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Where's Dave?

Pulling together skills to find a missing friend

BY OREN NOAH

There are some skills you learn with a hope you'll never need them. Like a kid learning fractions, you learn them anyway, never believing you'll actually use them in the real world.

I was no different. I learned all the safety protocols and took DAN® training courses to be prepared for emergencies. I bought safety gear to be properly equipped. I learned a lot of skills, never thinking I'd need a single one. Never did I imagine I'd need a bunch of them in one day.

My dive buddy, Dave, and I met for a two-tank dive on an April weekday in Monterey, Calif. The topside weather was great: warm and sunny with a gentle breeze.

We were welcomed aboard the charter boat by the captain — let's call him Luke — and the divemaster, who we'll call Derek. (These are their real names; no need to protect professionals at the top of their game.) Joining us onboard were some other local divers and a couple visiting from Scotland.

Despite the calm weather, the crew nixed the first few potential dive sites because of excessive current and brown, opaque water. They settled on a Carmel Bay dive site called "New Valley." Per the dive briefing, we were anchored in 45 feet of water near the top of an underwater pinnacle. Our instructions were simple: Explore the pinnacle, find the anchor and ascend on its line. Dave and I agreed to do just that.

We splashed and swam over to the anchor line and then descended into green-brown muck. Near the bottom, visibility "opened up" to about 6 or 8 feet.

We explored the pinnacle, descending to almost 100 feet in a counterclockwise circle, seeing lots of cool little critters and other stuff. When it was time to call the dive, we ascended and backtracked in a clockwise path up to the anchor depth. We couldn't find the anchor. "*Surely, it's around here somewhere,*" I thought. "*Where is it? And where are all the other divers?*"

The visibility was still pretty bad, but when I looked up into the green haze I could see a diagonal line at the edge of my vision. It had to be the anchor line, so we swam over, but it wasn't the anchor. Then I saw it again! We swam over — no, not the anchor. It was then I realized the "anchor lines" were illusions caused by my bifocal mask inserts.

That was good to know, but it wasn't helpful for locating the anchor. Worse, after all our twisting and turning we had no clue as to the direction of the damn thing.

After exploring up and down various pinnacles, we were

at 73 feet and 40 minutes into the dive. My computer was flashing "Low Time" and showing only three minutes remaining until I exceeded my no-decompression limit. No more looking for the anchor.

I pulled out a finger spool and my DAN surface signal kit to use the 6-foot sausage as a marker buoy. One exhalation and it was shooting for the surface. Dave and I ascended on that line, adrift in a green-brown sea with no visual references.

Then my mask started flooding. I didn't panic; I just kept clearing and spooling and looking over to Dave, who was right with me.

We did a safety stop and ascended to 10 feet. Distracted by the task loading, I didn't adequately vent my drysuit and rose to the surface. I was anxious to see how far from the boat we had drifted, so I stayed there.

I spotted the boat quite a way up current from us, but the safety sausage was spotted and contact made. I signaled OK and waited for Dave to pop up next to me.

No Dave.

I stuck my head underwater and scanned to see if I could spot him.

No Dave.

I looked and looked and started to get anxious.

No Dave.

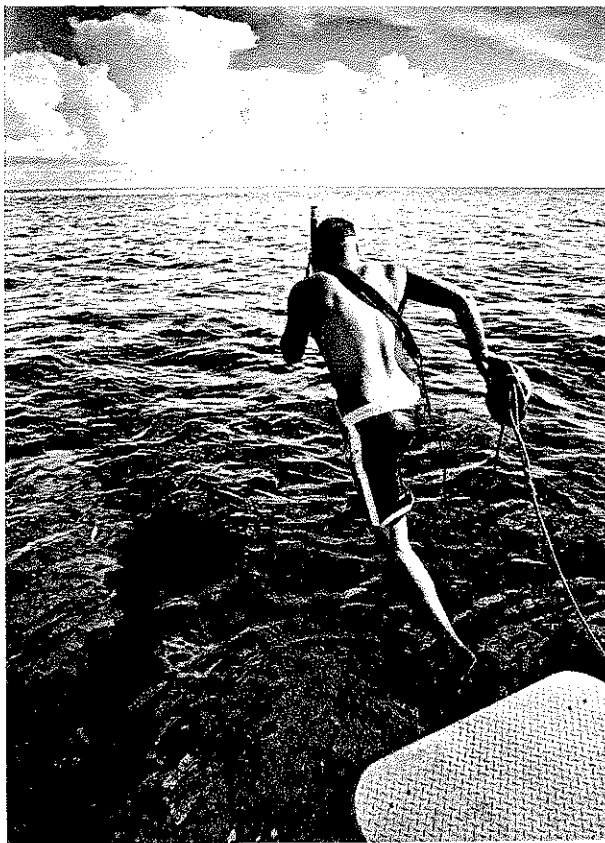
After about a minute, I signaled the boat that I needed assistance.

"*What the hell?!*" I thought. "*Where's Dave? What happened?*"

Before I knew it, divemaster Derek was in the water and hanging on the end of the current line. He was still quite a distance from me. I yelled that I was OK but couldn't find Dave. At Derek's direction, I swam to the end of the current line, and we hightailed it back to the boat.

I reported to Capt. Luke the details of our dive; he immediately radioed the Coast Guard and organized a response. Everyone was on edge; only days earlier two teenagers had died in Monterey, both found on the bottom with empty tanks.

The crew was very professional. One diver was handed a clipboard to record times and events. Another diver carried the divemaster credential and was assigned to assist Derek. A DAN-trained oxygen provider, I was assigned the oxygen bottle. Capt. Luke worked the radio with the Coast Guard



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and the first responders on shore. Everyone else scanned the surface for any sign of Dave.

Super-bad thoughts were going through my head. *“Crap! How could I have lost him? He didn’t show any signs of distress. How did this happen? How will I tell his wife?”*

“Where the hell is Dave?”

After hours and hours — OK, it was about 10 minutes — Dave surfaced. He was immediately spotted, and lots of yelling ensued. Derek hit the water, his new deputy right behind him. We all held our breath.

Dave signaled OK. Derek and the deputy signaled OK. Exhaling, we reeled all three of them in. Dave appeared to be unhurt, but Capt. Luke had me administer oxygen as a precaution.

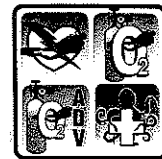
Dave explained that his computer put him into decompression, requiring a 10-minute stop at 10 feet. So he did a drift deco without issues (other than scaring the crap out of me and everyone else).

Dave was fine. There was much rejoicing.

Our close call had a happy ending. The response was clearly one that would have been activated in any dive emergency. Everyone onboard was prepared with proper training and obeyed safety protocols, and as a result we were able to act as an efficient and effective team when something went wrong. Not one of us boarded the boat that day thinking we’d have to put our training into action, but when we docked that afternoon, we were sure glad we had it. AD

GET TRAINED

Want to learn how to manage an emergency? Complete DAN’s Diving Emergency Management Provider (DEMP) training course to learn basic life support and first aid, the administration of emergency oxygen, how to conduct an on-site neurological examination and how to treat hazardous marine life injuries. To register for an upcoming DEMP course, visit www.DAN.org/training to find a dive center or instructor near you.



When things go wrong, there’s no substitute for good training and proper equipment.



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