

Devonport

Fluke find could have saved bushwalker

By Louise Stephenson

The chance finding of a packet of firelighters could have saved the life of rescued New South Wales bushwalker Robert Bignall.

Bignall was found late Wednesday night sheltering in a cave on the summit of Cradle Mountain after being reported missing on Wednesday afternoon when he failed to return from a one-day walking trip.

The keen freelance photographer from Abermaine, who came to Tasmania "for a week with a difference", said yesterday he had used the firelighters to start a fire to dry his clothes "because I knew if I didn't I would die".

On the way to the summit Robert had stopped at Kitchen Hut and he had picked up a packet of firelighters which had dropped from another hiker's pack.

Bignall (36), said he had taken photos all

the way up the mountain and walked around the summit.

He had intended to return to the Dove Lake car park by way of the Twisted Lakes, but he could not find the track leading down from the mountain.

He was well equipped for a day trip and also had a compass, but as he was following the track on the way up the mountain he did not take any bearings.

He said he made three or four attempts to find a path down, descending about 400 m and then climbing back to the summit.

"It began to cloud in and rain and I was using a lot of energy looking for the path.

"I realised I was lost and sat down for a while thinking of how I could survive the night."

He found some dead tree branches and gathered them to make the fire.

"It was while I was gathering wood that I found a cave about 150 m from the summit, with a small opening but big enough for me to stand up inside," Bignall said.

He left arrows in the ground with his initials scratched into the earth to make it easier for searchers to find the cave.

From the summit to the cave, Robert left a trail of stones and notes under a few rocks.

"By the afternoon I knew there was no way I was going to get down without help.

"I was cold, wet and hungry and very tired but I thought of all the training I had done and the things I still wanted to do in life and I made up my mind I was not going to die."

"I bedded down for the night but it was so cold that every half an hour I had to get up and walk around to get the circulation going again."

While Bignall was fighting for his life, Oliver Vaughan, the head ranger of the park, and Paul Darby, an S.E.S. officer, were searching the summit in darkness calling out in the hope they would be heard.

"I heard a coo-ee and saw the searchers' lights in the distance," Bignall said.

It was about 11.45, Wednesday night when Vaughan and Darby found him, well but tired, cold and hungry.

Mr Vaughan and Mr Darby returned to the foot of the mountain while another party stayed with Robert till daylight.

They helped him walk part of the way down

the mountain to Kitchen Hut where they were met by two police search and rescue officers and another ranger.

About 9 a.m. yesterday a smiling and very relieved Robert was taken to the ranger's house by an equally relieved Sgt Lindram of the North-West police district search and rescue squad.

Bignall said he thought he had become lost because the track from the summit was not clearly marked.

He said some of the rocks on the descent are marked with white paint but it is almost impossible to distinguish it from the white moss which grows prolifically.

Mr Vaughan said yesterday the area was re-marked about a month ago and a number of extra snow poles were set out, but as a precautionary measure more snow poles would be dropped on the summit.

An ambulance from Devonport met Bignall at the foot of the mountain and transferred him to the Mersey General Hospital at Latrobe.

After examination at the hospital, Bignall was allowed to leave.



● Rescued bushwalker Robert Bignall arrives at the Mersey General Hospital yesterday.