

Three die saving boy from septic tank full of deadly gas

By Jon Ferguson
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Three men were killed and two others injured Saturday afternoon as they first rescued an eight year old boy trapped in an abandoned septic tank and then attempted to save each other.

The three men----who had all descended into the septic tank during their rescue attempts---were the apparent victims of deadly methane gas which was produced by grass clippings that had been thrown into the underground tank.

Benjamin Walker the son of Dr. Jon G. and Eleanor M. Walker 161 Hamilton Rd., was reported in critical condition at the Hershey medical Center late Sunday night. The boy has been unconscious since he was admitted Saturday night, according to a hospital spokesman.



BENJAMIN WALKER

The victims were:

- Bruce Ditlow 24, of 209 Pearl St., Ditlow was a paramedic at St. Joseph Hospital.
- Kevin Weatherlow, 22, of 1602 Eshelman Mill Rd., Willow Street. Weatherlow, who was also a paramedic at St. Joseph's hospital, and Ditlow were described as best friends.
- Jeffrey Jones, 18, of 535 Abbeville Rd., Jones was a fireman with the Bausman Fire Company.



BRUCE H. DITLOW

KEVIN L. WEATHERLOW

JEFFERY W. JONES

Injured were Mark Rhinier, 18, of 47 Spencer Ave., and Ross Deck, 27, of 1007 Maple Ave. Rhinier, a fireman with the Wheatland Fire Company, was reported in fair condition at Lancaster General Hospital, and Deck, a Lancaster City policeman was under observation.

Rhinier was the only rescuer who descended into the tank who lived. Deck was exposed to the gas after workers dug a hole down the side of the tank and then broke through it's wall to remove the men still in the hole.

The tragedy started at about 4:15 p.m. when Dr. Walker, a urologist at St. Joseph Hospital, discovered that his son was trapped in the septic tank which is in the family's backyard and has been unused for a number of years---and called the St. Joseph rescue unit. Mrs. Walker is the director of public relations and development at St. Joseph's hospital.

The boy, who was mowing the lawn, was dumping grass clippings down a 14 inch diameter

pipe that leads to the septic tank when a grass catcher slipped out of his hands and fell into the tank, according to police. The family had commonly used the tank to dispose of grass and shrub clippings.

The boy then got a ladder, which he dropped into the septic tank and then climbed down in an attempt to find the grass catcher. The boy was overcome by the gas and unable to climb out. He was then discovered by his father.

When the St. Joseph rescue unit first arrived, they were unaware that the septic tank was filled with the noxious gas.

"It was dispatched as a routine call, a child trapped in a sewer with no serious injuries." Kevin Culton, a St. Joseph Hospital paramedic, said.

Unaware of the dangers, Ditlow went down into the septic tank in an attempt to rescue the boy and was overcome by the gas. "He (Ditlow) said, it's a little stuffy in here" Culton said "and then that's the last thing he ever said."

Joe Giordano, the chief of the Wheatland Fire Company, said when he arrived at the scene Weatherlow was ready to descend into the septic tank after his close friend. The Wheatland Fire Company was in charge of the rescue attempt.

Giordano said he insisted that Weatherlow wear an oxygen mask before entering the tank. A lifeline was also attached to the paramedic.

Because of the narrowness of the opening, rescuers entering the hole had to be lowered into it before oxygen tanks could be handed down to them.

After the narrow, 4 foot long passageway, the tank itself open up and was 6 to 8 feet deep and large enough for a man to walk around in.

Weatherlow was able to attach a lifeline to the boy, who was successfully pulled from the tank and rushed to St. Joseph Hospital, before being transferred to the Hershey Medical Center. He had been in the hole for about 25 minutes.

Dr. Witlaw M. Show, the county coroner, said the boy probably lived because he had not fallen into the deepest part of the tank, where the thickest concentration of methane gas was apparently located.



Paramedics and volunteer rescue workers strain to remove one of the victims from a hole dug into the side of the septic tank along Hamilton Road in Lancaster Township.

Dr. Show said he could not say with absolute certainty that methane gas killed the man until he receives results of blood tests, which are to be done tomorrow. But he said he was nearly positive that the gas caused their deaths.

According to Dr. Show, methane is a colorless, odorless gas that replaces the oxygen in the bloodstream and causes suffocation. The lack of oxygen in the blood and causes cardiac arrest.

It is formed from the decay of organic materials in areas with little air.

It is after rescuing the boy, Weatherlow was soon overcome by the gas as he tried to save Ditlow.

"I think that he tried to revive his buddy (Ditlow)," Giordano said this we'll never know because they're both dead.

"But I surmise that he tried to revive him by using the buddy system. They were probably trying to breathe off the same apparatus and he (Weatherlow) was overcome."

By this time, dozens of rescue workers from numerous ambulance and fire companies had arrived on the scene to assist in the rescue.

The next two men to descend into the underground tank were Jones and Rhinier, who were sent in an attempt to rescue Ditlow and Weatherlow.



Attendants wheel Benjamin Walker, 8 to the ambulance after his rescue Saturday. The boy's mother, Eleanor Walker is comforted , far left.

Both were chosen for the dangerous mission because of their slight frames.

"The men, Jones and Rhinier that were sent down, were not physically strong enough to bring the two men up because the bodies were limp," Elmer Reese, Chief of the Bausman Fire Company said.

Jones, however, was able to attach a lifeline to Weatherlow's body and the paramedic was

pulled from the tank. Attempts were made to revive him, but he was pronounced dead at the hospital.

The oxygen supplies keeping Jones and Rhinier alive soon gave out. Additional oxygen was dropped down to the firemen, but both were overcome when they attempted to switch to the new supplies.

