

## Unauthorized cave diving proves fatal for two open-water divers.

(Originaltext unter [http://www.scubadiving.com/training/lessons\\_for\\_life/no\\_way\\_out/](http://www.scubadiving.com/training/lessons_for_life/no_way_out/))



Photography by Walt Stearns

April 2005

By Michael Ange

John struggled forward through the silt. He could see nothing, and the lack of visual reference was unnerving. Once again, his head rammed into the side of the cave wall, adding pain and injury to his growing frustration and fear. He knew the opening to the underwater cave had to be nearby, but every move he made toward it only led to another rock wall. He wondered where Bill was. Had he made it out? Fear for his buddy, and a terror that he might die alone in the cave that had once seemed so enticing, gripped his thoughts. His panic grew as his regulator began requiring more effort for every breath. John began to claw frantically at his gear and the limestone wall, desperate to get out.

### The Divers

---

John and Bill were active-duty military stationed in North Florida, where they frequently spent their leisure time exploring the numerous freshwater springs. Both men were in their mid-20s and had qualified as open-water divers in college. They were in good health and possessed an above-average grasp of diving concepts.

### The Dive

---

The Saturday dive excursion started like many others with the divers heading out by 7 a.m. to a popular local spring. As John and Bill assembled their gear, they were intrigued by a team of tech divers gearing up for penetration into the cave at the bottom of the spring. Putting their curiosity aside for now, John and Bill suited up and began their open-water dive.

After their first dive, they surfaced to eat lunch and switch tanks. During the surface interval, the cave divers returned and John eagerly quizzed them about their dive. The tale they told of crystal-clear water and beautiful geological formations was fascinating to John and interesting to Bill. The cave divers loaded their cars and departed, leaving John and Bill with a warning about the dangers of diving caves without proper training and equipment.

Before the cave divers were out of sight, John began asking Bill, "How hard can this possibly be? Did you see the shape a couple of those guys were in? This has got to be a cakewalk."

Soon testosterone raged over common sense and the divers agreed on a short excursion "to see what's just inside the cave." With their small open-water dive lights at the ready, they descended to the spring bottom and peered inside the narrow cave opening as they had done numerous times before. This time however, John began crawling forward. When his buddy's fin tips disappeared from sight, Bill followed.

## The Accident

---

Remaining close to the bottom, the divers inched forward, their courage growing with every kick. The water ahead of them was dark, but crystal-clear, and the divers lost track of time. When John realized he was down to less than half of his gas supply, he nervously signaled Bill that they needed to start back. Bill acknowledged the signal, and the divers turned to find the first signs of their tragic mistake.

By swimming close to the silty bottom of the cave, the divers had turned the crystal-clear water behind them into a mud-brown soup. There was no hint of daylight from the cave opening, and the visibility inside the swirling cloud of silt was only a few inches at best. Neither diver wore a compass, so they headed in the direction they thought they had come from. Within seconds, they were hopelessly separated.

Totally confused by the loss of all visual reference, the divers stumbled blindly along the cave wall, using their hands to follow its contours, to no avail. They never found each other or the cave opening before running out of air and drowning.

## The Recovery

---

When John and Bill failed to return to base that evening, a concerned friend called the sheriff's office.

The cave recovery team waited for the water to clear and began their grim work early the next morning. They found Bill's body just 300 feet from the entrance. All of his gear was still in place, his tank was empty and he had obviously drowned. A few dozen feet away, John's body told a different story. Even though his tank still contained a small amount of air, he had discarded much of his gear, including his regulator.

## Analysis

---

Cave divers live by a set of inviolable safety rules. John and Bill violated several of them and, like hundreds of other untrained cave divers, paid for their mistakes with their lives.

The victims lacked any redundant light sources, and the lights they carried were sorely inadequate for illuminating a cave dive. Even if they had carried better lights, the silty conditions created by swimming close to the bottom would have made them useless. On the day of recovery, silt still limited the visibility to only a few feet.

Cave divers are taught special finning and buoyancy techniques to avoid silt-outs and even then use reels and marker lines to guide their way out. Finally, properly trained cave divers follow gas management procedures that leave a third of their gas supply in reserve for emergencies. By not following these rules, John and Bill set themselves up to become victims of a double tragedy.

## Lessons for Life

---

1. Never dive caves or other overhead environments without proper training and equipment.
2. When diving in overhead environment, always use proper gas management rules and use continuous guidelines to find your way back to the surface in case of emergencies.
3. In both open-water and overhead environments, spot-on buoyancy control is a skill that's critical for safe, relaxed diving.