

TRAINING

Coming around the coral head, Lisa realized she was running low on air and knew it was time to ascend to the surface. She signaled her intentions to her new buddy, Julie, who checked her own pressure gauge and realized that she still had plenty of air in the tank. Julie signaled that she was fine and waved to Lisa, an indication that she was going to stay down a little longer.

Lisa hesitated for a moment, confused that her buddy wasn't ascending with her, and then nodded her agreement and headed in the direction where she thought she would find the boat.

The Divers

Lisa was a fairly new diver. She'd made 20 dives, but hadn't dived for almost a year.

She owned some of her own gear, including an aluminum 80-cubic-foot cylinder, and she was in moderate shape.

Julie, on the other hand, had been diving for several years and owned all her own equipment, including a 90-cubic-foot cylinder, which she preferred because it gave her more bottom time. She'd taken a number of diving courses and was a very experienced diver. Julie was athletic and her buddies joked that she almost seemed to "make air" when she was diving because she used so little on a dive compared with everyone else.

The two women had met at a dive-club meeting and realized they had several common interests, so they agreed to be dive buddies on the club's next outing. Lisa was excited about diving with the more experienced Julie because she hoped to learn from her.

The Dive

The divers were participating in a dive-club outing, a regularly scheduled charter boat dive. They were making the first dive of the day to a local reef, which sloped gently from 80 feet up to about 50 feet. The boat had anchored at one end of the major reef structure, in approximately 60 feet of water. A light current moved along the reef, so the divers were all instructed to make their dive into the current, moving away from the boat and allowing the current to help them return to the anchor line at the end of the dive. Visibility was good but not perfect, as a storm the day before had stirred up conditions, and there was still some ocean swell with 3- to 5-foot seas on the surface.

The Accident

Julie's experience level as a diver helped her relax underwater. She took her time and made slow, easy movements. She was also very fit, helping her to have a lower air-consumption rate. She liked to dive

the slightly larger tank, though, because she hated to miss any time underwater.

As the divers reached the end of the reef structure, Lisa realized she was running low on air. The effort of fighting the current and her own lack of ease, along with an overall lack of fitness, had caused her to breathe through her air supply faster than either of the divers anticipated. Julie still had better than half her tank and didn't want to end the dive, so she signaled to Lisa that she should ascend alone to the boat. Julie pointed in the direction she should follow and waved goodbye, before turning to look at something that caught her eye.

Lisa paused for a moment, not quite understanding what Julie was telling her, before she began swimming back to the boat. She understood the dive boat was in the general direction the current was heading, but she wasn't completely sure where to find it. This was her first dive on which she wasn't with an instructor or a divemaster who was leading the dive, and she'd expected Julie to show her the way back. Lisa turned and began swimming toward the boat; knowing her air supply was getting low, she also began swimming toward the surface, making a free ascent in the water column without any sort of reference to follow. She never made it back to the boat.

Analysis

There is no way to know exactly what caused Lisa to get into trouble. She probably made it to the surface, but was too far away from the boat to be seen clearly by the crew. We can only guess that she probably didn't know how to signal the

boat and struggled to stay on the surface while she swam. She probably slid back under, got lost, panicked and drowned.

Searchers found her body on the bottom in 55 feet of water, with her weights still in place but no air in her BC and her tank empty. And while it's impossible to know what directly led to Lisa's death, it is obvious that her lack of experience in the water coupled with being left alone on the bottom by the more experienced diver contributed to the accident.

There is nothing wrong with buddies of different experience levels diving together. In fact, it's a great way for newer divers to gain experience. When differently prepared and experienced divers dive together, they have to realize that they must follow the limitations of the least-experienced diver. Buddy teams also have to communicate those issues to each other as part of their dive plan.

The divers should have discussed their different gear configurations. It's possible Lisa didn't realize Julie had a larger tank and what that would mean on the dive. Julie didn't realize that Lisa wasn't comfortable in the water, and having her return alone to the boat was a mistake. Had the divers discussed these limitations and expectations before the dive, this accident might not have happened.

When more experienced divers dive with those less experienced, as is typically the case when dive instructors lead groups of students or divemasters lead excursions, those dive leaders also need to realize they are effectively diving alone. While there are other divers in the water, there might not be anyone with the experience to help if they get into trouble.

Unequal Means Unsafe

A buddy team with different equipment and vastly different experience gets their signals crossed ■ ERIC DOUGLAS



MICHAEL MORGENSTERN

Lessons for Life

- 1 Communicate your dive experience and expectations to your buddy. Any time you dive with a new buddy, you need to spend a few minutes discussing your own experience levels and expectations for the dive. If your plans aren't compatible, find a new buddy.
- 2 Stay with your buddy. When you agree to buddy up with another diver, you should stay with that buddy from the beginning until the end of the dive.
- 3 Make yourself buoyant on the surface. Too often divers get in trouble when they surface but forget to inflate their BCs. They struggle to swim with the weight of their gear pulling them down and drown. By simply ditching their weights, they could easily avoid a problem.

Eric Douglas 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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