"As they were trying to get them out, I think they became excited and depleted the air supplies quickly," Giordano said. "They must have taken a few gulps of air and it overcame them."

Giordano said Rhinier talked to his mother after he was rescued from the tank.

"He told his mother he had a choice of breathing nothing through his dead oxygen tank or ripping his mask off and trying to breathe something."

"Now we have three guys down there" Giordano said. "At this point we did not know what we were dealing with but we knew we couldn't send anyone else down."

As the three men lay in the septic tank, the rescuers at ground level were busy pumping oxygen into the hole and ventilating it with fans. Some 25,000 pounds of oxygen were pumped into the whole.

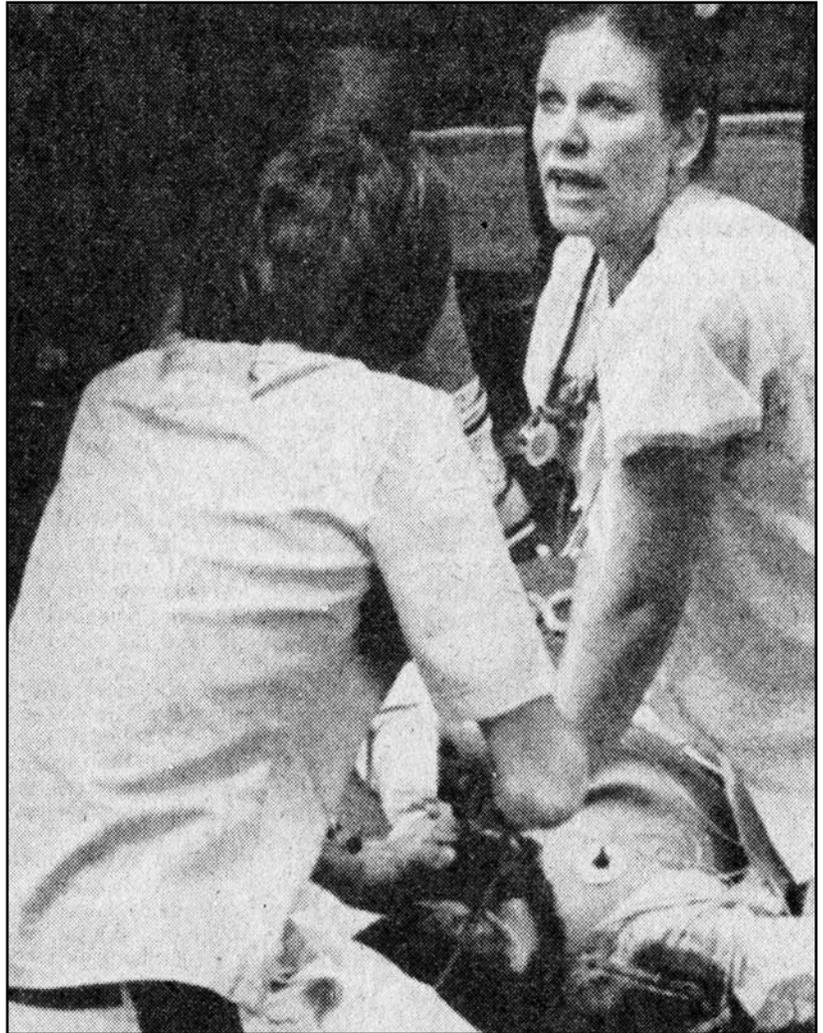
Heavy digging equipment was also called to the scene as workers frantically began digging down the side of the tank as part of a plan to break through its side and rescue the three men.

Giordano believes Rhinier's life was saved when the workers were able to drop an air hose near his head. Rhinier was unconscious at this time.

Rhinier, however, regained consciousness momentarily and was pulled from the tank.

"I said, Mark (Rhinier), grabbed the rope, Giordano said he looked me right in the eye and grabbed it."

Medical personnel at the scene administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation to Rhinier and he was then rushed to the hospital.



Paramedics concentrate Saturday to revive a rescue worker who collapsed in attempting to rescue a 8-year-old Benjamin Walker from a septic tank.

Rhinier had been in the tank for more than an hour.

“He was down there more than an hour” Giordano said. “I said if he was down there for about an hour, I thought we had a chance to save the others.” Unfortunately, that was not the case.

After workers finally crashed through the concrete and stone wall of the septic tank and removed Ditlow and Jones from the hole shortly after 6 PM, medical personnel made efforts to revive them.

They were unsuccessful and both were pronounced dead at the hospital.

Officer Deck was exposed to the gas when the workers broke through the wall and was subsequently hospitalized.

The septic tank was filled in after the two remaining men were removed.

“I think we did everything humanly possible to save these men” Giordano said. “I don’t think we could have done anything else.”

Those assisting in the rescue attempts include workers from West End Ambulance, Lititz F.C, West Lanc. F.C, Lanc. City Police, Lanc. City Rescue, Rohrerstown F.C, Lafayette F.C, Hempfield Ambulance, Columbia Susquehanna Rescue, Manheim Twp. Ambulance and Ambulance and Rescue Units from St. Joseph Hospital, Lancaster General Hospital and Osteopathic hospital.

This article was reproduced June 13, 2011 by LT. Greg Leaman of the Lancaster Township FD on the 30th anniversary of the Line Of Duty Death of Bausman Firefighter Jeffery W. Jones.



A memorial brick was placed at the Lancaster Co. Public Safety Center Memorial Park on the 30th anniversary of the line of duty death of Bausman firefighter Jeffery Jones.

St. Joseph’s Hospital Paramedics Bruce Ditlow and Kevin Weatherlow also died in the rescue of Benjamin Walker from a septic tank in Lancaster Township.

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