers from WA and one from VSA.

Later that year, we learned that Deb Hunter had been granted some money from the Bendigo Bank and Meander Valley Council Community Funds to buy a Petzl Nest, a \$3000 specialised cave rescue stretcher to be kept at Mole Creek. The ASF also helped with this major purchase and in March 2015 we used it for the first time. The Petzl Nest has an internal harness seen here with individual adjustable foot rests, and then a vinyl cover that is strapped down to fit the casualty, usually with their arms out so they can fend off walls and protect their face.

We held a day at Hillwood rockclimbing area north of Launceston where we used the existing sport climbing bolts as anchors and did some basic counterbalance lifts and tyroleans. Four cavers came up from Hobart, and Alan Jackson ran through the techniques for the northerners who had not made it to the Al Warild weekends down south. The next day we set up a couple of stretcher lifts over Abseil Hole at Honeycomb using all natural anchors, as Honeycomb is in Mole Creek Karst National Park, so no bolting is allowed. We also perfected our tyrolean set ups between the gum trees.

The following November, four from NC headed down to Hobart to learn some more advanced rescue rigging from Al Warild along with some visitors from NSW cave rescue squad, VSA and Dr Mike from NZ. We recapped the techniques at the quarry on the Saturday and rescued someone from the third pitch of Khazad Dum on the Sunday. I was quite enjoying the social side of having 20 people in the cave at once. You rig your section for about two hours, then once everyone is set up and been checked by someone who knows what they are doing, you package the casualty into the stretcher and they slowly traverse them up the



ropes for another two hours. Then everyone derigs the cave and the temporary anchors are all returned to the surface.

Only four northern cavers had managed to travel to attend the southern rescue practice days and we realised that the remainder of the members from the three northern clubs would be able to experience similar training if we got Al Warild to come up north. We had a day at Hillwood again but with more adventurous rigging, and then a day in Honeycomb where, on all natural anchors, we rigged four counterbalances and tyroleans around a contrived route. We had one visitor from VSA and from from WA, about 20 cavers altogether.

In October 2016, no one from MCCC was available, so NC organised a vertical self rescue practice in a tree at Cath's house where we couldn't quite work out how to do a pick off. But we did get the heat tent up for its first trial. This very lightweight polyester tent is designed to keep out the draft and keep the casualty and waiting paramedics warm. It was donated by Al Warild and I cut it down to this smaller size for our purposes.

In December 2016 we joined 18 cavers down the bottom section of Owl Pot including two from Queensland and a few from NSW to rig three pitches and a long carry. This took three hours to rig and then 2.5 hours to get the stretcher up the waterfall pitch and the next couple of sections. There was a large amount of gear to clean up with the new Fordyce designed rope cleaner and a pressure hose at Andreas' place the next day.

Honeycomb Cave was out of bounds for several months due to flood damage. Even cavers weren't allowed in and our interclub rescue practice floundered. One good thing that happened around then was a through trip of Kubla Khan cave with this group of key people in order to ground truth a written rescue plan for Kubla.

July 2017 saw the very successful rescue of Swiss caver Isabella from Midnight Hole by Tas Police, SES, Ambulance and STC for which they won a national rescue services award.

In November 2017, we gained permission from Parks to drill some holes in the limestone of the disused quarry at Mole Creek, so we held a practice with NC's new hammer drill and rigged a counterbalance lift and a tyrolean. We hope that we will rig much more on Sunday when we return to the quarry with people from this conference. That afternoon we trialled the Petzl Nest floating on a pack raft and a lilo to see what worked best. This is for floating a stretcher up the River Alph or maybe in Croesus or across the river at Lynds Cave. The packraft worked best and has been added to the gear store with a lightweight pump.



In December 2017, we headed back to the Junee Florentine with a few from NSW, and practised rescuing someone from the middle section of Owl Pot including the vertical squeeze. This took a long time and we used the new STC Michie phones for their first time. STC has spent many thousands of dollars in the past two years to increase their vertical rescue capability after receiving a Tasmanian Community Grant. They bought a Petzl Nest stretcher for use in southern caves, and lots of other hardware which is for use by all Tasmanian caving clubs.

In April 2018 back at Mole Creek, Deb Hunter resigned as the northern ACRC coordinator after eight years of doing an excellent job sometimes under trying conditions. I took on the volunteer job to keep providing rescue training opportunities and liase between the clubs to make it all happen. I also aim to raise the awareness of the emergency services personnel of cavers' specialist skills.

We had terrible weather and very low attendance in May 2018, but we still managed to practise manoeuvring the stretcher in tight spaces, ran through the Michie phones with two new members, and set up the heat tent in Honeycomb with a few candles which raised the temperature inside the tent from 9°C to 20°C in just ten minutes.

In September 2018, we saw renewed enthusiasm with strong support from STC for a short search practice at Honeycomb. Groups of three realised how hard it is to properly scour the cave for the hidden 'targets', while also reporting back to the surface comms person. Having a decent sketch of the cave was invaluable, and we ran 300m of comms line out using a smaller reel recently purchased by STC. That afternoon, we took the six STC cavers to some regularly visited northern caves to discuss the practicalities of a rescue from Westmorland and My Caves.

This year's big southern cave rescue practice shifted from the JF to Mystery Creek Cave at Ida Bay south of Hobart. Cave managers at Parks decided to allow temporary anchor placement in seven segments of this popular cave which floods to the roof, and teams had plenty of tricky rigging to do albeit in a horizontal cave where many of the contrived obstacles we rigged are normally bypassed. The added benefit was that the 30 odd cavers didn't have to wait on pitches and more people could see what was happening during the stretcher movement stage. There were folk from NSW, VSA, the SES, NC and MCCC. Another first for STC was that we used the Michie phones on an hourly call in system and had a dedicated



caver at a comms base station in the cave. The ACRC's new commissioner Brian Evans was elevated from the back of the cave and I had a turn in the stretcher for the really tight bit.

The strengths of both the north and southern Tasmania's cave search and rescue groups complement each other. Our caves are different and in the south, the emphasis has been on the technical side of rigging to convey a stretcher up their more vertical caves. The north has a focus on comms, patient care and a wide range of scenarios including the technical stuff but on a smaller scale. We invite all Tassie clubs to participate in all events and have had plenty of cross-pollination from the mainland too. Personally I have learnt as much about the cavers and others who have been involved as I have about cave rescue techniques, but I think that's expanded the enjoyment of my caving overall and my understanding that it takes a lot of cavers to do a successful rescue, and that they don't all need to be experts to participate effectively, they just need to be familiar with the rescue methods we use and be used to normal caving, and they will be better for the caves than any non-caver trying to do a rescue in dirty, cold, wet, dark conditions.