

## Fight for life: The Neil Moss story

Based on an article by Dave Webb and edited by Judy Whiteside

On Sunday, 22 March 1959, Oscar Hackett Neil Moss became jammed while trying to pass down a narrow unexplored tunnel in Stalagmite Chamber – now known as Moss Chamber – in Peak Cavern, a well known cave system in Castleton, Derbyshire.

Moss was a twenty-year-old undergraduate, studying philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, and also the sports-loving son of a British cotton executive. By all accounts he loved to explore and where better than the vast unknown darkness underground?

He was one of eight cavers who entered the Derbyshire cave that fateful day, intent on exploration. They elbowed and crawled their way through narrow mud-filled passages, a thousand feet below ground until they reached a larger, open chamber from which a still narrower shaft led almost straight down. Moss was the first to descend.

The story of his subsequent demise became worldwide news, reported in newspapers in America and Australia as well as here in the UK. On 6 April, 'Sports Illustrated' reported that 'all was quiet for a while' as Moss worked his way down, 'then suddenly from some 40 feet below came the terrible, factual statement: 'I say, I'm stuck, I can't budge an inch.'

'Such contretemps are not rare in caving and Moss's companions at first took it for granted that rescue would be a mere matter of lowered ropes and heaving. They gradually the truth dawned.'



Initial attempts to haul him free failed as the rope broke repeatedly. The air was thick and foul-smelling and, as the carbon dioxide from his own breathing built to toxic levels, Moss lost consciousness.

Radio news bulletins went out via the BBC and, within hours, volunteers from all over England were responding to the call for help. The RAF, National Coal Board, Royal Navy and dozens of private caving groups joined in the rescue effort. But, despite the best efforts and dogged determination of all involved, matters did not improve.

Three of the volunteers lost consciousness whilst attempting to descend the shaft. A fourth, Ron Peters, succeeded in getting a rope around Moss's chest but this only added to his breathing difficulties. As an RAF doctor, waist-deep in mud, pumped oxygen down through a tube, a renewed plea went out – for an experienced caver small enough to negotiate the narrow shaft.

Early in the morning of the second day, eighteen-year-old June Bailey – 'a Manchester typist' as a British Pathé newsreel described her – turned up eager to

Mountain rescuers in the vestibule  
Photo courtesy of James Lovelock collection

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make the descent. Her instructions were to break Moss's collarbones if necessary to free his shoulders. She bravely agreed to attempt this grim operation but, within forty feet of her goal, was forced to turn back due to the foul air. Shortly afterwards, Flt Lt John Carter, the RAF doctor who had monitored Moss's failing breath throughout the night, announced that the boy was dead.

Eric Moss had waited at the tunnel entrance throughout the ordeal and it was he who requested that his son's body be left in place, before anyone else risked their lives. The entrance to the tunnel was sealed with concrete and an inscription later placed nearby.

It appeared that during his descent of the shaft, Moss had moved a boulder at the bottom which had trapped the ladder across the passage, literally barring his exit.

The three-day incident had a huge impact on the village of Castleton and its inhabitants, and all those involved in the rescue. The story of Moss's death remains a salutary reminder – to cavers new and old – of the fragility of life and the nature of risk. In 2004, it was retold in the novel 'One Last Breath' by Stephen Booth and, in 2006, filmmaker Dave Webb – a Derbyshire caver himself – produced a DVD on the story, 'Fight for Life – The Neil Moss Story'.

Filming for the project had begun several years earlier, in 1994 and continued intermittently. 'It was finally resurrected,' says Dave, 'late in 2005, following sustained prodding from the interviewees who kept reminding me that they were not getting any younger, and

the arduous task of editing some fifteen hours of footage began in earnest.'

Dave's experiences in filming the DVD, gathering information and interviewing some of those involved, was reproduced in Mountain Rescue Magazine in July 2007 with permission of the author and publisher. It was extracted from an original article in *Descent* (195), in April 2007:

'I had not been caving for long before I purchased a small waterproof camera and indulged my artistic side through the medium of simple underground photography. Later, in 1991, I acquired an early Standard 8 format video camera and soon realised the superior creativity of the medium. Now I had the bonus of sound – here were grunts, drips, the chink-chink of electron ladders and, of course, a fair quantity of expletives!

