

Cave diving accident in Whiskey Still Sink / Wakulla County

WCTV:

http://www.wctv.tv/home/headlines/Body_of_Cave_Diver_Found_123696549.html

Updated: 11:07 AM Jun 14, 2011

[UPDATE] Cave Diver Drowns in Wakulla County

The Medical Examiner's preliminary autopsy findings of a deceased cave diver Sunday, June 12 were consistent with drowning.

Posted: 11:18 AM Jun 13, 2011

Reporter: WCSO Press Release

[UPDATE] 6-13 11am -

CAVE DIVER DEATH FOLLOW-UP

The Medical Examiner's preliminary autopsy findings of a deceased cave diver Sunday, June 12 were consistent with drowning, according to Sheriff David Harvey. James Edward Miller, 50, of Longwood, Fla. died Saturday, June 11 shortly after 4 p.m. at Whiskey Still Sink, located on private property at 127 Riversink Road.

Interviews with divers at the scene determined that Miller was part of the Woodville Karst Plain dive team that was diving and mapping a series of sinkholes and caves that connect to Wakulla Springs. The divers were diving to depths of 220 feet when Miller apparently attempted to use the wrong tank at the depth he had reached.

Several oxygen mixture tanks were used by divers in a specific order at certain depths during the dive. Detective Derek Lawhon interviewed two divers who were decompressing in the water when the drowning was first reported.

The two divers diving with Miller said he dropped one of his tanks at a depth of 70 feet. They noted that the tank he dropped at 70 feet was the one he needed at 222 feet. The divers were unable to get an oxygen tank to Miller in time to assist him. Despite dropping the tank, Miller proceeded with the dive. The deceased diver and his equipment were all collected from the scene. Two safety divers from another cave dive site in the Natural Bridge area of Woodville arrived at the Riversink site and recovered Miller's body from the water.

The case remains open as investigators review the oxygen mixtures in each tank. Miller's dive equipment and vehicle were impounded.

Miller was considered an expert diver with more than 20 years of dive experience and was a Colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve. Deputy Clint Beam, Lt. Mike Kemp, Deputy Ian Dohme, Captain Randall Taylor, Lt. C.L. Morrison and Detective Derek Lawhon investigated the accidental drowning.

The body of a 50-year-old Longwood cave diver was recovered in a Crawfordville sinkhole at 4:05 p.m. Saturday, June 11, according to Wakulla County Sheriff David Harvey.

The diver was identified as James Edward Miller. Investigators arrived at a private property sinkhole, Whiskey Still Sink, at 127 Riversink Road north of Crawfordville, and determined that Miller was conducting an exploratory dive in a chain of sinks that are connected to Wakulla Springs.

Miller was one of three divers in his group which included two other individuals in a support role. The divers were going to depths of 220 feet. It has not been determined whether the victim drowned or had a medical emergency. His body and diving gear were recovered from the scene. An autopsy is scheduled for Sunday, June 12 to attempt to determine the cause of death.

Miller was part of a group that has worked for many months exploring and mapping caves in the region. The victim was pronounced dead at the scene at 4:25 p.m. Support divers estimated that Miller was in the water approximately one hour and 40 minutes.

Lt. Mike Kemp, Lt. C.L. Morrison, Deputy Clint Beam and Deputy Ian Dohme investigated along with Wakulla EMS. The case investigation remains open.

US cavers forum:

[Update 6-13 8:26 P.M.]

David Erwin couldn't believe it when he found out 50-year-old Army Colonel James Miller drowned in the sinkhole on his property.

Erwin says Miller's always been prepared and has dived here at least three times.

"I simply couldn't believe it. He's the last person in the world you would ever expect this to happen to," said Erwin.

The Wakulla County Sheriff's Office says Saturday afternoon around four, Miller and two other divers were exploring the Whiskey still sink when Miller dropped a tank at 70 feet.

It was the same tank he needed to survive at 220 feet where he drowned.

"These particular folks our hearts go out to, professionals, because these are true professionals and they've just lost one of their colleagues, said Wakulla County Sheriff David Harvey. "So my heart goes out to them. They were a team."

Now that team is working to be there for Miller's family.

Miller had more than 20 years of dive experience.

Erwin says Miller drowned in the same cave he just recently discovered.

Yorkshire divers:

<http://www.yorkshire-divers.com/forums/i-learned-about-diving/161543-fatality-jim-miller-wkpp-11-6-11-a-7.html>

Scubaboard:

<http://www.scubaboard.com/forums/accidents-incidents/385666-fatality-wkp-8.html>

1. Hello, all...

I'm Todd Leonard, one of the Project Coordinators for the WKPP, and one of Jim's friends.

I've been posting info in the accident analysis thread on the Cave Diver's Forum about Jim's accident Saturday, and it seemed to be helpful there in minimizing the speculation that we often see when trying to make sense of the loss of someone from our community. I'm not a frequent contributor here, but I'm hoping that by posting a summary now I might clear up a few of the questions and misconceptions I've read in the thread here so far.

