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### Accident Database: Accident #3695

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**River:** East Verde

**Reach #:** East Verde [AZ]  
 US Route 87 to Verde River confluence III-V+  
 low                      02h38m                      [\[detail\]](#)

**Section:** US Route 87 to Verde River confluence

**Location:** First Gorge

**Gauge:**

**Water Level:** High

**Difficulty:** IV

**Accident Code(s):** Vertical Pin

**Injury Code(s):** Fatal

**Age:** 64

**Experienced/Inexperienced:** Extensive Experience

**Years Paddling:**

**Private/Commercial:** Private

**Boat Type:** Kayak - Unknown

**Boat Manufacturer:** unknown

**Boat Model:**

**Number of Occupants:** 1

**Number in Group:** 5

**Number of Victims:** 1

**Other Victim Names:**

**Hazard Codes:** Blast rock, Low Head Dam, High Water, Hydraulic/Keeper Hole, Man-made Debris Strainer, Pin/Broach, Rocks that cause blunt trauma, Natural Strainer or Sieve, Water Temp, Waterfall

**Initial Report:** Kayaker Dies In East Verde  
 Flood traps Valley man under 8-foot falls in remote stretch

By Alexis Bechman

March 12, 2013

A kayaking trip turned deadly for a group of friends Saturday when a veteran outdoorsman drowned in a remote stretch of the East Verde River below Doll Baby Ranch.

The Gila County Sheriff's Office on Monday identified the drowned man as James McComb, 64, a Valley resident and avid kayaker. A Department of Public Safety rescue helicopter managed to remove McComb's body at 11:30 a.m. Monday, almost two days after he drowned when his kayak overturned and was trapped in the eddy after he went over an eight-foot waterfall in a remote area in the Mazatzal Wilderness. Despite the frantic efforts of his friends to paddle up to him or throw him a rescue rope, he was pulled under and drowned.

The four people were kayaking from Payson to Fountain Hills Saturday when McComb flipped and could not right himself, said Lt. Tim Scott with the Gila County Sheriff's Office.

After finally retrieving his body, McComb's friends then made the agonizing decision to leave his body and continue, since they couldn't get a cell phone signal. The sheriff's office didn't learn of the events until late Sunday night when the group was able to get cell service. GCSO Search and Rescue Coordinator Sgt. Terry Hudgens learned that due to the remoteness and lack of cell service, the group decided to remove the body and leave it on shore, marking the location with a "highly visible object for easy locating by air." Payson Fire Battalion Chief Dan Bramble said he had paddled with Jim McComb before. He said McComb had extensive paddling experience. "It is a huge loss," Bramble said. "He was a pillar in the paddling community for decades now."

McComb was a retired Mesa physician. An avid outdoorsman, he fished, hunted and had kayaked for some 40 years. "He knew every square inch of the state," said friend Bill Langhofer, who was on the kayaking trip Saturday. This was the second time McComb had taken the route from the end of Doll Baby down to Horseshoe Lake. The first time was some 15 years ago, Langhofer said. It was the first time for the four other members of the group.

The group took off Saturday during the snowstorm and had gone down eight miles when they encountered an 8-foot waterfall, and class IV rapids (rapids are rated between a class I and VI based on difficulty). Three kayakers went over the fall successfully before McComb. McComb, who was in a longer kayak, followed, but got pinned at the base of the fall behind two rocks, Langhofer said. Within seconds, McComb's boat was covered in water and the other kayakers could only see a small red patch of his boat. McComb was pinned so severely there was no way he could right himself, Langhofer said.

The men quickly threw rescue ropes, but the ropes were immediately swept away by the current. Langhofer tried to paddle up to McComb but the current pushed him back. Another kayaker was finally able to attach a rope to McComb's life jacket. The men then used pulleys to get his body out. The boat could not be retrieved from under the fall and the men left it.

With 1,000-foot cliffs surrounding them and no cell service, the men decide

to leave McComb's body on the shore and head down the river as quick as possible. They paddled another 28 miles downstream before reaching the lake and cell service.

