

Wujul Wujul Rescue 2011

Wujal Wujal is a relatively small remote Indigenous community in the Far Northern region and located to the northern and southern sides of the Bloomfield River. Wujal Wujal has a population of just 326 and is located about 30km north of Cape Tribulation and 60km south of Cooktown. Access to this community is via an unsurfaced dirt track which is only suitable for 4WD vehicles due the gradient of terrain and the many streams and rivers that make up the Daintree Drainage Basin. This is a popular area for 4WD enthusiasts and tourists.

During the 'wet', roads are often unpassable due to high water flow in this area. Recent rains caused rivers and causeways to flood. The popular Creb track was closed on Friday July 1 due to the wet weather. Wujal Wujal police station is staffed by one sergeant and two senior constables. On Friday July 1, 2011, Acting Sergeant Jason Manders and Senior Constable Grant Jackson commenced what they hoped would be an uneventful shift at 2pm. By 5.30pm they were called to a single vehicle traffic crash.

A 1996 Mitsubishi Pajero attempted to cross the causeway spanning the Bloomfield at Wujal Wujal. The river was swollen by recent rains in the catchment area and the causeway was covered by approximately 70cm of running water. The water was fast flowing. After watching two vehicles successfully cross the causeway, the driver decided to follow. The vehicle managed to make it half way across the causeway before the strong current washed the vehicle off the causeway.

The vehicle managed to stay upright, however was submerged up to the bottom of the vehicle windows. Both female occupants managed to abandon the vehicle. Police arrived a short time after this and saw both women clinging to a rope that was spanning the distance of the causeway. Construction work was being done to erect a bridge over the causeway and as such a barge had been moored in the river and secured by ropes to both banks. The women were clinging to these ropes in an effort to prevent themselves from being swept away.

The river was in full flow and the power of the current was significant. The river poses other dangers, which include the infestation of crocodiles, which are regularly seen in this area. Police swung into action and called for further assistance from members of the remote community. Staff from both the local medical clinic and SES, were called to attend. A bystander was directed to alert other locals and secure a boat to help with a rescue. Both women were distressed and now having difficulties hanging onto the rope.

Senior Constable Grant Jackson took action by climbing out to the women. He managed to use the rope securing the barge to get out about 10 meters and climbed onto the barge. By this time, local health clinic employee, Angus Maconachie arrived to help. Angus is well known in the community and brought with him a wealth of experience as he is trained in swift water rescue.

Angus swam out through the river and climbed on board the barge to help Senior Constable Jackson. Jackson called out and signalled for the women to keep moving along the rope toward the barge, however noticed that both women were distressed and struggling to hang on.

Information from the resources of the QPS Media and Public Affairs branch

Senior Constable Jackson has again entered the croc infested river and managed to get to one woman and attempted to return her to the barge. Due to the large volume of water and the fast flowing current, he was unable to get the woman onto the barge as the woman had securely fastened herself around his neck on his back.

Acting Sergeant Manders secured another rope to the barge and held it secure whilst Angus Maconachie passed the rope to Jackson. As Jackson took hold of the rope he was completely submerged and dragged down river before he was able to be pulled to the bank by Manders and other locals.

Locals Stanton and Kathleen Walker managed to manoeuvre their boat in the flooded river and rescued the second woman who was still clinging onto the rope. The actions of all involved in the rescue are to be highly commended. With the river croc infested, in full flow and a powerful current, Senior Constable Jackson and Angus Maconachie showed no for their own safety and entered the water at great risk to themselves.

All involved in the rescue believed that it was highly likely the first woman rescued would not have held on long enough for the boat to arrive. At all times both persons acted professionally and demonstrated great calm. During the rescue Senior Constable Jackson was heard calmly talking in a reassuring tone to the panic stricken woman.

Angus Maconachie provided great knowledge and skill by co-ordinating the rescue from the barge. The actions of both Stanton and Kathleen Walker showed great skill to manoeuvre into the current and to be in a position to rescue the second woman. The small fishing boat could easily have capsized in the strong current.



The submerged vehicle shot the following day provides some insight into the previous day's events