

Case Study – Unit 8

Bringing Them Out of the Water and the Darkness: The Wild Boars Soccer Team Rescue

The evacuation of 12 soccer players and their coach, trapped in a flooded cave, ranks as one of the most difficult, dangerous, and inspiring rescues in recent history. In June 2018, 12 members of Thailand's Wild Boars soccer team (ages 11 to 16) and their assistant coach went to explore nearby Tham Luang Cave. Planning on being gone for an hour, team members took only their flashlights and no snacks. The group was trapped inside when the water level rose 10 feet in a flash flood. Rescue divers battled strong current, darkness, and narrow passageways for nine days as they searched for the team. "It was like walking into a strong waterfall and feeling the water rushing at you," said one diver. "It was a horizontal climb against the water with every move." Said another, "If you put your hand in front of you, it just disappeared."¹ On the tenth day, two British divers, who were searching for the bodies of the boys, surfaced to find the emaciated team members huddled on a ledge, miles from the cave entrance. A Thai army medical doctor and other personnel then swam to the ledge to stay with the children while other divers shuttled back forth from the cave entrance, carrying food and messages.

Once the boys were found, the focus shifted to how to get them out. At first, authorities thought they would have to wait months until the monsoon rains ended and the water level in the cavern dropped. None of the boys could swim and the journey out of the cave would take 6 hours, a good portion of it underwater. (The danger facing rescuers and the Wild Boars was highlighted by the death of a volunteer Thai diver who ran out of air while laying oxygen tanks along the escape route.) Thai authorities then decided to chance a water rescue given that oxygen levels in the cave were dropping.

Rescuers prepared the children for their journey by introducing them to scuba equipment. When it came time to transport the boys, they were given mild sedatives to reduce their anxiety and were outfitted with full-face masks, wrapped in plastic cocoons, and placed on floating emergency stretchers. Four boys were taken out at a time over a period of 3 days in a process that involved alternate periods of walking and submerging, sometimes for as long as 40 minutes. During the next to last rescue, a diver lost hold of the guide rope and had to retrace his steps to find it. The Wild Boars were flown to a nearby hospital where they were put into isolation to monitor their condition. (Two had mild cases of pneumonia but overall the group was in good health.) To prevent additional trauma, the boys were not allowed to watch news of their rescue. A week later, the team appeared in public to thank rescuers and dribbled a soccer ball to demonstrate their soccer skills. They apologized for not telling their parents about their plans to explore and mourned the loss of the diver who died during the rescue attempt. Most of the team members will serve as novice monks as a form of penitence for the diver's death.

The successful rescue was a marvel of cooperation both above and below ground. Groups and individuals from around the world were involved. Thailand's new king donated supplies and people across the nation volunteered in any way they could, cooking meals for rescuers, operating pumps to suck water out of the cave, and hunting for hidden cracks in the limestone formations through which the Wild Boars could perhaps be lifted to safety. More than 150 members of the

Thai Navy SEALs, outfitted with improvised equipment sometimes held together with duct tape, help create the escape route. Overseas military teams brought search-and-rescue equipment. Americans provided the logistics while British divers navigated the most hazardous stretches.

The soccer team, under the leadership of the assistant coach Ekkaepon Chantawonsse, acted as a unit. Coach Ek taught the boys meditation techniques he learned as a Buddhist monk to keep them calm as they awaited discovery. Once help arrived, he shared his food to make sure the boys were full. The military doctor who stayed with the team was impressed with how orderly and obedient the boys were. After eating, they put their trash in a bag to keep their perch clean.

The parents of the players also stuck together during the ordeal. Family members agreed to remain at the cave entrance until all the boys were rescued instead of being immediately reunited with their children. Local officials asked the press to leave the boys alone so that they can resume normal lives.

The reaction of Mae Bua Chaicheun, a rice farmer living near Tham Luang Cave, captures the selfless commitment of all those involved in saving the Wild Boars. Chaicheun volunteered for 5 days at the rescue center. When she returned home, she found her fields flooded from water that was pumped from the cave to lower the water level. She had been ready to plant but had to start over. Yet she didn't mind because the boys were alive and well. She even turned down government compensation for her flooded land. "I am more than willing to have my rice fields flooded as long as the children are safe," Chaicheun said. "The boys are like my children."²

Notes

¹ Beech, H., Paddock, R. C., & Suhartono, M. (2018, July 12). "Still can't believe it worked": The story of the Thailand cave rescue. *The New York Times*.

² Thai cave rescue: The watery trap is now empty. (2018, July 10). *The New York Times*.

Sources

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