



The History of Wemmer Pan Rowing Club



George Phela (1971– 1995)

Slightly adapted from the official citation...

George Phela was awarded the Order of Mendi for Bravery in Silver for displaying acts of bravery and valour by sacrificing his own life to save the lives of a drowning mother and her child.

On the evening of 31 January 2005, George Phela, like many people tend to do around that time of the year, was probably still pondering his new year resolutions.

After a hard day's work at Wemmer Pan Club, Phela and his cousin, Jacob, along with two other co-workers, were relaxing near the water.

George rose to collect some bottles of water a few metres away, out of sight of his companions. On his way back, he heard the piercing screams of a woman who, as he turned to look, was plunging into the water in an apparent suicide attempt, with a baby on her back.

George, who was by this time isolated from the rest and still out of their sight, instinctively understood what was happening. He leapt into the murky waters and without soliciting the assistance of the others, reached the two drowning victims and held them above the water.

Meanwhile, Jacob, who had also heard the screams and caught sight of the two figures, grabbed a pole nearby, and unaware that George was already under water, lowered it to pull the mother and child out.

With the baby still strapped to her back, the woman clambered onto the pole until she made it ashore. With the help of the other two colleagues, who had called for an ambulance during the rescue effort, Jacob was busy resuscitating the two survivors, unaware that his cousin was mired below the water. The paramedics arrived soon and the two survivors were stabilised and rushed to the nearest hospital.

Shortly after the ambulance had left with the rescued woman and her baby, Jacob noticed George's shoes, keys and the two bottles of water he had gone to fetch a little while earlier. However, George was nowhere to be seen and a frantic search for him began.



A couple of hours later, just minutes before midnight, rescue workers finally found George's body. It was stuck at the bottom of the lake in silt and mud. He was buried a week later in his rural home of Polokwane.



GEORGE PHELA

George together with his cousin Jacob had been joint caretaker at Wemmer Pan for six years.

On the evening of 31 January 2005 George went to the aid of a desperate woman and her child, and while saving them both, he gave his life in the waters of Wemmer Pan. It was a heroic deed, and he has been nominated for the President's gold medal for exceptional bravery.

George frequently acted as cox for Wemmer Pan R.C.; he was a talented artist, and he loved his dogs. He in turn was loved by all who knew him.

He was a small man but with the heart of a lion.

George and Jacob were caretakers at Wemmer Pan - a centre for aquatic sports, used by local schools and the university as their 'home ground', as well as by rowing, canoe and yachting clubs. The two relatives were responsible for the upkeep of the grounds and buildings, the repair of boats and for security.

According to Alan Francis, a part-time manager at the aquatic club, George Phela was not a swimmer, at least not a good one.

People who can't swim steer clear of water for one very obvious reason - to save their lives. Therefore, there can be only one reason for George's fearlessness on that fateful day - the only thing he could risk his own life for - to save somebody else's life.

It is only in exceptional circumstances - which are also few and far between - that people risk their lives to save the lives of others! George Phela performed a rare and magnanimous act of giving his life to save the lives of others.

George Phela (whose surname, ironically, means 'live' in Sesotho sa Leboa) was only 34 years of age at the time of his untimely death. He died in the prime of his life, when he was still

youthful, lively and had a promising future before him.