Langhofer had kayaked with McComb for eight years. He said McComb was an amazing guy, well liked by everyone. Just a day before this trip, the friends had kayaked West Clear Creek together. The storm had dramatically increased flows in the East Verde River. For instance, the Verde River normally carries about 700 cubic feet per second, but on Saturday, it jumped to 3,450 cubic feet per second.

### The Anatomy of a Fatal Pin

Dr. Bill Langhofer

River: The East Verde River Wilderness Section through Mazatzal Wilderness

- Class 4 on the East Verde (16 miles) and Class 3 on the main Verde (29 miles). Character of the river is willow tree and tamarisk forest class 4 tree dodging with 3 gorges of class 4 bedrock rapids on the East Verde. Following the East Verde is a class 3 paddleout for 29 miles on the larger flowing Verde river.

-Flow on March 9<sup>th</sup> was 500 CFS on East Verde, normally flows 15-20 CFS

-Put in is Doll Baby Ranch to the West of Payson. Take out is Horseshoe Dam 45 miles downstream, near Cave Creek, Arizona.

-Width of East Verde River ranges from 10 to 100 feet wide.

- Fewer than 20 people have ever kayaked this section of river

-5 whitewater boaters kayaked together on this day, combined 60 years of experience.

-Kayaking this section requires a 2 day excursion; therefore boats were loaded with overnight gear.

Boat involved in pin: Dagger Freefall

- Length- 9' 6"
- Boat did not collapse and had no signs of damage.

Paddler that was pinned: Dr. Jim McComb, 64 years old

- 26 years experience paddling class 4-5 whitewater in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and New Mexico
- He was the only member that had paddled this section of river, 15 years previously
- Arizona first descents: Upper Tonto Creek, Tonto Creek Hellsgate Section, Upper Burro Creek, Black Canyon, Lower Sycamore Creek.

### Summary:

Factors that possibly influenced the pin:

- The longer length of the boat did not allow it to clear the fall once it hit the piton rock.
- Older style river boats have less rocker, and do not deflect as well when hitting a piton rock.
- Weight of the boat- with overnight gear the boat was very heavy and settled into the piton rock easier instead of bouncing off.
- Slow speed off the drop with no boof stroke, prevented him from clearing the piton rock.
- Chocolate Milk colored water of the South West. The poor visibility of the water made rescue difficult as we were unsure where and what he was pinned on in the waterfall. The poor visibility of the water covering the piton rock made it appear like a wave.
- The river left slant of the waterfall naturally twisted the boat into the slot between 2 rocks on the left side of the fall, making the pin fatal and rescue impossible.
- On southwest wilderness creeks and rivers, very few people have boated them; therefore, many of the hazards that are well known on the East Coast have not yet been discovered on our rivers.

At the beginning of the third gorge a waterfall that is approximately 7-8 feet in height, at 500 CFS, was noted by the lead boater Ryan who boat scouted the drop. I was the sweeping kayaker and paddled to river right above the drop and got out to check for wood. The lead boater and the following 2 boaters paddled over the drop with speed and boof strokes taken on the edge with clean lines angling right toward the middle of drop as they went off the fall.

The Pin:

1. Jim paddled slowly to the edge and went over the drop leaning slightly forward.
2. His boat (the bow) hit a piton rock (that appeared to be a wave) at the bottom of the drop, stopping his boat.
3. His stern settled into the top of the waterfall as water started pouring over the stern. The water pouring over the stern pushed his torso forward, pinning him to the bow of the boat.
4. Once vertically pinned the stern was pushed underneath the water down to the base of the fall, where the natural slope of the rock rotated the boat sideways to the left.
5. Jim pinned in his boat, rotated left into a small slot between 2 rocks on the left side of the fall.

Jim was now pinned by the piton rock in front of his boat, the waterfall in back, 30,000 pounds per second of water on top (1/2 water flow at 500 cfs), and his body was trapped in a slot between 2 rocks, pinning him in his boat and causing his demise.

