

08-28-2005 Lawrence Co PA – Michael Switala - FF PSD Night Training

Dive Training Accident Claims Pennsylvania Firefighter

<http://fallenbrothers.com/community/showthread.php?4693-Dive-Training-Accident-Claims-Pennsylvania-Firefighter>

09-28-2005 Firehouse.Com News

The Lower Burrell, Pennsylvania Volunteer Fire Company No. 3 is reporting the death of one of their firefighters in a dive training accident.

Michael Switala, 50, a member of Station 69 and Water Rescue 68, died August 28 as a result of an accident the day before.



Initial reports are that the deceased and his partner made their third training dive, a night diving exercise at a lake near Slippery Rock when the accident occurred at approximately 17 feet. The partner signaled to Switala that he was OK and Switala responded back the same, then signaled to surface and OK. The partner surfaced and did the usual "locate" his position and to look for his partner (Switala).

He could not locate Switala so he dove back down and found Switala with his regulator out of his mouth and in a flexing/seizure body position. The partner made several attempts to reinsert the regulator into Switala's mouth as well as the backup regulator with no success. Both surfaced and the partner summoned help (team members and PADI instructor). They performed CPR and transported. Switala died Sunday at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh. The Allegheny County coroner ruled the death an accidental drowning.

Firefighter Switala was an 18-year member of the department having served in several different offices within the organization. He is survived by his wife Aimee, daughter Heather, 26, and two sons, Marine Lance Corporal Aaron Switala, age 24 and Matt, age 19.

Arrangements are being handled by Frank Gigler Funeral Home, 2877 Leechburg Road, Lower Burrell. A casket-side service will be held on Thursday evening, followed by a full honors funeral on Friday morning.

Scuba diver drowns during PADI night diving specialty course

<http://www.cdnn.info/news/safety/s050829a.html>

08-28-2005 - CYBER DIVER News Network

FREEPORT, Pennsylvania (29 Aug 2005) -- A diver with Lower Burrell Volunteer Fire Department No. 3 died Sunday as a result of a diving accident in the line of duty Saturday, Fire Chief Mark Marmo said in a release.

Michael Switala, 50, of Oregon Drive in Lower Burrell was an 18-year member of the department, having served in several offices within the organization, Marmo said.

Switala died as a result of accidental drowning in Lawrence County, the Allegheny County coroner's office said Sunday night.

Scott Camerlo of Scott's Scuba in Freeport said Switala was participating in a night diving exercise at a lake near Slippery Rock when the accident occurred.

"It appears to have been some type of medical condition that caused him to go unconscious under water," Camerlo said.

Switala's diving buddy during the exercise saw that Switala's mouthpiece to his air tanks was out of his mouth and that Switala appeared to be unconscious, Camerlo said.

The diving buddy brought Switala to the surface where Camerlo and three others in the diving group performed CPR until emergency medical workers arrived, Camerlo said.

Switala was first taken to United Community Hospital in nearby Grove City, then transferred to UPMC Presbyterian hospital in Pittsburgh, Camerlo said.

He said Switala was a member of a specialty diving course offered by Scott's Scuba. Camerlo is a master diving instructor and a U.S. Coast Guard master captain.

A firefighter at the Lower Burrell No. 3 said Marmo was unavailable for comment and more details about Switala's death would be released as they became available.

Switala is survived by his wife, Aimee, daughter Heather and two sons, Marine Lance Cpl. Aaron Switala and Matt Switala.

Funeral arrangements are incomplete. A memorial fund is being established to aid the family, according to the release.

Pennsylvania Firefighter Dies

<http://cms.firehouse.com/content/article/article.jsp?sectionId=39&id=44305>
08-29-2005 *Firehouse.Com News*



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A memorial fund to aid the family is being established. Funeral and additional information will be released as available.

Lower Burrell diver drowns

http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/trib/newssummary/s_368673.html

August 29, 2005

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Volunteer fireman drowns during diving exercise

http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/trib/newssummary/s_368622.html

August 29, 2005 By The Tribune-Review

A diver with Lower Burrell Volunteer Fire Department No. 3 died yesterday as a result of a diving accident in the line of duty Saturday, Fire Chief Mark Marmo said in a release.

