

## **Sheriff's Office Dive Team Recovers Boat Crash Victim**

June 28, 2012

On June 26, 2012 at approximately 6:00 PM, the Hall County Sheriff's Office Underwater Search and Recovery Team recovered the body of 13 year-old Griffin Prince, who was killed in a boating crash on Lake Lanier that also claimed the life of his 9 year-old brother, Jake. The operation was conducted in support of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, who is leading the crash investigation.

The victim was located in approximately 113 feet of water, in the immediate area of the crash, which occurred on Monday, June 18th at approximately 10:30 PM. Sheriff's divers began recovery operations immediately the next morning, and faced numerous hazards such as low water temperatures, near zero visibility, and the threat of entanglement due to heavy underwater standing timber in the area.

This tragedy prompted an unprecedented response from public safety agencies as well as the local community. The successful conclusion of this recovery operation was only made possible through the combined efforts of numerous government agencies, local businesses, and private citizens. The Hall County Sheriff's Office would like to take an opportunity to recognize those involved and those who supported the efforts. In no particular order, they are as follows:

### **Government Agencies**

- Georgia Department of Natural Resources: primary agency in the crash investigation and full partner in the recovery operation, providing boats, aircraft, manpower, materiel, and logistical support.
- Georgia State Patrol Aviation Division: provided not only aerial search and lighting capabilities the night of the crash, but also provided valuable aerial photography and additional advanced GPS mapping abilities during the search.
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: provided full support of all operations in the form of the command post location, lake data, and watercraft to conduct surface searches and to maintain a secure perimeter during the dive operation.
- Federal Bureau of Investigations Underwater Search and Recovery Team: after submitting a support request to the Atlanta field office for their local divers, the FBI team in Quantico, VA contacted the HCSO to offer their assistance. The team's highly advanced sonar equipment was absolutely crucial in locating the victim in this case.
- U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, Flotilla 29: provided watercraft to conduct surface searches and to maintain a secure perimeter during the dive operation.
- Cobb County Police Department Underwater Search and Recovery Team: provided a dive team during the early stages of the search to conduct line searches of key areas in the vicinity of the crash.
- Hall County Fire Services: provided safety divers and med units on standby during search operations, in the event of an emergency requiring rescue of one of the recovery divers. Assisted in securing search perimeter.
- Forsyth County Fire Services: provided side-scan sonar capabilities in searching the vicinity of the crash and assisted in securing the search perimeter.
- Forsyth County Geographic Information Services: provided invaluable on-site GPS mapping assets. These maps were a vital part of the daily dive plan and will continue to assist in the ongoing investigation.
- Georgia Emergency Management Agency Body Recovery Team: provided cadaver dog teams, which assisted in not only confirming the location of the crash, but greatly narrowing the search area.
- Gwinnett County Emergency Services: provided med units on standby in the area of the operation.

#### Private Businesses and Individuals

- Big Creek Tavern (Buford), Mr. Roger Cates: on day one of the operation, Mr. Cates offered to provide meals and drinks at no cost. He continued to provide and/or coordinate meals for up to 60 personnel throughout the operation.
- Kroger #687 (Sugar Hill), Mr. Kyle Branch: Mr. Branch worked closely with Mr. Cates of Big Creek Tavern in the delivery of meals and drinks at no cost.
- Milton Foods (Oakwood), Ms. Karen Allen: Ms. Allen also worked with Mr. Cates in supplying food for meal preparation, as well as drinks at no cost.
- Captain Robert Estrada, Tow Boat U.S. (Lake Lanier): Captain Estrada was an essential element of the operation. He remained a part of the surface search and perimeter operation throughout the entire mission. It should be noted that it was Captain Estrada who arranged and paid for the overnight delivery of the remote operated vehicle (ROV) that was instrumental in locating the debris field from the crash. Without that critical piece of equipment, the operation may have ended much differently. Additionally, he absorbed all of his own fuel costs and turned away business to devote himself full-time to the recovery effort.
- Humminbird, Inc., Mr. Bill Carlson: Mr. Carlson, a representative for the Humminbird company, provided valuable assistance by conducting sonar searches of the crash area during the early stages of the operation.
- Harbor Marine, Flowery Branch: provided emergency outboard motor repair so that operations could continue uninterrupted.
- Walmart of Suwanee: provided drinks at no cost.
- Ippolito's Restaurant (Suwanee), Mr. Dick Cunningham: Mr. Cunningham graciously provided meals at no cost to operational personnel.
- Home Depot #134 (Cumming): provided drinks at no cost.
- Lake Lanier Islands Resort: demands on equipment were great during the operation, and after a mechanical failure of one of the dive support pontoon boats, Lake Lanier Islands Resort provided a replacement boat at no cost to use as long as it was needed.
- Camper City (Buford), Mr. Don Merz: provided emergency repairs for command post air conditioning units.
- Crossroads Bar and Grill: provided meals at no cost.
- Mr. Alan Jones: donated drinks.
- Ms. Gina Rider: donated drinks.
- Mr. Jim Hixson: donated drinks.

In addition to all those named above, numerous unnamed individuals telephoned or stopped by the incident command post to drop off drinks, food items, or offer other support. We are equally as grateful to those good citizens and regret that we are unable to identify them.

The outpouring of support and spirit of cooperation demonstrated by this community and all agencies involved was simply remarkable and did much to carry the day. It is our hope that as we move forward, this incident marks a true turning point in interagency support and cooperation, as well as partnerships with the private sector. Although gained through a terrible tragedy, the lessons learned will prove invaluable in the future.