

08-21-1995 Black River Falls WI – Bruce Cormican – FF – Hydrolic



## **Bruce Cormican**

<https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/firefighter-fatalities/fatalityData/detail?fatalityId=324>

On August 21, Firefighter/EMT Bruce Cormican of the Black River Falls Fire Department drowned while conducting a body recovery in a creek for a drowning victim. Firefighter Cormican and two other members of the Black River Falls dive team were trapped in a hydraulic created by a small waterfall while wading into the creek and searching for the victim's body. Shore personnel were able to remove the three rescuers with a pike pole, but could not revive Firefighter Cormican after pulling him out of the water.

### **Department Information**

#### **Black River Falls Volunteer Fire Department**

P.O. Box 435

Black River Falls, Wisconsin 54615

Chief: Jeffrey Amo

### **Diver Keith Cormican creates legacy for lost brother**

[http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/diver-keith-cormican-creates-legacy-for-lost-brother/article\\_1a276770-fefb-513d-bdca-7a70ed6570ec.html](http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/diver-keith-cormican-creates-legacy-for-lost-brother/article_1a276770-fefb-513d-bdca-7a70ed6570ec.html)

Aug 4, 2014 ANNE JUNGEN

BLACK RIVER FALLS — Keith Cormican and his older brother saw the need for a dive rescue team in Jackson County. For years, the brothers worked side by side using their own scuba gear to find drowning victims.

The tide turned on a summer day in 1995 when Bruce Cormican, a Black River Falls firefighter, died trying to recover a victim from a Jackson County creek.

Driven by his brother's drowning, his younger brother now volunteers his time helping public safety workers bring drowning victims home to their grieving families.

"I do this because I know the need is there," Cormican said. "I feel the desire to help, and I feel I have the capabilities to do it."

Cormican, 55, of Black River Falls, and Bruce earned their scuba diving certifications in 1990 to help find drowning victims. At the time, Jackson County

was without a dive rescue team, and the only method to retrieve submerged bodies was to catch them on large hooks.

“That’s a poor way to recover a body,” Cormican said.

The brothers tried to convince Jackson County authorities to start a dive rescue team, but no agency wanted to accept the cost or liability, he said.

For five years, the brothers worked together to find victims. They recovered bodies in about half of the cases they worked.

On Aug. 19, 1995, a father canoeing Robinson Creek outside Black River Falls with his three daughters after heavy rains disappeared under the turbulent waters of a small waterfall.

“I never knew people actually canoed that creek until that day,” Cormican said.

Black River Falls firefighters couldn’t save him. They searched the surface and shoreline for days before three firefighters decided to enter the water and search for the victim to bring closure to his family.

In seconds, all three were pulled under the falls. One escaped, but the churning waters trapped Bruce and then-Assistant Chief Steve Schreiber. Neither was breathing when the water released them minutes later. Schreiber was revived with CPR, and a helicopter could only transport one of the firefighters.

“I kept saying, ‘Take Bruce,’” recalled Schreiber, now the department’s chief.

Bruce had no brain activity when he arrived at the hospital and died on Aug. 25. He was 40.

## **Expert diver**

Cormican left the tree removal and landscaping business in the wake of his brother’s death, gaining the training needed to teach others how to scuba dive safely.

“I believe it was a lack of training that killed my brother,” he said.

The next year, Cormican helped create the Jackson County Dive Unit and serves as the director of the volunteer agency.

He trains public safety divers throughout the Midwest and said teaching and watching others enjoy the water is a passion. He opened a dive store, Wazee Sports Center, in Black River Falls about 18 years ago.

Cormican is an expert diver, certified to travel the deepest that's safely allowed. In 2011, he dove 355 below the surface of Lake Michigan to explore the SS Carl D. Bradley, a 639-foot long ship that sank in 1958 during a storm.

It took seven minutes to reach the shipwreck, where Cormican spent 20 minutes exploring before the 2½-hour ascent to the surface.

"It looks like it sunk last year," he said. "It's amazing when you have been on a wreck that only a handful of people in the world have been on."

Cormican has explored the waters of Mexico, Belize and Hawaii, coming face to face with sharks, but is most impressed by what is below the surface of the Great Lakes. He has searched perfectly preserved sunken ships in Lake Huron, discovering dishes, furniture and skeletons at depths of 200 feet.

When business slows in the colder months, Cormican teaches public safety and recreational divers how to scuba dive under ice. He also plows snow.

"It's not by choice, but I have to eat in the wintertime," he said.

#### Bruce's Legacy

Cormican, a father of four, in early 2013 founded Bruce's Legacy, a volunteer, nonprofit organization named for his brother that aims to recover drowning victims to bring peace to their families.

He invested in a \$45,000 sonar system, a torpedo-shaped piece of equipment towed by Cormican's pontoon that swims underwater emitting sonar pulses. Computer software transforms the pulses into images of the water's murky bottom.