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Switala was first taken to United Community Hospital in nearby Grove City, Lawrence County, then transferred to UPMC Presbyterian hospital in Oakland, Camerlo said.

The Allegheny County coroner's office said Switala's death was a result of accidental drowning.

Rescue team diver dies in training exercise accident

<http://www.post-gazette.com/local/westmoreland/2005/08/29/Rescue-team-diver-dies-in-training-exercise-accident/stories/200508290171>

August 29, 2005 By Judy Laurinatis Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A Lower Burrell firefighter who joined a department diving and rescue team three years ago died yesterday after officials say he lost consciousness Saturday while on diving exercises at a quarry in Plain Grove, Lawrence County.

Michael Switala, 50, an 18-year-member of Lower Burrell Volunteer Fire Department No. 3, died at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh after being transferred there from a hospital in Grove City. The Allegheny County coroner's office said the death was an accidental drowning.

Fire Chief Mark Marmo said Switala was with other divers in the quarry when the accident happened. He said officials aren't sure why Switala lost consciousness while he was under water.

Switala was a member of the Braeburn Fire Department Dive/Rescue Team for about three years. He was also a member of the EMT unit.

Marmo said Switala, who was self-employed, was active on VFD No 3 committees including serving on the board of directors.

Marmo, who has been chief for nine years, said this was the first duty-related death that occurred since he has been chief.

"He was genuinely a good man," Marmo said.

Switala is survived by his wife, Aimee Bohrer Switala, a daughter, Heather, sons Aaron and Matthew and his mother, Genieve Zastawney Switala. He is also survived by a brother, Joseph, and a sister, Lydia.

Visitation is set for 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday and on Thursday from 2 to 4 and 7 to 9 p.m. at the Frank F. Gigler Funeral Home, 2877 Leechburg Road, Lower Burrell. Mass of Christian Burial will be held at 10 a.m. at St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church, 3055 Leechburg Road, Lower Burrell.

Burial will be in Greenwood Memorial Park, Lower Burrell.

A Firefighter Memorial Service will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday at the funeral home.

Firefighter diver died 'doing what he loved'

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/trib.../s_368864.html

August 30, 2005 By Chuck Biedka TRIBUNE-REVIEW NEWS SERVICE

Michael Switala was excited two weeks ago when he was able to dive to 90 feet.

"It was only for about 15 minutes, but it was like a 'new car' experience for him," said friend and fellow firefighter diver Randi Shank.

Switala's deep dive duration was short because of the decompression needed. Firefighter divers will only go to 100 feet deep if they have the added training. Special gas and air mixtures are needed for deeper dives.

Switala, 50, of Lower Burrell, died Sunday after a training dive Saturday in a lake near Slippery Rock, Lawrence County.

Switala was an 18-year veteran firefighter and dive rescue team member who continued to improve his skills as a diver, his friends said.

"He loved the fire department, community service and diving," said Scott Camerlo, of Scott's Scuba in Freeport.

Switala was known for his compassion, and he showed it even in death: he was an organ donor.

"Mike was a genuine person. He was easy to talk to," said friend and Lower Burrell No. 3 Fire Chief Mark Marmo. "You could sit and talk with him, and he was well-versed on many topics."

Switala, who was a Navy veteran, was a certified emergency medical technician, firefighter, rescue diver and devoted family man, Marmo said.

Switala was a man who didn't get excited during emergencies and his self-control helped to calm younger firefighters and divers, Marmo said.

Switala worked at Allegheny Ludlum until he was laid off. Since then, he was self-employed doing mortgage closings, according to Shank said.

Shank said that the Saturday night training session was going routinely.

"He was communicating well with his diving buddy," Shank said. "Everything appeared normal."

When Switala didn't return to the surface with his buddy, that driver immediately went back down and found Switala with his mouthpiece hanging away from his mouth, said Camerlo, a master instructor who supervised the dive.

The buddy diver tried to put the mouthpiece back in, but when Switala didn't respond, the driver grabbed him and raced to the surface, Camerlo said.

