

**“RESCUE! WHY?”**

## **I DON'T WANT TO BE A RESCUE DIVER, I JUST WANT TO DIVE FOR FUN”**

by: George Safirowski

ANYONE WHO DRIVES AN AUTOMOBILE REMEMBERS THAT GLORIOUS DAY OF OBTAINING A DRIVERS LICENSE. AFTER SEVERAL CLASSROOM LECTURES AND DRIVING LESSONS WITH THE INSTRUCTOR AT OPTIONAL CONTROLS, WE FINALLY MADE IT. AND THEN CAME THE REAL WORLD. RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC, SUPER HIGHWAYS, AND THE OTHER DRIVERS. THE LEARNING HAS JUST BEGUN.

Scuba diving is a very unique sport in many ways. The most obvious difference is in the sophisticated life support systems that divers carry on their backs, allowing them to safely venture into an environment that is very similar to outer space. Every sport has something different of interest to offer for the participant, but no sport rivals the enjoyment and sheer exhilaration of scuba diving. Anyone in reasonable health condition can learn to dive and enjoy the beauty and wonders of the underwater realm. However, because a scuba diver is dependent on the Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus for life support, dive planning and equipment check before each dive is a very critical part of preparation. It is also important that a diver understands how they are physically and physiologically effected by the increased pressures under which they are subjected during the dive. Every sport involves some degree of risk, and diving is no exception. However, the fact is that in comparison to other sports, diving is a very safe activity and the small risk factor outweighs the enjoyment for the majority of participants. It is uncertain on exactly how many active divers there are, however according to Chris Wachholz of DAN (Divers Alert Network),”the incident rate in diving is only .06% to .02% based on 1 million to 2.7 million divers”.

But unlike in typical sports, whenever an accident does occur, it's not just a sprained ankle or even a fractured bone, the results may be evident or inconspicuous, and often tragic. Proper rescue techniques, evaluation and treatment must be initiated immediately if a diver is to survive the incident and the injury is to be minimized.

Unfortunately, most recreational divers do not consider the need to be trained in dive rescue techniques, because they don't want to be involved in a rescue. Should some other diver have a problem, a typical attitude is that someone else will save that diver, so why should they bother themselves with another course, additional training, and perhaps the obligation to respond. After all, it's not going to happen to them, since everything there is to know to dive safely for fun, they learned in the basic scuba certification course. If that is so, then why is it that C' card carrying divers equipped with submersible pressure gauges sometimes run out of air? That is an inexcusable and suicidal blunder resulting in an array of emergencies! Do these divers intentionally run out of air? That's not likely. Are these divers themselves at fault, or is it perhaps ignorance and false feeling of security due to sometimes negligently insignificant pool training in emergency procedures? And why do some scuba divers at the end of an enjoyable dive and a safe ascend to the surface, have difficulty remaining afloat while wearing state of the art buoyancy

compensators? Avoidable drownings do sometimes occur, why? Obviously something that a diver was not prepared for has gone wrong. When Walt Hendrick Sr., former National Training Director of NAUI was asked, why should every sport diver have training in rescue techniques?, his reply was, “the more knowledge a diver has on what can go wrong, the better chance he/she will have to prevent any problems, and less chance there will be for a diver to need to resort to rescue techniques”. Another major widespread lack of knowledge is in the understanding of what is the difference between neutral buoyancy and buoyancy control. They are not the same! It is not difficult to establish neutral buoyancy anywhere in the water column, all it takes is more air in the buoyancy compensator. However, if a diver during a dive ascends three or four feet and begins to rise out of control needing to vent the buoyancy compensator in a hurry, then begins to drop through the water column and must inflate the buoyancy compensator assisted with a deep inhalation and breath hold to stop the fall, such drastic changes in buoyancy suggest excessive amount of weights, too much air in the buoyancy compensator at the start of the dive, and a whole bunch of little pieces going wrong, while the diver without knowing is perhaps on the edge of a serious injury during that dive. To develop buoyancy control in a weightless environment, a scuba diver must first understand the principles of proper weighting, equipment distribution, and the effects on buoyancy due to changes in breathing patterns resulting from exertion. The timing of breathing cycles to control a few ounces of negative or positive buoyancy is an advisable practice, but to compensate several extra pounds of negative buoyancy with breathing is no longer control, it's breath holding. Mastering buoyancy control should be one of top priorities for every diver. Neutral buoyancy is a skill, but buoyancy control is an art. This single aspect is a major factor to enjoyable and safe diving. How about those stuffy ears after a dive? That is a symptom indicating a small margin between the existing discomfort and a possible lung overexpansion injury that could have occurred during the dive (see “Early and Often” NAUI News March/April 1989). Also, stuffy ears after the dive indicate that some internal swelling has occurred associated with possible tissue damage, and therefore the injured area is susceptible to ear infections, an ailment that is so common during tropical dive vacations. In addition to reducing the possibility of personal injury, good buoyancy control techniques will contribute to environment conservation. A gentle controlled approach to a sponge or coral is much more enjoyable, resulting in better photos, and allows to appreciate its beauty without scraping off the protective mucous covering the polyps. Also a gentle departure from a sandy bottom will prevent the sandy silt from settling upon the coral resulting in the suffocation of the fragile animals. Why should an already certified diver take a rescue course? Let's look at some possible reasons.

