

IRELAND'S THAI CAVE RESCUE HERO REWARDED

Irish caver Jim Warny played a vital part in this summer's heroic rescue of the Thai junior soccer team and their coach. His contribution to the rescue mission is particularly amazing since caving is purely a hobby for this Lufthansa electrician, and he tells Lorraine Courtney about having no hesitation in diving in at the deep end at a moment's notice!

Jim Warny was presented with a 'Just in Time' Rescue Award at the Irish Water Safety's recent conference in Athlone, in recognition of his extraordinary contribution as a rescue diver to the Tham Luang cave rescue effort in Thailand this summer, when 12 boys (aged 11 to 17) and their 25-year-old assistant coach were rescued in this unprecedented operation exercised to military precision.

On 23 June, the football team was trapped in a flash flood inside Tham Luang, just four kilometres from the cave's entrance. After days of pumping water from the cave system and a respite from rain, the rescue teams quickly worked on getting everyone out before the next monsoon rain, which was predicted to start around 11 July.

With some of the most highly-skilled cave rescuers in the world, the rescue became an international operation, including military personnel from Thailand, America, Australia, Britain and China.

In total, the effort involved more than 10,000 people, including over 100 divers, many rescue workers, representatives from up to 100 governmental agencies, 900 police officers and 2,000 soldiers. The operation required ten police helicopters, seven police ambulances, more than 700 diving cylinders, and the pumping of more than a billion litres of water out of the caves.

During the three-day mission (8-10 July) all of the boys and their coach were safely rescued from the cave by an international team including Jim, who transported the boys through flooded, narrow sections of the cave in the dark using guide ropes.

They co-ordinated this treacherous mission, which ultimately saw all members of the Wild Boars soccer team and their assistant coach safely reunited with their families.

A PASSION FOR EXPLORATION

The Lufthansa electrician took up cave diving 20 years ago, and exploration became his passion after he moved to Ireland from Belgium. "I started diving when I was just 12-years-old – that's 20 years ago now," he says.

"I slowly developed my skills and as time went on I got more and more interested in the technical aspects of the sport. Cave



diving is the most advanced form of diving and I naturally became more and more attracted to that.”

The Belgian national moved to County Clare ten years ago and continued to go caving in his free time. “When I moved to Ireland I naturally started exploring new caves. I do trips once or twice a week, whether that’s diving or just dry caving and this tends to be around the Gort lowlands and Kinvara areas.”

One of his friends was Polish explorer Artur Kozlowski, and



Jim Warny pictured after receiving the Irish Water Safety (IWS) ‘Seiko Just in Time’ Award. He told delegates at the IWS Examiners’ Conference on 10 October about the rescue mission.

the two of them set a new Irish-British record for a four-kilometre traverse of a water-filled cave system near Gort, Co. Galway in 2010. When Kozlowski went missing during an attempted traverse of the Pollonora cave system near Kiltartan in Co. Galway in 2011, Warny located his friend’s body at a depth of 52m.

So, he is well experienced at cave diving. And when the international call came for assistance from Thailand, he was one of the first out there on a plane to assist with this dangerous and complex rescue. Rescue teams discovered all of the boys and their coach alive and in relatively good health, sheltering deep inside the Tham Luang Nang Non-Cave complex.

However, while the boys had been found, extracting them from the cave still remained a difficult task – much of the return trip was underwater and even though pumps were lowering the water level, the rainfall wasn’t letting up.

So, just how did a softly-spoken caver from Ennis, Co. Clare become part of one of the biggest news stories of the year?

MANY FOREIGN EXPEDITIONS

“I’ve taken part in lots of foreign expeditions over the years and I had met nearly everyone on the British Caving Association at some stage. I’d been diving with all of them on some expedition or another,” explains Warny. “They needed people that they knew. They knew that I had the skills but they also knew me on a personal level and that we’d be able to work easily together.”

The dad-of-one bravely volunteered to help following a request from the British Cave Rescue Council. “The call came quite suddenly. I’d been following the story and messaged a

friend on Facebook. I told him that I was here if he needed me and within five minutes we had made arrangements for me to go," he says. "It all happened very fast. I'd only sent that message on a Friday evening and on the Saturday morning I was on the plane."

Understandably, Warny was nervous setting off. "I was intimidated by what I had read in the papers. I was anticipating the worst but the media tends to sensationalise stories. I was nervous too, because prior to every expedition you try to visually imagine what will happen and you try to be prepared. We had just enough contact to know what equipment we needed to bring but we were really just going on the information that we were getting from the media."

A PERILOUS JOURNEY

Once Warny arrived, it was straight down to business. "We arrived on the first day of extractions so we met our friends, were briefed by surface personnel and got ourselves ready. Two hours later we went in."

It was a perilous journey even for experienced divers, which was underscored by the death of a former Thai Navy Seal in the cave; Saman Kunan (37) died of asphyxiation on 6 July while returning to a staging base in the cave after delivering supplies of air.

