

Rapport fra grottedykkerulykken i Pluras underjordiske løp

The Plura Recovery Operation

Ståle was last seen at 75 m depth and was clearly in serious difficulties. He did not return from the deep part of the sump and there were no known air surfaces beyond that point. Even if, by some miracle, he had found a way up to an air space, it was clear that he would not have had sufficient gas supplies to decompress, particularly as the report from his diving partner made it clear that he had experienced some problems with his equipment.

Having determined that the situation was a recovery, rather than a rescue, there was clearly no need to rush into action. Mark Dougherty informed Torstein Finnesand that he was available for help if needed and waited for a plan to be developed. It turned out that developing a plan proved to be more difficult than expected, and after a few days Torstein contacted Mark again and asked him to prepare a plan which relied on calling in some divers from Britain, with Mark acting as surface dive leader and with support divers provided from Norway.

It took 5 intensive days to plan the operation, a day to travel up to Plura, four days to carry out and debrief the operation and another day to travel home. It is not possible to describe in this article all the detail of the planning work that had to be done, but this list gives some idea of the different aspects which had to be worked on:

Logistics and transport, Equipment, Gas supplies, Information about the cave system, Compiling detailed information about the accident, Support personnel, Checklists for the diving, Emergency plans, Forensic aspects, Formalisation of the request for help through Interpol and the British Cave Rescue council, Insurance, Communication systems, Weather, Financial recompense, and Backup divers

Mark was in constant communication with Bill Whitehouse from the British Cave Rescue Council and with Torstein Finnesand from NGRT.

The site was very well organised. A large surface support operation was in hand, with everything from tents and food to electrical generators and gas supplies. Nicklas Myrin from SSF acted as Marks assistant.

The first day on site, Sunday, started with a briefing. The briefing was surprisingly short, but that was just an indication of how much planning had already been done. Everybody seemed to know their role and what the plan was. After a short meeting with Ronny and his team, the divers were ready to start their work. The equipment was taken down to the dive site and all five divers dived through to the air chamber, each carrying a load (the Heyphone communication system, an underwater decompression habitat and three tanks of decompression gas). Rick and Jason then installed the habitat in the siphon beyond the air chamber. The habitat was an essential protection against hypothermia for the long decompressions needed in cold water – it allows the divers to decompress in air, which is much warmer. A quick descent to 67 m confirmed that the body had been located.

On Monday, Rick and Jason were to descend to 67 m, complete a short checklist of forensic data and then bring the body back to the decompression stops. From this point the support divers would take the body back to the air chamber. All five divers would be needed to move the body through the air chamber and then the support divers would bring the body through the first siphon. When the body was brought to the surface, the whole team was still for a minute. It was a very peaceful and quite moving moment. After this, Rick and Mark were very busy assisting the forensics from the police. All of Ståle's equipment had to be documented and photographed, to make sure that no clues about what went wrong were missed.

On Tuesday a final dive was made to recover the decompression habitat and decompression cylinders. When the last divers were out safely we could finally call the operation a success.