

TRAINING

Sean was struck by how different his favorite dive site looked at night. He wished a buddy had gone out with him, but when they all declined he decided to go anyway. On the surface swimming back he could see the fire at the campsite, looking up frequently to steer himself toward shore. And then he heard the boat motor.

The diver

New to diving, Sean couldn't get enough. Just 24 years old, his enthusiasm tended to cloud his judgment from time to time.

Lessons for Life

He wanted to do everything "now" rather than gain the experience he needed. But his friends felt sure he would become a top-notch diver.

The dive

Sean had already made three dives earlier in the day on that same exact spot. So, when none of his friends wanted to join him for a night dive, he decided to go anyway. He told himself he would stay close to the beach near their campsite.

He'd made only one night dive before, and he had been accompanied by his instructor. For this dive, he simply picked up his light, donned his gear and walked into the water. He neglected to bring a float and a diver-down flag or a glow stick to attach to his tank.

On the dive, Sean was having a blast. But when he noticed he was running low on air, he decided to surface. It was only then he realized he had far exceeded his own dive plan, and had failed to stay shallow and dive close to the beach. He was in 60 feet of water, which meant he was a considerable distance from the shore.

He had a long surface swim, so he took a compass reading and headed for the beach. Low on air, he used his snorkel. He could see the campfire, so he turned off his light to save batteries and slowly kicked his way to the shore.

The accident

Sean's dive took him more than 200 yards out. Since it was night, the few boaters still out on the water had slowed down significantly. The one boat in Sean's area had its running lights on and wasn't moving fast, but the anglers on board were tired and looking forward to getting back to their own campsite. They had no idea that anyone else was even in the water, and Sean's black dive gear blended in with the water's surface.

All the boaters' heard was the sound of a thump. Sean barely had time to look up before the boat hit him. The force of the blow pushed him back under the water. Breathing from his snorkel, he inhaled water almost immediately.

A Night Dive Turns Deadly

Sean makes a solo night dive, and his lack of training leads to tragedy. This is a true story, but the name has been changed. ■ ERIC DOUGLAS



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The boaters slowed down and looked around, even shining a light on the water to figure out what they had hit. Failing to see anything, and since the boat seemed to still be running fine, they made their way to their campsite.

It wasn't until an hour later that Sean's friends realized he had not made it back. They found him floating in the shallows with several injuries from the collision with the boat. He had drowned.

Analysis

Sean made several mistakes on this dive, and he paid for them.

He went diving alone. While some highly trained divers do make solo dives, Sean was not in that category. He lacked even the basic safety equipment. He should have had a surface float with its own light to make it visible. He should have had someone on the beach serving as a beachmaster who could have watched for Sean and signaled to the boat that a diver was in the water.

Sean also violated his own dive plan. Had he monitored his air supply better, he could have made a slow, safe ascent and swam right up to the beach. Instead, he found himself in a situation that required a long surface swim.

Finally, had Sean saved enough air to be able to swim back to the beach with his regulator in his mouth, he might have survived. When the boat shoved Sean under, he immediately inhaled water.

Lessons for Life

- 1 Always dive with a buddy. Even when everything goes right, diving with a buddy is more fun, but a buddy can also be there to help you out if you get into trouble.
- 2 Conserve enough air in your tank to make it completely out of the water with your regulator in your mouth.
- 3 Always be aware of boat traffic. Often boaters can't see divers, and it's up to you to make yourself visible.
- 4 Be prepared for the dives you plan to make. This includes the proper surface support such as dive flags, buoys and lights as appropriate.

Eric Douglas is the director of training for Divers Alert Network. Check out his website, booksbyeric.com.

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