This view is from the top of the drop as we found the boat weeks later once the water had receded from 500 to 20 cfs, and had transformed from muddy to clear water.

The piton rock can be seen (#2). This small rock at the base of the fall is what stopped his boat.

The left slant in the rock at the base of the fall can be noticed (#4), with the boat still leaning in that direction.

Once his boat sunk in the water it hit that slant and rotated the boat to the left.

Jim was now pinned in the slot between the 2 rocks (Red/White and Black) on the river left (#5).

The approximate water line at 500 cfs was drawn into the photo, water line.

jim4.jpg

This photo was taken from the river right side where I was standing, while attempting rescue. In this photo the boat has been removed from the drop.

The tape measure in my left hand shows the length of the boat and the approximately 90 degree angle that the boat initially hit the piton rock. (Piton rock was the smaller rock at a sharp angle)

The slot that his body rotated into can be seen in this photo between the 2 rocks. Note the sunlight shining through the slot.

The approximate water line at 500 cfs is drawn into the photo.

When attempting rescue, Ryan was standing on the black rock above the piton rock. If Ryan had fallen off his rock he would have fallen into a sieve.

jim5.jpg

Downstream view, looking upstream at the pin. Note that the boat is still resting on the piton rock and slanted toward the river left slot in between the rocks (red/white rock and black rock). The boat remained in original pin location even after water receded weeks later.

jim3.jpg

Downstream, looking upstream at Jim's Falls, with approximate water level at 500 cfs drawn in yellow.

The person on the left (river right) represents the location where I was attempting rescue and where I was scouting.

jim2.jpg

River Right Looking at Jim's Resting Place and McComb Mountain.

C:\Users\svc\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\XDE6W9AE\IMG\_0116.JPG

### Detailed Description:

Trip Report In Memory of our Friend Jim McComb

Saturday, March 9, 2013 around 3:30 pm

By Bill Langhofer

On Friday it was raining and I did what I always do when it is raining, I called Jim to see what we might be able to kayak. I was heading to work , with my truck geared up, hoping that one of the rivers would kick with the storm. Jim arrived at the clinic and called my staff and told them that Dr. Langhofer's cohort in crime was in the parking lot. I just finished my last call and ran out to the truck and threw my gear into Jim's Grand Cherokee "THE BEAST" and we were off to the high country.

### Witness Narrative:

We ended up paddling a section of West Clear creek that neither of us had previously paddled. We started boating in driving sheets of rain, then sleet, then snow. By the end of the run the rain had stopped and we went to a country store next to the river, where Jim asked for the phone book and looked up a client of his that lived in Camp Verde. He called the "best elk hunter in the Verde valley" and asked for a ride back to the truck, which he gladly provided. The elk hunter commented on the ride that his wife was still looking for a doctor like Dr. McComb, and she had not been satisfied with the selection of doctors since he retired. Jim demanded that the elk hunter

take forty dollars for shuttling us and take his wife out for dinner.

While Jim was driving home, we evaluated the rainfall amounts, river levels, and snow levels on my IPAD as we debated what to paddle. Jim stated that this would be the perfect storm for the East Verde and fondly reminisced the last time that he ran this section 15 years earlier with his good buddy Rob. That was in the days before hourly water gauge updates, and you had to call a hydrologist at SRP to ask where the rain was going. Jim called his wife Jodie told her he loved her and he was on his way home, while I made a bunch of calls to set up shuttle and to notify the other likely members of our party.

The following morning Jim, Ryan, Spence, Matt, myself and our shuttle driver met at the Denny's in Fountain Hills. We loaded up and headed to Doll Baby Ranch next to the Verde wilderness. On the way we crossed American creek that had 18 inches of water running, and Jim reminisced of another time that Rob and him had paddled this creek down to the East Verde in similar conditions. When we arrived at the ranch it was lightly snowing, the trees on the mountains were covered in snow, and the sky was gloomy. Spence was having trouble loading his boat as this was his first overnight kayaking adventure, and as usual Jim jumped in to offer his years of experience in expedition packing a kayak.

