

The Hole Story

A climbers day off. What not to do...

I had been staying at Hang dog campsite at Payne's Ford near Takaka. After a number of days of climbing, I had to have a reluctant rest day for the sake of my muscles recovery. The rest day poses a question climbers often come across, 'What shall we do???' For some it is an obvious hangover day, for others nothing at all is quite acceptable. However for me I wanted more action and exercise and if I couldn't climb I was going to have to look elsewhere. The original plan was to go to the beach but the day was grey and not at all beach like. So we can all effectively lay blame for our activities on the weather (always has a lot to answer for!). It was meant to be sunny we were meant to be at the beach! So we gathered together and brainstormed ideas on how to spend the day. I wanted action and excitement and got out my map to look at places to hike. We threw around various ideas until the subject of Harwood's Hole came up. "Some one said you could just walk out through a track when you reached the bottom" "People do it all the time..." "So shall we go check it out, take our ropes and some gear and just see if it's possible to get down?" It was decided and we excitedly began piling gear and supplies into the car for the short drive to the hole. We had lunch at the car park and assembled the gear. It was 1:30 when we set off down the track towards the hole, stopping at the 'Danger' sign and having a bit of a laugh over it. The 40 minute walk took us 20 minutes. We were amped up from the previous days climbing, high on our own adrenalin, not wanting to lose that feeling just because it was a rest day. It seemed like nothing was going to stop us on our mission. If there was a problem we would work through it. If there was a piece of gear unavailable to us we would improvise, if we didn't know we would make it up, we were adventurers with huge egos. How hard could it be? The climber's way of problem solving was the very thing that got us into the mess that we ended up in. It was also how we got out of the situation that we created for ourselves.

We arrived at the hole just after two. I was the only one with a watch, (a residue symptom from a stressful city life that I had come to escape from, by taking a climbing trip around in the South Island) and always kept an eye on the time. I wasn't worried by how late it was in the afternoon it was summer and we still had plenty of daylight hours left. It was only a short walk of 1.3kms out the bottom. It said so on a tourist map at the top of the hole. ('Tourist' being the operative word here, not a map for actually taking literally and following apparently). The map we saw on the track at the top of the hole showed two caves. One was the huge hole and a straight line heading downwards and outwards for 1.3kms from the base of the hole. The other showed a cave further up from the hole with a series of narrow tunnels and complicated twists and turns and what appeared to be a maze of caves. Ryan joked that we should go and find those caves and spend several days trying to find our way out! It was funny, the irony. Yes it was going to be simple once we were at the bottom of the hole it was a straight forward 1.3km out. The hard part was getting to the bottom of a 175 meter hole.

As we set up curious tourists looked down on us with the video cameras and inquisitive faces. We looked like pros with our ropes and harnesses and radios, and we felt pretty cool too. We sorted out a system with three dynamic sport-climbing ropes tied together by double fisherman's knots. The first problem to overcome was

how to abseil down and switch from one rope onto the next one over the knot. We had to do this twice over two knots. At each knot we left a tail from the rope above with a figure eight loop knotted into it. The idea was to rappel down to the knot, take a safety cows tail from our harness and clip into the loop which hung below the knot. Then we could unclip from our belay devices and let the loop and safety take our body weight. To get the tension off the belay device we had prussic and a sling which we pushed up above the knot and stood in the sling to take the weight off the belay device so we could unclip it from the top rope and re attach it to the rope below it to continue the descent. We practiced the moves and how each of us would do the knot change over with our different belay devices. At 4pm Ryan began his descent. He went down with a radio and I kept hold of the other. He rappled down to the first knot and let us know when he was successfully past it. We informed each other of where the current person was on the rope and when the next should begin his or her descent. While talking to Ryan at the bottom of the hole it reminded me an episode of the Simpson's where Bart threw a radio device down the bottom of a well and pretended to be a boy named Timmy who had fallen in. In the end Karma caught up with him and he did fall in the well. Once again the irony. I was the last to leave the top of the hole. By 5:50 we were all safely at the bottom of the hole.

