

Dr. György DÉNES

ON THE HUNGARIAN CAVE RESCUE SERVICE

Occasional cave accidents occurred in Hungary before 1930, but with the increase in cave exploration from 1930 onwards cave accidents became increasingly frequent especially in the 1950's. In a metropolis with 2 million inhabitants, caves of thermal water origin occur, both in the suburbs and in the heavily built-up central area. The many high avens as well as deep fissures and a labyrinth of underground tunnels have always attracted both speleologists and large numbers of young people searching for adventure. Armed with an old clothes line and occasionally with a couple of candles or a single torch, young people have often attempted to penetrate such underground labyrinths, being unaware of the many dangers a cave may keep in reserve for the inexperienced visitor.

On several occasions the frayed clothes line did break and the young men hanging from them fell to their deaths in the deep shafts or suffered serious injuries. Similar accidents also occurred to cavers groping about in the dark or in flickering candle light. Large or small groups of people who are unfamiliar with caving often lose their way in the complex labyrinth of thermal caves, their torches become run down or their candles burn out. When they continue groping about in the dark, they may easily fall down a pit or deep rift. While helplessly stuck and in danger of dying they are awaited anxiously by their families. In despair, members of their family will ask the police for help. In order to find and rescue people lost and/or injured in a cave, the police will automatically call for the assistance of skilled cavers. There was a case when, because of a delay in informing the police, rescuers were requested to search for four young people a week after their disappearance. Searching all the caves of the region one after the other, they succeeded nevertheless in rescuing the unlucky foursome, still alive, though unconscious.

In order to reduce any loss of time due to the lack of an efficient cave rescue organization and to be able to bring assistance as quickly as possible to injured cavers the present writer organized the Hungarian Cave Rescue Service in 1961, and has directed it ever since. The authorities welcomed the establishment of this organization and made use of it for every cave accident as well as in other cases where the situation was similar to cave conditions.

The Hungarian Cave Rescue Service is part of the Hungarian Red Cross, but its staff are recruited from members of the Hungarian Speleological Society and the Hungarian Federation of Nature-Lovers. The Headquarters of the Service is in



Emblem of the Hungarian Cave Rescue Service

Budapest, but rescue teams have also been organized in the country's major karst regions.

The core of the Service is represented by the so-called "alert teams". Their members undergo a high-level training in first-aid and rescuing people from caves and attend both theoretical and practical refresher courses. The personal and communal equipment of the "alert team" is kept constantly ready for use in the depots of the Service. In case of an alarm the "alert teams" are able to reach the site of the accident within one hour.

In case of accidents needing a larger number of rescuers the members of a second-level rescue-service are alerted. They have undergone a medium-level training in first-aid and rescue techniques and have passed the relevant examination. In cases, where even these forces are still insufficient, the Service is allowed to invite any organized, active caver to participate in the rescue operations.

Accidents and disappearances are usually reported to the police, who ask the head of the Service to call its duty "alert team". The police also provide vehicles to transport the rescuers to the site of the accident. Depending on the rescue work to be undertaken, the members of the "alert team" collect the required equipment from the nearest depot en route to the site of accident.

Taking part in rescue operations is the voluntary and honourable duty of every caver and the Cave Rescue Service is highly appreciated by both the general public and official bodies. As a result of saving lives on many occasions several of its members have been awarded State decorations. The greatest pleasure of each active member of the Service is that of having been able to help people in trouble and of seeing people rescued safely from grave danger.

English translation revised by R.A. Halliwell.

Dr. György DÉNES,
Research Institute for Water Resources Development
H-1095 Budapest
Kvassay J. u. 1.
HUNGARY