"Cave diving is very different from diving in

ICRO IS "PROUD AND HONOURED" TO HAVE JIM AS A MEMBER

Jim's heroic actions have been widely praised by friends and colleagues in the caving world. Duncan Foster from Irish Cave Rescue Organisation (ICRO), who like other team members watched as the events unfolded in Thailand in July, tells 'Emergency Services Ireland that everyone within the voluntary organisation is very proud and honoured to have Jim Warny as a member of their team.



"It was clear to us how serious a predicament the boys and their coach were in, and that a successful outcome seemed unlikely.

"It's a testament to his skill and experience, that one of our team – Jim Warny – was recognised by his peers, who operate at the highest level of cave diving, as someone who could assist in the rescue.

"At very short notice, Jim flew halfway around the world to face some extremely challenging and dangerous diving conditions, and with literally someone's life in his hands, was part of a team that succeeded in an amazing rescue effort." (Pic: Independent.ie)



Jim Warny was presented with his award by IWS Chairman Martin O'Sullivan, who paid tribute to the dad-of-one for his heroic efforts.



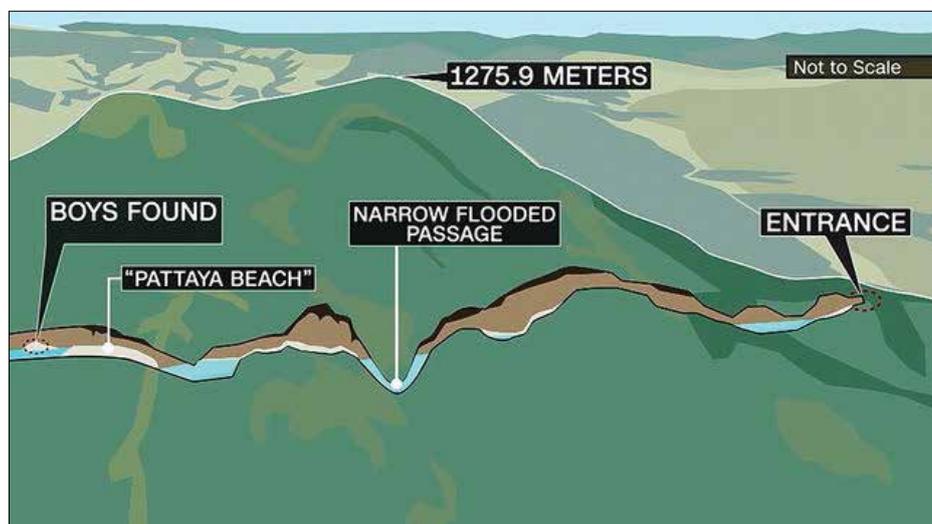
Royal Thai Navy personnel exit the cave during the rescue mission.

the open waters. The water can be so muddy that divers have to feel their way out. The passage can be so narrow that you have to take off your air tank. And you cannot simply swim up to safety.

"It was quite comforting that there was a plan in action. On the first day there I went 500 metres inside the cave. I was stationed in an air belt and acting as a support diver, swapping out air cylinders. Later, I was advanced forward when one diver wasn't able to take part any longer and this meant more hands-on time with the children."

COLLABORATIVE ACHIEVEMENT

The world watched on as the boys were rescued one by one with each mission taking three to four hours. They wore full-face breathing masks and were connected to a rescue diver for the



Map of a section of the cave in which 12 boys and their coach were trapped in a flash flood inside Tham Luang, just four kilometres from the cave's entrance.



As a member of the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation (ICRO), Jim was heavily involved in organising this year's annual symposium for cavers in Ireland. "The high-profile Thai rescue raised the profile of cavers among the general public," he says.

underwater sections while the divers were guided by dive lines.

On his third rescue day Warny assisted the coach to exit the cave. He describes the atmosphere throughout as very calm and well supported by the military and rescue teams.

"We're only amateurs compared to other teams present like the mountain rescuers. It was a massive collaborative achievement from the word go. It never felt like there was one person in charge, barking orders at the rest of us. It was more that we were all working towards a common goal and it was such a great feeling to be part of a team like that. It was a privilege and an honour to have played my part."

RAISING PROFILE OF CAVERS

Back at home Jim Warny, who is member of the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation (ICRO), was heavily involved in organising this year's annual symposium for cavers in Ireland. The 34th Annual SUICRO Symposium, jointly organised by the Speleological Union of Ireland (SUI) and ICRO, took place in Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare on 27-30 October.

Jim says that the high-profile rescue in Thailand raised the

profile of cavers among the general public. "Everyone is more aware of cave rescue now. They know that we exist, although hopefully we won't have to be utilised in another rescue anytime soon."

There's a movie or two currently in the works about this beautiful story of human beings saving other human beings. "I am telling and retelling my story now and I think that everyone can learn something from it. No matter who you are, if you put your heads together and work together, people can achieve great things," Warny says.

For more information on the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation visit www.caving.ie