Camerlo said CPR was being performed within three minutes of when he surfaced and an ambulance was there in three minutes.

The Allegheny County Coroner's Office performed an autopsy and ruled that Switala accidentally drowned. No other findings were made, a deputy coroner said.

Camerlo said nighttime diving is something that emergency divers want to know how to do to better serve the public.

In his obituary, Switala's family noted, "He died doing what he loved to do."



ROLL OF HONOR

<http://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighter/michael-a-switala/>

Michael A. Switala

- **Firefighter**
- **Lower Burrell Volunteer Fire Department**
- **Pennsylvania**
- **Age: 50**
- **Year of Death: 2005**



Submitted by his wife

Michael A. Switala, 50, was a life member of the City of Lower Burrell in Pennsylvania Fire Company. For the majority of this time, he served

Company #3 as an EMT and firefighter. In 2000, Michael became a member of Company #2 Dive/Rescue Team. He had participated in several divers' training/certification classes throughout these years and had accompanied the team on various rescue-recovery events. On August 27, 2005, Michael drowned during a night dive certification class. He was revived, but remained unresponsive and died the following day, August 28, 2005.

Michael was a good and generous man, a man of commitment. His life was marked by service to others. As a boy, he had attained the rank of Eagle Scout, the Scouting system's highest rank. As a young man, while enrolled at Slippery Rock State College, Michael joined the Navy (1973). He was a Machinist Mate 2 aboard the USS Andrew Jackson. After the Navy in 1977, he married his wife Aimee Bohrer Switala. Together they have three children Heather 27, Aaron 25, and Matthew 20. We consider them 'our greatest treasures.' Michael was a wonderful husband and father who participated in his children's lives. He was a nurturer, instructor, protector, provider and mentor. His love was enormous. In addition to his wife and children, Michael is sadly missed by his mother Genevieve, siblings Lydia and Joseph and their spouses, as well as several in-laws, nieces and nephews.

Michael was an avid hunter and fisherman and shared these activities with his sons and brother. As a family, we shared a summer camp in Erie, Pennsylvania, where we'd swim, fish, go boating, cook out, and spend evenings around the fire. Watching Steelers football was also a weekly event for our family.

In honor of their dad and because of the wonderful impact he had on his sons, Aaron and Matthew have also joined the fire company as firemen and are also training for the dive/rescue team. Michael died doing what he loved. As my husband, Michael was my best friend and my greatest love. We are committed to each other, our children, and God. To our children, he was 'dad' – the guy who could do anything and make everything right. Michael always gave his best, did his best, and to all of us, was the best. His love does go on.

Volunteer Fire Fighter / Rescue Diver Dies in Training Incident at a Quarry - Pennsylvania

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire/reports/face200529.html>



Death in the Line of Duty...A summary of a NIOSH fire fighter fatality investigation

F2005-29 Date Released: July 28, 2006

SUMMARY

On August 28, 2005, a 50-year-old male volunteer fire fighter/rescue diver (the victim) died after nearly drowning during a fire department sponsored night-dive training exercise at a quarry the night before. The victim had performed a total of three training dives the day of the incident (August 27, 2005) as part of the requirements for Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certifications for advanced open water diver and night diver.

After the students completed the exercises for the "night dive," they were instructed to complete the training dive with a "partner dive." During the partner dive, the victim's partner reportedly signaled to him that he wanted to surface, and the victim signaled back "OK, let's surface." After the partner surfaced, he looked around and did not see the victim. The partner reportedly looked down and saw the victim still below him waving his light from side to side in a distress motion. The partner dove back down and found that the victim did not have his regulator in his mouth.

The partner tried to donate his alternate air source, but at that point the victim's underwater flashlight dropped and he went limp. The partner brought him to the surface and yelled for help. At this time the master scuba diver instructing the course (Instructor #1) and his partner were below the surface on the partner dive in another part of the quarry. Another dive instructor (Instructor #2) and a diver on shore unrelated to this training heard the calls for help and immediately went to provide assistance. The victim was towed to shore and provided cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Emergency 911 was called and arrived within 15 minutes. The victim was transported to a local hospital where he died the following day.