My initial posting was...

I'm very sorry to report to you that our friend and fellow explorer Jim Miller died today during a dive in the WKP.

It's too early for us to report on the dive in great detail, but what I can tell you is that he seized and drowned in the cave after breathing a 70ft deco bottle for an extended period of time on his way into the cave. The bottle was marked and analyzed correctly. The depth was approximately 200ft and the incident occurred soon after the team turned and began their exit. He was brought back to the basin by his buddies following an unsuccessful attempt to revive him at depth, and then to the surface by other team members.

I posted more as I received additional detail, and as I received questions from CDF members who were wondering various things. Rather than trying to assemble and repost all that, however, I think I'll just try to present a chronological summary of the dive:

Jim was diving with two buddies Saturday, each using an RB80 rebreather. They entered at a site in the WKP (Woodville Karst Plain) called Whiskey Still Sink. From Whiskey, the conduit proceeds at a shallow depth to Innisfree Sink, and beyond Innisfree it drops deeper to a max depth around 220ft and continues. Thus, their decompression was to be done on the other side of Innisfree. Their bottom mix was 240 gas. They carried deco gas to be used at 120, 70, and oxygen at 20. Given the offset profile, they did their own deco setup.

They began the dive on their 120 bottles, which are suitable for the shallow cave between Whiskey and Innisfree. Passing Innisfree they dropped deco bottles at their respective depths. The first error occurred at the 70ft stop, where Jim dropped one of his 240 bottles -- he should have dropped his 70ft bottle, and it should not have been carried any further into the cave.

After proceeding down to the 120ft stop, the team stopped for their switch to 240 gas (their bottom gas). At this point the second and most serious error occurred -- Jim switched onto his 70 bottle. Part of our standard procedure and a very critical step in each and every bottle switch is to check the MOD sticker on the side of the bottle, which would have made very clear that he was about to switch to the wrong bottle; we don't know why, but this check was missed. We also want buddies to watch each others' switches carefully enough to confirm the correct bottle is in play, but this secondary check was not performed and the error was not caught. Following the switch the team dropped their 120 bottles, and proceeded into the cave.

They continued into the cave for a little less than an hour (with Jim breathing his 70 bottle), and turned the dive as planned. Not long after the turn, Jim experienced a seizure. His buddies tried unsuccessfully to help him recover from the seizure, and Jim drowned.

After a prolonged exit the team was able to bring Jim back to the basin at Innisfree, and shortly thereafter a pair of our support divers brought him back to the surface.

So, that's the crux of it. There was a significant error, a critical error, plus missed opportunities to catch and correct those errors.

Jim was a very experienced and responsible diver, and known among his friends for his exceptional meticulousness. We're profoundly shocked and saddened to lose him, and he'd be one of the last people we'd ever imagine might die this way. This dive was well within his

skill and experience levels, and the site was very familiar to him.

- Todd Leonard

Re: Fatality in the WKP - 6/11/11

Good Morning

The past 40+ hours have been difficult for the family and the dive team. Todd Leonard has been communicating basic information as it becomes available. In reading some of the responses, I must agree: Jim was a well respected member of the cave diving community, joined the WKPP as a support diver in 2002, became a senior team explorer doing serious setup and exploration dives, completed a 12,000ft setup in Wakulla only a few weeks ago, will not be easy to replace in or out of the water, appears to have skipped several basic gas checks with fatal consequences. Jim was recently promoted by the US Army to Full Colonel and had a reputation within the team of being meticulous, detail oriented and by the book. This makes the entire situation difficult to understand but based on the information we have, this is what appears to have happened. No excuses to offer other than to strongly suggest to everyone in the cave and tech diving community to double check the basics and talk among your dive team members. Of course there is a secondary buddy check procedure and it appears that was missed but in the end, the diver owns the responsibility to check his/her breathing gas, especially at this level with multiple mixes in the water. I saw a comment about narcosis being obvious with the 50% mix. We are reasonably certain that Jim was using a 50% O2 and 50% HE deco mix. This is not unusual as team members reserve the right to add HE to any mix and the analysis tape on the tank indicates this. I cannot confirm because the authorities impounded the equipment but we will eventually confirm. Yes, had the diver or team caught the error in dropping the wrong tank at 70ft in the first place the outcome may have been different but ultimately the diver must verify every breathing mix before he breathes it or plugs it into the RB. If more information becomes available I will ask Todd to communicate to the list but I believe it is exactly what it looks like and based on interviews Jim was relaxed and looking forward to the dive that morning. Jim will be missed.

Safe Diving,
Casey McKinlay
Project Director
Woodville Karst Plain Project

Todd

Thanks for taking time to follow up on many of the questions. Those of you close to Jim can email Todd directly for information regarding the services scheduled for this Saturday in Orlando. I am not sure of all the forums carrying this topic so please cross post where appropriate.

