

## THE RESCUE AT WEE JASPER, JUNE, 2021.

*Chris Curtis.*

This is a report that I should have done much earlier, but I was reluctant to do so for the JSSS. I wanted to write this in a respectful manner. I don't like writing these kinds of things, but I feel it's necessary. I have chosen not to mention any names or show any pictures as a sign of respect to everyone on the trip. There were six cavers on this trip.

On the June long weekend of 2021, SSS headed to Wee Jasper for the usual fun, three day weekend of caving. The first cave planned for the Saturday was Punchbowl Cave. If you're not familiar with Punchbowl Cave there is a large entrance chamber with a twenty-three metre abseil down to the rest of the cave, which is quite a substantial cave with lots of passages and chambers to explore.

Saturday morning got off to a very slow start. We didn't end up getting to the cave until almost lunch time. I rigged the entrance pitch with an abseil line and also a ladder. This gave people the option to SRT out or to use the ladder and the rope as just a self belay line, with the chest ascender sliding up the rope as the self belay method.

I went down first then everyone else followed, other than the trip leader who decided not to abseil down due to a lack of fitness and concerns of getting back up. This was a very wise and commendable decision.

We probably spent close to two hours exploring the main sections of the cave, which were easy enough to explore. We certainly didn't see the entire cave, which would have taken many hours more. Except for myself, nobody had any food or water and it wasn't long before people were feeling hungry due to the very late start.

So, we decided we had seen enough and headed back to the entrance pitch. I went up first using SRT, the others then followed up using the ladder.

Everyone was up bar the last person. The last person tried to climb the ladder, but was not able to climb and pull the rope through the chest ascender for the first few meters. He sat on a small ledge at the base of the climb and said, "I can't do it".

At first the two of us tried hauling the last person up with a 2:1 counterbalance system, but the weight of the person, plus a lot of rope friction on the rocks was too much for any progress.

I had actually been involved in a Cave Rescue Squad training exercise before in Punchbowl Cave so I knew the cave well from a rescue point of view. Unfortunately, I couldn't rig the entrance pitch for rescue in a more ideal way due to the lack of people skills and rigging equipment resources available.

After realising two people were not going to get the last person up with the current rigging, I changed to haul system to a 2:1, with a 3:1 at the top, which gave a 6:1 compound system. I knew we could do the haul even though it would be much slower. Just to make sure the haul ran smooth I thought it would be best to have everyone there helping.

Without me knowing, half of the group had gone back to the car park, which to some luck is only a few hundred meters from the cave entrance. I hadn't realised this until I went outside the cave looking for them though.

So, I went back down to the car park and told everyone else to get back up to the cave as someone needed to be hauled back up.

On the walk back up there was a group of about ten or so scout members who were about to visit Signature Cave, which is just below Punchbowl Cave. I asked them if they could help us with the hauling just in case, to which they were more than happy to help.

With the haul system ready to go, the scouts all lined up next to the haul line and alternated themselves on both sides of the rope in preparation for the haul. This was awesome to see considering I didn't have to tell them what to do; they saw the rope on the ground laid out straight and instinctively got themselves into position, almost like they had done this before!

I gave them a very quick briefing explaining basic commands and the hauling started. The only small problem I had to overcome was the haul line wasn't long enough to go down and back up the pitch, which meant the knot had to pass through the haul system. I hadn't practiced this type of scenario before, but it worked perfectly.

We had the last person up in less than ten minutes with no issues.

A huge thank you to all of the scouts who helped out. With thirteen people hauling it was super easy work.

What lessons to learn from this?

1. When you have finished a cave and others are still in the cave, don't leave the remaining cavers alone. This is very important for several reasons, (especially if you are the trip leader).

a. Help with de-rigging any pitches. This can often be a tiring process at the end of a day of caving and some people may be very tired.

b. Help carry any gear back from the cave to the cars/accommodation. As before mentioned, people are tired, help share the load, especially with ladders.

c. You may be needed for a potential rescue at some stage!

2. Take food into a cave just in case you are underground longer than planned. Just one snack bar can make a big difference.

3. Make sure you are fit enough for the day's adventure. If you are unsure of your SRT skills, come to a training day and test yourself in a controlled environment.

4. Have enough gear to do some basic rigging for a single pitch rescue. A few pulleys and a rope can go a long way.

5. If you need help (or think you will) just ask! It could change an outcome!

Everyone's caving skills are different, from rigging skills to fitness; we all need help in some way at some point. So, we all need to work together as a team.

JSSS

#### SPELEO SCENES SECTION



**Photo 1:** Gobarralong Road bridge over the Murrumbidgee River, from Yass to Wee Jasper. **Photo:** Ross Ellis, 2007.



**Photo 2:** The Punchbowl Hill limestone. **Photo:** Ross Ellis, 2007.