

Accident Database

Report ID# 480

Help

1998-04-26
Date
Mark Palmisalmo
Victim
0
Victim Age
Chagrin River
River
Through Daniels Park in Willoughby, OH
Section
Dam at Daniels Park in Willoughby OH United States Ohio, US
Location
Gage
High
Water Level
N/A
River Difficulty
Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic
Cause

Injury Type(s)

– Head Injury / Concussion

Factors

– Other

Inexperienced

Victim Experience Level

Private

Trip Type

Other

Boat Type

Group Info

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status

Accident Description

Mark Palmisalmo and a friend were floating the Chagrin River near Willoughby, OH on April 26, 1998. Both were wearing cold-water survival suits, probably Coast Guard Gumbo Suits, and apparently floated the river often. After taking out, Palmisalmo jumped back into the river to demonstrate the suit's buoyancy and comfort to an onlooker. A recirculating side eddy drew him into the backwash of the Daniels Park Dam. The dam's drop is only about three feet, but it is powerful. Palmisalmo was recirculated four or five times, then released. The paramedics who were stationed down river made the recovery. They reported that the victim showed signs of severe head trauma, perhaps from the debris that was being recirculated in the backwash. The victim's friend, realizing that a mistake had been made, dove into the river to attempt a rescue. He, too, was pulled into the hydraulic, but managed to escape unharmed.

SOURCE: Cleveland [Plain Dealer](#); Steve Ingalls post to rec.boats.paddle

ANALYSIS: (Walbridge) Dams with any more than a trickle of water flowing over them are often dangerous! River runners must always stay clear of the backwash.

4-29-98: It happened Sunday night (4-26-98). The guy, Mark (sorry, I don't want to butcher the spelling of his last name), was showing off a "survival suit." He inexplicably jumped into the water in the backwash of a notorious low head dam on the Chagrin river in Willoughby, OH. This dam is capable of surfing 40-foot logs for a couple of days at a time, I'm told. Mark got sucked in, was surfed for a while, eventually spat out, and was flushed downstream. His total time in the water was 30 minutes. He was 33 years old. Mark knew all about the dam. One good friend of mine, who knew him well, says "He should have known better." These survival suits are filled with air. They're used by people who work on oil

One friend notes that, according to AWA, it would only cost a few thousand dollars to build a tongue into the dam's backwash. That would make this dam, which has killed many, much less lethal. Willoughby, a nice suburban community, could afford to do it. Although people should know to stay away, maybe modifying this dam should come under serious consideration. Mark's family apparently was on hand and witnessed the whole horrible event. What a sad tragedy. This is what I understand. My source is reliable, a friend of the family who's spoken with the eyewitnesses at length; he is familiar with the area and knows whitewater. The survival suits used make one look like the Michelin Man. They have a lot of air-based flotation, but they don't allow enough motion for controlled swimming; all you do is float. They're expensive suits, designed for fishermen in the frigid Alaskan waters. Mark and a friend often floated the Chagrin in survival suits (no raft or canoe, contrary to some newspaper reports) when it rained. Mark's brother happened by when Mark and his friend had taken out to avoid the dam. This dam is truly a bad lowhead killing machine. Any time there's heavy rain, it recirculates a huge amount of bad debris. Its backwash, as I posted earlier, is big and bad, perhaps two boat lengths. There is also a causeway downstream of the dam on river left (I believe), which creates a weird eddy that feeds the dam's recirculation. After taking out, the two were approached by a curious onlooker who asked about the suits. To demonstrate their flotation, Mark jumped into the water. It is not known why he jumped in where he did; his brother, watching, knew immediately that he'd jumped in at the wrong place, into the eddy. He was quickly sucked into the dam. Nobody had a rope, but apparently, the gloves on such a survival suit don't allow one to grasp a rope securely in any case. Mark got surfed in the dam for only about 30 seconds before being washed out. Paramedics, who stationed themselves downstream, found him floating about 30 minutes after. He had a lot of head trauma, which likely rendered him unconscious. There apparently will not be an autopsy. His friend told me that Mark was a wonderful person. He leaves a wife and three children. His slight misjudgment cost dearly; those who knew him are devastated. It is ironic that Mark's nephew was trapped in that hydraulic only a couple of years ago. The nephew was bruised badly by the dam's debris, but he survived. This dam (at Daniels Park, Willoughby, OH) is a known killer which serves no useful purpose. I've been told that a recent issue of American Whitewater had an article which outlined efforts to spur municipalities into altering old dams. A tongue can be built into the dams, which acts against their tendency to surf debris. It's not too expensive; it's well within the means of Willoughby. Friends and family are preparing to present such a proposal to the town in the wake of this tragedy. On April 26 Mark Palmisano was floating the Chagrin River near Willoughby, OH with a friend. Both wore cold-water Survival Suits, probably Coast Guard Gumby Suits, and apparently did this often. After taking out, he jumped back into the river to demonstrate the suit's buoyancy and comfort to an onlooker. He was taken by a recirculating side eddy into the backwash of the Daniels Park Dam. The drop is only about 3' high, but he was recirculated 4-5 times. Paramedics were called, but he was dead when the hydraulic released him.

The above was published by the River Safety Task Force:

The following was posted in Rec.Boats.Paddle:

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