

# Situational Awareness Saves a Life



Navy photo by Lt. Corey Barker

The destroyer USS *Fife* (DD 991) is shown underway while participating in the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual UNITAS exercise, held in June and July off the coast of Chile. *Fife's* current five-month Eastern Pacific deployment for counter-drug operations and UNITAS participation will be the ship's final deployment. The Spruance-class destroyer is scheduled to be decommissioned early next year.

The day seemed peaceful enough as Sailors from the destroyer USS *Fife* swam in a river while on a canoe trip to a remote Panamanian Indian village. The lazy river appeared safe, slowly meandering through lush trees lining its banks, but its current was faster than what appeared.

One swimmer was Petty Officer Third Class Michael Griggs. All seemed well until he struck his knee on a submerged rock in the river. "My knee hit the rock, and my leg went numb; I couldn't swim," he said. "I turned on my back to float, but the current was too strong. I was swimming as hard as I could, but I still was going under." An observant shipmate, Petty Officer Third Class Jonathan Ruth, saw his buddy in trouble and swam to help. "The current was strong, and I could tell he was having trouble. It was instinct . . . to help," he explained.

Petty Officer Ruth dragged his struggling friend to some rocks so the two could rest after escaping the strong current. "Once I got him on the rocks, I realized how much trouble he was

having," Petty Officer Ruth said.

Their swim had exhausted them, and they rested for about half an hour until others from the tour swam to them and gave the injured Sailor a life vest so he could be brought to shore. He then returned to his ship, where a checkup showed he sustained only minor lacerations and some bruises and was fit for duty.

"I have a renewed feeling of friendship and respect for Jonathan [Ruth]. We were good friends before and now we are closer than ever since he saved my life. All I remember is Jonathan pulling me onto some rocks," said Petty Officer Griggs about his shipmate's quick actions, which prevented a possible tragedy.

Two significant factors contributed to this event's outcome: good situational awareness and using the buddy system. Petty Officer Ruth was aware of his surroundings and sensed trouble when Petty Officer Griggs hit his knee and began foundering in the rapid current. Petty Officer Griggs also was using common sense and following Navy recommendations by swimming with a group of shipmates, instead of impulsively seeking adventure on his own. Sailors constantly are reminded to go on liberty in pairs or groups. It is especially important to buddy-up when swimming or diving, or when participating in any watersport. *Fife's* commanding officer, Cdr. C.L. Ponds, awarded Petty Officer Ruth a Navy Achievement Medal for his quick actions. 🌊