From the boat, Cormican studies the pictures to try to identify bodies before divers make the recovery. The technology helps him cover vast areas quickly and reduces the risk posed to dive teams, he said.

"We find all kinds of things when looking for victims," he said. "We find victims, a tremendous amount of boats and lots of garbage."

The surface above a victim is marked with a floating cage before Cormican scans the area to pinpoint the location. He aims to get the cage exactly above the body so a diver can safely descend down a line to its location.

Cormican has assisted public safety agencies at no cost about 20 times in the past year, driving as far as 1,800 miles into Canada to try to find drowning victims. Most of the departments aren't equipped with sonar technology, which found five people in those cases.

"We also do a lot of eliminating," he said.

One of his latest searches was on July 11 in La Crosse, when 23-year-old Shalim Augustine went missing after docking with friends late July 8 behind Powerhouse Marine.

Cormican offered equipment and expertise not available in La Crosse, police Sgt. Randy Rank said. He began searching south of Clinton Street about 12:30 p.m., when authorities turned their focus to the water.

"The technology was impressive, and he was completely focused the whole time," said Rank, who searched alongside Cormican.

Cormican found two submerged vehicles and helped authorities eliminate areas to search for Augustine, Rank said, before a boater found his body in the Black River just south of the Interstate 90 bridge early that evening.

"I thought, 'How'd he get up there?'" Cormican said. "Sometimes there are no answers."

Each search is complex, complicated by the terrain and submerged objects that can hide victims. But Cormican's mission never changes: to find them and bring them home to their loved ones.

"Offering that closure is so important," he said. "Families are desperate. You see their sorrow."

Cormican through Bruce's Legacy also works with those with disabilities for rehabilitation so they can experience movement offered by water, he said. "Most of what I've done is with disabled veterans," he said.

He continues to educate community members and children about water safety, and police and firefighters about rescuing and recovering drowning victims.

Schreiber, the Black River Falls fire chief who has known Cormican for decades, called him an asset to emergency service providers.

"Keith's heart is in the right place," he said.

## **Memorial Organization Honors Fallen Search and Rescue Diver through "Bruce's Legacy"**

<https://www.prbuzz.com/non-profit/235071-memorial-organization-honors-fallen-search-and-rescue-diver-through-bruces-legacy.html>

August 21, 1995. It was a day Keith Cormican would remember forever. His brother Bruce Cormican, a certified diver, worked with the fire department in rescue and retrieval operations. But on this tragic day, Bruce himself became one of those victims.



A father was on his annual canoeing trip with his three daughters in Robinson Creek near Black River Falls. Torrents of rain had fallen all week; the current was strong

and swift and the water levels were dangerously high. The group fell into the swirling waters, and while the daughters survived their father did not. The Black River Falls Fire Department put together a search and recovery plan in the hopes of retrieving the man's body and bringing some closure to his grieving family.

In the midst of the search, the unthinkable happened. Three firemen, including Bruce, were swept off their feet and pulled into a hydraulic whirlpool created by the nearby waterfall. One firefighter managed to kick out and swim to shore. The other two were pulled down by the force of the water. After several agonizing minutes they were released from the turbulent vortex and pulled to shore by emergency rescue staff. The second fireman was successfully resuscitated with CPR on scene. The third, Bruce, was airlifted to La Crosse Hospital, where sadly he could not be saved.

The difficult decision was made by family to cease life support on August 25, 1995. He was only 40 years old. He left behind a loving wife, son and daughter, as well as a shaken community who mourned this noble man and his selfless act.

It had long been the brothers' intention to create a dive rescue unit that could help rescue and recover drowning victims. Keith Cormican founded Bruce's Legacy to honor his brother's memory and utilize the advanced technologies now available. "What spurred me to act on this, is knowing the need," explains Keith.

Bruce's Legacy is a nonprofit volunteer organization that provides emergency assistance, education, public safety awareness, and search and recovery operations for drowning victims to provide resolution for their families. It takes highly specialized equipment, time and money for the organization to function.

Bruce's Legacy uses a Klein 3900 side-scan sonar: an extremely high-resolution digital sonar used in search and recoveries. Earlier this year the organization purchased a remote operated vehicle (ROV) for those situation when sending a diver would have been ill-advised. These machines are capable of handling deep depths and fast currents, and are equipped with a grabber arm that can bring items to the surface.

The organization is completely volunteer and nonprofit; donations are heavily relied upon and always appreciated. "We volunteer our time and equipment in these endeavors," explains Keith. "But we ask the local authorities or the families to recover our traveling expenses if possible. But we will still come even if they don't have the money."

"We are always humbled by the gratitude and appreciation the families have for our efforts and service," says Keith. "It makes the operation less onerous, complete with a sense of satisfaction. This is exactly why we do what we do."

For more information, or to support Bruce's Legacy, please go to [www.bruceslegacy.com](http://www.bruceslegacy.com).