

# Two Divers Left at Sea

## -- *did the head count fail?*

A diver's worst nightmare occurred on Australia's Great Barrier Reef Sunday, January 25 when two divers aboard the dive boat *Outer Edge* were abandoned at sea.

The two Americans, Thomas Lonergan, 33, and his wife Eileen, 28, both of Baton Rouge, Louisiana were among 26 divers and a crew of five diving on St. Crispin's Reef, about 35 miles north east of Port Douglas. They were not missed until late Tuesday the 27th, when a crew member noticed some of their possessions still on board. Police were notified and checked the Lonergan's hotel. They had not returned.

### The Search

Officials launched a massive search with 17 planes, two helicopters, navy divers, and several private boats, scouring a 3,200-square-nautical-mile area of ocean and a long strip of coastline.

*Outer Edge* crew member Karl Jesienowski told reporters that a head count was taken after the third dive, before the boat left the reef, "somehow they fell through the system. . . I apologize, I sincerely apologize," he said. He believed the couple "just stayed under too long and missed the boat." Another couple who boarded the boat returned to the water, he said, and then reboarded, causing the false head count that led charter operators to believe the Lonergans were on board.

Jesienowski said the Lonergans, who had 160 dives between them "asked specifically not to dive with a divemaster, so they were diving on their own, which is cool, but if they didn't dive the plan, then all

of a sudden they come to the surface and ... there's no boat there ...." But, there was a boat there the next day, when the *Outer Edge* itself returned to reef; in fact, they found weight belts in the same area where the couple had been diving.

After three days, police called off the search, noting that currents could have carried them well away from the original dive area. A large amount of debris caused by recent cyclones made spotting difficult.

On February 6, Tom Lonergan's BC was found washed up on a crocodile-infested beach, about 10 km north of Cooktown which is 110 km north of Port Douglas. There were no shark or alligator teeth marks or any other damage, and the search resumed. In the following days, searchers found Ms. Lonergan's fin, then her BC, and then her wetsuit hood. On February 13, they discovered a black tank, believed to belong to one of the Lonergans on a beach 180 km north of Cooktown.

### A Bizzare Suicide?

The mystery deepens because of the discovery of Eileen Lonergan's diary among her possessions. The [Sydney Daily Telegraph](#) said it showed that her husband had wanted to commit suicide while diving. The diary showed that Thomas Lonergan was depressed, spoke of suicide and despaired at returning to the U.S. after their stint in the Peace Corps in Fiji. The newspaper reported that diary entries described Lonergan as feeling as though he had nothing left to live for, was unqualified to forge a success at home in Baton Rouge, and could not bear the thought of his wife living alone.

Thomas Lonergan's sister Nancy reacted angrily to the media speculation. "I had received a letter from him in December, my mother has been keeping in very close contact with him," she said. "We're very upset that you all are trying to look for something to say that this is on purpose. They found a couple who was with them the night before and they said they were in great spirits and very excited about their trip (to the reef). There was nothing at all to indicate any sort of problem anywhere."

Ms. Lonergan said the diary entries referred to the couple's dissatisfaction with their accomplishments in the Peace Corps. "It had nothing to do with any type of personal problems. My brother was very excited about getting back to the States." They were planning to return on March 15 and had sent some of their belongings ahead."

Ironically, on February 14, Valentine's Day, officials called off the search, this time for good.

Despite probable grounds for legal action, Eileen's father James Hains said his family would not sue *Outer Edge* for damages. "Our hearts go out to the guys who are being held responsible for this. There was no criminal intent. They did something stupid and their lives are going to be wrecked," he said. "They are facing charges from the government and my heart and prayers go out to them," said Hains.

### What Really Happened?

Of course, the tragedy raises all sorts of questions. How thorough could the head count have been? What happened to the sign-in system that is supposed to be used? Why weren't the missing tanks noticed? Why didn't any of the passengers notice the couple was missing? How quickly did the boat

leave after the last diver climbed aboard? How long did the boat engine idle before departing and could they have heard it? Was there a maximum bottom time set that was ignored? Did they get into trouble underwater? Were they being cautious and taking a long safety stop? Were they on the surface and not spotted?

The Advisory Standard for Recreational Diving and Recreational Snorkeling publishes safety procedures to follow, including a log recording the number of people entering and returning from the water, and a count of passengers boarding and leaving the vessel.

Some answers will come out in the inquest. Queensland Industrial Relations Minister Santo Santoro ordered an investigation of practices of the diving industry in general and, in particular, whether the boat's crew followed laws requiring them to take a head count before a dive and again before leaving the dive area.

According to the Australian Associated Press, the state's tourism industry has gone into damage control. Diving pumps \$110 million into the Queensland economy each year and an additional \$340 million into associated expenditure such as hotels and airfares.

### Scaring the Tourists Away

Queensland Premier Rob Borbidge said the timing of the incident was unfortunate because of the effort to target the north American and European markets to counter the damage caused by the Asian currency meltdown. "It's a dreadful incident at a dreadful time."

Santoro says Queensland is a world leader in safety for recreational workplace scuba diving. Until this tragedy, there had been just one fatality with supervised scuba dives since 1995, when the regulation of dive operators was tightened. He claimed Queensland recorded one fatality

per 430,000 dives, compared with one per 100,000 dives in the United States and 6.5 per 100,000 in Japan, he said. (Joel Dovenberger of DAN told us that he does not know where Queensland authorities got these figures, since to his knowledge neither DAN nor anyone else estimates the number of U.S. dives conducted annually.)

Still, the accident brings to mind a 1993 incident where a 16-year-old drowned after being separated from a group of snorkelers. Her absence was only noted after the tour boat had left the dive area. Since that year, 21 snorkelers on commercial trips have died, most due to pre-existing medical conditions.

Apparently, for charter boats to leave divers behind isn't as rare as this incident. Undercurrent has since heard of several unreported instances of American divers being left behind, but later rescued.

As for *Outer Edge*, after a self-imposed closing, they will resume charter operations.

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## The Navy's Extreme Cold Water Regulator Tests

During the past couple of years, the U.S. Navy has evaluated several commercially available regulators in 28 degree F seawater, down to depths to 198 feet. Here's what they found:

**Poseidon Odin Jetstream:** Under these rigorous conditions, the probability of failure was very low and there were no high breathing pressure incidents with a 1500 psi supply pressure. It is recommended for Navy use in sea water down to 28 deg F and depths to 190 fsw.

**Scubapro MK10 and MK20:** The probability of failure for the Scubapro MK20 was relatively high, but was lower than in the MK10. There were several high breathing pressure events in both regulators at a 1500 psi supply pressure. Performance was improved at 500 psi supply pressures. Neither the Scubapro MK10 nor the MK20 is recommended for Navy use in seawater down to 28 deg F and depths to 190 fsw.

**Sherwood Blizzard and Sherwood Maximus:** The probability of failure for the Sherwood Blizzard was approximately half that of the Maximus. Furthermore, the Blizzard's breathing effort was consistently lower than the Maximus, especially at low supply pressures. The Sherwood Blizzard should be adequate for dives of up to 40 minutes in sea water temperature to 28F. Deeper than 100 feet, only moderate work should be accomplished.

**U.S. Divers Nordic:** There were no freeze-ups of the first or second stages, however resistive effort was remarkably high, especially at low tank pressures. The first stage regulator frequently malfunctioned due to the loss of silicon oil. It is not recommended for Navy use in cold water down to 28F at any depth.