

Armstrong, "Cave Diving Accidents and Incidents 2015-2016," American Caving Accidents, Improving Safety Through 50 Years of Accident Reports and Analysis, NSS (National Speleological Society), <https://caves.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ACA-50.pdf>, p. 87

25 February 2015 Sistema Camilo, Quintana Roo, Mexico fatality, lost, medical issue

On a Wednesday afternoon, three divers began their first dive during a trip to Quintana Roo. At approximately 1400, Keith Price (72), Tom Corwin, and Bill Lavine entered Cenote Muchachos, one of the cenote entrances to Sistema Camilo. The divers all had many years of experience and were familiar with this cave. Information later gathered from Price's dive computer was used by Bil Phillips to reconstruct this scenario: At approximately 35 minutes and some 1,800 feet penetration distance into the dive (underwater depth of approximately 60 feet), the divers reached their gas-turn-around pressures. The divers signaled to each other and started their exit toward the cave entrance. At this time, or very shortly thereafter, visual contact with Price was lost. One of the divers claims that he saw Price's light to the right side of the guideline and at a deeper depth than the other two divers. The divers began a short search for the missing diver, backtracking and looking with their lights for signs of their buddy until they were forced to leave the cave due to their gas reserves.

At approximately 1500, the two divers exited Cenote Muchachos and asked one diver's wife if the missing diver had surfaced. The answer was "No." The two divers informed the caretakers at the cenote site that there was a missing diver in the cave. By this time, the surviving divers assumed that the victim had either perished in the cave by exhausting his gas supply, or he had exited the cave system by another entrance. An underwater search team did a preliminary search of the main line and 150 feet down each side passage. The only clue observed was a bubble trail that led deeper into the cave. When that trail was lost, the team ended their search for the day. Land searches did not find Price at any of the cenotes they checked.

The underwater search resumed the next day. Divers again found and followed a bubble trail. It eventually led to Cenote Camillo, where Price's two dive cylinders were found at the water's edge; the tanks had 450 and 500 psi respectively. A diveline led into the jungle. The divers called out but heard no response, so they returned to Cenote Muchachos to inform the surface team.

Once the surface team located the cenote, they followed the guideline into the jungle and found where Price had discarded his fins and helmet. The guideline ended after 200 feet, but Price's trail was discernible from branches he had broken, pointing in his direction of travel. More than 1,600 feet from the cenote, Price was found face down on the ground. He was still wearing his mask with prescription lenses, wetsuit, hood, cave diving harness, buoyancy compensator, lights, and dive computer. An autopsy determined that a heart attack was the cause of death.

1. Bil A. Phillips, "Sistema Camilo Cave Diving Incident, February 25–26, 2015, Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico," undated.

Comments: It is not clear why Price separated from his group and began following an adjacent line. That line had permanent arrows, which he followed, but they led away from his point of entry. Phillips concludes his report, "At some point, the victim had to realize that the guideline he was following would not lead to his original entry point. He encountered a few jump lines coming from other directions. He

followed one (without the use of a jump reel to maintain a continuous guideline). This second line contained line markers pointing further into the cave. This line in turn came to an abrupt end, and the victim chose to make another 'visual gap' without the use of a guideline. Including his original departure from the main line that the team used to enter the cave, the victim made a total of three 'intentional visual gaps' neglecting to maintain a continuous guideline to his original exit. By pure chance his wanderings led him to Cenote Camillo. He was able to surface here before exhausting his gas supply. By him attempting to reach his vehicle and starting point overland, we can guess that he was overcome by the combination of physical exertion, dehydration, and overheating. As stated in the autopsy, a heart attack was the cause of death. Although this accident did not occur in the cave environment, the cause of death was a direct result of poor decisions made by the cave diver during the dive."