I radioed down to the bottom to let them know I was on my way. The first thing that I noticed was the weight of the rope, heavy! It was hard to move over the edge the lip of the hole and actually make progress down the rope because of the friction. I could now understand why it took the others so long to get down. I inched my way down the rope until I was hanging in open space dangling miles up from the depths of the hole. "Why were we doing this again?" I asked myself. I was to find the question remained unanswered for the entire time I spent in the hole and still to this day can not really think of the answer. We went in search of adventure and got a little more than we bargained for. At the first rope knot I had trouble. The others had abseiled down using ATC's but I had a figure eight and a spare Grigri. We all carried spare belay devices on our harness's just in case we dropped one at the knot change overs. As I approached the knot the first piece of equipment is the prussic that has been left by the person before me. I would have to undo this and reattach it when my belay device was below it after of course making myself safe on the loop. The prussic got through the figure eight and in a bit of a jam but thought it would be fine to sort out once I was safe, I clipped in to the safety loop. I unclipped from my figure eight and drooped down onto the safety loop. I reached up to sort out my prussic, and to retrieve my Figure eight from the top rope to put it onto the rope below. This was not easy and in the end I abandoned my figure eight and the prussic and continued my descent with a Grigri. The second knot change over was easier but I dropped down too low on the safety loop to reach the prussic that I had used to get my weight off my grigri. It was too high and I couldn't un-jam it. By this time I had been dangling in the air for over fifteen minutes and I just wanted to feel solid ground again and quickly. So I continued my descent and got to the bottom of the hole leaving the prussic at the second knot 30 meters above the hole floor. We wouldn't need it again we were walking out. Ironically we would need the prussic again. The abseil itself was challenging and scary, initially we thought that was going to be the hardest part. How wrong we found we would be. Coming down the rope the air grew predictably colder and still. The four others were tiny mini people walking around carefree on loose rock and shale making a huge echo that was heard even at the top of the hole. Other than the stones moving and loud shouts and whistles that were distorted by the immense

echoing we could not hear anything from above. Those at the top of the hole would only hear noises not actual voices. The hole was damp and dripping all over. The cave was filled with the sound of dripping and bird calls from above. The walls were covered in moss and moisture. The first thing that sprung into my mind when I reached the rocky bottom was “holy shit that was the easy part it looks like the adventure has just begun!” The smell of something dead filled my nostrils. The cave was overwhelming, it was massive still light at the bottom of the hole with a rough circle of sky above. The cave floor was covered in large loose sharp rocks that moved when you stepped on them and made a huge sound far louder than any shout. It was this sound that could be heard easily from above, above all other sounds. The sound was alien, unfamiliar. The base of the hole was not flat it descended steeply downwards narrowing into the darkness of the caves. It was dirty and a colorless grey. After I hit the bottom we quickly headed off down the sliding rock surface calling out “rock” whenever one got away on us. We passed the source of the smell a maggot infested dead possum.

To the left there was a large black hole we could not see to the back of, and on the right the cave narrowed down into the dark, we had to check out the option on the left just in case there was a path down that way. After discovering it was a dead end we followed the steep descent to the right. Checking out all the possible options just in case there was more than one cave to walk out. There never was, the map was at least right about that! There was no natural light just the glow from our head torches. The cave changed from loose sharp rocks to smooth clean stone. I think all of us realized several things at this point, it was beautiful but we had no idea where we were, or where we were going. The cave had condensed from a massive hollow cathedral to a narrow tunnel with the sound of rushing water below us. We all stopped at our first obstacle laid out before us. A steep slab heading down to a pool of water a few meters deep. Jutting out from the water was a couple of boulders. We debated about whether this was the correct way out or not. Had we missed anything on our way down? After shining our lights further into the cave we saw something that might be a rope. I braced my feet against the sides of the cave and slid down feet first towards the pool at the bottom escaping from a dunking by using the boulders as stepping stones to get to the other side. I called out to the others letting them know that there was in fact a rope down here and that they had to be careful not to get wet by using the stepping stones. Holding on to the rope we could walk down the slippery damp slab. Then there was another rope to follow and more slides down steep parts of rock. I was very grateful for all the skills that climbing had taught me and that I was in the company of other climbers of equal skill level. With out the body awareness and repertoire of moves that are gained from climbing it would have been impossible to move through the caves. We continued through the cave in this manner, keeping close and watching out for each other, warning one another of what was ahead, and where the best foot and hand-holds were. Water was all around us, if we weren't walking in it, it was dripping on us or rushing past us. For the majority of the time in the cave the freezing crystal clear water was up to our ankles. The leader changed around from Ryan to Tobias to me. When the person in front came to a difficult place where it looked too hard one of us would over take and find a way through it, demonstrating the moves that were used. It was like a continuous series of low grade boulder problems performed in the wet-dark with out seeing the next problem before the last was completed. We kept close and spoke often.

