

Vessel
Kayak

Name:

Key Events

1.1 On 18 November 2001, a party of 14 kayakers flew into the lower Hokitika River landing site, from the road end in the Whitcombe Valley.

1.2 Upon landing at the put in point (*See Glossary for explanation*), six of the kayakers chose to make their way upstream to see the Gates of Argonath (a particularly impressive gorge a few hundred metres upstream) and paddle the extra rapids on the way back to the helicopter site. Mr John Rice and Mr Robert Edgerton proceeded to make their way upstream, with the aim of getting to the bottom of a gorge. Mr Mark Planner and Mr Rod Banks followed separately upon landing, but caught up with them. The main party, consisting of eight kayakers, headed downstream from the helicopter site (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1*).

1.3 Mr Barry Boyd and Mr Brad Johnson, the last two of the six kayakers, made their way upriver on a different series of ledges. A recent slip (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 1, #1*) not far up the river, halted their progress before making The Gates of Argonath. Mr Boyd and Mr Johnson put on the river, before the others and paddled downstream to catch up with and assist the main party before they got to Kakariki Canyon (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2*).

1.4 The other four kayakers got in their kayaks in a large pool (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1, #1 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 1, #1*), several metres from the slip, approximately 200 metres upstream of the landing zone. They had scouted informally on the way up the river and boat scouted on the way down. Mr Rice and Mr Planner paddled the first drop (about one foot high with a small recirculating hydraulic (*see Glossary for explanation*) below it) (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 #3*), and exited to an eddy (*See Glossary for explanation*) on river left (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1, #2 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 2, #1 & #2*). Mr Banks went next, but hit the aerated eddyline water (*See Glossary for explanation*) out of balance and capsized (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 2, #2*).

1.5 This was Mr Banks' first move of the day without a warm up. He rolled back upright, but was facing upstream as he washed quickly towards the next drop, about seven metres downstream (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #4 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 3, #1 & #3*).

1.6 Mr Banks went into the second drop, (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 3, #1 & #3*), upright but facing upstream. He was swept into a pillow of water in front of a boulder at the bottom of the drop (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #5*), and was again capsized. He was washed past the obstruction.

1.7 It is unknown if Mr Banks took any major knocks. He then physically removed himself from the upturned kayak, below the second drop (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #6 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 4, #4 & #6*). Mr Rice did not observe any attempts by Mr Banks to roll, prior to this (*Generally an experienced kayaker will always right their kayak unless they are stuck in/on something or they have injured themselves while hitting rocks under the water*)

1.8 Mr Edgerton paddled through the first and then second drops after observing Mr Banks' problems. Mr Rice and Mr Planner were still in the eddy between the first and second drops (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #2*), some 20 metres upstream.

1.9 Mr Edgerton arrived near Mr Banks (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #7*), who was holding his paddle in his right hand and his upturned, half full kayak, in the other. Mr Edgerton attempted to push the kayak back into the flushing eddy (*See Glossary for explanation*) on the river left (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Figs 5 & 6, Pos A*) but was unable to do so in the current. They continued to head towards the final drop, a one metre high waterfall, situated approximately 30 metres from the second rapid (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Figs 5, 6, 7 & 8, #5*). Mr Edgerton (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1, #8*) indicated to Mr Banks that he would have to swim the drop and that he should assume the 'whitewater' swimming position (feet up, facing downstream, boat in front). Mr Banks pivoted around and assumed this position and went over the fall.

1.10 Mr Edgerton was watching from the tail end of the eddy (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1, #9 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 6 Pos B*) just above the fall when Mr Rice came by. Mr Edgerton told Mr Rice that Mr Banks was in the falls. Mr Rice paddled the fall and eddied out on the left behind a large boulder (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1, #10 & Appendix 2 - Photos - Figs 7 & 8 Pos C*) slightly downstream, but adjacent to, the hydraulic below the drop. Mr Edgerton paddled just after him and made the eddy also.

1.11 Mr Banks was caught against the right side wall immediately below the fall (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 - #11*) with his head and chest above the water (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Figs 7 & 8*). He had released his kayak and it had washed downstream. Mr Banks appeared to be stuck or was caught on something under the water, but no one could see exactly what it was.

