



Accident Database

Report ID# 273

Help

1984-05-05

Date

5 unidentified rafters

Victim

20

Victim Age

Potomac

River

6. Little Falls

Section

Brookmont Dam United States Maryland, US

Location

6.5' at Little Falls

Gage

High

Water Level

N/A

River Difficulty



Cause Code(s)

- Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic

Injury Type(s)

- Does not Apply

Factors

- One Boat Trip

Inexperienced

Victim Experience Level

Private

Trip Type

Raft

Boat Type

Group Info

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status

Accident Description

On May 5th, 1984 six members of the Third Infantry Regiment stationed in Fort Meyers, VA attempted to run Brookmont Dam on the Lower Potomac. This dam is a wide, 4' high river wide drop that creates a deadly hydraulic and the drop is routinely portaged by local paddlers. The high water level of 6.5' at Lettle Falls only made the reversal bigger. The soldiers were all in great shape but lacked any kind of whitewater training. They rented a raft, paddles, life vests, and other gear from the base recreation department. The vests were of the "horse collar" variety and came off during the events which followed.



the warning buoys had been carried away by the high water. They went over the drop and became stuck in the hydraulic at the base of the dam.

A local resident saw what was happening and called 911. The Park Service helicopter, a Bell Jet Ranger, reached the dam 5 minutes later. The pilot saw the raft, still upright, bouncing violently and taking on water. Suddenly it flipped, but some of the rafters could still hold on. The helicopter lowered a Billy Pugh Net to the group. One person got in; another grabbed hold of the outside. As the helicopter ferried the two towards shore, the second person lost his grip and fell off. The helicopter left the other person on a nearby island and returned to pickup the second person. After bringing him to safety the pilot headed back to the dam. He spotted three people in the river and chased them and lowered the net, but they lacked the strength to grab hold. One body was recovered bt fishermen at the base of Little Falls; the others were recovered during the next few weeks. The raft stayed in the hydraulic for over a week before paddlers used ropes to snare it and bring it ashore.

Source: Washington Post; various CCA Members

This dam has been the scene of many drownings over the years, but this was the worst tragedy ever. As a result of this accident the Corps of Engineers filled the downstream area with grout-filled sandbags, which broke up the hydraulic and made the drop less dangerous.

A new law mandading placement of warning signs also forbidds paddlers from coming within 100 yards of the dam. This latter regulation is not very smart. At low water, 100 yards is way too far for experienced paddlers. At high water it's not nearly far enough to protect novices . The Military placed Little Falls off limits to their personnel.



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