At the end of one rope there was a scooped out platform just big enough for us all to fit on, it reminded me of a giant eagle's nest. Bolted into the nest was the end of the rope we had come down and another that went over the brow of the nest into blackness. We came to a halt. We were at the top of what seemed like a small overhang. To me the drop looked somewhere between 3 and 5 meters. The ropes were swollen from wear and water so they did not fit in a Grigri or an Atc. Before even I knew what I was doing I was over the edge of the nest hand over hand on the rope. Soon I was swinging, dangling free holding my weight by only my hands through which the rope was slipping. My only thoughts were I'm hurt! I let go an automatic reaction to prevent rope burn, and only half a meter below I landed on a small lip of solid rock. I started breathing again. I called up to the others not to try it that way but it was too late Tobias had already leapt over the edge and he too was now rapidly sliding down the rope to the tiny lip as I quickly scampered off to make room for his landing. He was not so lucky to avoid the rope burn. The rush of the water made it hard to hear each other even if we were yelling. We called up to the last three to use a munters hitch on a biner. We used the radios here for the last time before the battery, that was meant to last 25 hours went dead. The descents of Ryan, Karine and Noah were much safer.

All the time we were going down, deeper and deeper. The pools of water were crystal clear and deep, we couldn't see the bottom. Around the edges of the pools were shelves of rock forming ledges that jutted out from the walls of the cave at water level. There was just enough space on the ledges to walk around the edges of the pools. We had to duck and bend to get around bulges in the cave wall. Bouldering skills were invaluable to keep from swimming in freezing water.

After two hours we came to a place in the cave that was quite different from the part we had already travelled through. The cave had narrowed down to a width where a person could only get through if they were side on and bending with the kinks in the walls, a round boulder was wedged in the gap making the maneuver more difficult, even for a small person like me. It seemed darker. I was at the back of the group with Karine in front of me. We couldn't quite work out whether we were close to getting out or not. Ryan had gone on ahead and was relaying messages back through the group to us at the back. We eventually backed up and regrouped in the bigger warmer space in the cave. Instructed by Ryan we stood in a shoulder to shoulder huddle for warmth and so we didn't have to yell above the sound of the rushing water. His verdict was that the cave was getting a lot more difficult from that point on, it might be that we would have to get wetter than we already were, a very dangerous thing would be to get colder. We were all shivering and tired. Ryan suggested that someone else give the tunnel a try to back his decision up. I said I would go not wanting to believe that there was not a way out around the next corner, there just had to be! For me this was the most frightening part in the cave. After scrambling through the tight gap I was hit with this fierce ice cold wind blowing up at me, if I was cold before I was freezing now. The wind was at first exciting as the exit must be near, but we were not at all near the exit. I was alone in the cave in the dark with the defining sound of water all around me. A very steep narrow chute was directly below me the cave opened out again at the bottom of this, I continued through for a few more meters then was forced, by the roof of the cave, to bend down, and was eventually in a crouch in a tiny space looking desperately down the path that the water was taking. It disappeared through a very small hole I could get through on my tummy but that would mean

getting soaked. All of us were too cold to get any wetter. And then what would come after that? Would we get out after that? And where would we be if we did get out? Later in the night I would realize that I should have thought this whole adventure through a little more. But right then, we were in a situation where hypothermia could easily take us out. The cold was our number one concern at that stage. What would happen if any one of us got any colder? I didn't hang around in the cramped dark part of the cave any longer, completely dismayed that Ryan was correct that we would have to turn back. Panic hit me then, we were not getting out of the cave, we were actually stuck. I raced up through the tunnel to the rest of the group suddenly feeling alone in the dark.

