

Shaft Cave Filming Project

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Close to the small village of Allendale, 15 minutes south of Mount Gambier in South Australia, there is an unremarkable cow paddock. It looks exactly the same as the dozens of other cow paddocks we've passed on the drive out, but this one is special. We open the gate and our procession of utes, 4 wheel drives and trailers bumps slowly across the field, stopping close by what looks like an abandoned piece of wire mesh fence lying flat on the ground. Part of me wonders why I've travelled all the way from New Zealand with 70kgs of luggage, but as I walk up to the wire mesh I finally get to see the reason for my visit – a four foot diameter hole. Amazingly this under-whelming surface experience hides an almost over-whelming subterranean experience, which over the last 40 years has drawn hundreds of cave divers from around the globe. Beneath this particular cow paddock is one of Australia's most spectacular cave diving sites, The Shaft.



The cave was discovered in the late 1930's when a plough horse stumbled after putting its hoof through the 30cm entrance hole. Intrigued, the farmer lowered a weighted rope and discovered water 7m below, with solid rock a further 40m down. For almost 20 years the cave was then neglected until in the mid 1960's a local diver was lowered through the entrance, which was now enlarged by rain to 80cm and discovered the 17m wide surface lake. Using only very basic diving gear he descended to 21m and on his return reported a huge cavern which appeared to extend in several directions. It was time to call in the cave divers.

What the cave divers discovered was an enormous sinkhole, with fabulously clear water, which appeared initially to be bottomless. The solid rock originally plumbed to 40m was the natural top of a debris pile, although it is now somewhat larger than before due to the vast number of rocks introduced to the cave over many years by the farmer – he disposed of the unwanted rocks in his field by dropping them down the hole. From this rock pile the cave drops steeply away, reaching more than 120m at its deepest point, far beyond the range of the early explorers.

However, it is not just cave divers who have visited, but open water divers as well, drawn by the amazing water clarity and the mystique of the dive site. Unfortunately open water experience is no match for the rigors of the cave environment and in 1973 there was a terrible accident. Eight experienced ocean divers entered the cave, planning to dive to 70m using single tanks filled with air. Although they had done several deep dives in preparation for this trip they had very little cave experience and 4 of the 8 died. It was 11 months before all of the bodies could be recovered and the media had a typically hysterical reaction – “killer cave”. With 6 other cave diving deaths in the preceding 4 years and the government threatening legislation to prevent cave diving, the Cave Diving Association of Australia (CDAA) was formed in September 1973.

Immediately after the tragedy the land owners closed the cave to all divers and it took 4 years for the CDAA to persuade them to reopen it. Since then divers from all over the world have visited this iconic dive site, with

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each one signing the visitor's book on their first visit. The visitor's book has become a veritable Who's who of the cave diving world and now at last it was my turn to dive the cave and sign the book. I was pretty excited.

I had arrived in Melbourne on Saturday morning and was met at the airport by several of the other team members. After a little bit of filming we packed the remainder of the gear, except Casey's luggage which was still in Los Angeles, and headed off. The drive across to Mount Gambier usually takes 5 hours, but with an extremely heavy trailer and several stops for Andrew our cameraman/director to take set up shots we didn't arrive



until the evening. Arriving at Pine Tank Lodge, our home for the next week, we unhooked the trailer and headed straight out for dinner, meeting the rest of the team at the restaurant.



Sunday was our preparation day, with three of us staying at the lodge to fill tanks and the others heading to the site to test the abseiling/winchng gear and lower in as much equipment as possible, mainly safety bottles, decompression bottles and scooters. Our final dive team members Trent and Gideon also arrived in the evening, having waited in vain for several hours that morning at Melbourne airport for Casey's gear – which included the specialist HMI lights we needed to properly light up the cave. Thankfully the lights arrived intact at Mt Gambier airport shortly after 8pm.

Which brings me to the excitement of Monday morning, the signing of the visitor's book and the preparations for my first dive. The plan was for Steve, Casey and Gideon to use RB80 rebreathers to visit the very deepest part of the cave, with an open circuit film team videoing them down to the initial restriction at approximately 70-80m. Andrew Cronan our video guy had mounted a high definition video camera to one of the

scooters and I was to be his buddy, responsible for the 50W HID lights which would light up whatever subjects Andrew wanted to film. Casey and Steve would take the HMI lights to light up the cave and once Andrew and I had finished our bit Gideon would swap scooters with Andrew and film the remainder of the way down. Amazingly I was quite comfortable with this dive plan, even though I had never dived with Andrew, never been in this cave before, had a new type of scooter I'd never used before and almost all my dive gear was borrowed, plus of course the task loading of extra video lights on top of all the gear required to safely dive to such depths in a cave. Only a few years ago such a dive would have been well outside my comfort zone, but with such a good dive team and support divers and plenty of preparation dives in NZ it all seemed very normal.

Getting everyone in place for such a dive takes a long time. Firstly all the rebreathers and double 18 litre back gas tanks had to be lowered, then all the other gear required for the dive – stage bottles, lights and cameras. Next came the surface support divers who would help us kit up in the water, followed by Andrew and myself and lastly the deep team. Most of our shallow decompression bottles had already been placed into the cave

but Andrew and I still had to drop off our travel gas at 21m as our back-gas was hypoxic at shallow depths. The deep team would drop their travel gas at 57m, just before the start of the restriction.