We started down the river and almost immediately Jim upstream pinned under a log, I jumped into the water and pulled him out from under the log. We walked around the trees and continued on our way. Ryan was leading down the river, while I swept from the back. The river soon dropped into the first gorge and the walls of the wilderness started closing in around. The large amount of trees that have grown up in the river bed made the travel difficult. The rapids were overall class 4 and would have been enjoyable if not for the continuous trees. At one point Jim stated that the tree anxiety was exhausting. A juvenile bald eagle watched us from his perch as we passed deeper into the wilderness.

We arrived at an 8 foot waterfall that Ryan was scouting from his boat. He paused for a second while leaning on a rock at the top of the fall, which prompted me to paddle to the shore to scout the drop. I arrived at shore, and as I went to get out of my boat Ryan stated that the drop was good and paddled over the edge. I stood up and saw Ryan in the pool below. I motioned Matt, then Spence who both paddled over the edge and had uneventful runs. I then motioned to Jim who slowly paddled to the edge and leaned forward as he went over the drop.

Due to the murky water of the East Verde, we had not noticed a piton rock (or log) at the bottom of the waterfall which the bow of Jim's boat hit. The stern settled into the top of the waterfall, and water started spraying over the back deck of Jim's boat. He was immediately pinned on the bow of his boat and covered with water. I ran to the edge of the waterfall and threw my throw rope across the river and hit the spot where he disappeared into the fall. There were no hands that came up and the rope was immediately washed off him into pool below.

I made repeated attempts to throw the rope into the falls, while Ryan ran up the opposite side of the river. Matt joined and started throwing his rope into the falls. Each time the rope was washed off the falls into the pool below. I told Spence to get back in his boat and wait in the pool below in case Jim

was freed. Ryan got to the top of the drop and swam out in the river, where he jumped on the rock next to where Jim was pinned. Ryan asked where Jim was and I frantically pointed into the waterfall. Ryan laid down on the rock and reached into the waterfall, but could not feel or see any sign of Jim or his boat. Ryan then threw a rope to me and I jumped into the water below the falls. He tried to pull me up to the boat, but the force of the water pulled me under and almost pulled Ryan off the rock. I let go of the rope and swam to Spence who paddled me to shore. I ran back up the shore to the falls where Matt was still throwing his rope.

Matt snagged something in the falls and we started pulling but the rope just released and came out of the falls. We noticed a black spot that came floating up behind a rock at the base of the falls, Ryan laid back down on the rock and reached out and grabbed Jim's lifeless hand. He felt around in the water until he located Jim's PFD, and he attached a carabineer and rescue rope under water. Matt and I repeatedly pulled on the rope and Jim's body and boat remained in the falls. We set up anchors and pulleys to help with the extraction. Over the next 15 minutes with repeated attempts and with all of us pulling we were finally able to free his body from the waterfall. Jim's boat and paddle remained in the waterfall. The entire extraction took over 30 minutes, and Jim was underwater the entire time.

When he arrived at shore his eyes were fixed and dilated, he was unresponsive, his skin color was purple, but his eyes were still as blue as the sky. We carried his body up to the base of the cliff. I muttered a simple "I love you and I will miss you Jim". I took off his cobalt blue helmet and set it on a tall dark, red rock out in the open so that the rescue personnel could easily spot it from the air.

We were surrounded by 1,000 foot cliffs that disappeared into the clouds, and the only way out was down stream. Ryan and Matt checked their cell phones to verify that they had no service. I carried my boat down the shore, got in below Jim's fall and we proceeded down the river. We paddled for 3 more miles until we passed the East Verde gauge station. We continued another mile until it was too dark to keep paddling, so we stopped and made camp under a grove of sycamore trees. The following morning the sun was shining. We packed our boats and got back on the East Verde. We paddled for another hour and a half before we reached the Verde.

