

# TRAINING

Alex and Emilio were thrilled as they surfaced after their dive. It was the first time they had dived from Emilio's new boat. They loved it. They could dive wherever and whenever they wanted. No crowds, no one else's agenda. On top of that, Alex found several large lobsters on their favorite wreck, and he was already dreaming of

the fine dinner he was going to prepare that night. He was looking forward to showing off to his friends his skill and good fortune now that they had a boat of their own. Alex slipped out of his scuba unit and pushed it up onto the swim step as he prepared to get out of the water. And he immediately began to struggle.

## Lessons for Life

After surfacing, Alex sheds some gear — but what he removes first puts him in peril. This is a true story, but the names have been changed. ■ ERIC DOUGLAS

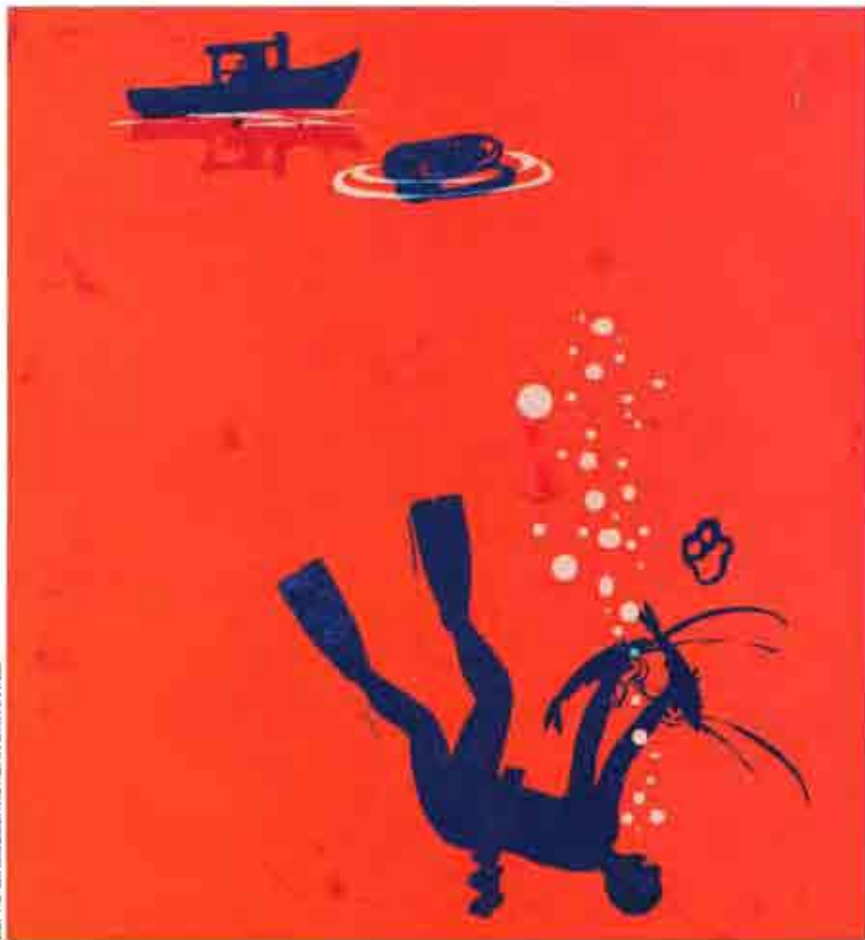
### The Divers

Alex and Emilio had been diving for only a short time, but they dived every weekend they could get away. And when they weren't diving, they were talking about it. Emilio loved underwater photography and took his time on dives. Alex liked to swim and explore. It worked out well, though, as Alex could play the role of Emilio's subject or would find interesting things for Emilio to photograph. Unfortunately, that scenario often meant that the pair had to call the dives because of Alex's air consumption. His hard swimming caused him to tire quicker and breathe faster than the relaxed Emilio.

### The Dives

The morning dawned clear and crisp as Emilio and Alex headed out. They wanted to get moored up on their favorite dive site before any of the local charter boats got there. They were excited about their newfound freedom. Their only previous diving experience was on charter dive boats and neither had stopped to consider that because they were diving from their own boat, they might need to change their diving routine. So they just jumped in the water and went for a dive. Together they performed back-roll entries and laughed at each other once they had gotten themselves re-oriented to the surface. After settling down, they began their descent.

They had incredible visibility as they headed toward the wreck. The current was a bit stronger than normal, but both divers compensated. They turned to swim against the water pressure and began to explore. Emilio brought his camera to his eye and immediately began photographing the freighter's coral-encrusted hull on the bottom. Alex dropped to the sand and began looking under wreck debris, checking for lob-



sters. He was successful, quickly finding two large ones. He ended up chasing a third for a few minutes, but finally got the crustacean into his game bag.

Emilio kept an eye on his friend while he worked and made sure they stayed close together. After bagging the third lobster, Alex checked his submersible pressure gauge and dive computer, realizing it was time to make his controlled ascent to the surface. He hooked his game bag to his weight belt, signaled Emilio and headed to the ascent line.

