Rolf Adams 1965–1992

On Sunday afternoon, April 19, 1992, Australian cave explorer Rolf Adams died in Hole in the Wall spring near Marianna, Florida, in a cave-diving accident. Adams was one of the world’s leading deep-cave explorers. He had come to the United States at the end of February to join an international team that was training for the 1993 San Agustin Expedition to Huautla, Oaxaca, Mexico. The team had successfully completed two months of cave-diving training at hyperbaric research facilities and at Jackson Blue Spring, using computer-controlled rebreathers, and was in the process of packing up when Adams and team-mate Jim Smith decided to tour one of the many nearby springs prior to Adams’s departure for Australia that afternoon, using standard open-circuit cave-diving apparatus. They were returning to the entrance from a 365-meter penetration into the cave when Adams developed difficulty breathing at a depth of 30 meters. Despite a heroic effort by Smith to assist, Adams passed out and drowned within 60 meters of the entrance. Medical studies later indicated that he had suffered an arterial gas embolism.

Adams was best known to cave-exploration teams around the world for his pioneering work in the deep caves of Oaxaca, Mexico, although his capabilities were also well known in European circles, in his native Australia, and in New Zealand. Rolf gained fame in 1987 in the Chichotla highlands of Oaxaca as a protege of Australia’s premier vertical scientist and had recently completed a project on micro-computer-vision protocols at the CSIRO Applied Mathematics Branch of Australia’s National Research Laboratories in Sydney.

Rolf was in top form. He acquired the highest level of cave-diving certification and then went on to learn about experimental rebreathers. He amazed everyone with his ability to grasp complex new tasks and then put them into practice. After discovering during a dive a problem with one of the electronic display systems on the rebreather, he calmly sat down one afternoon in a hammock at base camp with a printout of the sixteen thousand lines of code that ran on the on-board computer. That evening he took aside the engineer who had written the code and politely pointed out the problem. By the time the training exercises were over, Rolf had the ability to confidently carry out a four-hour rebreather cave-dive, swimming a total distance of nearly four kilometers under water in the process. And he could do that every day, or, as he often did, simply serve as the safety diver for another member of the team, using traditional Scuba. He was equally at ease under water with whatever apparatus was needed. That Rolf should be taken from us while on a tourist dive following this complex work seems terribly unfair. But such cruel irony is common in our world. It is much like the crack Himalayan climbing team that is returning from its most dangerous expedition without a scratch, only to lose one of its best members while bouldering on the hike back to civilization.

Theodore Roosevelt, one of America’s most charismatic presidents, once said, “Far better to dare mighty things than to take rank with those who live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.” Rolf embodies that credo, and in his brief time on our planet he lived a richer life than all but a very few will ever know. And he left our world, and all he touched, a great deal richer in spirit. Although he was only twenty-six years old, he was one of the finest individuals I have ever known.

If there were to be an epitaph for Rolf, it should read: “He was a quick study, a jack of all trades, and good at every one of them. He was the ultimate modern explorer, bright, athletic, a team player you could count on when the chips were down. He was never at a loss for a smile or a good joke, and he always carried more than his fair share.” We, your fellow explorers, salute you. Goodspeed, Rolf Adams.”