Speluncean Explorer Timeline

(see Peter Suber, *The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: nine New Opinions*, Routledge, 1998)

Timeline of the events in the cave

The timeline is more subtle than it might appear on first reading Justice Truepenny's statement of the facts. I've sorted it out here for those who are interested. But for those who aren't, let me assure you that you may skip this section with impunity. These subtleties are not material to the holding on virtually any theory of the facts or law.

Day 0. The men enter the cave.

Day x. The landslide occurs.

We are never told how many days after Day 0 this occurs. However, we can deduce that it is at most 3. See the notes below. Day x + 20. Radio contact is established (p. 7, line 31).

Day 23. The men hold the lottery and kill Whetmore (p. 8, line 27).
Note that this is Day 23, not Day x + 23.

Whetmore would have waited another week to hold the lottery (p. 8, line 40). To know just how long the men had gone without food at the time of the lottery and killing, we'd have to know both (1) the value of x and (2) how long it took them after Day 0 to exhaust the provisions they carried in with them. Unfortunately we don't know either of these key facts, but see the notes below.

Day x + 30. Earliest estimated rescue date (p. 8, line 5).

On Day x + 20 (p. 7, line 31), the engineers predicted at least a 10 day rescue (p. 8, line 5). The doctors predicted that the men could live at least to this day if they ate one of their companions (p. 8, line 17), and would almost certainly not live to this day without some additional food (p. 8, line 11).

Day 32. The men are rescued (p. 7, line 25). Note that this is Day 32, not Day x + 32.

Notes on the timeline.

Radio contact is established on Day x + 20, and Whetmore is killed on Day 23 (not Day x + 23). If x were greater than 3, then the radio contact would have occurred after the killing, which we know is false. Hence x must be less than or equal to 3.

If x = 0, the minimum, then the rescue was two days slower than the engineers predicted (12 days rather than 10). If x = 3, the maximum, then the rescue was one day faster than predicted (9 days rather than 10). Either way, the men were rescued 9 days after the killing.

Another way to put this: Assume that the doctors were right that from the day of radio contact the men could not have lived 10 more days without food, and assume that the men had not killed a companion to eat. If x = 0, then the men would have starved to death before being rescued, but if x = 3, then they would have been rescued before starving to death.

Is there any textual evidence to help us decide whether x is 0, 1, 2, or 3? I don't see anything explicit. But here's a possibility. On the day of the killing, Day 23, Whetmore wanted to wait another week before killing anyone.

Why a week exactly, especially if they were already close to death by starvation?

If x = 0, then the predicted date of rescue (Day x + 30) would be exactly one week from the date on which Whetmore wanted to wait a week. By contrast, if x = 3, then waiting a week would still put them three days short of the predicted date of rescue. Hence, if Whetmore picked a week thinking of the predicted rescue, then that suggests that x = 0.