ADVENTURES IN BLUNDER HOLE

By Jeff Bartlett

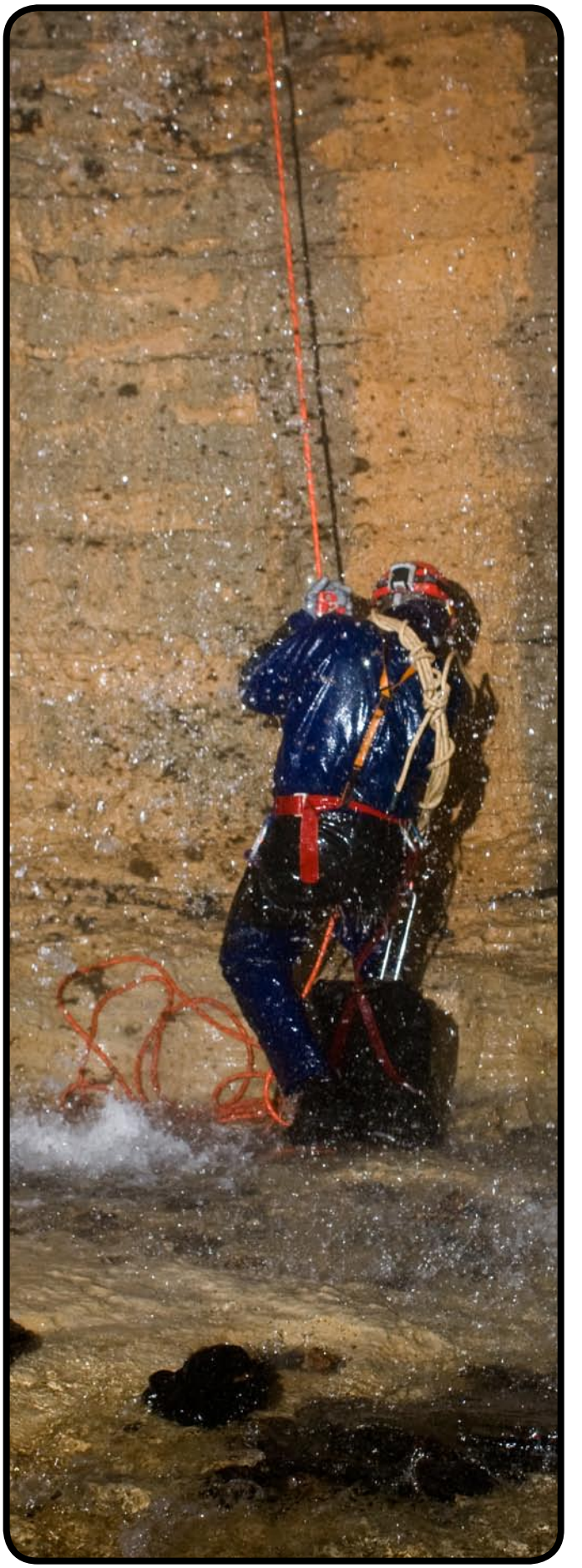
On January 3, Mike Patton and I had the wonderful oportunity to cave in Blunder Hole with some friends from the TAG area: Shane Stacy, Ryan Musick & Dave McRae.

Blunder Hole is a very, very wet multi-drop cave in Alabama. The drops we did were 107, 34, 12, 14, 41, and 24; there are actually 4 more after that but, from what I've been told, it gets to be some hard caving and becomes "not really on the tour" territory.

The entrance is a short crawl out to the lip of a big shaft, with surface water pouring in through one or two points in the ceiling. At the bottom, you immediately celebrate by laying belly-down in a wet constriction known as the "Scuba Squeeze." It's fairly tight, and no more amusing due to the total chest (and face) immersion while wearing vertical gear and pushing cave pack and coiled rope with outstretched arms. From here, following the whooshing water, another surface creek joins the fray and plunges down a 34' waterfall drop. At the time, this bolted drop, which places the rope directly in the waterfall's flow, seemed pretty exciting. In retrospect, we had no idea what we were in for.

Next is some crawling and caving downstream, to a 12 foot drop. You can see at several points where waterfalls are thundering in through holes in the ceiling and running water comes down flowstones; you often have to crawl through water, and all the time the stream is gaining power because it's joining up with additional surface water. Soon, we arrived at the top of the 14-footer. These three drops, in short succession and done with a single rope rebelayed to bolts in the wall (though you don't actually pass them as a free-hanging rebelay; you stand on a ledge and switch ropes), are known as "The Wet Willies."

The first is nothing; you can easily stay out of the water. But the fifth drop in the cave (the second Wet Willy), the 41-footer, is like nothing I've ever seen. At this point, four surface creeks have sunk into the cave and it's more like a thundering river than a stream. You have



Page 30 - Mike Patton attaching himself to the rope and preparing to ascend the second drop in Blunder Hole. Page 31- Shane Stacy climbs up the same 34' drop.

to rappel right down through the waterfall. I couldn't see anything while rappelling and was actually scared I'd hit the ground or a ledge before I was able to see them. The water slams into your face and in your eyes and ears and pounds the mud out of your coveralls. At the bottom, looked at Mike, wide-eyed and exhilirated, both of us thinking "how the heck are we going to go back *up* that??" The sixth drop, last of the Wet Willies, is more of the same, though not quite as bad as the 41-footer.