I confirmed the decision to turn back at 8:15pm. It had taken us just over two hours to get down, the thought that we had to back track all that work was heart breaking. By now it was vital to get out of the water and somewhere warmer. I could no longer feel the ground under my feet, they were numb. It made walking through the water difficult and stepping over the deep pools required a slower pace and much more care. Filled with a sense of urgency to get out I raced back up the way we had come. I carelessly missed my footing and stepped straight into a bottomless pool soaking myself, and pack from the neck down. Up to this point I had stayed dry apart from my feet.

It was decided that we would have to save battery power on some of the head-lamps. I had carried a spare, but we would have to be as economical with our lights as possible. Losing light would be the last thing we needed. So when we stopped to regroup or discuss something we stood in total darkness. I followed Tobias closely and turned off my light whenever I could.

We kept closer together in single file communicating clearly, supporting each other and moving rapidly. I was surprised at the efficiency of our progress back through the cave. It took only an hour to reach the overhang with the rope. We were told later by the caving guides that this was aptly named the mushroom. Ryan unsuccessfully tried to climb it. Eventually we used two slings as prussic and a munters hitch to inch up the rope. At the top the two boys Ryan and Noah grabbed me and hauled me into the eagles nest. It was 10pm by the time all of us were up the rope. Not too far and we were back at the base of the hole. It was so dark that the only way to tell we were at the same place from where we had started in the hole, was the smell of the dead possum we had encountered on our way down.

By this time I had succumbed to the idea that we were to spend the night here in the cave. The five of us spread out through the cave and managed to find a spot that wasn't wet. We had a picnic there with the dried apricots, peanut butter, banana chips and various other bits and pieces. Food has a wonderful way of lifting spirits. After a short rest Ryan went to work on a way to get up the rope with only two slings to use as prussic. Tobias lit a tiny smoky fire that had to be nursed carefully to keep it alive in the wet. I moved about the cave looking for firewood without any luck, it was all too wet. I eventually gave up on the wood search and settled on a rock holding my bare feet with my hands in a vain attempt to get some feeling back into them. I had removed my shoes and socks earlier as the water logged shoes were keeping my feet frozen. I looked down on Ryan as he worked on the end of the rope, giving him support and company. Eventually he gave up, too tired and without a solution to

ascend the rope. At 11.00pm we huddled together in the dry part of the cave next to Tobias's fire that gave absolutely no heat. It did provide a small boost to moral and it gave Tobias something to do. However after a while tending the fire became too much work and Tobias gave up and bunked down with the rest of us. Just as we had rearranged our huddle to accommodate him and got him under the one heat blanket that we had, the fire miraculously sprung to life! "Hey would you look at that!" said Tobias It was just so funny we couldn't help but laugh even in our predicament.

I began watching the 'clock' and counting the very slow minutes. It was a long night. I kept everyone informed of the time and how long it would be till dawn. I lay awake watching out for signs of hypothermia. Those who slept woke cold, numb and disorientated. In a way staying awake was warmer. By 2am we were all brought to life by an agonizing wail from Noah suffering cramp. We all got up and bounced around talking and doing jumps and squats to get the blood circulating again. We did this several times through the night and the following day, alternating between exercise and huddling. I found the best place for me was to sit inside my pack with my knees pulled up to my chest or to wrap my legs around Karine and have her lean back on me.

Although I had been fully dunked in the water I was by far the best dressed for our situation. I had thrown in a pair of long thermals which I changed into, removing my wet shorts, immediately after reaching the base of the hole. They were damp from the little swim that I had had, but the material is designed for quick dry. I was also wearing an upper thermal and a polar fleece which were wet but did eventually dry out. Ryan had borrowed a spare jacket from me at the outset of the mission. Karine only had one thin long-sleeved layer and three quarter pants. Tobias and Noah were in long cotton pants that remained wet. A valuable lesson that I have learned is that in New Zealand it is vital to pack extra clothing, and clothing made from quality outdoor fabrics, you just never know when the weather will turn wet or cold.