Finally we were ready and we sank into the inky darkness. Although we had the huge HMI lights the walls of the cave were still hard to make out and as we dropped towards the rock pile they disappeared altogether. As



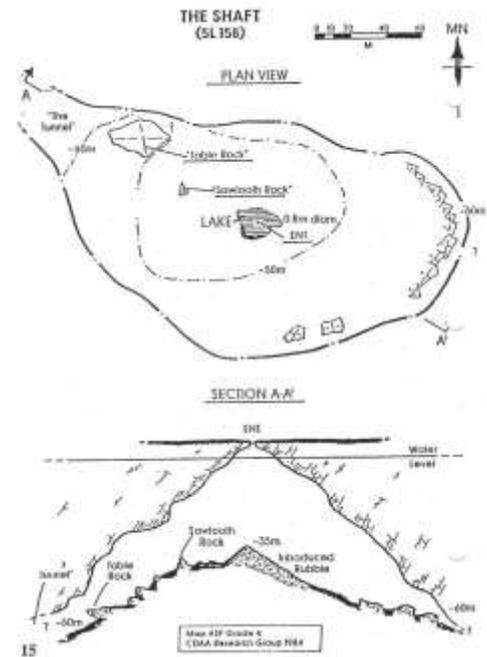
Steve is the most familiar with the cave, being a regular guide there, Casey and Gideon followed him down whilst Andrew zoomed around on the scooter taking video from different angles and I chased after Andrew trying to keep the lights pointed in the right direction. It seemed to work although my cave orientation became thoroughly messed up with all the changes in direction. Thankfully navigation is relatively simple, especially with a nice helium rich trimix keeping our heads clear, you just look up and aim for the tiny little hole of light far above.

All too soon it was time for us to leave the deep team and Andrew and I cruised back to the shallows to complete our extended decompression. Unlike ocean diving decompression in a cave can be far more comfortable as the environment is very stable and you can always clip off your unwanted gear to the line, which is what we did – and then scootered round and round the shallow part of the sinkhole exploring whilst we off-gassed. We finally surfaced nearly two hours after

initially descending, having watched from 6m as the deep team appeared back through the restriction to start their far longer decompression. It would be at least 3 more hours before they finally surfaced, which meant we would be tidying up in the dark.

Although everyone was extremely tired after a very long day we still had plenty to organise that evening. The main aim of our project was to get some really good video footage of the cave as this hadn't been done before, and we still had plenty more of the cave to capture on film. Whilst Andrew reviewed the footage for the day the rest of us prepared gear and filled tanks until nearly midnight.

The plan for dive day two was to film divers in the shallower part of the cave to a max. depth of 45m. The 'money shot' as Andrew called it would be looking up from the rock pile with a couple of divers in mid water and the tiny entrance hole illuminated by the sunshine. Again I would run the HID lights, this time with Rhys and Ryan taking the HMI lights, Pieter as the safety diver and Rick acting as the model, slowly scootering round and round at different depths whilst Andrew 'faffed' as only a director can. Once this was complete Steve and Gideon jumped in to do a static photo shoot again with plenty of us hovering around providing lighting and support.



For day 3 the plan was to scooter to the shallower end of the cave, only at 80-90m. This time I got to take an HMI light and also act as one of the models for the dive whilst Rick did the filming. At the end of this dive we also cleaned up the cave, bringing out all the various safety bottles and used deco bottles. Controlling an ascent with half a dozen bottles, lights and a scooter can be a bit tricky and it was a relief when Gideon appeared at 21m and started to unclip and carry away all the extra bottles, lights and other equipment we didn't need, allowing us to complete our decompression in relative ease.

Of course the success of a filming project is ultimately determined by the quality of the video footage at the end, but to properly edit many hours of footage, including interviews and surface shots takes time, so it will be a while before we get to see the full fruits of our labour. However for those of you who can't wait Andrew has uploaded a small taster video onto Youtube, which will give you a far better idea of our preparations and diving than I could ever write. Enjoy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUTpHNQMy9M&feature=autoshare>

Final words and a thank you to everyone

Of course when you write up a series of challenging dives in a few short paragraphs it is impossible to convey all the details and all the planning which goes into making them a success. Individually each diver has to have the skills, experience and dive fitness to complete their assigned dives, but equally the ability to slot into the team and work with others is vitally important. Steve as the project director had the unenviable task of trying to organise a very large group which came from all over Australia and further afield – he did a great job and I'm very pleased to have been invited. Although I travelled with 70kg of luggage I still left behind the majority of my personal dive gear and it was great to arrive in a cow paddock in the middle of nowhere and have familiar gear presented to me. Thank you to everyone who lent me equipment, especially Joe who provided all his gear but spent all his time winching and not getting in the water. Also a special thank you to Trent for buying me some gumboots – vital in a cow paddock full of cows**t.



Not all the gear I was offered was GUE standard

Tech diving in New Zealand is still very much in its infancy and we have little history of large team projects to learn from, so being asked to join projects like this one in Australia is really important. I always learn something new on each project and being surrounded by like-minded and passionate divers always gives me a buzz. I intend to continue going on projects like this as often as I can and for anyone else in NZ who thinks this type of diving sound exciting I offer the following advice – work on your skills and build your dive experience, there will be plenty more projects like this to come.