**A school caving incident and media: A dangerous mix!**

Shane Closter

On Monday 25 August 1997 a female student was stretchered from a cave at Shiprock Falls [which is located] approximately 13 kilometres from Gembrook. The media coverage that resulted was significant, with the incident being covered on all three commercial television stations. It was reported in the print media by the *Herald Sun, The Age* and at least four local papers, and many radio stations also covered the incident, although their coverage won't be included in this article as I do not have available documented evidence of it.

**Coverage in the print media**

The caving incident was reported in the print media the next day by the *Herald-Sun* in a half-page article appearing on page 3 and by *The Age* in its 'Just Briefly' section. It was also covered by at least four local papers in the week after the incident. The following is a series of quotes from the various articles with the heading to each article highlighted.

'Schoolgirl's cave ordeal' (Herald Sun, 26 August, p. 3)

'A teenager rescued after a dramatic cave-in vowed ...' Melissa Conner, 16, spent more than two hours trapped alone in a freezing, dark cave .. .
' ... she said the ordeal would not put her off her high-risk hobby.'
'A student in front of Melissa slipped, kicking her in the head and causing her to fall on to the granite floor of a three-metre deep hole.'
'They formed a human chain to carry her through narrow sections, past deep holes and over an icy, fast-flowing underground creek.'

'Insp. Nicholas Vallas, of Dandenong police, said it was fortunate Melissa's teacher had a mobile telephone so emergency help could be called quickly.'

'Schoolgirl saved after cave fall' *(The Age,* 26 August, p. 2)

'A 15 year-old girl was rescued from a cave after a climbing accident. . . '
' She received head injuries when a student climbing above her slipped and caused her to fall.'
' ... when a student slipped on icy rocks and accidentally kicked Melissa who fell three metres into a hole.'

'Gembrook girl injured in cave' *(The Gazette,* 27 August 1997, p. 7)

'Melissa was kicked on the bridge of the nose by a fellow student who slipped down a steep slope in front of her'

**Coverage on TV**

As stated earlier, the caving incident was covered on each of the three commercial television stations' news broadcasts. All sent reporting teams to the site. The incident was the lead story (afternoon news) on both Channels 7 and 10 and the third story on Channel 9, as well as being on news reports as far away as Darwin. The news reports on each of the stations lasted between 1 minute 25 seconds and 1 minute 35 seconds, as well as in the introduction to the news broadcast. This was among the longest time spent on a news story by any of the stations that afternoon. The ABC didn't cover the incident or send a news team to the site.

Each of the stations introduced the story in a dramatic way, for example:

* 'Today a Dramatic Cave Rescue'
* 'School Caving Trip Proves a Painful Lesson'
* 'A Day of Adventure Quickly Turned to Near Tragedy'

Accompanying each of these introductions was video footage of the student being stretchered up the steep valley. Each of the reports included video of close-ups of Melissa on the stretcher, most showing her with some blood on her nose and hands shaking, either from cold or shock. They showed her being loaded into the ambulance, close-ups of her in the ambulance, an entrance to the cave with someone coming out (set-up shot after Melissa had left), interviews with a police officer and an interview with one of the ambulance officers. Channel Nine also had overhead footage of the cave from their helicopter and of Melissa arriving at the hospital by helicopter. Channel Seven had drawn a diagram of the supposed route taken by the stretcher. Channels Ten and Nine also showed footage of the waterfall part of the creek near the cave or of part of its just inside the cave, making it appear wetter in the cave than it actually was. The following is a series of quotes from the news reports.

**Channel 7**

'Injured fifteen-year-old schoolgirl has been rescued from a cave by paramedics who used techniques learnt in the Thredbo tragedy ... ‘

.. her face bloodied and hands still shaking, she was transferred into a waiting ambulance ... '

.. for more than an hour and a half the Emerald Secondary College student was trapped more than 30 metres underground .. .

.. the girl was unconscious for several minutes .. .

**Channel 9**

'A day of adventure quickly turned to near tragedy for fifteen-year-old Melissa Conner.

**Channel 10**

‘... the girl slipped while on a school excursion ... ‘

' .. the student above her slipped.'

If you were to believe everything you hear, see and read, it appears obvious at this stage that Melissa fell at least three metres after the student above her accidentally kicked her in the nose when he slipped and fell. She was then trapped alone in the dark in a freezing cold cave for up to two hours. To top it all off, of course, while all this was happening, there was a cave-in.

**What actually happened?**

Hopefully, by now you will have realised that each of the above quotes has been included in this article because it contains false or misleading information that results in the actual incident being blown out of all proportion.

The following is an account of what actually happened on the day.

* At approximately 12.50pm on Monday 25 August, Melissa Conner was caving with twelve other students under the instruction of three staff at Shiprock Falls. Melissa was moving up a vertical shaft to an exit when she received the blow to her head, which was inadvertently delivered by the student above her. She did not fall at all, nor did the student above her. He inadvertently swung his foot backwards after pushing off the wall of the shaft at the same time Melissa moved up. Melissa complained, quite obviously, about the blow which resulted in a bloody nose and her feeling dizzy. She was assisted back to a flatter and larger part of the cave by myself and was assessed. She was feeling dizzy, had a very sore (possibly broken) nose and was not 100 percent conscious.
* Due to the current state she was in, the staff on the trip chose not to attempt to assist her from the cave without expert medical attention or without her feeling better and able to move safely by herself. At this stage, Melissa was left under the supervision of one staff member while the other staff took the remaining students out of the cave and called for an ambulance on the mobile phone. In contacting the ambulance on 000, the fire brigade and police were also dispatched without my request. This also brought the media not long after.

While a student being stretchered out of a cave is obviously quite newsworthy, the articles and news reports contained a lot of false information. Some further points should be noted:

* Firstly, there was no cave-in, no rock in the cave moved, nor was there any attempt to move any in getting the student out of the cave. At no time was she trapped, left alone or in the dark while in the cave. A staff member and torchlight were continually with her until she was moved out of the cave on the stretcher.
* The temperature of the cave was 9-10 degrees Celsius, not freezing as reported.
* Although there had been heavy rain on the weekend prior to this visit, the caves at Ship Rock were not affected and were in the driest state at that time of year in at least ten years.
* Melissa was airlifted to the nearest hospital only because the helicopter was on site and not because her condition warranted such measures. In fact, she was discharged from hospital by 7.30pm on the day of the incident, having been diagnosed with a bruised nose (not broken), minor whiplash and some minor cuts and bruises to her body (these most likely occurring during her stretcher ride). She later suffered some shock from the total incident and subsequent media coverage.
* While at the site of the incident, I was constantly filmed talking to police, carrying helmets to the bus, and even filmed through the window of the bus when about to drive off.

The media may not be totally to blame for some of the mistakes or misleading information that appeared in their reports. Some other factors may have contributed. Among these factors are:

* my reluctance to talk to reporters on-site after the incident
* a police officer giving a statement to the television stations before Melissa was out of the cave and before getting all the facts from me
* ambulance officers who were obviously uncomfortable while in the cave, giving interviews with television stations.

It is unfortunate, however, that the articles and news reports appeared as they did. Reporting in this way may deter people from caving or similar adventure-based activities and make people assume that the caving done by my school and others is a high risk activity. This is definitely not the case. In addition, the dramatic way in which the incident was reported has definitely caused stress to both Melissa and her family, as well as to the student who accidentally kicked her.