



The water rescue team was ultimately responsible for retrieving the teen. Front row from left are Barry Blondin and Dean Taylor, the two who went down the sewer, and, back row, Capt. Randy Olmstead and Peter Lamar who worked with them from ground level.



Rescuers help Christopher Watt, centre, out of the sewer after the dramatic rescue. Rescue workers from across the city answered the call for help. As they worked frantically to locate the teenager, many feared he was drowned or overcome by fumes in the city's sanitary sewer system. Yesterday, Christopher was resting at home after being released from an overnight stay in hospital.

Rescuers feared they'd find a body, but Christopher Watt survived his ordeal in an Ottawa sanitary sewer

Kelly Egan, with files from Patti Edgar and Andrew Mills

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Under a leafy linden tree, about 600 metres from where the boy fell into the rushing blackness, rescue workers threw open two large trap doors -- like the doors to a dirt cellar -- and the artificial light rushed down the shaft and into the tunnel.

This was the hole where Christopher Watt, 15, would come out, dead or alive.

On the surface, Capt. Neil Warren, 47, acting chief of special operations for the Ottawa fire department, was in the eye of a storm, looking for a needle in a haystack 20 metres underground.

He would need the help of an army. Luckily, there was one available. Within minutes of the initial call at 8:39 p.m., about 70 firefighters were spread across a kilometre of scrub-land under a hydro corridor.

They were joined by police, ambulance workers, municipal crews and six highly trained firefighting units. A generator roared away, providing light. The boy's mother, Susan Watt, was soon there, fearing the worst.

Almost three hours had passed since firefighters had arrived at an overgrown field near the intersection of Walkley and Hawthorne roads, looking for the slight teenager, who climbed down a pried-open manhole and didn't come out.

It was now almost 11:30 p.m.

Capt. Warren, a firefighter for 25 years, was beginning to think the rescue operation was turning grim. "We're starting to think we're looking for a body."

As the metal doors clanged to a stop, a pair of municipal workers began to shout down the hole and firefighters readied for descent. Silence was ordered around the opening.

And then they heard it. The thin sound of a voice, its place of origin uncertain, but a human voice, nonetheless. Christopher Watt was alive.

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When firefighters retraced the boy's initial steps, they descended the vertical pipe, about five metres straight down, and found a sanitary sewer pipe about a metre wide -- big enough to walk in.

One of the first firefighters to arrive on the scene was Donnie Smith, a 24-year veteran of the Ottawa force. "It was probably 20 minutes before we could get someone in the hole," said Mr. Smith.

Rescuing a victim from an enclosed space is one of the most hazardous duties a firefighter undertakes and the preparation before descent is meticulous.

A cornerstone of the technique is to test the quality of the air in the enclosure. Oxygen levels must be checked, as well as the presence of explosive gases. Should firefighters wear self-contained breathing apparatus or use piped in air?

Mr. Smith instructed two firefighters to head down into the sewer, which is an access tunnel to the main trunk sewer. About five metres down, they found two horizontal sewer lines converging in a 40-centimetre pipe that flows down to the main trunk.

As they scouted about, tethered by ropes and breathing with portable air units, what they found filled them with dread.

The bottom of the vertical pipe led to a small wall. Over the wall, the water rushed into an ever-shrinking pipe, no bigger than 40 centimetres. The brown sewage, in effect, was being sucked into a hole.



Christopher Watt's mother, Susan Watt, arrived at the scene and watched in horror as rescue crews attempted to locate her son. Here she sits in a police car at the spot where her son went into the sewer Monday evening.

The Ottawa Citizen

Capt. Neil Warren is operations director for the Ottawa Fire Department and was intimately involved in the rescue of Christopher Watt.



City of Ottawa sewer workers were instrumental in the rescue. Front row from left are: Ray Ayoub, Mike McNally, Roger Lecuyer and Bruce Jackson, and back row, from left: Jody Harrison, Luc Dugal, Gerry Taylor and Neil McPhee.

Is this where the youth had gone?