'Once the techniques of shooting to tape had been grasped, I embarked upon a crude method of editing with my finger on the pause button of the VCR, which led to the satisfaction of creating a storyline.

'The next few years were technically a steep learning curve but I eventually achieved a modicum of success in local and national film and video competitions. Then, in 1994, I found myself in Peak Cavern and Moss Chamber. I was already familiar with the outline details of the immense physical and emotional struggle that had taken place here thirty five years earlier, but the large, well decorated chamber that housed the tiny shaft which became Neil Moss's final resting place possessed an extraordinary atmosphere that was

impossible to ignore.

'Here was human drama which had captured the imagination of cavers and non-cavers alike. The fact that, had he lived, Neil Moss would have been the same age as me, was an additional spur to attempt to retell the story, this time through the medium of video, using the recollections of those who were around at the time.

'The story was already well documented and the announcement to caving colleagues that I was planning to make a film met with mixed reactions. A few thought I would be opening a can of worms, but most were very supportive and felt the rescue attempt was an important part of local caving history and should be recorded for posterity.

'On Sunday 22 March 1959, Neil had descended a narrow shaft feet first but had been unable to climb out again – despite a major rescue attempt that made headlines throughout the UK. So great was the event that reporters were present in Castleton en masse and national appeals were made for help while cavers struggled underground to reach Neil. As it transpired, with bad air exacerbating the problem, Neil's life faded and, though the exact time of death is uncertain, the inquest stated 3.00am on Tuesday 24 March. His body was eventually sealed within the passage.

'Despite the heroic efforts of his would-be rescuers in almost impossible conditions, there followed many accusations and counter-claims regarding poor organisation and incompetence relating to the failure to extract Neil. Some of the media coverage was negative towards cavers and



Neil Moss photo  
courtesy of James  
Lovelock collection

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caving as an activity. In fact, certain quarters called for it to be banned altogether as irresponsible and dangerous! Even now, press reports concerning individuals who get into difficulties and require rescue are inclined to describe their predicament as 'foolhardy'.

In my presentation, I wished to show the structure and voluntary nature of our rescue services. The Neil Moss rescue attempt was a pivotal moment in caving history. It focused minds and changed attitudes in a manner that helped move the sport towards a more considered approach and became the catalyst for the reorganisation of the Derbyshire Cave Rescue Organisation. I wanted to record the memories and feelings of those who were there and present a study that was as unbiased and factually accurate as possible.

Two very full accounts exist – one by Eldon PC member George Cooper, the other by Les Salmon, one of the rescuers. Both have since died. I was also fortunate to find a box of correspondence between Les and Eli Simpson of the BSA. This included a copy of the police log which revealed the true extent of the three day operation.

My first scoop was to be granted an interview with Bob Toogood, one of the original team, who agreed to be interviewed in Moss

Chamber. Spurred on by this, I went on to interview others who took part, each with a different perspective.

The only photographs of the site had been taken by well known French caver Jo Berger, which subsequently appeared in Paris Match (although as coroner's evidence they should not have). My lengthy correspondence with the Paris Match office failed to produce the desired issue. However, I did receive the following week's edition, which contained an article and photos of the diminutive caver June Bailey who had offered to help. The female angle was picked up on by the media although she had not been allowed to descend the shaft. It was some time later when Ralph Johnson produced a yellowing and slightly dog-eared copy from his attic complete with Jo Berger's famous photos.

Eventually, I also received a collection of old press photos from James Lovelock, author of 'Life and Death Underground', which contains an illustrated chapter on the incident. He had also been a freelance reporter with the News Chronicle at the time. This was the icing on the cake so to speak, as the quality and relevance of the photos was outstanding.

Having thoroughly enjoyed gathering material, interviewing

people and making new friends along the way, I faced the daunting task of actually making the movie. The hardest part was deciding on the structure and a storyline that flowed, with twelve hours of footage to trawl through and a commentary to make, to fit the sequence of photographs. It took almost a year dipping in and out to complete the project but the reception so far has made it all worth while.'

### References

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- Sports Illustrated.
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