We bottomed this and turned around to head out. No one was cold yet (we all had wetsuits, balaclavas, etc) and Shane went up first, followed by Ryan. I told Mike to go ahead, which would leave me as the last up rope and in charge of de-rigging the Wet Willies. After Mike crawled away from the top of the pitch above me, I clipped in and ascended up through the first of these waterfall. It's actually not as bad as rappelling; you can use one foot to hold yourself out of the waterfall while the other stays in the footloop to frog, and I found it easier to keep my eyes and face out of the water. At the top, I sat down at the edge to pull the rope.

I had unscrewed the carabiner from the bolt, clipped it to my gear loop, and had just removed the knot from the rope when I saw my pack strap slide past. Before I could process this information, I heard the dull BOOOOOOM from below the drop. Leaning out, I could see my pack laying on a bedrock shelf next to the pool of water at the bottom of the drop. Shit. I was going to have to go get that, and would have to re-rig the drop to do it. I reached down to grab the 'biner I'd just taken off the wall... except it was gone. And so was my rack.

My small Howie's pack (with almost nothing in it), my rack, my rack attachment carabiner and the rigging carabiner had all been on my gear loop. The key word in that sentence, of course, is *had*. The force of the water going over the drop had literally torn them off of the gear loop, sending them crashing down to the floor below. Now I couldn't descend down to retrieve my gear, and I couldn't ascend safely because I wouldn't have been able to change over if I somehow got stuck in the 41' mega-waterfall. There was no one below me, Mike was already at the top of the drop above me, and no one would be able to hear me very well over the thundering water.

I was stranded.

Vertical caving requires some problem-solving skill, and I began to run down the list of "emergency" options based on my level of training and the gear I still had left (though, certainly, this was not yet an emergency, nor necessarily about to turn into one). The safest option, and my first inclination,would be to descend down to my gear with a Munter Hitch, then start back up the drop; while this woule leave the last bolt unrigged, the rub would be acceptable and the third Wet Willy was a short drop. Unfortunately, the carabiner I use for that sort of thing (a pear-shaped locking) had gone down the drop with my rack, as well as the large D locking used to rig the 24-footer. I had no other carabiners on me large enough to attempt a munter rappel. I thought for about 5 seconds about downclimbing on my ascenders, but 24 feet of downclimbing directly in a waterfall sounded like a dreadfully bad idea.

Likewise for the more creative options... say, trying to

munter on my harness maillon (unscrew it, remove leg loop, attach rope, replace leg loop, screw it, munter down, unscrew it, remove leg loop, remove rope, replace leg loop, screw it, collect my gear, and start back up... yeesh[1]). I didn't want to try anything complicated or potentially difficult in a waterfall. The margin for error would have been painfully slim.

Likewise, I didn't want to try and ascend the 41-footer without *any* way of changing over. If the bolt above us popped, or my gear jammed, or anything went wrong, I would be stranded directly in the full force of the falls... and I would be hypothermic or dead before anyone else could even get to the surface to call for help.

I decided that the wisest course of action was to start hollering for someone to come down. Lowering a rack down to me would work, but it would be easier (especially with communication nearly impossible) for someone to come down with it, and one of us would go down for the rest of my stuff. If it came down to it, if no one could hear me and I was in danger of going hypothermic, I would have to take my chances and ascend up the waterfall. It could likely be done without incident, but seemed foolish to try unless necessary.

I started yelling for help, and tried to huddle in a small alcove along the wall, out of the spray of the falls as much as possible. The sound and fury of this room was breathtaking. Mike was working on clearing the lip on rope above me, and he could hear me but no one could clearly understand what I needed. They started to think I might be hurt. They yeleld "are you OK?" and I bellowed "YES" in response. It had been was about 15 minutes before Shane appeared on rope and slid down toward me. By then, in the vortex of swirling wind and water spray, I was pretty cold.

> "The force of the water rushing past had grabbed my pack and torn the gear loop right off my harness!"

He rappelled down to me and I explained what happened. He nodded, pointed for me to sit down in the dry spot, and disappeared down the sixth drop to retrieve my gear. Five minutes later, I had my rack and pack attached to the waistband of my harness and was heading up the difficult waterfall. I was up it uneventfully, or at least as uneventfully as one can grind up through the flow of a thundering waterfall, and Ryan and Mike were relieved to see that I was fine.

They had been ready to charge for the surface to call for a rescue! Five minutes later, we were laughing and eating candy bars and I was nice and toasty warm. We took our time and headed out of the cave. Even without the unnecessary gear loop adventure, this was the most intense cave I've done and I really, really want to do some more wet multi-drop caves in the future! Our TAG friends sure have good taste in karst.