Weird things happened through the rest of the night and the following day. Karine was convinced that she could hear voices, and if you listened really hard she was in fact right. At one point Ryan saw light on the cave walls (from the dying fire), "Someone's coming!" A strange thought popped into my head at this point, "No I'm not ready to be rescued I have just got used to this idea, I am too cold to move now."

I didn't so much as sleep but slip in and out of different states of consciousness, states when time passed and nothing was felt and it no longer mattered where I was, the stones didn't hurt and I was numb not cold. There were moments when all feeling ceased and my mind wandered to faraway things, warm things, sunbathing, my car-bed, hot showers, sex (yeah I thought about that! Sex is warm), getting into a car that has been sitting locked in the sun all day. There were also moments when the stones we were lying on were like razors, the cold was unbearable and it really did matter that we were stuck in a giant hole we couldn't get out of. Time seemed to come to a standstill.

One of my random thoughts was of the boring book that I was reading at the time, about a woman struggling to hold down a full time, high profile job and raise two children. Who needs to read exciting books when you can read boring books and lead

exciting lives. I wanted to get away from the stress, work, chores, and grind of city life. I probably couldn't have been further from that, if I'd tried!

For some reason all through the night I had been convinced that by morning when we could see, things would at least feel warmer. They did not. As dawn arrived the cave emerged from blackness to grayness. The rope we had come down resembled a single strand of a spiders web. Later we found out that the day had been beautiful hot and sunny. We had a breakfast with the remaining food, and moved around to get warm. Ryan gave the rope another try. He left the cave floor at 9am with spare belay devices and the radio that had flat batteries. (It had taken him two and a half hours to reach the top). We watched from the bottom as he inched very slowly up the dynamic rope. The climb up would have resembled 200 meters of pull-ups. Ryan had to get over both the knots. At least after the first 30 meters after the first knot he could use proper prussic. After the second knot we could hear him talking to someone, not words but it was definitely his voice, we were very excited about this. Later we found out that there was in fact no one there, Ryan was singing to pass the time and to take his mind off the agonizing job. He could hear us playing a game at the bottom, we had placed a stone on a boulder in front of us and were throwing stones at it till we knocked it off. There were whoops and cheering and we all scored points when we hit the stone off the boulder. I think Noah and Tobias took the Harwoods hole stone throwing champ title. Ryan exited the hole at 11:30am. He walked back along the track, and met two friends from Hang Dog camp who had come up to look for us, after noticing the five of us had not returned to camp. "Water, water, do you have a drink?" he said. It was all he could think of at the time. From there the police were contacted and a rescue was set up. The remaining four of us could not prussic up the rope like Ryan it was just too great a risk. Loose rocks were a constant hazard, and the physical strength that was demanded to prussic up a dynamic rope was too great for all of us. We knew it was not safe to follow him. Having Ryan at the top was a huge help to the rescue team. He could tell them that no one was injured and what our circumstances were, what was needed and our climbing capabilities.

There was a distinctive communication difficulty between the top of the hole and the bottom. At the top nothing could be heard except whistles or the movement of the rocks. At the bottom we could hear even less, voices were so distorted by the echo that most of the time anything we did hear didn't seem real. Occasionally Ryan would whistle which only made us wonder what was going on. The radios worked for a while, Ryan had replaced the batteries in his one and mine had continued to work, so we heard that there was a rescue team on the way. I still knew it would be a long time before they reached us. At 1 p.m. the radios died, Dick Smith will have a bit of explaining to do! So for the remaining time we had to entertain ourselves and hope that all was being done up the top.

The day dragged on, we had not heard anything at all from above for quite some time. Shadows turned into bats creeping along the rocky floor licking at Karine's feet. We all saw faces in the cave walls, looking at us, happy, sad, smiling angry. Karine had been asleep for about half an hour when she woke around 3 p.m., the cave had got mysteriously darker, perhaps the sun had shifted. Disorientated and tired she became convinced that we had been forgotten; "They're not coming, something's happened and they don't know we are here, the message hasn't got through to the rescuers, we

are not getting out!” She was voicing what we all felt and it got me thinking about the stories that I knew of where people spent days in these situations waiting to be rescued, or even found. People have been in much worse places than this freezing and losing hope. In the big picture this was small fry stuff. I have absolutely no intention of landing myself in a worse situation, the next adventure I go on will definitely have more planning!

