

TRAINING

Cruising through the cave using a diver propulsion vehicle brought back the magic of cave diving for James. He was having an incredible, effortless ride and didn't have to fight the current caused by water flowing out of the cave. He relaxed and let his new DPV do all the work, pretending to be a pilot soaring around turns and through passages. After what seemed like only a few

minutes, James released the trigger on the DPV and looked around to get his bearings. He didn't recognize the room. Worse, he had no idea where the permanent cave line was. James was lost.

Lessons for Life

The Diver

James loved diving, especially the gear. He liked tinkering with new gear and

checking out catalogs and displays at the local dive shop. While he'd never admit it, most of his friends suspected he pursued cave diving so he could play with the tec gear that level of diving required. He loved carrying multiple tanks and having multiple regulators. His friends often heard him say, "There isn't a problem in a cave that a redundant regulator can't fix." He often carried more equipment than the cave environment required. His weakness, though, was in not spending time reviewing how to use new equipment.

The Dive

After seeing a group of cave divers using DPVs in his favorite cave system, James decided to buy one. He told his friends how cool the divers looked soaring through the water. As soon as the DPV was delivered and he charged its battery, James planned a cave dive. His buddies joined him, but neither had a DPV. The three divers agreed to enter the cave system together. James's two buddies planned a standard progression through the cave system — a dive the three of them had made many times before — while James would use his DPV.

The spring was relatively shallow, rarely dropping below 50 feet. What it lacked in depth it made up for in breadth: The cave system sprawled underground for miles, branching off like veins in a leaf. Divers had explored the cave system for years, marking routes and laying in permanent guidelines, but many of the branches from the main tunnel remained unmarked.

James planned to cruise ahead of the other two divers with the DPV, following the permanent guideline installed through the main passageways of the system. He said he'd return to them after a few minutes, allowing them to use the scooter as well.

The divers entered the water, relaxed and joking. James played around in the open-water area of the spring for a few minutes, getting a feel for the DPV and how it responded. After turning a few loops underwater, he decided he was ready to make the dive.

The three divers entered the mouth of the spring. James cruised through the opening where the flow of water pushing out of the spring is the greatest, while his buddies struggled against the water's force. In his excitement to use his new toy, James didn't realize he left his friends behind almost immediately.

The Accident

After sailing through a few passageways, James released the trigger on his DPV and hovered in the water for a minute. The scooter was slightly negatively buoyant, and it began to pull him toward the cave's silty bottom. James added air to his BC and clipped the scooter to an open D-ring. He made himself positively buoyant so that he floated up to the ceiling. He wanted to stay off the

bottom to avoid silting up the tunnel and obscuring his exit.

Shining his light around the room for the first time, James marveled at the elegant rock formations around him. Only then did he realize he'd never penetrated this far into the cave before, and nothing looked even vaguely familiar. He checked his dive computer and

James realized he was lost in the cave system, wasn't sure which way was the way out and had a limited air supply.

realized he'd been inside the cave system for about 20 minutes, far longer than he planned. He checked his pressure gauge and was relieved to find he still had plenty of air in his tanks. Riding the scooter, he had been totally relaxed, barely swimming at all.

James scanned the room again. It was only about 10 feet high but seemed to go on forever, at least beyond the range of his dive light in either direction. He

wasn't sure from which direction he'd entered. He checked the cave's floor with his light to find the permanent line. Often cave divers place directional arrows on the line to indicate the way back to the main line and the surface. There was no line on the bottom. James realized he was lost in the cave system, wasn't sure which was the way out and had a limited air supply. He was in trouble and began to panic.

Analysis

Only cardiac issues cause more divers' deaths than panic. Panicked divers make poor decisions and fail to choose life-saving options. Panic didn't cause James to get into trouble in the first place; he made a number of mistakes that put him in that situation. But panic is ultimately what led to his death.

When James' dive buddies realized he had been gone too long, they returned to the surface and waited. When they waited beyond when his air supply should have been exhausted and still saw no sign of their friend, they called

Wrong Turn

A new dive toy and poor planning on a cave dive lead to deadly consequences ■ BY ERIC DOUGLAS



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the authorities, who immediately put a dive team in the water to search for him. Experienced cave divers, the team was well versed in the dangers and special procedures necessary to make a body recovery from a cave system.

When James' body was eventually recovered, the rescuers discovered he still had air in his tank. We can only theorize that when James realized he had no hope of finding a way to the surface, he panicked, hyperventilated and passed out. Unconscious, the regulator slipped from his mouth and he drowned.

The only way to avoid panic is to train until the skills become second nature. The more complex the skills, the more a diver should train. In any awkward or dangerous situation, a diver's training should kick in so he can handle the problem. A diver should be able to stop, take a breath or two, think through the situation and then act.

James made a number of other mistakes besides not training adequately. He took a new piece of equipment into a dangerous situation without thinking

about how it would change his dive plan. He moved so quickly and effortlessly that he left his buddies behind without even realizing it. James violated all the lessons learned during his cave-diving course and the knowledge he'd gained from his own experience. He lost contact with his buddies and with the guideline. Leaving the permanent

guideline in a cave system isn't a problem as long as a diver follows proper cave procedures. James should have tied off his own line to the permanent line and then moved forward. When he reached the end of the line, he could have reeled it in and arrived back at the main line. And then James could have found his way back to the entrance.

Lessons for Life

- ① Be familiar with the equipment you are using. If it's new gear, learn how to use it. Think about how it will change the way you dive.
- ② Plan the dive. James and his friends failed to make a dive plan, other than to agree that James would use the DPV and then return to his buddies.
- ③ Obey the rules. When entering a hazardous situation like a cave or a wreck penetration, follow the rules of this specialized training. James failed to take even the most basic of cave-diving precautions by following a guideline and putting out his own reel.
- ④ Make sure your dive team is similarly equipped and has similar experience levels. When divers in a buddy team are not equipped the same or have drastically different skill levels, they can't function as a team.

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. Check out his website at booksbyeric.com.



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