

Lolo man, sons nearly drown near Bitterroot River's diversion dam

BY PERRY BACKUS
Ravalli Republic

CORVALLIS (AP) — Mark Maier put in two infantry tours in the Middle East, but nothing that he saw overseas frightened him as much as the Bitterroot River on Monday afternoon.

Maier and his two sons, Jackson, 12, and Campbell, 7, started their float at Rotary Park just north of Hamilton late that morning.

Their watercraft included a small pontoon boat and a couple of inner tubes. By early afternoon, they had already stopped to picnic and enjoy the water a few times.

"It was the perfect day,"



PERRY BACKUS / RAVALLI REPUBLIC

MARK MAIER OF LOLO poses with his two sons, Jackson and Campbell, next to the pontoon boat that capsized after going over a dangerous diversion dam on the Bitterroot River Monday afternoon.

Maier said. "The river was swift, but not too swift."

They had never floated this section of the river before and

had no idea that there was a dangerous diversion dam just a few miles below Woodside Crossing. They saw the warning signs posted on the banks. They saw the sign pointing out the portage on the other side of the river. By the time they understood the danger, it was too late.

"I started paddling as hard as I could to try to get to the other side," Maier said. "The tubes were pulling me downstream. I only got about halfway across before we went over."

The pontoon boat immediately flipped over backward in the deep swirling water below the dam. All three were thrown

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into the river and were immediately caught in the powerful hydraulics that flipped them over and over under the water.

A powerful swimmer, Maier pushed hard and popped up just downstream. He couldn't see his sons when his head cleared the water.

Maier swam to shore, where Jeff Nagle of Corvallis was standing by his raft. In a matter of seconds, the two were on their way to the opposite shore where Maier would have access to his sons caught in the powerful backwater.

The raft floated about 100 yards downstream. With blood streaming down his neck from a deep cut in his head, Maier jumped to shore and ran as fast as he could upstream, at times jumping from log to log along the stream bank.

"I jumped further than I ever

jumped before in my whole life," he said. He could see Jackson had made his way out of the water, but he couldn't see his younger son.

"I was holding his head out of the water," Jackson said. "I was screaming at him: 'Come on, Campbell. Grab on to something like I am.'"

"I lost my hat," Campbell remembered. "I was underwater for what seemed like a long time."

When Maier got just upstream of the dam, he dove in headfirst just above the pontoon boat.

"I didn't even have time to make one stroke," he said. "The water was moving so fast that I was just there."

His body became tangled in ropes as he reached around to put his arms around his sons and held them tight as the pontoon boat was buffeted by the water rushing over the dam.

"We were just stuck there. No matter what I did, I couldn't get us out of there," he said. At one point, his sons asked him if they

were all going to die. "I have never been so scared in my life," Maier said. "RPGs bouncing off your vehicle didn't compare with what I felt that day."

Maier and his sons were stuck in the backwater for close to an hour as emergency crews mobilized to help. Eventually, Nagle ferried volunteers with the Corvallis Fire Department and Ravalli County Search and Rescue in close enough to get a rope to the now incredibly weary Maier.

"They pulled us out backwards," Maier said. "It almost pulled my shoulder out of the joint, but there was no way I was going to let go."

Maier said he was thankful to everyone who stepped forward to help. It was the third rescue operation that the Corvallis Fire Department has responded to at the same location in the past eight days.

A 6-year-old girl drowned after the drift boat she was riding in became caught in the

backwater and filled with water on June 23. The girl's grandfather said his son did everything he could to keep the boat from going over the dam, but the current was too strong.

If he had his way, Corvallis Fire Chief Jim Knapp said he would close the section of the river between Woodside and Tucker until something is done to fix the dangerous situation at the dam.

"That diversion dam is a crisis waiting to happen," Knapp said. "The problem is that beginning-level floaters or people who haven't been down that stretch don't know how dangerous it is."

The most important piece of advice Knapp said he can offer anyone floating on area rivers is to purchase a waterproof case for their cellphones that attaches to their body.

"I've been to numerous river accidents now where no one had a cellphone to call for help," he said. "The phones end up getting wet or drifting downstream in a dry bag. Their lifeline to

help is gone and they lose precious time going for help."

At the most recent drowning, Knapp said there were four adults in the boat. After the accident, none had a working cellphone.

"If you're going to recreate, people should at least protect their lifeline," he said.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks fisheries manager Pat Saffel said the department has new, larger signs it plans to post as soon as possible to warn people about the hazard at the diversion dam. Additional signs at fishing access sites upstream have also been posted.

At the very least, Maier thinks someone needs to post some very large signs well upstream of the site.

"The last warning sign is just way too close," he said. "There's no escape when you get caught below that dam. Absolutely no escape. They need to have big signs that say you're going to die if you go over that dam. People need to know."