

Skin Divers Save 4 Trapped Spelunkers

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Ark. (AP) — Skin divers today reached four spelunkers trapped in Rowland Cave near here and reported that all were safe.

The four explorers were found in a small room where they climbed to escape rising waters which trapped them early Sunday.

The rescue team planned to bring them out of the cave by carrying diving equipment to them.

Word that the men were safe came by walkie-talkie radio carried by one of the rescuers.

William Karras, safety officer for the National Speleological society and director of the rescue effort, said it would take some time to get the men out.

A team of Navy divers and Karras flew into Mountain View today and two professional divers from Louisiana volunteered their services.

The Navy men flew in from Washington. The Louisianans—Tom Klelas and Jim Springer of Morgan City — were vacationing in Oklahoma and drove here when they heard of the lost men.

The rescuers went into the cave in three rowboats. They faced underwater swims of at least 200 yards and possibly 400 yards before reaching the trapped men.

Skin divers tried and failed Sunday night to reach the men through the cave, a one-time tourist attraction.

The four men entered the cave early Saturday night — Hugh Shell, 46, of Batesville, Ark., a veteran spelunker, and three college students, Mike Hill, Steve Wilson and Hogan Bledsoe.

Rescue workers said lights outside the cave, at the end of a line reaching 900 feet inside, blinked in a distinct S-O-S signal several times — an eerie but hopeful sight in the nightlong vigil.

1965 Apr four trapped spelunkers saved

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The rescue workers took the signals as a sign of hope that the four trapped men were safe above the water level in one of the rooms off the main tunnel.

The string of bare light bulbs was installed in the outer reaches of the cave to give interior lighting and enhance the tourist value of the cave.

The lights are hooked up in series — as are many strings of Christmas tree lights — and when one goes out, they all go out. This way, the trapped men could signal by unscrewing a bulb at their end of the line.

Water flows frequently through the cave, but usually not deep enough to trouble either spelunker or tourist — “and never this deep before,” said a deputy sheriff when a skin diver reported depths of 30 to 35 feet.

When the four spelunkers entered Rowland Cave — a maze of unexplored limestone tunnels in this remote and hilly section of north Arkansas — Saturday, they said they would come out by noon Sunday. The cave was dry then.

The explorers were looking for evidence linking Rowland Cave with Blanchard Springs Cave, a mammoth labyrinth a few miles away.

Sunday noon passed with no sign of the spelunkers. By this time, the water had swept in.

Jim Fields of Silver Springs, a tiny community in the area, tried twice to lead a team of skin divers through the underground stream and reach the stranded men. A tangled safety line stopped him the first time. Stomach cramps got him the second time.

His teammates, lacking Fields' experience, decided to wait for the rescue team from Washington.