2025 Sumposium Weekend

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The American sump rescue community got together on November 8th 2025 to begin our annual practice session. We had no idea that the weekend would be interrupted by an actual rescue attempt. This article will discuss what practice we did get done. Details of the rescue attempt are published in a companion article.

The American sump rescue community has been getting together for a “Sumposium” practice event every year since 2022. This enables us to experiment with different ways of executing the key tasks, and to practice our solutions. This was a down year with only six attendees – Michael Raymond, Ian Flom, Chris Garguilo, Christopher Howell, Tucker Palmatier, and Aaron Thomas – but we were still able to make forward progress. We met at Gray Quary in northeastern TN. The plan was to practice individual tasks on Saturday, and then do a mini exercise on Sunday. This would be our first time doing an end-to-end exercise, with the goal of identifying the unknown unknowns.

The event included a presentation by the author about the recent European Cave Rescue Association (ECRA) conference in Poland. This year’s conference was the largest ECRA had hosted so far, with over two hundred cave rescuers from around the world. It included a multi-specialty skills demonstration at a flooded pit mine with cliffs around it. Divers moved a mock patient through the water to one of the cliffs, where a rigging team raised him up, moved him to a different cliff, and lowed him back into the water, where the divers took over and swam with him again. This happened several times. The medical group participated by showing how they would treat and monitor the patient throughout the simulated evacuation.

Other topics discussed at the Sumposium included the use of full face masks (FFMs), what supplies to bring in your response kit bag through the sump, and what equipment is available for building shelters on the far side of sumps. We tried out a bothy bag, which is a multi-person shelter. It is supported by the personnel inside, which is uncomfortable, but this makes it small and light weight to transport.

At the end of the morning, we practiced swimming patients along guidelines in open water. We set up a ~30M guideline that stayed at a level depth of ~7M. We also set up a short guideline dropping sharply down to ~15M. Divers buddied up and propelled each other back and forth along the guidelines, and then swapped roles. All mock patients wore sidemount harnesses and were face down.

After the swimming practice, we discussed ways to get better. It's rare that we can all get together for practice sessions. Being able to practice swimming with a "Rescue Randy" mannequin would allow us to get more repetitions in. We assumed that none have realistic buoyancy characteristics though. After the event we learned that the Ruth Lee company makes dummies that are used by public safety dive teams. While somewhat expensive, they bear further investigation.

The group agreed that the exercise was made easy because all the mock patients were experienced divers. In the future we would like to practice with brand new divers, or even non-divers, to see what changes. The logistics and risk management of that will be challenging. Further lessons learned from this exercise are discussed in the companion article *Equipment and Procedures for Evacuating a Patient Underwater*.

At the end of the afternoon, we re-entered the water to practice two more tasks. We practiced looking for exits from sumps, or for indicators in the sumps, which could help guide beyond-sump search planning. We also practiced swapping a tank on a patient using a gas block. The author served as the mock patient for the later. He found that those rescuers who constantly checked on his status as the gas block was manipulated and the tanks were moved around, greatly increased his comfort level and awareness of what was going on.

Done for the day, we cleaned up and headed out for Mexican food. As we left the restaurant, we were planning to head to our campsite and hang out before bed. This plan was interrupted by a call about a missing miner in the Rolling Thunder mine in West Virginia. The mine had flooded earlier in the day, and he was presumed trapped beyond the sumped tunnels. All thoughts of continuing our practice the following day disappeared as we got on the road.