NIOSH investigators concluded that, to minimize the risk of similar occurrences, fire/rescue departments should:

- **develop, implement, and enforce standard operating procedures (SOPs) or protocols regarding diver training**
- **ensure that each diver maintains continuous visual, verbal, or physical contact with his or her dive partner**
- **ensure that a backup diver and ninety-percent-ready diver are in position to render assistance**
- **ensure that positive communication is established among all divers and those personnel who remain on the surface.**



Photo courtesy of the fire department.

INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 2005, a 50-year-old male volunteer fire fighter/rescue diver (the victim) died after nearly drowning during a fire department sponsored night-dive training exercise at a quarry the night before.

On August 29, 2005, the U.S. Fire Administration notified the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) of this incident. On October 14, 2005, the Chief of the Fatality Investigations Team and a Safety and Occupational Health Specialist from the NIOSH Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program (FFFIPP) investigated this incident. Meetings were conducted with the Chief of dive operations, Instructor #1, and Instructor #1's dive buddy on the night of the incident. The Chief of dive operations was not present at this training, but provided investigators with needed documentation and background information.

The investigators reviewed the victim's training records, the department's Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (SCUBA) team rescue operations SOPs, the certificates of air quality tests of air used in the victim's SCUBA tank, the victim's dive equipment, and the victim's diver's passport (note: for all intents and purposes, a diver's passport is a personal record of dives completed). NIOSH investigators also reviewed copies of diagrams of the quarry where the incident occurred, photographs, and witness statements.

Department

The volunteer fire/rescue department involved in this incident has 4 stations, 80 uniformed fire fighters, and serves a population of approximately 12,000 in an area of about 9 square miles. One of the stations houses a paid ambulance service.

Dive Team

The incident department's dive team was established in 1994 and has an 18-member roster. The dive team provides mutual aid dive services for the Northwest region of Pennsylvania. The team consists of 3 levels: 1) Entry Level; 2) Operations Level; and 3) Technical Level. Of the 18-member team, 6 members are considered to be trained to the technical level by the department, and are issued equipment for dive team response to emergency situations. The victim was considered to have reached the operations level, and was permitted by the department to participate in selected recovery or search incidents based on level of training and actual diving experience required by the department. The training courses being completed at the time of the incident were part of the training necessary to achieve the technical level designation by the department.

Victim's Training and Experience

The victim had been diving for approximately 5 years, and had completed requirements for certifications in Basic Public Safety Diver, Equipment Specialist, and Dry Suit Diver. The victim participated with the department in 3 search dives for State, County, and local police departments from November of 2000 to July of 2003.

In addition to dive training and experience, the victim had completed a documented 64 hours of training related specifically to fire fighting since becoming a probationary fire fighter with this department 15 years earlier.

Equipment and Definitions

The victim was wearing/using the following equipment during the incident dive:

- **Air/Tank** – The SCUBA tank contained compressed air, and was made of aluminum with a volume of 80ft³. The tank and related equipment were owned by the victim.
- **Dive Mask** – A skirted glass window constructed to provide air space between eyes and water and to permit both eyes to see in the same plane.
- **Snorkel** – A hollow tube swimmers or divers can breathe through when they are close to the surface.
- **Fins** – A device that either slips on or straps to your feet to aid in propulsion while swimming.
- **Regulator** – A device which changes air pressure from the air tank from a higher pressure to a lower pressure.
- **Submersible Pressure Gauge (SPG)** – A device that allows the diver to continuously monitor the amount of air in the tank during a dive.
- **Depth Gauge** – A device that indicates how far a diver is below the surface of the water.
- **Buoyancy Control Device (BCD)** – An inflatable vest worn by the diver that can be automatically or orally inflated to help control buoyancy.
- **Alternate Air Source** – A device a diver can use in place of the primary regulator, in order to make an ascent while still breathing normally.
- **Dry Suit** – A water-tight garment that keeps the divers' body warm by providing insulation with a layer of gas, such as air; for diving in waters that are too cold for comfortable wetsuit protection, usually below 65°F.