It is a common misconception that a diver rescue course is limited only to the training in emergency procedures, including some form of tired diver assists, basic in-water and on land life support techniques, first aid treatment, oxygen administration, patient or victim evacuation, and accident response management. Yes, that is the curriculum for a typical rescue course. But in this type of a course, the skills taught are only demonstrating how to manage a situation after the accident has occurred. However not all rescue courses are created equal. In addition to the rescue skills, safety and accident prevention must be part of a well organized rescue program. For example, if an accident or any stressful situation was analyzed, the investigation would clearly reveal that there were red warning flags indicating a possible developing problem, but at the time these signals were not

recognized, and therefore not corrected. As the common saying goes, “an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure”, and statistics do confirm that 98% of all diving accidents occur due to diver error, lack of knowledge, peer pressure, or false feeling of security. It is not the sport, but usually the diver that is unsafe.

To conduct safe diving, it is absolutely important that a diver understands why they do the things they do. Simply just the way a diver is suiting up and puts the gear on and off can make the difference between a fun safe dive, or a disaster. It is ignorant to believe that continued education in safety awareness and advanced diving skills is an unnecessary waste of time. The sheer number of previous dive excursions or the amount of underwater time logged, which is usually categorized as experience, does not necessarily indicate the level of knowledge or quality of safety. Practice does not make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect. Walt “Butch” Hendrick who is an International Rescue Expert, founder of Lifeguard Systems Inc., and recent recipient of the DAN/Rolux Award for safety states that “because people are creatures of habit, divers must train and practice safe procedures all the time on every dive, and understand how the equipment they carry was meant to be used, because that one time a diver needs to do something right while under stress to self help or his/her buddy, reflex habit and training will dictate the outcome of the situation. When seconds count, it is usually too late to remember text book procedures”.

A diver with poor understanding of the mechanics behind basic scuba skills, can with repetitive practice in time become an expert at unsafe techniques and hazardous diving. There is more to diving than just jumping in the water with complete and well functioning equipment. One of the most frequently practiced skills that each diver is redundantly performing, is clearing a flooded mask during a dive. But, in cold water, many divers experience a difficulty in breathing and may begin to choke and gasp for air as the face comes in contact with frigid water. To prevent this stressful situation, all a diver has to do is acclimate the face while still on the surface by saying “hello to the ocean” before the descent. It is done by gently flooding the mask and wetting the face in the water. This maneuver should lessen or could completely eliminate the physiological drowning syndrome induced by a reflex causing laryngospasm and the epiglottis to shut down resulting from sudden immersion of the face. This is a syndrome that all divers are susceptible to, and instructors should be aware of this condition, particularly while conducting open water training dives, because full mask clearing skills in cold water environment can result in the student wanting to bolt to the surface. Another skill that is continually practiced and taken for granted, is simply holding the second stage regulator and placing it in the mouth. All divers do this, every time they test the quality of air, before they enter the water, and sometimes to say “Hi Mom” in front of an underwater video camera. That skill is no problem, most divers are good at it, right? Wrong! A diver who repeatedly grasps the regulator with the palm of the hand is developing a very dangerous habit. In such a hold, the hand is obstructing the purge when offered to a starved for air “leech” (an out of air diver) who is not able to blast clear the regulator due to lack of air in the lungs. Therefore, the situation can result in panic, the out of air diver easily ripping the regulator out of a wet hand while bolting to the surface and dragging the donor at a horrifying ascent rate. A regulator should ALWAYS be handled by the hose just behind the regulator, if we can expect to execute habits effectively and to have the ability of remaining in control during a stressful situation. Remember, first things learned are best remembered and habits are executed during reflex actions. These are only some

examples of what a safe diver should know. The concepts are not new, just sometimes forgotten. A good rescue course and a refresher every two years is definitely a must for every diver, on every certification level including instructors. It is equally important that the course is directed by experienced professional rescue trainers. Their job is to be informed on the most recent up to date changes in diving physics, physiology and emergency procedures. Also, effective training in accident prevention, safety awareness and rescue techniques is most successful when a rescue course is conducted by instructors experienced in personal real life rescue involvement, and the understanding of human behavior in a stressful situation.

As Walt "Butch" Hendrick often sincerely says "I wish to see the day when my rescue training company goes out of business because every diver out there is safe, there are no longer any diver injuries, and my services are no longer needed". Meanwhile, his firm with a company of rescue trainers travels all over the country and the world, conducting very unique hands-on rescue and safety awareness courses for any group or dive shop that realizes the need for an increase in personal scuba diving safety.

So even if a diver wants to dive for fun only, safety should not be jeopardized, and an increase in diving knowledge and skills through training in Diver Rescue Techniques is the most important certification course a diver should consider, because "NOTHING HAPPENS UNTIL IT HAPPENS", it's up to the diver to prevent it!

"Water is our big friend. It gently embraces us, allows us to play in it and with its magnificent creatures, and gladly reveals to us its most inner secrets and majestic beauty. It gives us life, but don't bend its rules, water can be also ruthless".

Be safe and enjoy diving.