

TRAINING

Brett knew he was in trouble as he tried swimming toward deeper water. He and Tom had watched two other divers enter and begin their descents, but neither had asked any questions about the best way to get there. They just knew this was supposed to be a great dive site and that local instructors used it for training. But when the wave slammed Brett into the rocks, he couldn't breathe and he felt pain down one side of his body.

The Divers

Brett and Tom met during their first dive class and hit it off quickly. They had both signed up for a trip that would take them to the Caribbean for their open-water check-out dives. They were

Lessons for Life

dive buddies on that trip, and in the year and a half since being certified, had dived together on two more trips. Neither had tried diving locally, but they

both thought that this site couldn't be that hard to dive. They both owned their own gear, which was set up for warm-water diving.

They lived near the coast, but the water was cooler there than on the dive trips they'd been on. Neither diver had really become involved with the local diving community or taken any continuing-education classes; they hadn't continued to learn. Their only diving experience was in warm, clear water from dive boats that guided their dives. They had never dived on their own.

The Dives

Tom stopped by the local dive shop to check on a trip he and Brett were thinking of booking, when he overheard two divers make plans to dive that weekend. Tom was jealous and decided to persuade Brett to dive with him that weekend. He wanted to get in the water and couldn't wait two more months for their upcoming trip. He rented two tanks on the spot and called Brett on his way out of the parking lot.

The next morning Brett and Tom arrived at the dive site early and found a group of other divers were already there, gearing up and crossing the beach toward the water. The dive site was in a small cove with rocks off to one side that formed a rock reef and a nice wall. Feeling confident, if a little embarrassed, neither Brett nor Tom talked to the other divers; they nevertheless tried to keep an eye on them as they entered through the surf and began their surface swims to get to the spot where they began their descent.

By the time Brett and Tom had finished their preparations and walked through the surf, they were the last divers on the surface. Both owned heavy wetsuits from when they first purchased their gear, but it was the

first time either diver had used them. They added extra weight to their BCs to compensate for the thicker suits, but they could only guess how much they needed, so they doubled the amount of lead they normally carried on the warm-water dives.

They made it into the water without getting knocked down and began swimming out. Reasoning that the dive itself was along the rocks and the wall, they swam in that direction.

The Accident

The seas were relatively calm but some small waves rolled up the beach. They were both overweighted and, to compensate and keep their heads above water, they had their BCs completely inflated. The jacket-style BCs were pressing in on their chests, making it hard to breathe. They were both breathing hard and still struggling to stay on the surface. Neither had gotten much exercise lately and they were both out of shape, not prepared for the work of the dives they were making.

As they swam near the rock reef to their right, the heavy wave surge pushed them back and forth, closer and closer to the wall. Hoping things would be better underwater, Brett and Tom swam to each other and began their descent. They faced each other and tried to get ready to descend together, but didn't

A second wave hit, pushing him into the rocks again; this time, his head struck a rock and he lost consciousness.

notice the waves had pushed them in closer to the rock reef. The waves were foamy on the surface as the water moved back and forth.

A fresh set of waves approached as the divers began their descent. A wave topped their heads, pushing them underwater as they let the air out of their already full BCs. The combination of the wave and being overweighted pushed them under the surface faster than either expected. The wave surge

slammed Brett into the rocks, knocking him breathless. He began to panic, twisting to find his friend, but couldn't see anything around him because of the foam and waves. A second wave hit, pushing him into the rocks again; this time, his head struck a rock and he lost consciousness.

Tom was in trouble too. He was a little farther away from the rocks when the wave struck, so he was able to recover. He lost sight of his friend in the water through the turbulence. When Tom saw Brett again, he realized Brett was sinking and it looked like his eyes were closed. Tom kicked toward his friend as hard as he could, forgetting to equalize as he did so. He felt a searing pain in his ears, and then suddenly the right one felt fine. He tried to equalize at that point, but his ear drum had burst. The rush of cold water into his middle ear caused him to become disoriented within seconds. He was upside down in the water, swimming toward the rocks when the third wave in the set hit, slamming him into the rocks as well.

Wrong Way In

Always get a proper orientation for a site you've never dived ■ BY ERIC DOUGLAS



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Analysis

This dive accident could have been prevented by a simple conversation with a local diver. While both Brett and Tom lived in the area, they had never dived there. Effectively, they weren't local divers and had no understanding of how to dive in those conditions or circumstances. Had they spoken to a local diver about the dive site, they would have quickly learned about the wave surge near the surface that can easily push divers back and forth as waves pass overhead. They also would have learned that the easiest way to approach the actual dive site was to swim farther out, away from the rocks and to descend to the bottom and swim back toward the underwater wall.

The other problem for these divers was too many "firsts." It was their first time making a shore dive and entering through surf. It was their first time using heavier wetsuits and diving in colder water. Each of these small problems on its own easily could have been overcome. Combined, they were too much for the

divers. Both men were knocked unconscious when the wave surge slammed them into the rocks and they drowned. None of the other divers noticed they were even gone until someone realized they hadn't come back for the gear they left on the beach. It took a day for the search team to find their bodies.

Your diving certification is good only for the conditions you trained in. If you've made dives only in warm, clear water with no current, you aren't qualified to jump into dark, cold water without some sort of local orientation from a dive leader who can explain the proper techniques.

Lessons for Life

- 1 Get a local orientation before you dive in a new location or attempt any style of diving beyond your experience.
- 2 Training and experience in one type of diving isn't appropriate for all types. A diving certification is just the first step, but you need to understand your limitations. Don't be afraid to say when you don't know how to do something.
- 3 We all need to be fit enough to do the dives we are attempting. Diving in colder water with heavy gear puts more stress on the body. So does shore diving or diving in currents, as compared with diving in still water from a boat. Follow a regular exercise program to be fit enough to dive.
- 4 Avoid being overweighted in the water. Take a class that will help you achieve neutral buoyancy and proper control in the water.

» Eric Douglas is the director of training for Divers Alert Network. He co-authored the book *Scuba Diving Safety* and has also written a series of dive adventure novels and short stories. Check out his website at booksbyeric.com.



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