To the best of my knowledge:

Avg depth from WSS through Ashee to Innisfree is shallow – I believe 40-60ft max. Deco must start downstream of Innisfree as the sink comes shallow before heading back upstream to WSS

Jim was mostly in the lead (in and out) following the final switch

It appears Jim was the last diver to leave the 70ft drop where the first error was made in dropping the wrong (240) tank

There is most certainly NOT a culture of complacency within the team. The WKPP would not exist today if that were the case. You can bet that procedures will be re-emphasized but even the most robust procedures do not work without a commitment on behalf of the diver and the dive team. If there is a better way to do it we will seriously evaluate that possibility.

All of Jim's tanks were marked correctly with MOD, each tank had current analysis on it and we have every reason to believe the analysis was accurate but this cannot be verified because the equipment was impounded and the mixes are being confirmed by the authorities. I have no reason to believe they would be different than indicated by the tape.

Forrest's comments are spot on. Without Jim we will never know what may have been distracting him from his normal attention to detail during gas switch procedures. Bad things happen to good people and we will be reminded of that reality for a long time. Procedures are in place but they must be followed. Secondary checks must also be followed but the diver has a primary responsibility to himself and his team. This is serious business and I am sure most technical divers understand this. The tragedy is that it takes the loss of a competent, capable and experienced diver not to mention a friend, son, veteran and outstanding member of the community to remind everyone of the basics. There are no excuses.

I would also like to note that on behalf of the WKPP there has never been an official or unofficial policy to withhold information regarding any incident from the diving community. The WKPP works tirelessly to remove as much risk as possible from these endeavors but we would be kidding ourselves to pretend there was little or no risk in exploration. Explorers must be permitted to explore, procedures must be followed and preparations must be in place to deal with both good and bad situations. The response will make all the difference since it is never a matter of "if" and only a matter of "when". I recognize the WKPP for numerous reasons has never been popular with many segments of the diving community. I do not expect to be able to change that but I personally assure you that any information, accident analysis or details learned will always be made public in as timely a manner as possible. The entire community takes a hit regardless of the dive site or the dive team and making a post accident phone call to the family is something no one should ever have to do in their lifetime.

Respectfully,

Casey McKinlay
Project Director

Von www.bubblemaker.ch stammt folgende Uebersetzung eines möglicherweise anderen Berichts (vergl. mit Original von Todd Leonhard)

Jim Miller, kürzlich zum Colonel der US Army befördert, also aktiver Armeeeoffizier, WKPP-Supporttaucher seit 2002, Senior Team Explorer mit regelmässigen Langstrecken TG's auch für die WKPP, er hatte z.B. gerade einen langen 12000ft / 3,7km Setup für die WKPP absolviert.

Er galt als methodisch und detailorientiert in seiner Taucherei, hochrespektiert in seinen Kreisen und der WKPP.

Samstag 11.06.2011,

Jim begibt sich auf einen TG im Dreierteam, Whiskey Still Sink, Teil des Wakulla Systems bzw. des Wakullaparks, (das ist mir nicht so klar)

RB80 pSCR,

max Tiefe ca. 67m,

Stages mit

- 6m/20ft O2,

- 21m/70ft Heliox 50,

- und 36m/120ft Gas

- sowie zwei Bottom-Stages, mit 240ft/75m Gas.

Der TG beginnt auf dem 36m Gas, gut passend zum initialen Höhlenprofil, ich kenne das Profil nicht aber es klingt als wär man ein Weilchen rein gefahren um dann weiter hinten die Dekogase abzulegen, 6m und 21m.

Beim Stage ablegen auf dem 21m/70ft Stop passierte der erste, kritische Fehler, Jim legt versehentlich eine der Bottom-Stages, 75m 240ft (MOD-Marker 240) ab und behält das Heliox50, 21m Gas am Mann.

Weder Jim noch sonst wem im Team fällt dieser erste kritische Fehler auf.

Wer sich näher mit tieferem TEC-Tauchen nach WKPP/GUE-Training beschäftigt, weiss um die extrem sorgfältig und mit vielfachen Checks ausgestatteten Gaswechselprozeduren, die in solchen Kreisen eigentlich üblich sind, um besonders solche tödlichen Fehler zu vermeiden. Und zuvorderst ist es natürlich der Taucher selbst, der einen Gaswechsel zu jedem Zeitpunkt hochwachsam durchführen sollte.

Im weiteren Tauchgangverlauf, Gaswechsel auf 120ft/36m, passiert der zweite kritische Fehler.

Jim wechselt versehentlich vom 36m Gas auf das 50er Heliox / 21m Gas, eigentlich wäre das 75m/240ft Gas einzustöpseln gewesen.

Weder Jim, noch ein anderes Teammitglied fällt dieser Gaswechselfehler auf.

Das Team beginnt die Grundzeit, nach etwas weniger als einer Stunde geht es wieder zurück wie geplant.

Kurz nach der Wende krampft Jim in offensichtlich schwerer O2-Vergiftung und ertrinkt, die Hilfsversuche seiner Buddies sind vergeblich. Das Team bringt Jim Miller im selben TG mit raus, tot.

Übersetzung: Jan Hinrich Hoffmann