

Diver drowns in quarry

Rescue crews find body after two-day search

By **ALAN J. KEAYS**

Herald Staff

Police on Monday recovered the body of a missing New Hampshire scuba diver who shared his breathing apparatus with a fellow diver moments before he was last seen in an abandoned marble quarry in West Rutland.

Tim Gagnon, 43, of Northwood, N.H., was reported missing late Sunday morning. Search and rescue crews were unable to find him in the cavernous underwater quarry throughout the day, according to Vermont State Police.

The search was called off Sunday night and police and dive teams returned to the scene Monday afternoon to continue to look for Gagnon. Divers found Gagnon's body later Monday, about 400 feet from the point where he went into the quarry, police said.

An autopsy will be performed at the office of the chief medical examiner in Burlington. Police said that while the case remains under investigation, Gagnon's death has been ruled accidental at this time.

Searching for Gagnon was no easy task

for police.

"The difficulty comes because it is a series of caves in there, and when I say caves, it's not the caves with very tight quarters, it's a very large area," State Police Lt. Donald Patch said Monday afternoon, moments before dive teams were set to enter the water.

"When you think back when they did the quarry work in there, there were actually vehicles that drove in there and it's like a whole underground network in

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this area," Patch said. "It's very large. There are old power lines down there. There are old pieces of equipment. Of course the visibility, it's underwater and it's dark."

The quarry is located about 200 yards off a small path from Pleasant Street in West Rutland, near Marble Street Extension, Marble Street Extension, a dirt and bumpy road with few homes on it, was closed to traffic Monday about a mile before the scene.

Closer to the quarry, several cruisers and pickups were parked Monday afternoon, and divers were putting on wetsuits and testing equipment. Other rescue workers stood close by.

At the water's surface, the quarry they were searching appeared no bigger than a cellar hole filled with dark murky water. However, underwater it measured as deep as 100 feet. There are other larger quarries in the area, and some are connected.

"It's not just one tunnel down there, it's a series of tunnels or a series of ways that he could have gone," Patch said of Gagnon. "We've done extensive interviewing with

the man that came out to try to determine exactly where his buddy might be in there."

Police said Gagnon and his friend, John Weymouth, also of New Hampshire, have gone scuba diving in that quarry as many as 20 times in the past. Police said both men are also very experienced, certified divers, who do "cave rescue-type work."

Police said the two men went into the quarry Sunday morning and descended underwater, where they spent approximately the next 25 minutes.

"After they made their turn to come back, one of them had problems with their equipment. They dealt with the problem and then (Weymouth) started swimming out," Patch said.

The equipment problem, Patch said, involved a breathing apparatus, and for a period of time the two men shared the same breathing line.

"They dealt with the problem and started swimming out," Patch said. "When (Weymouth) got to the surface, he assumed that his buddy was coming behind him, but just swimming slower ... His buddy didn't surface, that's why he called 911."

Police were called to the scene around 11:30 a.m. Sunday. Police, fire and rescue crews spent Sunday

at the scene and returned Monday afternoon with divers from the Colchester Technical Rescue Team and certified cave rescue divers.

"It's a very difficult situation and it's a very hazardous situation. You aren't going to ask just anybody to go in," Patch said early Monday afternoon. "We're going to take our time; we're going to make sure everything is safe. ... The recovery may be quick or it may be something where they have to search for a long time."

Temperature near the water's surface in the quarry was about 40 degrees.

Air tanks were placed Monday afternoon on tarps near the quarry as divers prepared to enter the water and ropes hung from tree limbs above.

The quarries in West Rutland are popular with skilled scuba divers seeking adventure.

Patch said he could not specifically recall another drowning taking place in any of the abandoned marble quarries in West Rutland.

Both divers had the necessary equipment needed for their dive Sunday, Patch said.

"All the information we've gathered tells us that it's an accident," the lieutenant said.

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