

Final members of boys soccer team rescued just before water pump malfunction flooded Thai cave

By Jessica Schladebeck
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(TNS)

1 The harrowing rescue mission to free the final group of boys and their soccer coach from the depths of a cave in Thailand nearly ended in tragedy, with the main water pump that was draining the chambers failing just hours after the last person emerged from the water.

2 Divers and other rescue officials were nearly a mile inside the cave when they learned of the equipment malfunction, which allowed for water levels to rapidly increase, said Maj. Charles Hodges, the U.S. mission commander for the 353rd Special Operations unit for the Air Force who participated in the rescue operation.

3 "Well, three of the SEALs, there's four of them back there, three of them made their way into chamber three and about the same time we got word that the pumps that had been running nonstop shut off for unknown reasons and the water levels back in chamber three started rising which would have cut off our access back to chamber two, one and then out of the cave," he told CBS News.

4 "And that's an abort criteria for our guys and so when that water level started rising everybody started grabbing their kid and they were ready to get out."

5 The other rescuers inside the cave made it out within the hour, with Australian doctor Richard Harris as the last to emerge. His father recently passed, and he stayed with the boys to monitor their health.

6 Their successful exit from the cave with the remaining soccer players in tow marked "mission complete" for the days-long rescue effort — which had no shortage of terrifying and challenging moments.

7 At times a happy ending seemed impossible, Hodges explained, adding that "we also understood, though, we didn't have the option not to attempt this."

8 The Wild Boar soccer team and their 25-year-old coach became trapped nearly three miles inside a complex cave system in the Chiang Rai Province nearly two weeks ago after an unexpected bout of heavy rain flooded their path to the exit. Thai officials initially believed the boys could survive for months in the cave and wait out the monsoon season, but dropping oxygen levels and the cave's potential for flooding forced them to accelerate their rescue efforts.

9 An elite team of 19 divers were tasked with guiding the boys and their coach out of the Tham Luan Nang Non cave, according to the Guardian. They emerged with the first four boys on Sunday, another four on Monday and then the final four boys and their coach around 8 p.m. local time on Tuesday.

10 The entire group of 13 is expected to remain in the hospital through the weekend, Thai officials told CBS. The boys were given anti-anxiety medication and continue to do well mentally — something doctors attribute to the fact that they remained together throughout the ordeal.

11 Officials also praised the coach, saying the care he provided to the team is something to be admired.

12 Some of the boys have lung infections and they each lost an average of about four pounds, but overall, they are in good health. Because they managed to survive by drinking water dripping from the cave walls, they are currently in quarantine being monitored for disease.

13 "The big worry that you get with caves is the presence of bats," Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the John Hopkins Center for Health security in Baltimore, told Live Science.

14 "We know that bats can transmit many different infectious diseases, including things like rabies."

15 Video from the hospital where they are staying, one of the first clips of the boys since they escaped the cave, sees them waving and flashing peace signs at the camera.

16 Meanwhile, the daunting rescue has caught the eye of the entertainment industry — film producers have already landed in Thailand to scout locations.

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