

Ian Rolland

I met Ian during my first trip to England, in 1985. We had both come at the request of Rob Parker to work on the exploration of Wookey Hole in the Mendips. Ian was barely twenty years old. Parker had told me how lucky he had been to find at the last minute this young, enthusiastic lad who would haul loads to and from Chamber 24 every day, and always with a smile. He was very good, and he had that route so well rehearsed that he was able to dive ten low-visibility sumps (five in, five out) with packs nearly the size of himself, yet reliably arrive at the Queen Vic Inn up the road by 6 P.M. each day, like clockwork, for a pint of Butcums. Now there was a man worth knowing! During the main push, we spent five days camped out in Chamber 24 supporting Parker in his effort to crack Sump 26. Ian had cheerfully played a supporting role until the final afternoon, at which point he quietly asked Rob, "Mind if I have a look?" He left camp by himself with three tanks of trimix and a bottle of oxygen and descended nearly to Parker's limit. It was his first mixed-gas dive. I never realized it at the time, but these were all trademarks of Ian: initiative, modesty, and being totally at ease working solo at the frontier.

In the following nine years, Ian and I became close friends with a



common goal, fielding an expedition to the Sótano de San Agustín in southern Mexico. The nature of this expedition particularly appealed to a man of Ian's professional talents, as well as to his unabashed lust for exploration. It involved the development of experimental closed-circuit backpacks for cave diving. From 1989 until 1994, Ian was present in the United States for more than four months of development, testing, and training

with the ever-changing apparatus. It was his precise feedback and "test-pilot" commentary that helped guide the development toward apparatus tailored to the needs of the team. His unrelenting enthusiasm served to push us all onward in the face of despair when some new idea failed to work.

On a cold January 16 this year, Ian came to my house in Maryland to help with the final organization of the expedition. During the two weeks that we lived and worked together before the main team arrived, I saw the same drive and dedication, but in an older, more worldly man. He was now a family man, too, and he loved his wife and children, not only his own three about whom he spoke often, but other children who would visit us during our month-long effort to make sure that everything was ready for the trip to Mexico. He carried photos of his family in his caving helmet and, quite often, had a small teddy bear up there too, lashed to the outside. That teddy bear had probably been on more expeditions than most individuals would be privileged to participate in over a lifetime. It was, apparently, also cave-diving certified, for I had certainly seen it a number of times lashed to the manifold of open-circuit diving hardware when Ian was on safety duty for someone diving the rebreather, and

later on the rebreathers Ian used. Ian often joked, "If he gets bent, that's when I know I'm really in trouble."

In the expedition world, leadership is recognized and respect is earned by actions, not words. Ian merited both attributes on any project he was involved in. At San Agustín he was always in the lead, rigging, hauling equipment, planning the next mission. There was not a day that went by that Ian did not bring a list of some sort to the breakfast table for discussion. At first it was a list of rigging requirements, later provisions for Camp 3, and finally auxiliary decompression tables, which he had generated himself, for the initial dives in the San Agustín Sump. His RAF managerial skills shined when it came to helping maintain the operation on an efficient track. He popularized the old RAF phrase "chocks away" to indicate to the whole team it was time for action, usually followed whimsically by, "Be back in time for tea and medals."

He had a team spirit and a sense of mission that were unstoppable. I distinctly recall one late evening in early March of this year. He and Kenny Broad, the wise-cracking professional diver turned PhD student who had become Ian's inseparable apprentice in deep caving, were down at the -300-meter level in San Agustín, rigging. The plan was for them to rig to a certain location, after which I and Barbara am Ende would take over. They were using an electric impact drill to set rock bolts. The battery had, some time earlier, been drained. Undaunted, Ian had taken out the drill bit and, holding it with his bare fingers, used a rock hammer to set the bolts. When I reached the rope above them at around 10 P.M., I yelled, "The cavalry has arrived." He

grinned and said, "Ah, Mr. Stone. Right on schedule." And so was he. They had painstakingly set those final bolts by hand, with no drill holder, to keep things on track. Only much later did I learn that when he set off, on March 27, to explore the chamber that now bears his name, the last words he said to Kenny were, "If I'm not back by 10 P.M., call out the cavalry."

Two years ago Ian was diagnosed with diabetes. His response was typically Ian Rolland: to tackle the technical problems that this change in his body would entail and then to press on at full power. His expedition schedule never skipped a beat. He had asked me directly whether this condition would affect his position on the team. He, of course, knew that none of us could stand in his way after nine years of his life had been dedicated to the project. It was just his polite way of putting the issue to rest.

In late March, two months into the expedition, we were finally at the obstacle that had brought us to Mexico, the San Agustín Sump. Ian and I were in the lead on this particular day, rigging the final stretch of the Lower Gorge. When we reached the bottom of the last pitch, I recognized the beginning of the sump, took off my vertical gear, and swam to the staging point used in 1981, a little infeeder passage to the right with a one-square-meter flat space. When Ian arrived, I said, "Welcome to the San Agustín Sump, Mr. Rolland." He replied, as he always did, in his cordial fashion, "Thank you, Mr. Stone, and it is very good to be here . . . finally." I, for one, was awfully glad Ian was there.

On the basis of his drive and his proficiency with the rebreathers, Ian was a natural selection to be on the

initial exploration diving team, along with Noel Sloan and Steve Porter. Working, living, and sleeping at Camp 5, suspended over the sump, they began exploration of one of the most challenging obstacles in modern history. Although no lead diver had been designated, it was agreed among those at Camp 5 that Ian would make the first dive. Within three days, this team had explored 250 meters of underwater tunnel while operating in extremely poor visibility. They then took a rest break and retreated to Camp 3.

At that time, Kenny Broad expressed interest in moving on to Camp 5 and having a go at cracking the sump. Ian promptly offered to go in a supporting role. Kenny immediately succeeded in extending the line a significant distance to the south. The depth was decreasing. Fired by this breakthrough, Ian and Kenny began taking alternate leads toward what they were now sure would be the long-sought far side of the San Agustín Sump. When Kenny returned on dive eleven saying he had broken through at a distance of 430 meters, Ian immediately made plans for a solo reconnaissance of the new territory beyond. He was exploring virgin land at the limits of human endeavor when he died. For Ian Rolland there could be no more befitting epitaph.

For those of us who remain, there is an unfathomable sense of loss, not only of an irreplaceable team mate, husband, and father, but of a personal friend who shared some of our best memories. I shall remember his drive, wit, sense of mission, and unselfish team spirit. Ultimately, we must pick up and carry on, as he would have. Chocks away, Ian.—*Bill Stone, September 1994*