
Lost at Sea

Learning from the Palau Tragedy

Last month, the worst diving accident in recent memory claimed the lives of six people adrift off Peleliu, the southernmost island inside Palau's barrier reef. The initial news report, which came out of Saipan, described the loss of five Japanese divers and their Palauan guide. The report was sketchy on most details, except for the tragic notes that one of the divers took on her waterproof slate as she slowly died from exposure. The slate, found attached to her body five days later, told of multiple search planes, ships, and boats that passed her by without seeing her.

As of press time, two of her companions have also been found dead in the water, and the other three are missing and presumed dead. The Palauan Justice Ministry is reviewing the event, and the Japanese government is calling for a detailed investigation. The accident is rapidly turning into an international incident. As anyone who has been to Palau knows, Japanese tourism is a major economic force in the islands. Widespread trip cancellations have been reported as a result of the accident. The rumor was spread within Japan that it was a Palauan at fault (after all, the guide was a native), and of course the Palauans have responded with understandable anger.

What Really Happened?

The dive took place in a spectacular area. When it's nice, it's very nice, indeed, and most old hands that have been to Palau several times will list Peleliu as one of the three or

four best dives there, along with Ngemelis, Blue Corner, and Blue Holes. It's not for everyone, however, and must always be approached with respect. Nancy Barbour's book *Palau* says this about conditions at Peleliu: "The diving at Peleliu is completely dependent upon the weather. The water is often rough, and currents can be strong enough to make conditions too dangerous for diving."

The divers were put over the side about 10:30 in the morning on February 5. The weather wasn't calm, but was diveable, judging from the fact that several vessels had dived the site that morning. The news report indicated that the divers were expected on the surface about 11 a.m., and when they didn't show up, the boatman searched for half an hour and then went for help about 11:30 a.m. A search then commenced, but was unsuccessful. The news report makes it sound as if things were well organized, but we heard a different story from contacts in the dive-travel industry. We had to sift through a certain amount of hearsay — and felt that a cover-up was likely to take place under the canopy of "damage control" — but believe our sources are reliable.

Our scenario runs like this: There had originally been two boats on site, operated by Antelope Divers, a company specializing in tours sold in Japan. One boat left after picking up its divers. The other

boat, it was discovered too late, was unable to start its engines.

The second boat's divers did come up around 11 a.m., within sight of the boat. The man in charge of the crippled boat saw his customers drifting away, but was unable to get his engine started. He was also unable to call for help, because the other Antelope boat was gone and his boat did not have a functioning radio.

He tried to restart his engine for approximately an hour, and finally succeeded around noon. By that time, the divers were long gone. He searched for about three hours without finding the divers, then turned back to look for a radio and to ask for additional help. By that time, of course, it was mid-afternoon, and the sun was on its way down.

A search plane was called out, but the urgency of the request was either not properly recognized or was intentionally ignored. Whatever the reason, the only available plane didn't join the search until another hour or two of confusion had gone by, and the divers' fates were sealed.

Second-Guessing the Grim Reaper

After the fact, it's usually easy to suggest ways that an accident could have been avoided, even one of this magnitude. No responsible dive operator should send a vessel to this remote location without a functioning radio, whether or not Palauan government regulations address the point (I don't know if they do).

When his engine didn't start, it's not clear why the boat driver didn't just cut his anchor line and drift along in the

current with his divers. Instead of being in the water, they could then have swum to the boat, climbed aboard, and waited in safety while the engine problem was sorted out or someone came to get them. It's a lot easier to find a lost boat than a lost diver in the water, and you can survive on a boat a lot longer than you can in the water.

Once it was clear that the divers were lost, why did the boatman spend three hours of daylight searching, instead of going immediately for help? Undoubtedly he thought he was going to happen upon them any minute, and that everything would be all right — and much less embarrassing — if he just got them back on board without having to make a public spectacle of himself by initiating a full-blown search. Hell, they'd probably have had a couple of drinks and good laugh over it, with the ritual jokes about cheating death again.

Finally, why weren't the divers spotted, either that night or the next morning? Boats and planes were on the lookout for them but somehow just went on by. The bodies were found 7 to 14 miles from the dive site (the reports are contradictory), which isn't all that far to search downcurrent. The most likely reason is that they weren't visible above the surface chop, either at night or during the day.

There is no information yet as to what signaling devices the divers might have carried, but it seems likely that they had none, or at least nothing that would have attracted the attention of aircraft or boats after dark. They might have expected a drift dive, but at 10:30 a.m. they probably would not have made safety provisions for a

night dive. Once the sun went down, without strobes or lights the divers would have been virtually guaranteed another 12 hours in the water before anyone could search effectively for them. In a diveskin, that's probably enough time to pass out or die of hypothermia.

