

TRAINING

LESSONS FOR LIFE



quickly through the water. He would hover quietly in one spot and watch to see what would swim past his camera lens, or how the light would play on the giant kelp as it danced in the surge.

Phil and Don loved to share stories and look at Phil's pictures when they were back on the boat. It never occurred to either of them that they had completely different diving experiences.

THE DIVE

On board the boat, the two divers settled in for the hour-long ride out to their favorite series of sites. They had both made these dives many times before, but when friends asked why they returned to the same sites, they both replied that familiarity allowed them to spend less time trying to learn the site and more time simply enjoying it.

The sites they preferred were well known to be calm and flat with little or no surge. When they arrived at the planned dive site, though, the boat captain informed the divers that conditions were rough. The winds had turned and they were going to try a new spot in a cove a few minutes away, hoping it would be a little calmer in more protected waters.

The new site was less rough than the original site and the waves were down, but there was still a considerable amount of underwater surge, which the divemaster noted in his briefing.

A little rattled from the change of plans, Phil and Don nevertheless suited up and prepared to jump in the water. They had never dived this site, but both were familiar with the area and had no reason to be uncomfortable or change their dive plan.

THE ACCIDENT

Other divers on the boat noted that Phil and Don made their descent directly under the boat, about 60 feet down, and then just swam away. Neither diver acknowledged the other or hesitated; they simply began doing what they wanted, confident the other diver would be waiting back under the boat when it came time to end the dive. That made it all the

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more confusing to Phil when he returned to the boat and Don wasn't there.

Don was also confused — he realized that he was tangled in kelp. He had been swimming through a particularly dense section of the fast-growing algae, allowing his body to move back and forth with the wave surge in the middle of the water column, about 30 feet from the surface. His body and the kelp moved at different speeds, so even though he swam through the openings, he managed to get first one fin and then the other tangled up.

Kelp breaks easily when you snap it off, but it's strong when you pull against it. With his fins tangled in separate stipes rising up from the bottom holdfasts, Don began to kick, trying to free himself.

His lack of flexibility and the extra weight he was carrying made it difficult for him to reach far enough down to free his feet. The twisting only served to tangle him up further. Caught off-guard and struggling, Don began breathing harder as he twisted and turned, trying to get free. He was overbreathing his regulator when he finally twisted free from the majority of the kelp.

It was only then he realized each breath from his regulator was more difficult than the one before. He frantically groped for his submersible pressure gauge, but before he found it he took his last breath. Then Don bolted directly for the surface.

ANALYSIS

The divemaster on the dive boat reported seeing Don reach the surface momentarily, and "swim around" before he submerged again. The divemaster watched for a minute to see if there were any other signs of a problem. Don never signaled for help or resurfaced. Without seeing Don again, the divemaster was quickly distracted as other divers began returning to the boat. He assumed Don was simply surfacing for a moment to get clear of the kelp before dropping back under the water.

After Phil returned to the boat and reported his buddy missing, the boat crew called for help and began a search. They soon found Don's body close to where the divemaster saw him surface. His tank was empty, his weight belt was still in place, and he was twisted up in kelp.

Don and Phil routinely dived the same site again and again. While there is nothing wrong with repeating dives, in this

case Phil and Don weren't prepared to handle unusual circumstances, such as a different location that included surge — something they admittedly weren't used to dealing with, and for which they had only a limited range of experience.

Had they realized conditions were different and opted to stay together, it's likely that Don would still be alive. The moment Phil realized his buddy was tangled, he could have stopped Don's struggling and used a dive knife or even his hands to remove the kelp. At the point Don realized he was out of air, he could have secured Phil's alternate-air-source regulator and they could have made an uneventful ascent to the surface.

Instead, Don depleted his air supply in the struggle and brought himself to near panic as he fought with the kelp. Panic causes perceptual narrowing, limiting rational choices. With his air gone, Don held his breath and swam for the surface rather than following his training. The air expansion from 30 feet caused the air in his lungs to nearly double in size. He experienced an air embolism and lost consciousness.

Even at that point, had Don remained on the surface, the divemaster would have realized there was a problem and likely could have saved him. But since he was negatively buoyant, he sank back to the bottom and drowned.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

1 **DON'T ASSUME** one set of dive experiences is good for all diving situations. Adapt your diving to the situation and seek out advice on how to handle unfamiliar situations.

2 **DIVE WITH A BUDDY.** While there are solo divers who dive safely, they're prepared with extra gear and training. Diving solo without redundant gear and appropriate training is foolhardy.

3 **STAY FIT ENOUGH TO DIVE.** Regular cardiovascular and flexibility exercise can help you enjoy your dives.

4 **LEARN AND PRACTICE** self-rescue techniques, and techniques for making emergency ascents.

5 **CARRY** an alternate air source.

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

Separation Anxiety

When both divers in this buddy team have different goals, it leads to separation, panic and ultimately death

BY ERIC DOUGLAS

Phil and Don had been diving together for years and had an understanding: They began their dives together and ended them together, but what they did in between was at their own convenience. Don liked to sightsee and explore; Phil preferred underwater photography. It was never a problem until Don realized he was entangled in kelp, and his buddy was nowhere to be found.

THE DIVERS

Longtime divers, both men were beginning to age. They weren't in great shape, but neither were they overweight — just a bit more sedentary and slow. Diving

was their primary form of exercise.

Diving and exploring dive sites fired Don's imagination. As a diver, he got to fly through the kelp forests or cruise over a wreck instead of being stuck on the ground.

Phil often lost himself in his daydreams as he swam around, looking for fish and exciting new creatures. He told friends that diving gave him a feeling of freedom he never imagined.

While Phil's reaction to diving was similar to Don's, it was his approach that was different. He moved slowly, understanding that fish and other sea creatures would often shy away from him if he swam too

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