



The 12 boys and their coach were trapped in darkness for two weeks, but were armed with flashlights before entering the cave.



Writer and Director Tom Waller briefs his cast Eoin O'Brien, Mitch De Young and Jim Waryn, who plays himself.

By Colin Hastings

■ THIS month marks one year since the heart-stopping rescue of all twelve members of a boys' football team, aged 11 to 16, and their coach from a water-filled system of caves in northern Thailand.

For 18 days, the world had held its breath; their fate was in the balance. When the boys finally emerged, thanks to an amazing internationally-supported rescue mission, the collective sigh of relief mingled with a torrent of tears was felt across the globe. Not since the astonishing rescue of the Chilean miners back in 2010 has there been such tension and real-life drama.

The race is now on to launch the first movie about the rescue and its many heroes.

'THE CAVE' - WHEN THE WHOLE WORLD HELD ITS BREATH



Tom Waller with the U.S. Major, played by James Edward Holley, at the rescue camp on the set.

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Tom Waller's latest film tells the dramatic story of the heart-stopping rescue of the Wild Boars football team and their coach from a water-logged cave in northern Thailand. Exclusive to The BigChilli - behind-the-scenes photos of the film during production

In pole position is Thai-Irish director Tom Waller, whose movie 'The Cave' is scheduled to debut in Thailand and then internationally later this year. A trailer is expected next month.

Tom, whose previous work includes the award-winning film *The Last Executioner*, *Butterfly Man* and *The Elephant King*, says he has based the movie's script and action on true events – the thrilling story of the largest international rescue mission of modern times from the unique perspective of men and women facing life-and-death decisions and displaying selfless determination and sacrifice, culminating in a triumphant outcome against all the odds.

With permission from both the Ministry of Culture and the National

Parks Authority, the movie was shot in just 30 days, mostly in locations in Thailand, including one day at Tham Luang Cave in Chiang Rai, where the boys and their coach of their Wild Boars team were trapped in darkness for two and a half weeks. Other scenes were shot in the UK and Ireland.

"It wasn't easy getting access to Tham Luang," says Tom. "It fills up with water in November and December so it's not possible to enter for more than four months.

"Also, since the rescue, the cave gets thousands of visitors."

An alternative cave complex in Sa Kaew province was used for filming, together with a replica set built in an abandoned swimming pool in Bangkok. The film crew were able to recreate



Two of the boys on the set, playing members of the entrapped football team of 12 boys and their football coach.



A U.S. Army Staff Sergeant, played by Bobby Gerrits, carrying a 'Sked' stretcher on the set.



Outside the cave entrance a rescue camp was setup including field hospital, food stalls and areas for military, press, rescuers, relatives, volunteers etc. A similar rescue camp was setup at the movie set for 'THE CAVE', here with the area for Thai soldiers.



Tom Waller briefs a U.S. Captain, played by Mitch De Young, on the set with actor Eoin O'Brien in the background playing Sgt. O'Brien.



Tom Waller is framing a shot of an actor, playing a Thai Government Official, thanking the heroic rescuers including Jim Warny (second right) who is playing himself as one of the core members of the dive team during the actual cave rescue.

realistic conditions of the cave with its poor visibility by using head lamps.

Tom recruited more than a dozen participants from the actual cave rescue, including several of the real divers such as Jim Warny, Tan Xiaolong, Erik Brown and Mikko Paasi, to play themselves in the movie. Experienced divers from Belgium, Finland, Canada and China were also used.

There was no contact with the boys or their parents because the Thai government is protective and chaperones them everywhere. "To talk to them you have to deal through a committee," notes Tom.

Like everybody else, Tom was transfixed by the actual rescue as it unfolded in April last year. "I realised that as a Thai film director and producer, I was in a unique position to tell this story. I had met one of the divers in Ireland who gave me a first-hand account of what had happened,

so I felt that this just had to be my next project.

"I didn't think about the finance. I'd got the idea to captivate the world and thought I should have a crack at it.

"Being both a Brit and Thai gives me a unique dual perspective."

Nonetheless, making a movie about a real-life event requires special care and attention. "It's as if you're re-writing history when you're making a film like this, so a lot of responsibility goes into it, and you have to be very careful. Some of the characters are analogous, some are fictitious. Overall, we paid a huge amount of attention to detail."

The story was developed by the same team that wrote 'The Last Executioner'— Don Linder, Katrina Grosse and Tom.