- **Primary and Secondary Light Source** – Underwater flashlights
- **Personal Locator Beacon** – Underwater strobe light used for personal location Incident

Site / Weather

The quarry where the incident took place had a maximum depth of approximately 45 feet. The water's visibility was reported to be approximately 20 feet. The water temperature was recorded to be 75 degrees. The weather on the day of the incident was reported to be clear, with an air temperature of 85 degrees, and calm winds

INVESTIGATION

The victim had performed a total of three dives on August 27, 2005. These dives were part of the requirements to gain an advanced open water and night diver PADI certification(s).

At approximately 1730 hours, the total of four divers involved in this training, including Instructor #1 (the course instructor) initiated a briefing for the dives, where it was identified that communication throughout the exercises would consist of verbal communication on the surface, and hand signals underwater.

The first of the three dives consisted of a daylight surface and underwater navigation dive. The dive consisted of an out and back pattern, a square pattern with a compass, and an out and back pattern without a compass. This dive took approximately 24 minutes to complete and reached a depth of approximately 20 feet. There were no problems reported, and after the daylight surface and underwater navigation dive the class took a break, changed air tanks, and reviewed the agenda for the upcoming portion of the night exercises.

At approximately 1900 hours, the crew of 4 completed a review of the second and third dive of the training - a "nighttime underwater navigation dive" and a "lights out dive." At approximately 1930 hours, the four divers (including Instructor #1) initiated the nighttime underwater navigation dive, which was identical in practice to the daytime underwater portion of the dive

completed earlier. The maximum depth of this dive was 21 feet. After the nighttime underwater navigation dive was complete, the victim changed air tanks again. Instructor #1 noted that the nighttime underwater navigation exercise was completed without incident and no problems were reported. After the navigation exercise was completed, Instructor #1 and the students began the third dive of the training – a “lights out dive.” The four divers entered the water and descended to a platform attached to the dock ([Photo 1](#)), turned off all light sources, and sat in darkness for just over four minutes at a depth of 20 feet. This dive was also completed without incident, and Instructor #1 reported that all three divers performed well.

At this point, with the exercises completed but prior to debriefing, Instructor #1 told the group to split up into pairs and begin a 20 minute “partner dive.” Instructor #1 and his partner progressed easterly, along the shore of the quarry. The victim and his partner followed them to a point and then broke off to investigate a submerged satellite dish. The depth at the area of the incident was approximately 12 feet. After completing their time underwater, the victim’s partner signaled to the victim that he was ready to surface. The victim reportedly signaled back "OK" and confirmed that they were going to surface. The victim’s partner began his ascent, and once on the surface, followed the PADI protocol of determining his location then checking to see if his partner surfaced successfully. The victim’s partner noted that he was straight out from the dock ([Diagram 1](#)), but could not locate his partner. The partner then placed his face back in the water to try to locate the victim, and he saw a flashlight go back and forth (distress signal). The partner then immediately descended back down to the victim, and noticed that the regulator was not in the victim’s mouth. The partner replaced the regulator and it fell from the victim’s mouth. The partner then took his alternate air source (an alternate, second stage air source used by a diver’s buddy to provide air to a partner in distress in an out-of-air situation) and placed it in the victim’s mouth, but it fell out as well. The partner immediately inflated the victim’s BCD and brought him to the surface. The partner then yelled for help to divers (Instructor #2 and a diver – both unrelated to this course) who by chance were in the area on shore. The estimated elapsed time at this point from the partner noticing the victim was in distress to yelling for help

was less than one minute. Instructor #2 and the diver on shore immediately entered the water to provide assistance. After arriving at the location of the victim and his partner ([Diagram 1](#)), Instructor #2 and the assisting diver dumped the victim's weights and assisted the partner in towing the victim to shore. At first, the victim appeared to be caught on something, so Instructor #2 told the victim's partner to cut whatever was restricting their forward movement. The partner did so, and it turned out to be the victim's alternate air source being caught in "seaweed" at the surface. The partner then reached over and turned off the air tank, as air was bleeding from the cut hose. The three divers (the partner, Instructor #2 and diver from shore) towed the victim to shore, and once on shore immediately initiated CPR. Emergency medical services were summoned and arrived within 15 minutes. Instructor #1 and his dive partner (a medical doctor) surfaced minutes later and assisted CPR. The victim was transported to a local hospital where he died the next day.