Firefighters believe the boy stepped or fell into a pool he thought was shallow. Instead of standing on a concrete bottom, he was sucked into a hidden pipe, submerged and pulled into a sump about 10 metres away, whereupon he was spat out into a larger pipe, where he found air.

District Chief Wayne Brownlee, a firefighter for 34 years, saw the flow of the water in the pipe and estimated it was travelling at 30 kilometres an hour.

It was not only fast, it was slippery. The bottom of the pipes is covered in a greasy sludge. There are no handles to grasp on the side and even standing up would have been an achievement.

"When I got this information, I figured 'we're not going to get this guy'," said Mr. Brownlee.

District Chief Jake Charron said there is something else to consider: the utter blackness inside the pipe. "I've done a little exploring in caves," said the firefighter. "That's the kind of darkness we're talking about. Not a crack of light."

While we have yet to hear it from the boy himself, rescue workers say he must have been pulled along by the rapid current, descending deeper and deeper into the ground, as the system is propelled by gravity.

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The initial state of affairs at the scene was one of confusion.

Children like to play in sewers, Capt. Warren says, and the department gets two or three calls a year about the problem. Sometimes they are hoaxes. Interviews with Christopher's friends convinced them the danger was real.

Help was on its way from across the city. Capt. Warren was called while he walked his dog, hustling in from Stittsville. Jim Andrews, acting captain at Station No. 2 in Nepean, had finished his shift and was on his way home when he heard the call go out in his own vehicle.

Mr. Andrews, a specialist in extracting victims from confined spaces, headed for the site.

While a municipal sewer worker was soon on the scene, Capt. Warren said they were struggling to make head or tail of a thick book of sewer maps, which they were reading by the dome light in a van.

Just after 9 p.m. Monday, Luc Dugal was working on his home computer when a city worker called to say a teenager was caught in Ottawa's maze of sewers. For a brief moment, the city's superintendent of sewer maintenance thought the teenager was trapped in the storm sewer system. But Mr. Dugal was frightened to learn that Christopher had tumbled into the main line of the city's sewage system.

In the "trunk" tunnel deep below the city, the current is strong, and watery sewage is a cool 10 C. Then there is the risk of toxic gases, like hydrogen sulphide, which can kill in minutes.

"When I first heard that there was a kid down there, I thought this kid is not coming out alive," said Mr. Dugal. "Even if I had fallen down there, I would have been scared. Your chances of surviving aren't that good."

Mr. Dugal called the man who knows the sewer system within Ottawa's old boundaries the best -- Gerry Taylor, a sewer inspection supervisor. With 20 years of experience, Mr. Taylor understands the workings of all 220 kilometres of old Ottawa's trunk sewer line. "We pretty much know the whole thing," said Mr. Taylor. "Someone brought maps, but as soon as we got there, we knew where he could be."

The plan now was to intercept the youth as he drifted down toward the Green Creek sewage treatment plant. The complexity of the problem drew upon all the skills of the Ottawa fire department. They have special units trained in rescues from enclosed spaces and those skilled in swift-water rescue. One of the cornerstones of such rescue work is that the work itself must not endanger the firefighter. And so it took time. "One of the first things you have to worry about is air quality," said Capt. Warren.

Special probes were lowered into the pipes to measure for combustible gases and levels of oxygen. Firefighters need that information to determine what kind of protection to wear.

They must also be tethered with rope, to ensure the rescuer doesn't slip and suffer the same fate as the victim. Radio contact must also be tested and maintained. As midnight approached, rescuers were still unclear how far the youth had drifted.



Firefighters involved in the heroic rescue effort included, front row from left: Dan Aupry and Scott Mellan, and back row from left: Doug Richardson, Rick Barkhouse, Dominic Assaf and Brian Gadde.

As a precaution, about 1,800 metres from the main entry point, a second water rescue crew descended down a manhole near Sheffield Road. It was a large pipe, about 2.5 metres in diameter. The crew, in effect, set up a net, spreading two or three ladders across the rushing current. If Christopher made it this far, he would at least have something to latch onto.

Maintenance workers Mike McNally and Ray Ayoub unlocked the metal cover and almost immediately heard shouts for help. "Stay where you are. Help is on the way," Mr. McNally shouted back.

