

TRAINING

LESSONS FOR LIFE



Peer Pressure

Poor communication and an unwillingness to cancel a dive lead to drowning ►► BY ERIC DOUGLAS

Joan liked scuba diving in warm tropical locations. For her, diving was just part of taking a vacation. For her husband, William, it was all about the diving — he loved to dive any chance he got.

After much cajoling, William finally convinced Joan to make a dive with him in their local lake. She'd always protested, claiming it was too cold and dark. So when Joan swam up to William through the murky water, with the regulator out of her mouth, he got very scared.

THE DIVERS

Joan was a comfortable, competent diver. She'd learned to dive with William on

a vacation, and every year they dived together on a trip. She'd made about 60 dives over seven years, all in warm, clear environments with good visibility.

William had dived a few times without Joan, visiting the local lake with buddies from the local dive shop. Joan always resisted diving the lake — she liked it warm and she liked good visibility.

Finally, though, she ran out of excuses and agreed to join William at the lake. He rented her a thick wetsuit so she wouldn't get cold. He was excited about getting into the water again, telling her how happy he was she'd joined him. In spite of her misgivings, she couldn't back out now.

THE DIVE

Joan and William arrived at the lake early, but took their time getting ready. With thicker wetsuits than they were accustomed to (and Joan's first time in fresh water), they realized they'd need to do a buoyancy check first. They estimated the amount of weight they'd need and then entered the water to test it out. Both were able to sink quickly, so they decided their weights were fine.

Even during the brief submersion on their buoyancy check, Joan felt uncomfortable. Other divers had already begun their dives and stirred up the bottom, and the visibility where they entered was very low. When Joan put her face in the water, she was stunned by the frigid water and dismayed that she couldn't see the bottom only a few feet below her fins.

Joan attempted to back out of the dive but William convinced her to continue. They made a plan to descend to 30 feet and follow the contour of the lake until they reached the turning point, caused either by low air or cold, and then ascend to 15 feet for the return trip to the exit.

THE ACCIDENT

Only a few minutes into the dive and Joan was beginning to relax. She didn't like the dive, but signaled to William that she was doing alright. She descended slightly below William for a moment when she saw something shiny in the rocks below. She was surprised when something caught hold of her regulator.

When she pulled hard against whatever had caught her, the regulator pulled out of her mouth and she swallowed a mouthful of water. Frantically she signaled for William. Fortunately, he was just a few feet away and slightly above. She signaled that she was out of air and he quickly gave her his alternate air source.

She continued to choke, struggling and fighting for the surface but unable to rise. William inflated Joan's low pressure inflator, hoping to get her to the surface. She ascended, but only slightly. She began to panic and so did William — neither could understand what the problem was.

MICHAEL MORGENSTERN

During the struggle, Joan knocked William's weight belt loose and it fell to the bottom. William quickly began to float toward the surface, away from Joan. And when he did, he took Joan's (alternate) air source with him. William fought to swim back down to her, but never made it, breaking the surface feet first a moment later. Without his weights, he was unable to swim back down.

ANALYSIS

When Joan's body was recovered, rescuers realized her primary regulator was entangled in a rope tangled in rocks on the bottom, and that it had been pulled from her mouth. By inflating her BC to try and help her ascend to the surface, William made it impossible for Joan to reach her regulator or to free herself. He essentially turned her into a balloon at the end of a string.

While both divers took the time to perform a buoyancy check before their dive, they were still overweighted: they only checked to make sure they could descend, not whether they had too much weight. By the time both of them relaxed, exhaling completely and allowing water into their wetsuits, they were negatively buoyant on the bottom. Both William and Joan had all their weight on their weight belts as well. Wearing all your weight in one place isn't wrong by any standard, but when something goes

wrong, as it did with William, you go from being negatively buoyant to positively buoyant very quickly.

In any emergency, your first steps should be to stop, take a breath, and think before you act. Just that moment of clarity will make all the difference in the world, especially in entanglement situations. By twisting and turning, divers who are entangled in ropes or fishing line often make the situation worse — getting themselves further wrapped up. Joan choked on the water making her

more prone to fear and panic, but if she had simply backed up and found her regulator, descending to the bottom to breathe and wait on her husband, she would have been fine.

If William had taken time to think through the problem, he would have seen Joan's regulator was entangled and been able to free it. They could have then ended the dive safely. As things escalated and Joan panicked, her struggling released William's weights and sealed her fate.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

► **DON'T MAKE DIVES YOU AREN'T COMFORTABLE WITH.** Any diver can call any dive at any time, for any reason.

► **SEEK TRAINING** and experience in a class before jumping into a new dive environment for the first time. Training and experience in one environment does not necessarily mean you are prepared to dive in all locations.

► **GET A LOCAL ORIENTATION TO THE DIVING ENVIRONMENT.** Local divers can warn you of hazards at a particular dive site and offer advice on equipment or techniques to make a dive more comfortable.

► *Eric Douglas co-authored the book Scuba Diving Safety and has written a series of dive adventure novels and short stories. Check out his website at booksbyeric.com.*