The following 22 miles down the Verde was overall uneventful and we arrived at the boat dock at the edge of Horseshoe Lake around 6 pm on Sunday evening. We went up to the truck and drove around looking for a ranger or dam manager, and none could be found. We then loaded our gear, and drove into the city until we found reliable cell phone service to call the police. Jim's body was removed by rescue personnel from the canyon the following day. Jim will be sorely missed by all who enjoyed his company. He is the type of person that made you want to start hunting, fishing, snowboarding, golfing, or paddle boarding, just so you could spend a little more time with him. In the end we are reminded to enjoy every minute, and celebrate life, because that's what Jim did.

Kayaking drowning in Arizona's East Verde River

March 11, 2013

Authorities have recovered the body of a Phoenix-area man who apparently

drowned while kayaking on a remote stretch of the East Verde River in central Arizona. The Gila County Sheriff's Office says the body of 64-year-old James E. McComb was retrieved by a state Department of Public Safety helicopter about 11:30 a.m. Monday. A four-person kayaking group reported that one of the members drowned Saturday afternoon. They say his kayak overturned and couldn't be righted on the river west of Payson and north of Fountain Hills. The other members of the group were eventually able to retrieve the body, but had to leave it at a marked sight for pickup later as they went for help. Sheriff's officials say they are investigating McComb's death.

**Conclusions:**

**Link:**

**Report Status:** Reported

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## Analysis Of A Vertical Pin Fatality

*posted October 15, 2013 by Charlie Walbridge*[Tweet](#)

On Arch 9, 2013 Dr. Jim McComb died after his kayak pinned vertically on a small ledge on Arizona's East Verde River. His friend Dr. Bill Langhoffer recently forwarded a detailed description of the pin along with several photos. This may be useful to any paddler running difficult whitewater. His detailed accident report can be found in the accident database.

### The Anatomy of a Fatal Pin by Dr. Bill Langhofer

River: The East Verde River Wilderness Section through Mazatzal Wilderness. Class 4 on the East Verde (16 miles) and Class 3 on the main Verde (29 miles). Character of the river is willow tree and tamarisk forest class 4 tree dodging with 3 gorges of class 4 bedrock rapids on the East Verde. Following the East Verde is a class 3 paddleout for 29 miles on the larger flowing Verde river.

-Flow on March 9<sup>th</sup> was 500 CFS on East Verde, normally flows 15-20 CFS

-Width of East Verde River ranges from 10 to 100 feet wide.

- Fewer than 20 people have ever kayaked this section of river. Kayaking this section requires a 2 day excursion; therefore boats were loaded with overnight gear. The 5 whitewater boaters kayaking together on this day had a combined 60 years of experience.

Boat involved in pin: Dagger Freefall - Length- 9' 6" - The boat did not collapse and had no signs of damage.

Paddler that was pinned: Dr. Jim McComb, 64 years old 26 years experience paddling class 4-5 whitewater in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and New Mexico. He had paddled this section of river 15 years previously. His other Arizona first descents: Upper Tonto Creek, Tonto Creek Hellsgate Section, Upper Burro Creek, Black Canyon, Lower Sycamore Creek.

Factors that possibly influenced the pin:

- The longer length of the boat did not allow it to clear the fall once it hit the piton rock.

- Older style river boats have less rocker, and do not deflect as well when hitting a piton rock.

- Weight of the boat- with overnight gear the boat was very heavy and

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#### Second Photo Caption:

This photo was taken from the river right side where I was standing, while attempting rescue. In this photo the boat has been removed from the drop.

The tape measure in my left hand shows the length of the boat and the approximately 90 degree angle that the boat initially hit the piton rock.

(Piton rock was the smaller rock at a sharp angle)

The slot that his body rotated into can be seen in this photo between the 2 rocks. Note the sunlight shining through the slot.

The approximate water line at 500 cfs is drawn into the photo.

When attempting rescue, Ryan was standing on the black rock above the piton rock. If Ryan had fallen off his rock he would have fallen into a sieve.

**Charles Walbridge**  
Bruceton Mills, WV [Details](#)

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