

A scuba diver is shown in silhouette, swimming upwards through clear blue water. The diver is wearing a mask, a tank, and fins. Bubbles are visible around the diver, suggesting movement. The background is a bright, sunlit blue, with a darker blue area on the right side, possibly representing a reef or a cave entrance.

# Fighting the Night Tide

By TSgt. Kelvin Stovall, USAF,  
Little Rock AFB, Ark.

**F**or most people, scuba diving is an exhilarating adventure, but some friends and I wanted to enhance the experience. We decided to go diving at night. It was beautiful—the moon was shining on the ocean, the water and wind were calm—a perfect night for diving, or so we thought.

We climbed into a van and started to the dive site: a 200-yard-long pier on an island in the South Pacific. Touted as one of the greatest scuba-diving places in the world, it was where we planned to observe the mysteries of the deep.

Our group consisted of two dive masters and two beginners. I was one of the green-horns. The dive masters began the pre-dive safety meeting and gave instructions for our diving excursion. We checked all our equipment, then paired up into two groups—one dive master and one beginner in each group. We agreed on a rendezvous point and time, in case we became separated. With everything set, off we went into the dark ocean.

When we got into the water, we noticed a strong current. Therefore, my partner and I started swimming into the current, which is normal, because you always have more energy in the first half of a dive. It's easier to swim or drift with the current during the second half of the dive, when you're returning to shore, tired and almost out of air.

The other two had a different plan. They wanted to cover a lot of area, so they started swimming away from the pier with the current. The dive master wanted to show his beginner a coral-reef shelf that contained a lot of different and colorful underwater life. So we went our separate ways.

About an hour later, my partner and I had made it back to shore on time without any problems. We had had a great dive and were at our rendezvous point on time. The other two divers, however, were nowhere around. We didn't start worrying until 30 minutes had passed, still with no signs of our friends. At first, I was too excited about my first night dive to realize anything was wrong, but the intensity in the dive master's face told me I should be concerned.

Because our friends had swum with the current, they had been pushed farther away from the starting point. Darkness contributed to distance miscalculations. When they realized how far away they were, they tried to turn around, but it was too late. They were a half-mile to the left of the dive spot and 200 yards off the pier. They were too far out to make it back with the air remaining in their tanks.

On the way back to shore, they had to fight the current, an exhausting endeavor that forced them to use up their remaining air even faster. Panic started when they realized they

weren't making any progress getting back to shore.

The sky and surface were dark. A few streetlights guided them toward dry land. While they were underwater, the sea began to get rough on the surface. The surf crashed along the shore.

The beginner first ran out of air, so he couldn't inflate his buoyancy compensator to stay afloat. He started going under, gasping for air, trying to stay afloat, and screaming for help. The dive master came to his aid and released his 18-pound weight belt from around his waist, which was just enough to keep him afloat.

The two tried to snorkel to shore, but waves crashed over their heads, filling their snorkels with saltwater. Snorkeling would be impossible. The dive master still had air left, so he placed his alternate regulator into the beginner's mouth and started pulling him ashore.

Back on the beach, we still didn't know what could have happened to them. We started reviewing our options. We couldn't go back into the water to look for them because our tanks were empty. We couldn't call for help because we didn't have a telephone. We couldn't go get help because we didn't have the keys to the van. All we could do was wait.

Two hours overdue, our friends finally made it to shore. Tired and cold, they then had to drag their gear another half-mile to the rendezvous site, but at least they were safe.

If we had used operational risk management, we might have done a better job identifying some of the extreme hazards of night diving. We also might have assessed the risks of splitting into two groups. To control the risks, we should have had a cellular telephone, emergency numbers, and duplicate keys to the vehicle available. Finally, we should have determined whether the rewards outweighed the risks. ■

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