Cause of Death

The coroner listed the cause of death as drowning.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSIONS

Recommendation #1: Fire departments should develop, implement, and enforce standard operating procedures (SOPs) or protocols regarding diver training

Discussion: Operational protocols, minimum equipment, personnel requirements, qualifications for team membership, and issues of training, drills, health, and safety should all be addressed in fire department SCUBA team SOPs.¹ Operational protocols should address specific needs such as a designated safety boat, backup divers, ninety-percent-ready diver, and emergency medical personnel to immediately respond to an emergency incident. SOPs should be reviewed in-house, at a minimum, on an annual basis to see whether any changes are necessary. Every team member should have a copy of the SOPs, and each member should sign a statement indicating that he/she has read, understands, and agrees to abide by them.

While this department had operational SCUBA team operational protocols, there were no specific protocols (designated safety boat, backup divers, ninety-percent-ready diver) to be followed for or during dive training.

Recommendation #2 : Fire departments should ensure that each diver maintains continuous visual, verbal, or physical contact with his or her dive partner.

Discussion: Effective underwater communication refers to the capability to communicate between divers and from a diver to the surface. The divers present at this incident were able to communicate by using recognized dive signals such as a “thumbs-up” to indicate they were okay. Fire departments should follow OSHA safety standard 29 CFR 1910.424(c)(2) by ensuring that a diver be line-tended from the surface or accompanied by another diver in the water who is in continuous visual contact during the diving operations. The victim was a volunteer fire fighter and was not covered by OSHA regulations. However, following OSHA standards would provide additional protection for fire fighters who face unique environments and hazards associated with training or technical rescue operations.² Effective communication and continuous visual contact are two ways in which divers can convey any equipment or medical problems they may be experiencing.³

Recommendation #3 : Fire departments should ensure that a backup diver and ninety-percent-ready diver are in position to render assistance.

Discussion: Public Safety Diving states that “in addition to having the normal duties of divers, a backup diver must be ready to act as a replacement if the primary is unable to perform for any reason, and he must be ready to render assistance if the primary diver runs into trouble. Because of the complex nature of diving, it’s always possible that the backup diver will experience a problem when called. Following a policy of having contingency plans in place, it’s best to have a second backup diver available, wearing an exposure suit and with his gear fully checked and functioning. If the backup diver is called

on to make the descent, the ninety-percent-ready diver completes the dressing process so that he is fully ready to enter the water. With a ninety-percent-ready diver in place, the redundancy and safety of an operation increase dramatically.”¹ In this incident, there were only the four divers present and participating in the training. No assigned backup diver or ninety-percent ready diver was present.

Recommendation #4 : Fire departments should ensure that positive communication is established among all divers and those personnel who remain on the surface.

Effective underwater communication is imperative. Specifically, diver-to-diver and diver-to-surface communications should be established and maintained during the entire dive(s).³ Underwater electronic devices are available to establish diver-to-diver and diver-to-surface communications. In this incident, there were no personnel at the surface to perform monitoring, and underwater diver-to-diver electronic devices were not used. All communication was either through surface face-to-face verbal communications or underwater hand signals.

REFERENCES

1. Hendrick W, Zaferes A, Nelson C [2000]. Public safety diving. Saddle Brook, NJ: Fire Engineering Books & Videos.
2. 29 Code of Federal Regulations 1910 Subpart T, Commercial Diving Operations. 1910.424 (c)(2), SCUBA diving.
3. NFPA [1999]. NFPA 1670, standard on operations and training for technical rescue incidents. Quincy, MA: National Fire Protection Association.

INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION

This investigation was conducted by Robert E. Koedam, Chief of the Fatality Investigations Team, and Jay Tarley, Safety and Occupational Health Specialist, Division of Safety Research / NIOSH.

