

Being fresh off the course, I welcomed the chance to castigate him for his obvious disrespect for the reef. Approaching, I realised the gravity of the situation and quickly slipped into the lift-and-rescue drill. I was lucky. My victim was an obese 20-stone (127 kg) and was wearing an 8 mm semi-dry. He obviously had more buoyancy than most and, as I dropped his 13 kg weightbelt, I felt his body bob up in the water.

I made good ground, towing him towards the boat 100 m away, performing AV and doing my best to attract attention.

That is, I made good ground until, in accordance with PADI teaching, I ditched his BC. And then it all went wrong. My victim was sinking. Little wavelets lapped across his unconscious face as I struggled to support his head above water.

Every tiny ripple washed over us, threatening to swamp his airway.

I finned desperately, supporting his head and trying to keep the two of us from drowning. By the time I reached the boat I was almost too exhausted and too panicked to continue.

Had the victim been less buoyant, and had the sea been less than mirror-calm, an effective rescue would have been impossible. As it was, it was too late anyway.

I'll be fair, Mr Kermode. I think you were proposing a technique for UK waters only.

Here I will quote you: "We all hope we will only have to do it in drills but we are also concerned that we might have to do it for real one day."

Believe me, when the time comes to do it for real, you are in no state to remember whether you are in the North Sea, the Red Sea or the Timbuctoo Sea.

Mr Kermode, those who do have to do it for real one day will not thank you for teaching them a technique which I believe is better suited to drowning the victim than saving him.

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SURVIVING COMMON DIVE HAZARDS

Peter Armstrong

Key Words

Accidents, equipment, incidents, rescue.

Panicking buddy

Panic can affect divers of any skill level who find themselves in situations outside the scope of their training or ability. Proper training, a well-conceived and adhered-to dive plan, gear checks and diving on a regular basis with a regular buddy, all help reduce the chances of panic.

If you notice your buddy is having problems that seem to be getting worse, stop the dive and regain control. Establish eye contact; often this and a gentle, yet firm hand on the arm is all it takes to calm someone down. Next determine the source of the panic. Is it an equipment problem? Is it a buoyancy problem? Is he injured in some way? Is he having mask problems? Is his weight belt falling off? Is his tank falling out of the backpack?

You will have a much better chance of controlling the panic if you understand the problem. Well understood signals are essential and it is for this reason that we insist on commonly understood signals throughout the Scottish Sub-Aqua Club (SSAC).

Try to control your buddy's breathing. Panic can lead to increased respiration, which can lead in turn to shallow, rapid breathing. This results in a build up of carbon dioxide. Once the pH (acidity) of the blood changes due to the dissolved carbon dioxide, faster shallow breathing occurs anyway.

Once your buddy is breathing properly and slowly, half the battle is over.

Do not endanger your own safety.

The only thing worse than a panicky diver is two panicky divers.

Lost dive boat

It is a very lonely feeling: if you surface to discover that the dive boat is nowhere in sight.

Take a couple of deep breaths and ask yourself what could have happened.

Did you simply swim further from the boat than you thought? If so, when all the other divers are on board the boat will come looking for you. Has the surface become

rough and because of the waves, you can't see the boat? Again, when all the other divers are on board they will come looking for you. Has something happened to force the boat to move or leave the area? If so, they will be back; they know you are there.

What if the situation is more serious? What if no one was left on board as a boat handler, or the anchor or mooring line was severed and the dive boat floated away?

First, there is a wide range of surface signal devices on the market, including strobes, flashers, signal mirrors, whistles, sound alerts, power inflator whistles and horns, extension dive flags and flares. If your signal device is dependent on air from your scuba tank, use it conservatively. Save strobes, flashers and under-water lights for evening hours in case it will be after dark when you are picked up

Flares should be fired at 90 degrees to the approaching boat, helicopter or even the shore. This makes the trail of smoke from the ascending flare more visible.

Relax. Stay where you are unless you know where you are going and you are sure you can make it. Drop your weight belt if necessary to make yourself positively buoyant and comfortable. Dry suit divers may want to leave their belt in place to remain upright in the water.

Move slowly. In order to decrease fatigue and the loss of heat, do not use any more energy than absolutely necessary. Movement will give you a false sense of warmth, in reality your skin temperature could rise as your core temperature is falling. Hypothermia is a definite cause for concern.

Assume the "survival" position with the knees drawn up to the chest, head forward and clear of the water and arms clasped around the head. This is the recommended position as it reduces the surface area of the body in contact with the water.

Try to keep the inside of the dry suit dry. Any liquids will pool around the kidneys causing rapid cooling of the body core. Most important, remember that people know you are missing and a search of both bottom and surface will soon be under way

Long surface swim

If you surface from a dive to find that you are a long distance from the boat or shore, take a minute to assess the situation. Are you in physical danger? If so, establish positive buoyancy by adding air to your buoyancy device. Drop your weight belt if necessary, use a signalling device to call for help and wait for assistance.

If you are not in immediate danger, then the situation is merely an inconvenience. If you think you have enough strength for the swim, take your time. I personally find it easier to turn over and swim on my back with my buoyancy device partly inflated.

Sudden loss of visibility

Sudden loss of visibility can be unnerving, to say the least. Silty waters are a reality in muddy places and should not be a deterrent to diving. Wrecks are often silty, especially in their inner recesses.

As your mother told you, there is nothing in the dark that was not there in the light. It may just come out in the dark !

If you find yourself in a sudden blackout, try to keep in mind that your movements probably caused the disturbance in the first place. More movement is not going to help. If you can sit quietly with no quick movements, visibility will often return in a short period of time. Then you can move slowly and safely away from the silted area. If the silt does not clear up quickly, ascend slowly to the surface, but keeping an arm and hand outstretched in your direction of progress to detect anything that might be in the way.

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The address of SCOTTISH DIVER is The Cockburn Centre, 40 Bogmoor Place, Glasgow G51 4TQ, United Kingdom.



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