The final chapter was about to be written. At fire station No. 2 on Preston Street, four members of the swift-water rescue team were in the middle of a 14-hour shift when the call came for help at 10:33 p.m. Within 20 minutes, they were on the scene with an inflatable rescue boat called a Fortuna, which was never more aptly named. Oddly shaped, open at both ends, the yellow craft has straps on the side and is normally used for ice rescues.

When they arrived, Dean Taylor, 40, and Barry Blondin, 42, quickly donned their wetsuits, custom footgear, life-jackets, waterproof two-way radios, helmets and breathing apparatus.

This is the kind of moment they had trained for in the powerful rapids at Britannia. Another specialty firefighting unit, the high-angle rescue team, rigged up a system to lower the boat by rope. Even this was no simple endeavour. Capt. Warren said there was a danger that the rope would rub against the top of the concrete tunnel and wear out. The high-angle crew worked out a pulley system.

At 11:29 p.m. the boat was lowered down the shaft, with Mr. Taylor and Mr. Blondin down below. They hopped in and began the most unusual boat trip of their lives. They had two high-powered lights and a pair of paddles. The current pulled them until the first 100-metre long rope had been used up. They paused. A second length was added, then a third. The smell was beyond belief. "Stick your face in a toilet," said fellow crew member Peter Lamar, who was doing backup on the surface. "That was what it was like."

As the two men drifted along in the brown sea, they were astonished at how fast the water was moving, at one point even creating a small set of rapids. As they moved along, they kept shouting at the youth. His responses were audible but indecipherable. "We kept saying 'We're coming, we're coming'," said Mr. Blondin.

About halfway to their destination, their radios stopped working because of the mass of overhead dirt and concrete. They were now about 20 metres underground. It is protocol to call off a rescue if communication is broken, said Capt. Warren, and that very nearly happened. But the men had a trick up their sleeves.

Attached to their life-jackets were whistles. They began blowing sharp bursts to let the other crews know they were all right. It only occurred to Mr. Taylor later that his whistle had dipped in the water.

For about 30 minutes, as fellow crew member Capt. Randy Olmstead put it, "they were heading down shit creek with a couple of paddles." Finally, after the 2.5-metre-wide pipe took a couple of twists and turns, the light caught Christopher, standing in waist deep water, his feet lodged on the bottom. About 15 metres from their destination, the rope stopped. For another agonizing moment, he had to wait.

An astonishing amount of rope had been let out: 600 metres. It was only later that the men learned they were only a third of the way to the next manhole. Mr. Taylor hauled the shivering, blue-lipped youth into the boat. A life-jacket was immediately placed on him and he was tethered to the craft. They asked him his name and what happened. "I fell," was his brief

response.

"He said he thought he was going to die," said Mr. Taylor, a firefighter for 22 years. "He said it four or five times." There wasn't a single tear, the men report.

The rescuers now had to get back. Mr. Taylor began pushing the boat upstream, while Mr. Blondin stayed in the boat and piled up the rope. They tried tugging on the rope a couple of times -- a signal to draw up the line -- but it didn't prove effective. They even put Christopher to work piling up rope.

The men estimated they pushed the boat back about a third of the way -- 200 metres -- when the surface crew finally began pulling the other way.

Only 41 minutes after entering the water, they were back at their starting point and the youth was able to climb up the stairs. Rescuer after rescuer commented on the miracle of his survival.

When the trio reached the ground, there was an immediate concern about contamination. And so yet another specialty unit, specializing in hazardous materials, went to work.

A crude curtain was erected in the grassy field, beneath a Giant Tiger warehouse. Christopher was stripped and hosed down with an anti-bacterial solution, cold water from a fire pumper dousing his frame. He was then covered with an emergency pair of overalls and taken to hospital.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Blondin spoke like everyone involved in the rescue, describing their roles as one small part of a mammoth team effort. "What's really cool is bringing all the guys together. The old Gloucester guys, the old Nepean guys, the Ottawa guys," said Mr. Taylor. "You just feel good," said Mr. Blondin, back on shift last night. "Your team got the guy."

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