We headed down to the cars, changed, and got ready to go out for chinese food. I asked Mike if he would drive, since I'd had a plastic cup of beer after exiting the cave and I'm a total lightweight. He agreed, and got behind the wheel. We'd driven about 100 yards before

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1 For the record, if I'd had my Petzl Omni at the time instead of my not-always-cooperative stainless steel half-round, I might done this. It would have been nearly as easy as rigging a munter on a carabiner.

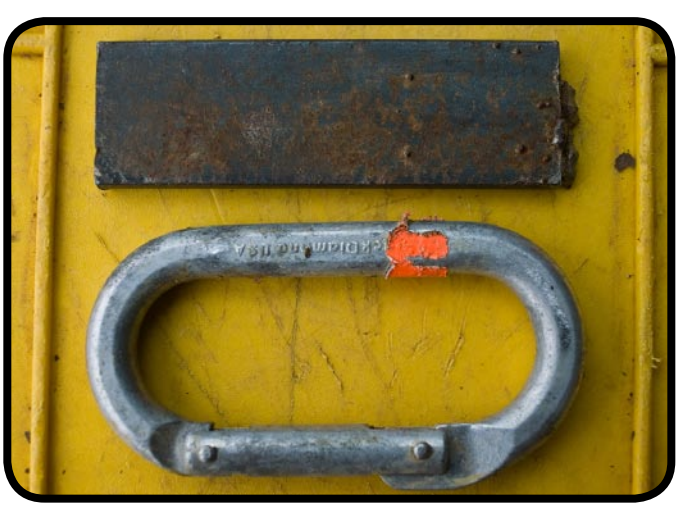
we heard a tire explode.

It was the right rear, and it was flat as flat could be. I walked down the road looking for what we'd hit -- it sounded like we'd run over a tree limb -- but couldn't find a thing! To make things worse, the left front looked dangerously low as well, and was apparently damaged. I took the donut out of my car and was dismayed to realize that I didn't have the jack and lug wrench kit along with it... I was stuck. Again.

Dave arrived within 10 minutes to see if we were OK. he had a lug wrench in his truck. A local landowner pulled up with a hydraulic jack that fit under the Acura. We jacked up the bad tire, put on the donut, lowered it, then removed the low left front. Mike and our good samaritan (I have unfortunately forgotten his name) left to take it to his house nearby and try to fill it with air and/or fix-a-flat..

While they were gone, we noticed that the inner sidewall on the bad tire had a huge hole punched in it. It was shaped like a "V" and was at least two inches across. Puzzled, we picked up the tire for a closer look... and heard something clanking around inside of the tire!!

Dave grabbed a pocketknife and we cut the tire open, extracting -- get this -- a 4 inch piece of rusty, poorly welded iron (see the photo on pages 2 & 3, as well as the photo below... carabiner provided for scale). I don't entirely know how this even happened, and in lieu of a Zapruder film we will never know. It must have been flat in the road, maybe nicking the left front, ricocheting off the bottom of the car and shooting through the right rear? I've never seen anything like it. On a paved road, no less.



We drove to the house in Scottsboro where we'd be staying with the group from Syracuse, and immediately realized that our trip to Rumbling Falls in Tennessee for the next day was going to have to be cancelled in order to take care of the tire situation. So, that's what we did. We spent two hours in the morning getting new tires at Wal-Mart; the left front had irreparable damage to the inner sidewall as well, and I had to buy two new ones. At 10:30 or so we headed to Neversink, and by 3:00 we were in the car and heading home. The weather was awful, and we just barely made it into LR before the ice got really bad. I was at Mike's house at 10:00 PM, pretty slow for what is normally a 6 or 6.5 hour trip. I stayed home from work the next day, since I'd already put in for the vacation time, and was operating on very little sleep until I had the chance to sleep in this morning. What a weekend!

Editor's Note: In the name of learning from experience, it's instructive to discuss, retrospectively, what went wrong here.

First, while it's certainly acceptable to keep one's descender on a gear loop, don't ever clip a pack -- even a lightly loaded pack -- onto a gear loop. While I'd never considered that mine would turn into a water balloon and perform its own impromptu pull test, this is where I made my error.

Second, while I'd intentionally been keeping an HMS-style carabiner (suitable for emergency munter hitch rappels) on-hand, I'd been using it as my descender attachment. This seems silly, in hindsight, as this would only be useful should the rack become damaged and not lost. If the rack is lost (much more likely), chances are the attachment carabiner has gone with it, and along with the carabiner goes the emergency option. I have since begun carrying, as an extra carabiner in my vertical rig, a Black Diamond Mini-Pearabiner. Along with the Petzl Attache that continues to serve as my descender attachment, I now have two locking carabiners at all times that have a shape and size suitable for safe descent using a munter hitch.

While I recognize that gear loops are not intended to perform life-support functions or be subjected to much in the manner of stress, I was nonetheless disappointed in how easily the loop on the Pit Viper failed. It wasn't shock-loaded or caught on a protrusion or subjected to abrasion; it simply gave out. I have since replaced the loop pictured on page 26 with a tied loop of webbing that slips around the harness webbing as opposed to being sewn to it.