

Three college spelunkers find themselves entombed a mile inside the earth; here is their personal story—an eternity of blackness, stillness, despair

We Were Trapped in Lookout Mountain

By MARTIN HUDDLESTON
as told to Jack Ryan



Martin Huddleston

WE HAD BEEN TRAPPED in Lookout Mountain at least two days—or was it three or four? Cut off from light, sound, even fresh air, we had no idea how long we had been entombed almost a mile inside the earth.

We had made a pledge: estimate our time conservatively so we wouldn't be driven to panic if not rescued right away. We had pledged, too, not to think of what might happen if rescuers didn't reach us in time. I hadn't been able to keep my mind off that idea, but I didn't know if my fellow spelunkers, Jim Mason and Bill Bartee, were being haunted, too. We had been silent for hours.

"Whatever happens," Bill said softly so as not to wake Jim Mason, who was dozing between us, "we don't want to lose our heads. If we're going to . . . well, going to die here, let's do it quietly, like men." I nodded. We agreed we wouldn't try to climb that treacherous rope that dangled invitingly before us, leading 60 feet upward from this subterranean well to a cave which, in turn, led to the outside world.

And we agreed not to tear at the limestone walls that formed our prison, nor turn on each other in insane frustration. Bill was the most casual of us, and his cool appraisal of a somber future calmed rather than frightened me.

We were sitting on a shallow ledge we had hacked from the mud walls. Jim stirred restlessly

between us, then sat upright. "Listen," he said. Something was moving above us.

Suddenly the sound rushed at us with startling sharpness. "Rock fall!" Jim shouted. Instinctively we drew back against the wall. But the rocks crashed harmlessly down the other side of our trap and splashed into the large subterranean pool that formed the floor of this pit. And then nothing. Noise was cut off as if somebody had flicked a switch. No echo, no reverberation. I wondered if we could ever hear rescuers—or if we did, whether we could ever call them to us.

We leaned back wearily, shivering as we had been since entering the cave—how long ago? My jaw was sore from chattering teeth, and I stroked my cheek for relief. I was startled at the length of my beard. I knew it had been at least two days since we had been trapped a mile inside Lookout Mountain in northwestern Georgia—two days of torment and frustration made bearable by the certainty that we would be rescued. But now that certainty was waning. Everything had gone wrong—maybe the rescue would go wrong, too.

Jim Mason and myself are students at Emory University in Atlanta, and Bill Bartee attends Presbyterian College in Clinton, S. C. This was supposed to be just an overnight exploration for us. We had entered the mountain through a three-foot tunnel, clambered along for about a mile until we came to a chimneylike hole that dropped down to the subterranean pool that had fascinated us for months. We had lowered ourselves down the 60-foot hole by rope and swum in the frigid waters for only 15 minutes before our troubles started to pile up.

First it was cramps. They stabbed at us so violently we almost doubled up in water far over our heads. We forced ourselves to shallower water, and Jim Mason grabbed the end of our rope which was secured to a rock in the cave above. "Better start up while we can," he said.

WE TRAINED our flashlights on Jim, and he shinned upward hand over hand. The line dangled too far from the pit's wall for Jim to brace his feet on, but he was a skilled climber, and we didn't expect trouble. About 15 feet up, though, I saw Jim's hands slipping on the hemp. "This rope is wet," he called. "Can't get a grip." Our flashlights cast sharp shadows on his face, and they deepened as he strained to hold on. Then he gave a half-angry cry. His hands drew away from the rope, and he plunged into the water.

Bill and I found him with the beams of our flashlights. He was flailing at the water. "Cramps!" he gasped. "My arms are frozen!" We dove over to Jim and held him while he worked his arm muscles loose from racking pain.

Bill wanted to try next, but we wouldn't let him. Our hands and clothes were filmed with slime, and even the escape rope was soaked from the moisture-laden air. Worse, the cold had sapped our strength and chilled our muscles until they would knot under the slightest exertion. Yet we had that

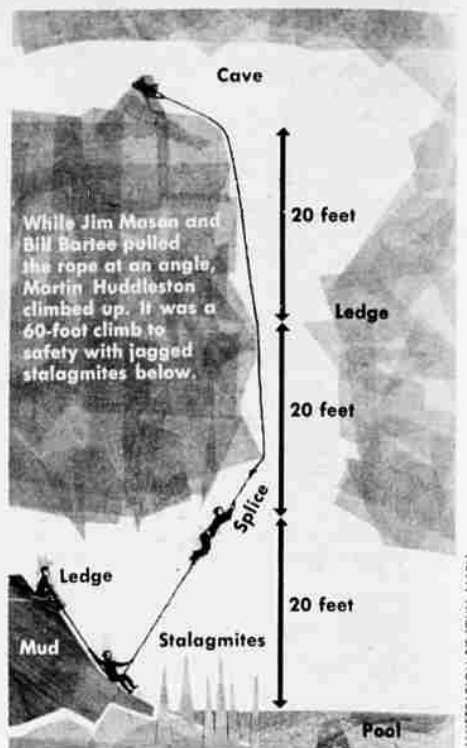


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN ALLEN

treacherous 60-foot climb to safety.

With our flashlights, we took a new look at our surroundings. We were caught in a room between the sheer drop of the hole and the pool level. We couldn't stand in the water long without being dragged under with cramps, and we couldn't climb up our rope. From the pool, a steep muddy bank rose to form the base of the room.

"Let's try scrambling up that slope," Jim said. "We won't freeze anyway." But it was just more disappointment. We'd dig our hands in the mud and try to pull ourselves up. We could make a few feet, but as we would increase our weight, the silt would slip out between our fingers until we had nothing but our fists and were sliding back into the water. We finally collapsed in exhaustion, half on the bank and half in the numbing water.

THE VOID closed in around us and added to our shivering. No sound, no light once our flashlights were off, not even a draft of air to give us a sense of the outside. It was as if the world had been extinguished, and we'd somehow been overlooked completely.

Our deep breathing condensed in heavy clouds before our faces. With no air currents to blow away the fog, it just got heavier. I waved my hands to dispel it. "We've gotta get out of this place," I said. "Even the air is dead."

"We've got to get up that bank," Bill said. He pulled an army-surplus knife from his belt and handed it to Jim, the strongest of us. "Maybe you could drive this into that bank and pull yourself up on it," he continued.

Jim plunged it into the bank over his head, and with his feet braced on our shoulders laboriously dragged himself up the slope. The moment he relaxed, he would start slipping back, but he managed to dig his heels in well above the water and hold on. He dropped a small line to us and helped drag us out of the pool, too.

We kept this up, but each foot we gained pulled our muscles into tighter bands, and you could tell when a shooting cramp would knife through

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