## Removing his weight belt and game bag first would have made all the difference for Alex.

They both made a slow ascent and surfaced at the stern of the boat. The boat's two small swim steps on either side of the twin outboard engines forced the divers apart. They could hear and talk to each other, but couldn't see each other because of the large engine housings.

On the surface, Alex's BC was fully inflated to compensate for the lobster's weight. The additional air made it bulky and difficult for him to move around, so he unbuckled the jacket and slid out of the scuba unit. He was in a hurry to get out of the gear, as the pressure from the full jacket was making it difficult for him to breathe. With a push, he shoved his gear onto the swim step. The upward force of his push shoved his head underwater, and the additional weight from his weight belt and the game bag dragged him down. His only air supply was on the surface and he dropped quickly — out of control.

### Analysis

Unfortunately, scenarios similar to this accident happen all too frequently. This diver was found on the bottom, a day later, with his weight belt and game bag still in place. The lobsters tied to his belt added approximately 10 pounds worth of extra weight.

Typical of dive accidents, a series of small problems compounded to cause a bigger problem. It's very rare that a single issue gets a diver in trouble. In this case, chasing lobster on the bottom with a stronger than normal current served to tire the diver out. He was out of breath from the dive and the overinflated BC



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on the surface. Alex was inexperienced and was also diving slightly overweighted. Add in the extra drag and weight from the game bag, and this diver was at his limit.

Those problems would not have caused this diver to die, though, under normal circumstances. His lack of familiarity with small-boat exit procedures was a major problem. If both divers had taken the time to plan their exit, Alex might be alive today. They had never made an

## Overlearning skills means they are so automatic that you don't have to think about them.

entry or an exit from a small boat, as indicated by their lack of familiarity with the back-roll entry. The best course of action for the divers would have been to discuss the process with a dive instructor or an experienced diver from their local dive shop who could give them advice.

Removing his weight belt and the game bag first would have made all the difference for Alex. Often, those who dive from small boats, especially ones with high sides, will hang a line over the side so they can tie off their equipment. Alex was so overweighted that as soon as he removed the additional floatation provided by the BC, he couldn't compensate by swimming. The weight and the reactive force as he pushed his gear up pushed him down, and the momentum kept him going.

All Alex had to do as soon as his head went underwater was flip open the buckle on his weight belt, sending his weights and the game bag to the bottom

and making himself positively buoyant again. His wetsuit would have seen to that. Its natural buoyancy would have slowed his descent and pulled him back to the surface — even if he was unconscious. There's no way of knowing if Alex simply panicked as he sank, but it is quite likely. Panic causes divers to forget basic skills and make poor choices. The perceptual narrowing brought on by panic typically offers only one solution — in most cases that's a flight response, bolting for the surface and fresh air. It's very likely that Alex struggled and tried to swim for the surface. This exertion would cause him to use the residual oxygen in his body even faster. He probably never even considered releasing his weights — or his game bag. He might've been so excited about the lobsters inside, he didn't want to drop them. It's also possible that he never really practiced ditching his weights in his entry-level diving class. Sometimes dive

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instructors won't fully practice the skill, worrying about damaging the bottom of the pool. Or maybe it had been so long since Alex's initial training that ditching didn't cross his mind. To make emergency skills an automatic response, they need to be overlearned, not just learned. Overlearning of skills means they are so automatic that you don't have to think about them. They just happen, typically keeping potentially life-threatening problems from escalating. The only way to overlearn skills and make them automatic is to practice them regularly and in various situations and conditions. When panicked and out of air underwater, one should not have to have to think about what to do next.

For whatever reason, Alex never released any of the weight and it dragged him down. It took a few moments for Emilio to realize his buddy was even gone, since they couldn't see each other around the engines. When Emilio finally realized something was wrong, he didn't have enough air in his tank to try and find Alex. By the time help arrived, Alex's body had drifted away.

## Lessons for Life

- 1 Adjust your dive routine for the circumstances of the dive. Anytime you make a change to your diving, take a few minutes to think through how you need to alter your technique to compensate.
- 2 Keep all your gear, especially the life-support equipment, in place until you are solidly in the boat. If you need to take something off, remove your weight. Keep your regulator in your mouth and your mask on your face as you climb into the boat. The gear might feel like it's in the way, but it won't be if you should fall back into the water.
- 3 Take time to properly adjust your buoyancy. Diving with less weight on your belt will help you remain streamlined in the water and use less air, and energy, on your dive.
- 4 Be familiar with basic emergency skills. It's always a good idea to practice emergency skills if you haven't done so in a while. Ditch your weights, and remove and replace your regulator and mask from time to time, in controlled circumstances, so you won't hesitate if you need to perform those potentially life-saving skills in an emergency.
- 5 Dive with a buddy with a similar style and purpose. While sometimes it is nice for one diver to be a photographer and one a model, these two divers really weren't compatible. If Emilio had gotten distracted by a photographic subject, he could have lost track of Alex earlier. That wasn't the cause of this accident, but this problem has caused many others to get in trouble.

**Eric Douglas is the director of training for Divers Alert Network. He also co-authored the book, *Scuba Diving Safety*, and has written a series of dive-adventure novels and short stories. To see more of his work, visit [booksbyeric.com](http://booksbyeric.com)**

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