To pass the time, to keep warm and lift spirits we sang songs. Karine was a wonderful singing teacher (she even got me singing!) we learned several Hebrew songs and also sang ones we knew. We sang every arm and leg action song we could think of, and when we ran out we started all over again. Ryan heard us at the top. He was sitting up there the whole time waiting for the rescue team. He had an interesting conversation with one of the team that he later told us about. “The last time we rescued a guy from here he got out of the hole at the bottom but got lost, it took us a week to find him.” Ryan said “ He must have been fair parched by the time you got to him!” “Nah” said the rescue guy “He was dead!”

At 4 p.m. a rope was lowered down the hole and a person slowly rapp down it. We excitedly rushed about packing up, putting on wet shoes and collecting all the rubbish. The caver brought with him, warm fleece overalls (they were luxury), lots and lots of chocolate, and warm Raro (NZ’s Koolaid) - to date this is the best drink I have ever tasted. The first thing we said to him was that we were sorry, very remorseful and embarrassed at the predicament that we were in. A second rescuer joined us. They were keen cavers and had both left boring Sunday chores to come down one of the most beautiful cave systems in the world. After establishing that the four of us were all ok and raring to get going, they revealed to us that they were stoked to be there and that we couldn’t have picked a better cave to be rescued from! We were provided with proper caving helmets with acetylene lamps. The new lights lit the cave up brightly we could see all around us it gave the cave a warm orange glow as opposed to the cold blue light of our own head torches. Expertly guided through the caves down the path we had taken the day before, this decent felt safe and final. Not long and we would be warm again.

Retracing our steps, this time under the direction of experienced cavers and powerful lights we reached the exit in two and a half hours. I quickly forgot about being cold and tired and enjoyed the cave. Truly one of the most incredible places on the earth, beautiful and dangerous. Safety was expertly relayed to us and techniques were taught as we moved down the same path that we had tried the previous evening. On this final decent we realized that the choices we had made to turn back at the point we did may well have saved our lives. If we had got passed the two squeezes we would have also had to overcome a huge pool that required us to bridge across it to save, from swimming. Thinking back we would not have thought to bridge we would have thought swimming was our only option. We would have been drenched! Upon exiting the cave we would have come out into the bush soaking, in the dark, and would have had no idea which way to turn to get back to the car. Hypothermia may have got to us that night, or we may have never found our way out of the bush. It is a lot harder to find someone in the New Zealand bush than it is to find a bunch of five stupid climbers at the bottom of the southern hemispheres largest hole!

There was a final neck-deep pool that we had to wade through and then at last 29 hours later we came out of the earth. We exited the cave onto a huge rocky slope. The rocks radiated heat from the warm day that we had missed. The helicopter picked us up in dramatic rescue style all of us bowing our heads and being pulled off the rocks into the helicopter. As we lifted off I looked out and realized how difficult it would be to find a missing person down there. The final swoop of the helicopter made my stomach flip still riding high on adrenalin. I could see the car park and an ambulance, 'What was an ambulance doing here, we weren't hurt?' And another thought, 'Who are all those people? The media? It really wasn't that big a deal!' ...And the rest you all know.

After landing we were all shuffled into the ambulance for a briefing and checking over I then went out and spoke into the extremely bright white light of the cameras. No one mentioned Noah's age. I was reunited with Ryan. One of the media people approached me again after my interviews and asked me if I was going to go home now, if I had family waiting. "No I'm not, I am going back to the camp site to sleep in my car and I will probably have a day off tomorrow and be climbing for the rest of my trip" This seemed to surprise her, "You are just going to carry on with you trip?" "Yep" was all I could say. It was well and truly dark by the time I finally drove myself and my four other companions back down Takaka hill. One final lasting memory of that day was sitting around the camp fire back at Hang Dog eating freshly caught fish with Karine.

I was riding high on that same adrenalin buzz for the next day and even today I can think back to that 'I'm alive!!' feeling. I see the experience as a huge learning curve and a warning. We are not invincible and precautions are essential. You can never be too prepared!