

ABSTRACT

Thailand lessons symposium

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A report from a Department of Home Affairs symposium on the Thai cave rescue. The Tham Luang rescue was noticed by all. We present a report from the Lessons Symposium held by Emergency Management Australia to discuss the lessons that Australian emergency management learned from it.



EMA's Thai lessons symposium

Brian Evans, January 2019

Thanks

- NSW Cave Rescue Squad for the invitation
- Emergency Management Australia for putting on the event
- Dr Richard Harris
- Al Warild, both for correcting and clarifying what was said on the day.

A Timeline

23rd June	The boys and their coach take a post-training adventure
24th June	The world learns that the boys did not come out of the cave.
25th June	Vern Unsworth, British caver, on the spot, knows the cave well
26th June	Al Warild is contacted by Speleo Secour Francais to see if we can supply divers. Al in-turn contacts several divers and puts them on standby.

27th June	NSW Cave Rescue Squad captain gets a request to assemble a list of suitably useful cave rescuers.
	Al provides list to EMA via NSW Fire and Rescue but is told that they'll prefer to send paid professionals rather than volunteers who actually know what they are doing– AFP divers and a navy diver.
	Two British cave divers and a caver arrive.
28th June	Ric Stanton and John Volanthen find four park workers flooded in the cave where they had been attempting to drain it yesterday. They dive them out.
30th June	Australia sends: six officers in an AFP specialist rescue group
2nd July	Ric Stanton and John Volanthen find the team alive.
3rd July	Divers bring food and support to the team. Two Thai Navy SEALs now stay with the boys until they are rescued
	The rescue effort is trying to find a way to extract the boys – it is a given that diving them out is far too risky.
	The media barrage begins: ASF addresses and cavers or divers who have ever spoken to the media (or just were known by someone that had!) were being peppered with requests for background, details, or just a voice that knew something about caving. The world is taking a VERY big interest in a cave related event!
5th July	ACRC gets an email from Fairfax, via Andreas, asking for an opinion piece.
	Ric Stanton specifically asks for Richard Harris as a cave diving anaesthetist.
	DFAT finds a way to support sending Harry, and (even harder) Harry's dive buddy, Craig Challen.
6th July	Thai Navy SEAL, Saman Gunan, dies after a diving trip placing dive bottles in the cave.
	There are 13 foreign cave divers and five Thai navy seals involved in the diving part of the rescue. There are over a thousand others involved in everything from pumping and draining to administration.
8th July	The first four boys are successfully extracted from the cave.
10th July	The final group are successfully extracted from the cave.
13th July	The world's media interest evaporates.

Lessons discussed on the day

- Being part of huge, intense rescue effort
 - a very small Australian caver team
 - a very small Australian support team
 - intense media interest
 - the need for support to allow recovery and organisation
 - the jungle of politics being played out around the rescue
- International relations and what they mean for cavers
 - what Australia is trying to say to the world
 - overing Australian arses — liability

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- the competition of international politics
 - Australian public service and jumping through the hoops
 - pre-existing relationships — it would seem that an Australian military officer, who had previously spent two years ‘embedded’ in the Thai military, helped considerably in the administration of the rescuers
 - there was concern expressed, that, unlike the Thais, Australia would be unable to approve foreign specialists to operate in Australia, if we were the ones that needed help!
 - the Australian response to the media both governmentally, and not.
 - Sending the right people
 - Why can the UK send specialist cave rescuers while Australia can manage no cave specialists? (until they receive a specific request)
 - ‘What would these middle-aged foreigners be able to do that we can’t?’ (Thai rescue coordination). They eventually let them in but quite publicly stated that they wouldn’t be pulling their dead bodies out.
 - Even after Harry was specifically requested, it was his insistence that saw DFAT find a way to send Craig. The foreign divers on site subsequently decided that it was easier to bring specialist cave divers in from various other countries, rather than any additional Australians.

What we should be taking away as cavers...

- Building relationships with those that control rescues is the key:
- Police, and maybe Emergency Management Australia, need to:
 - know what they can and cannot do effectively
 - know what we can (and cannot) do effectively
 - know how to call cavers and get an effective response
 - TRUST that we can do what we can do, without making it worse
- How we fit into a rescue incident — who commands, and how to get the support that we need
- If we need support from cave rescuers from overseas, DFAT warns that they may not be able to allow them in!
- There might be an enormous media circus about a cave rescue, or other event. We should think about how cavers and the ASF responds to that meaningfully
- How do we convince governments to recognise that volunteer cave rescuers are more likely to be able to satisfactorily rescue from a non-trivial cave, and that they need to support and recognise us?
- On the day Shane Fitzsimmons, RFS, NSW, (big public profile) said we should make a register, he’d get that happening, etc. Al Warild tried contacting him later, but no reply.
- Right now, Emergency services know something about, and are a tiny bit interested in, caving, although they are by no means expecting incidents.