Photograph and Diagram



Photo 1. Illustrates the underwater platform where the "lights out" exercise was performed. The photo also depicts the clarity of the water in the quarry. (Photo courtesy of the fire department)



Diagram 1. Location of personnel when incident occurred.

Lower Burrell stops dive team operations

http://triblive.com/x/valleynewsdispatch/s_510640.html

June 2, 2007 BY TOM YERACE

The city fire department's dive team has ceased operations while city officials try to determine if the divers have insurance coverage and how a workers' compensation case might affect it.

"The dive team is on hold," Braeview Fire Company Chief John Rockwell said. "That's about all I can tell you."

"We have asked the dive team to abate while a matter in litigation is resolved," City Clerk Ed Kirkwood said.

The workers' compensation case is an appeal of decision awarding benefits to the family of Michael Switala, 50, a city firefighter and dive team member.

Switala died in a Pittsburgh hospital after he was found unconscious during an underwater training exercise at a Lawrence County lake in August 2005. That appeal is by Penn Prime, an pooled trust of municipalities through which they obtain coverage.

Amy Switala, Michael Switala's widow, said she and her family were awarded workers' compensation benefits after an initial hearing in October.

"Actually, they are basically fighting workmen's payments to me and our family," she said, referring to the city. "I don't understand why they would have to abate their activities while this is in litigation."

She said while the city honored her husband -- an 18-year member of Lower Burrell Fire Co. 3, following his death -- shutting down the dive team is "a travesty" to his memory.

"What greater honor would there be for him than to keep that dive team going?" she said.

City Solicitor Steve Yakopec Jr. emphasized that it is the city's insurance carrier, not city officials, that is contesting the workers' compensation award to the Switala family.

"It's out of council's hands," Kirkwood said, when asked if city officials had taken a position on the case. "I have never had a council that has gotten involved with claims resolution. Why have an insurance carrier if you are going to tell them how to do their job?"

Yakopec said city officials only want the dive team to hold off on responding to calls until they can determine whether the divers have proper insurance coverage.

"The only thing that the city said is: 'We'd like to put you on hold while we see if we are covered or not,'" Yakopec said. "The city has never said 'You are not allowed to have a dive team.'"

He said if the insurance does not include the dive team, then city officials have to do whatever is necessary to get that coverage.

"I think part of the question is whether a dive team is part of a fire department's duties," Yakopec said. He said council may have to pass a resolution clarifying that in order to maintain insurance coverage.

"The last thing the city wants is for firefighters to go out on a dive team where we don't have insurance coverage and if somebody gets injured or somebody dies, then it is the taxpayers who are on the hook," he said.

Kirkwood said council asked the dive team to suspend operations "months ago" initially and then again as recently as about six weeks ago. He said the situation with the dive team and the Switala case are separate issues but yet linked.

"Let's settle the first incident so that we know where we stand," Kirkwood said. "If we are on solid ground, then we can proceed forward."

"Until we resolve the economic issue, we don't know how to move forward, that's number one," he said. "Number two is that the dive team has never been approved by council. They kind of went ahead and did it on their own, and that's not the proper thing to do."

He said he did not know if the lack of official approval is an issue in the case.

Yakopec, who is not involved with the case, said one issue is the cause of death. The insurance company believes it was a heart attack, but Switala's widow said the Allegheny County Coroner's Office ruled it a drowning.

"The prudent thing is to limit your exposure and liability until you find out what the situation is, what the true costs are going to be," Kirkwood said.

"It really comes down to an economic type issue," Yakopec said. "What is the value of the dive team as opposed to the cost to the taxpayers."

"Council has a responsibility to the taxpayers, that has to come first," Kirkwood said.

Until the case is resolved, city officials will have to request the services of dive teams from other municipalities if one is needed.

Meanwhile, Amy Switala said having the award being contested by the insurance carrier has been difficult for her.

"My husband believed in what he was doing," she said. "He was constantly trying to do for someone else."

"It's not like he's pretending he hurt his back moving furniture. My husband is dead."