1.12 Mr Edgerton attempted to paddle into the bank of the hydraulic to offer Mr Banks the nose of his kayak. Mr Banks touched the kayak, but could not get a hold. Mr Rice attempted the same manoeuvre. Again, Mr Banks could not get a hold and was sinking lower in the water. His head was the only part visible in the water and he was struggling to breathe.

1.13 Mr Edgerton paddled in again, and Mr Banks got a 'tow handed grip' through the bow loop. Mr Edgerton grabbed

the rock wall and attempted to pull the two of them back out of the hydraulic. Mr Banks appeared to be pulling also, but was not moving. Mr Edgerton then capsized his kayak against the wall and swam free so as to leave his kayak in the hydraulic for Mr Banks to hold on to. However, Mr Banks could not hold on, and the kayak came free. Mr Edgerton swam to river left with his kayak and paddle.

1.14 Mr Rice made another attempt at rescue, but Mr Banks had disappeared below the surface and was not seen again until much later.

1.15 Mr Planner had got out on the river left side (*See Appendix 2 - Photos - Fig 5, Pos D*), and walked down with his throw bag to render assistance.

1.16 Within five to ten minutes of disappearing below the surface and while caught in the fall, Mr Banks' Personal Flotation Device (PFD) 'flushed out' and was recovered.

1.17 Mr Edgerton, Mr Rice and Mr Planner stayed on site until they felt sure Mr Banks was not going to surface again and had drowned. They then continued 25 metres down to the helicopter landing site (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 1 #13 & Sketch 2 - Pos H*) to decide their course of action. It was 1205 hours NZDT.

1.18 After considering Mr Planner's preference to wait until Mr Banks' body 'washed out', they decided the safest option was to head downriver. They paddled 800 metres to the Kakariki Canyon, portaging one drop at the top (i.e., by-passing the drop by carrying the kayaks around it). At the bottom eddy of the last drop into the Kakariki Canyon, (some 850 metres from the fall where Mr Banks initially disappeared (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2, #1*), they discovered the body of Mr Banks floating face down in a large eddy on the river left. They decided to try and move his body to a place beyond the vertical walls of the canyon, where they could get it out of the river. However, once in the current again, Mr Banks' body sank and disappeared. The group continued through Kakariki Canyon looking for Mr Banks' body, expecting that it would resurface.

1.19 After they reached the rest of the main party, who were scouting some rapids at the bottom of Kakariki Canyon (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2, #2*), Mr Banks' body resurfaced in the shallow water at the bottom of the canyon. Mr Boyd attached a throw line to Mr Banks' PFD and effected a 'strong swimmer rescue' of the body and towed it to shore (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2, Pos X*).

1.20 Two attempts to resuscitate Mr Banks were made by Mr Howes and Mr Planner, but were halted after a short while when it was realised there was no sign of life. Mr Banks had been under water for over 45 minutes.

1.21 The rest of the group were then shepherded and directed conservatively down the rest of the section and out to the vehicles, lead by Vladimir Filipovic and George Field.

1.22 Mr Boyd and Mr Johnson had left to paddle out to the vehicles at the Whitcombe Valley road end (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2*), and drive to where there was cellphone communication to raise the alarm.

1.23 A Police helicopter arrived between 1600 and 1800 hours and removed the body of Mr Banks from below Kakariki Canyon (*See Appendix 1 - Sketch 2, Pos X*).

1.24 On 19 November 2001, Pathologist Dr H R Bodle at Grey Base Hospital, carried out a postmortem. He reported that the death was caused by drowning.

Key Conditions

2.1 The deceased was Rod Banks, aged 45, a Sales Assistance in a kayak shop. Mr Banks had begun paddling whitewater seven years previously, but did not do this regularly. He was an experienced sea kayaker and held a Sea Kayak Operators Association New Zealand (SKOANZ) Level 1 award (*See Glossary for explanation*). He had competed in multi sports events involving kayaking and had completed the Coast to Coast endurance race. He had joined the Christchurch White Water Club (CWWC) about one year ago. He had paddled with the club on the Waiau, Buller, Mangles and Matakaitaki

Rivers. He had successfully paddled the lower Kakapotahi and the lower Toaroha rivers, the day before the accident.