"Instead of worrying about what the audience already knew, we endeavored to recreate authentic conditions in a way that would allow



the audience to feel as if they were actually there – even to feel as if they were immersed in the tunnels with the rescuers,” says Tom.

“We wanted the audience to feel what the boys themselves must have experienced: the hunger slaked only by water dripping off stalactites, the disorientation of complete darkness and loss of sense of time, the threat of rising waters suddenly engulfing and carrying them away, and the real possibility of never seeing their parents again.

“My film focuses on the volunteer spirit of the rescuers, following the untold personal stories of those unsung heroes involved in the mission to bring out the trapped boys and their coach from the cave.”

To ensure accuracy and credibility, Tom involved more than a dozen actual rescuers in the production, mostly playing themselves in the film. “They helped to maintain the authenticity since, for them, there’s no acting required.

“Although the story is embedded in a Thai narrative the film features a truly international cast. In the same way that this rescue was a real mix of participants from all over the world, I’ve tried to match that variety by



The coach, played by Ekawat Niratworapanya, being carried away on a 'Sked' stretcher. All the boys were transported in a sedated state wearing bodysuit and full face mask.

using a very diverse ensemble cast, which includes real people from the rescue as well as trained actors to portray certain roles.”

“Many of the people from the local Chiang Rai/Mae Sai community who were actually involved the events at Tham Luang cave have cameo appearances as extras in the film.”

Production challenges

As with any movie, production of The Cave had its fair share of glitches and need for quick adaptations. In September 2018, Tom got special permission for the writers and some of the crew to visit the mouth of the actual cave, which had already been closed off to the public. This was an important visit.

Co-script writer Don Linder notes: “My take-away from standing right at the cave was that no matter what I had seen on TV or in photos captured how dangerous and seemingly crazy it was for the 13 to climb down a slippery escarpment and enter the tiny entrance to the cave.”

Despite requesting a permit to access the front of the cave again to film external scenes, that permit was never issued until after the main filming block had finished. So, on



Cave divers Tan Xiaolong and Jim Warny, who are playing themselves as rescue divers in the movie, together with actor Alex Winslow.



Cave divers Tan Xiaolong and Jim Warny, playing themselves, are preparing for a scene. They are two of the actual cave divers that took part in the sensational cave rescue mission in northern Thailand.



The movie is paying attention to detail in order to remain true to the genuine cave rescue, here at the rescue camp on the movie set with proper costumes for a member of the Chiangrai Medical Emergency Response Team (MERT) and the Thai Police.



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Perhaps the biggest disappointment was that the Ministry of Culture never issued the requested permission to use the boys themselves.

Cave rescue divers Jim Warny (Belgium) and Mikko Paasi (Finland), who are playing themselves, share a moment between takes on the set.

the day that scene was shot, the crew had to search on-the-fly for a nearby cave entrance that was so similar that it was easily transformed for the scene where the boys ride up on their bicycles and clamber up a hill to the entrance. Other authentic caves were used for some internal shots just a few meters in.

The scene when the boys are rushed in individual ambulances to a waiting helicopter to take them to the hospital in Chiang Rai also almost went down the tubes when the

promised permit to use a helicopter was never issued. The crew were able to use the actual field where the helicopters landed and took off, but there was no helicopter. Instead, huge blowers were brought in to replicate the dust storm created by a chopper, and the scene was refocused on the dramatic rush from ambulance to helicopter.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment was that the Ministry of Culture never issued the requested permission to use the boys



*Cinematographer Wade Muller, known from films such as *The Last Executioner* (2014) and *Mechanic: Resurrection* (2016), is preparing for a scene at the rescue camp on the movie set.*

themselves. Understandably, the Thai government has been very protective of the boys to avoid their exploitation. So, twelve actors were hired, and with make-up and wardrobe, they gave amazing performances barely indistinguishable from the actual boys.

Languages presented another problem to be solved. To maintain authenticity, Tom decided that characters would speak whatever language they would have used during the rescue, including various dialects of Thai, English, pidgin English, and Chinese.

Ultimately, *The Cave* is a film which not only captures the incredible events and essence of the story, but also its Thai-ness. As Waller noted, “It was a Thai emergency, but the whole world tuned in and tried to help.”



Executive Producer Desmond O'Neill and Writer/Director Tom Waller on the set with cave rescue diver Erik Brown, who plays himself, on location in Thailand.