Blue Creek – plan B, C or maybe D?

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We are eight days into the expedition and finally I've reached the area of the cave I've been dreaming about for months. We are down at 68m in the catacombs, with good vis., no video camera to distract us and enough gas to look around for at least 20 minutes. Mel hasn't been to this area before so is simply taking everything in, but I have been here before and I'm on a mission. I'm looking for the way forward, a tunnel leading on, something the few divers who have been here before might have missed. There are two leads on the left, but a short investigation proves they are connected and make a simple U-shape. Next I reel out to where we had ended our line on the last trip, to have another look into a crack which I knew leads into a small hole – but just as I had noted before it is still too tight to pass through. A part of me had hoped the recent heavy rains might have opened it up a bit, but with enough time to really study the hole it is clear there is only a tiny amount of gravel and the rest is solid rock. Dammit, we're running out of time again and still there is no way forward.

As I back out of the crack I finally become aware of Mel's increasingly agitated attempts to get my attention. I've been fully focussed on examining the hole and now she's not looking happy, pointing up into the dead end tunnel behind me. Oh shit – the recent rains have changed the cave – and our bubbles have dislodged a huge wall of silt which is now advancing rapidly towards us. I look around for somewhere to tie off the reel, quickly trying to identify a good spot by sight before the silt blinds us. I see a suitable rock, but cannot complete the tie-off before we lose visibility. And at this point I make a mistake and do exactly what I preach to my students not to do. Instead of just leaving my reel I decide to cut it off. It's a beginner's mistake – I should know better – but at this stage I know I have plenty of time so I calmly tie a loop into the end of the line and tidy away my reel. But what happens next is a slap in the face for my complacency. I'm wearing dry-gloves, but my hands are still a little cold and the thick fingers make me clumsier than normal. As I hurry to put my knife away I somehow manage to nick my left hand, not enough to draw blood, but enough to flood the glove with 6 degree water. Suddenly the gremlins start to appear in my head.

By now of course Mel is exuding 'WTF are you doing vibes', wondering why I'm not simply moving out of the silted area and exiting the cave. Even without sight I know what she's thinking and I finally get my act together and we moved along the line. After 50m or so the vis. starts to clear up, just as we reach the tightest restriction in the cave. Going first Mel misjudges the way through; she stays too far to the right and jams herself. She backs out and tries again, still unaware of my flooded glove and the fact that my hand is going numb. Finally she's through, but now the silt has caught me again and I'm forced to negotiate the restriction in reduced vis. – which means more time and more gas. My mind is whirring – how can one simple error have led to this?

At last I'm through and into bigger passage again. We ascend up the deep gravel slope pausing partway to keep our ascent rates to the profile we'd agreed. I indicate the flooded glove to Mel and she nods her understanding – with a numb hand she will have to help me through the gas switches. We pass through the next tight area of cave and reach our first deco bottles at 36m. The switch isn't slick, but we get onto our richer mix and start tidying up in preparation for the final tricky area of cave. With 5 bottles and a scooter each we have to pass the 'gravel restriction', the area of cave where many would be explorers give up. We also have to complete several minutes of decompression stops whilst uncomfortably wedged on this slope, but everything is fine and we reach our next deco bottles at 21m.

By now the water has started to seep past the wrist-dam in my glove and up my arm. I'm starting to chill and I can feel my body giving an involuntary shake every minute or so. My breathing rate is also starting to climb and I force myself to think happy thoughts and relax. With help from Mel to speed things up we complete the switch and ditch the scooters and empty bottom stages for the support divers to collect. Now that we are past the gravel restriction the buoyant empty stages slide slowly up the line towards the shallows – at last the cave is starting to help us. We complete our stops at 21m, 18m, 15m, and 12m and move to 9m. My breathing is still too heavy so I'm thankful I was conservative with my reserve gas calculations. The world feels like a nicer place at last – I just need to manage 10 minutes at 9m and then we can climb into the habitat and get warm.

But the cave hasn't given up trying to kill us yet – it has one final blow to hand out. Just as I start to relax my deco reg free flows. In my bulky undergarments I can't reach across to the valve with my right hand and the fingers on my left hand are nearly useless. In the confined space Mel and I do an impression of Disney's ballet dancing hippos as she tries to get to my valve. We finally turn the tank off but now I definitely don't have enough gas to complete the stop and all the movement has forced even more cold water up my arm and across my chest. I'm now shaking almost constantly and we decide to cut the 9m stop short and climb into the habitat at 6m.

As we reach 6m Rob's friendly face appears. Today is his first time doing support and he's expecting to simply collect our empty bottles, get the OK from us and make sure we're comfortable in the habitat. Based on the team's past form he's also expecting the possibility of a practical joke and his first thoughts when he sees the look on our faces is 'yeah right' only to realise we're not joking. Suddenly his relaxed support dive isn't so relaxed!

I get into the habitat first, followed by Mel who gives Rob a note explaining the situation. She also checks that the extra O2 bottles we placed in the cave 'just-in-case' are still there hanging beneath the habitat. Finally my world really does become a nicer place. The temperature in the habitat rises to a balmy 13 degrees, we can chat and with plenty of spare O2 we have time to recalculate the extra deco we need to do.

After 10 minutes or so my shaking has subsided and I can reflect on the dive. For the last hour it has felt like a hyper-active three-year-old had suddenly got hold of the remote controller for my life and has been randomly pushing buttons just for fun – with time standing still at one moment and then rushing past on fast-forward the next. I think back to the 'one' simple error I made and realise it was actually a series of errors. In my rush to start exploring I hadn't focussed on laying the line properly: I should have tied it off before heading into the crack and I should definitely have laid it better through the deep restriction. I was also too wrapped up in looking for the way forward and forgot about my buddy, who was trying to warn me about the silt long before it became a problem. As for not leaving my reel – how many times have I berated students about that?

But it's not all doom and gloom. The time and effort spent setting up a habitat has proved completely worthwhile, our reserve gas calcs and safety bottles were good, our support team were great and the extra money spent getting dry-gloves with wrist-dams seems like the best decision ever. Sitting in the habitat the only thing I wanted to check was the free-flowing reg, which we later discovered had been compromised by gravel from the slope. Finally, 50 minutes after entering the habitat we re-enter the water and ascend the last few metres to the surface pool – not exactly comfortable, but alive and without any complications such as hypothermia or DCS.

Of course most of this unfolding drama happened far out of sight. I'm the only person who knows the full story and it would be easy to simply write up Blue Creek as a series of well planned and executed dives. But in cave diving things do go wrong and far more often than we might care to acknowledge, but that's why we train and why we plan. If we expected all dives to go perfectly then we wouldn't have spent weeks sorting out the habitat, days carrying in extra safety bottles or hours running different deco schedules to understand our various bail out options. We also wouldn't have spent years building our experience and getting a team together – but we did – and now you know why. At Oztek'13 last month I listened to several talks about very challenging dives, all of which shared common themes with our experiences at Blue Creek. No matter where you are things always go wrong – it is how you deal with those problems which separate the successful projects from the failures.