2.2 Mr Banks was a mostly self taught kayaker, but had paddled some harder rapids. Mr Planner described Mr Banks as being not technically advanced with either his river skills or eskimo rolling (ability to roll the kayak while still in it). A physically able athlete, Mr Banks was considered to be in good condition both mentally and physically. While keen to push his kayaking skills along and be part of the more advanced team, he was not prone to irrational decisions. He made the choice to walk upstream and paddled the first section of the lower Hokitika river.

2.3 The weekend trip was an annual trip organised by the White Water Canoe Club (WWCC) based in Christchurch. It was open to any club members and the trip leader had the option of declining to take someone on a trip if they were not at the required level.

2.4 A sequential plan was put into action, whereby each kayaking section, undertaken by the kayakers, was slightly more challenging than the previous one. This gave the kayakers a chance to get warmed up to the 'West Coast' style of paddling and also to decide if they were up to the finale of the tip, which was a helicopter trip to the Lower Hokitika River.

2.5 It had rained briefly on the morning of 18 November 2001, and the weather at the beginning of the trip was cold with light drizzle and mist. The river was up very slightly, but running clear. The river level was steady or dropping.

2.6 The overall day leader was Mr George Field. There were no appointed deputies or sub-leaders. The Club relied on the more experienced paddlers taking the reins where necessary and had set up elaborate safety measures on the more difficult rapids attempted (throw baggers in hazard locations, chase boats on the water and only one kayaker paddling at any one time).

2.7 Mark Planner had 10 years of intermediate experience in kayaks and held a New Zealand Outdoors Instructor Association (NZOIA) Stage 1 qualification (*See Glossary for explanation*). He was the ex-president of the Otago Canoe and Kayak Club. He had conducted a range of intermediate West Coast river runs previously. He had also conducted four previous trips on the lower Hokitika river and had walked upstream on this river twice before.

2.8 John Rice had 12 years of intermediate experience and held an advanced White Water Course qualification with the New Zealand Kayak School. He had a 'solid range' of intermediate West Coast trip experience. He had conducted five previous trips on the lower Hokitika river and had walked upstream on this river on previous occasions.

2.9 Robert Edgerton had 11 years intermediate experience. He had an extensive range of leadership and professional guiding experience in North America. He also had a solid range of intermediate West Coast runs experience, with four previous lower Hokitika river trips. He had previously walked up to the Gates of Argonath on two occasions.

2.10 George Field, the day leader, had 14 years experience and held a Class III-IV Paddler qualification. He had conducted seven previous Hokitika river trips and had recently completed an Advanced White Water course at the New Zealand Kayak School.

2.11 There was no acknowledged group leader in the informally gathered group of six kayakers that went upstream.

2.12 Mr Banks was the only member of the six kayakers who had not run the upper rapids on the Hokitika river before. Indeed, it was his first time on the Hokitika river.

2.13 Mr Banks had chosen to paddle a WaveSport Foreplay kayak (*See Glossary for explanation*), despite there being 'creek' boats available, as organised by Mr Field (*See Glossary for explanation*). He had paddled the WaveSport Foreplay kayak on the lower Kakapotahi and Toaroha rivers the previous day. He had tried a different kayak on the Toaroha river and had to get out of it when he failed to roll after being capsized. He had owned and paddled the WaveSport Foreplay for 10 months. He had not made any alterations to the kayak, beyond paddling and comfort modifications.

2.14 Amongst the five other party members who went upriver, there was some retrospective speculation held as to Mr Banks' ability to paddle this type of boat competently in this level of water. This ability was not questioned before the trip.

2.15 Mr Banks was wearing thermals, neoprene shoes, neoprene spray deck, Macpac dry top, Macpac Rescue PFD and a plastic, full coverage, Wildwasser kayak helmet. All his equipment was in good order and there was no question of gear failure being causative of the accident.

2.16 The other boats in the team were:

Mark		Planner
	Dagger	RPM
	}	
Robert		Edgerton
	Dagger	Redline
	}	<i>(See Glossary for explanation)</i>
John		Rice

Only Mr Rice's kayak was an acknowledged 'creek' kayak.

2.17 The team of six kayakers were conscious of safety protocol and within the team there was the following equipment:

3 x Throwbags
2 x First Aid Kits
1 x Split Paddle
Survival equipment
Miscellaneous slings/crabs/pulleys/towlines

They all had airbags.

2.18 No one had a wood saw. This is an important item to carry on rivers, where trees or logs may be an issue, namely, kayaks becoming snagged by trees or logs and the need to cut them clear. If someone was trapped in this manner, a saw would probably be the only way to free them.

2.19 Mr Planner held a NZOIA Stage 1 Instructors award, but did not consider himself current as regards his Instructors skills. No one had completed any river rescue or safety courses in the previous three years. Only one had completed a formal River Safety Course before.

Contributing Factors

3.1 The exact cause of the accident is unknown, but conjecture points to some form of foot or leg entrapment on/in a rock or tree feature, under the surface in the backwash of the hydraulic.

3.2 Mr Banks' PFD was removed by the force of water early in the submersion. This is not uncommon on white water rivers. The rest of his clothing had been pulled high up his torso which suggests at some stage he was caught in a head downstream position. This was his observed position prior to him being submerged when rescue was being attempted by Mr Rice and Mr Edgerton.

3.3 Because Mr Banks' body floated down the river for some distance, it was difficult to ascertain a mechanism of entrapment from marks on the body.

3.4 General kayaking practice and expert opinion, respectfully, supports a poor choice of kayak by Mr Banks for this particular run. Paddling this kind of water in this particular boat appeared to be at the upper limits of Mr Banks' experience and skills at that point. Mr Planner had thought about mentioning something before the trip, but didn't feel in a position to do so (people often feel reserved about this because it is a subjective decision on behalf of one person questioning the skills of another kayaker. There are obvious character and ego implications involved when making these requests).

3.5 Club trips in general don't have clear lines of responsibility and accountability. This makes it difficult for one person to make a directive decision on behalf of someone else regarding either boat choice or decisions to paddle or not to paddle certain sections of water.

3.6 No one in the rescue party had completed a recent River Rescue or Safety Course. They had adequate equipment.

3.7 The sheer number of people on the river augmented the problem of knowing where all the party were at any one point in time and, who was looking after each person. Lines of communication were informal and the areas of responsibility were vague.

Cause

4.1 Mr Banks drowned on the Hokitika river when he became caught in an unknown manner in a pour over hydraulic feature.

Opinions & Recommendations

5.1 It is recommended that Club trips have a manageable ratio of leaders/experienced people to trip members (*this should take into account the type of water and the skill level of the participants. EOTC guidelines (See Glossary for explanation) suggest a ration of 1:4; professional operations would accept a ratio of only 1:2 in this environment*). If a trip party splits into several groups, then new leaders should be appointed **or** the split team needs to understand they are no longer part of the 'club' trip and are to all intents and purposes 'on their own'.

5.2 Kayakers need to be totally competent in the kayak of their choice once they are paddling rivers or rapids above Class III+, and leaders of trips are encouraged to ask about and/or check competency. Members of a party should be encouraged to voice any concerns about another kayaker's ability or choice of boat to the leader.

5.3 People accepting positions of responsibility or duty of care should ensure they have appropriate equipment (including choice of kayak) and training to render assistance in any reasonable situation the given environment may provide.

5.4 In steeper pool/drop rivers getting the swimmer out of the water as quickly as possible is **absolutely paramount**. In this case, the distance between drops was sufficient to tow/carry a swimmer out of danger - without their kayak and equipment. Equipment should always be jettisoned if there is at all a possibility of not going over a steep fall/drop.

5.5 All clubs are encouraged to complete river safety or rescue courses and upgrade within two to three years. The leaders at least should be part of this system. *People need to regularly use the skills and decision making required to make efficient and correct judgements (necessary by the nature of the water medium) in a crisis situation. As the level of real risk increases (>Class III+) this becomes crucial.*

5.6 All clubs should be aware of the changing nature of measuring amateur club practice against professional practice and responsibility. While not in effect in New Zealand currently, recent overseas experience points towards a movement

in that direction.