The Crux of the Matter

Moving rapidly away from the incident and into arm-waving territory, *In Depth* feels strongly that the predisposing factors had been in place for a long time before this accident occurred. There's more than enough blame to go around. Lack of a radio, an unreliable or poorly maintained engine, inadequate contingency planning, disorganized search procedures, and the carelessness of the divers themselves (poor planning, inadequate signaling devices) — absent any one of these factors, this could have been simply one of those scary learning experiences that divers seem to have along the way, rather than a multiple fatality.

Unfortunately, there's not much that we, as individual divers, can do about any of these factors, except the last one. That's got to change if we hope to avoid this kind of horrible event in the future. In my opinion, the diving industry has had a blind spot when it comes to handling surface emergencies. That's odd, considering how many diving professionals have had similar drift-away experiences.

In a previous article (*In Depth*, August 1992), I described coming up at the end of a dive in New Guinea and failing to get the dive boat's attention. I blew my Dive Alert, but the only guy on the boat was wearing hearing protectors and working on the compres-

or, and didn't even look up. My buddy and I floated away into the blue, and were spotted half an hour later only as a result of putting up a Scuba Tuba. On another dive as a graduate student in oceanography during the late '70s, my buddies and I surfaced to find that our unmanned, anchored skiff had popped a plug and turned turtle while we were underwater. Strictly by chance, we were picked up by a passing fisherman just before sundown.

A few quick calls to professional diving friends, each with over 20 years' diving experience, readily produced an assortment of similarly scary stories. Off Cozumel (en route to Florida the hard way), a dive travel specialist trusted her life to a Tabata Weenie, a tall, orange, inflatable tube handed out as a promo at DEMA, and was rewarded. Off San Nicholas Island, a local dive-store owner barely spotted one of his dive-masters about a mile astern, drifting away rapidly, when he was believed to be forward of the bow. The stories went on and on.

Any Time, Any Place

What do we teach our new students about necessary gear for every dive? They learn that knives and other line-cutting devices are essential equipment. And, by the way, how many times have you used your line-cutter lately? I've been carrying one as mandatory gear for 27 years, and have yet to cut myself loose from anything. I wouldn't be without it, though.

On the other hand, students are taught that *visual* surface signaling devices are dive specific. In other words, you don't need them on every dive. If they could speak to us now, I've got a hunch that the six

divers lost in Palau would beg to differ. Their experience confirms that with a little bad luck, an open-water dive can easily become a drift dive, and then just a drift.

It's not that we don't know what actually works in an emergency, either. We're just vague on when to carry the necessary gear: inflatable tubes (ScubaTuba, Safety Sausage) for daytime, and flashers (non-photographic strobes) for nighttime. Inflatable tubes work well under most conditions, sticking up above chop and swells, and standing out against the horizon even in low-light conditions. They roll up and fit in a BC pocket, need essentially no maintenance except the occasional inflation test, and cost less than \$10.

Why carry a flasher when you're not making a night dive?

The news report out of Saipan stated that the deceased woman's slate mentioned having "flashed her camera" at a passing ship, but it didn't save her. If she was nearly out of film, she might have had only one or two strobe shots available. Once your film's used up, you can't depress the shutter button. Very few strobes — such the Morris Aquaflash products — can fire test shots without being triggered by a camera shutter button. It is possible to fire some Ikelite strobes by turning their switches off and on, to and from slave position, or from full to half power, but few divers know that trick. If you've got a strobe, before your next dive trip it might be a good idea to see if you can pop it without using your camera's shutter.

Again, look at the Palau experience: their mid-morning dive became a night dive. If you've got a flasher, you've very likely to be found after the sun goes down, maybe even more likely than in the daytime. Flashers are highly visible against a darkened sea, like aircraft against a darkened sky. For about \$30, you can buy a flasher from Helix that uses a C-cell and will blink for hours and hours.

The Agency Stance

All the training agencies we contacted have similar policies on signaling devices. They require a surface signaling device, but do not insist on a specific visual signal unless the dive appears to call for it.

For instance, PADI addresses the issue of surface signaling devices in its published training materials. The Drift Diving Section of *Adventures in Diving* says that "you may need to attract the boat's attention with a surface signaling device [such as] a whistle attached to your BCD inflator. . . . Another handy device is an inflatable signal tube." The word "handy" seems more than a little understated, given the accident in Palau.

PADI seems to consider visual signals to be optional, sometimes useful safety devices. Here are a few quotes from the *Undersea Journal*, first quarter 1992: "Both the Safety Sausage and Com-2-Me seem like inexpensive and easy to carry insurance policies for anyone diving offshore, particularly in currents, where swells and surface chop could obscure a diver from the sight of land." [*Publisher's note: We reviewed the Scuba Tuba and the Com-2-Me in the October 1992 issue of In Depth, and found the Scuba Tuba more visible in daylight, the Com-2-*

Me better at night when illuminated with a flashlight.]

The Bottom Line

The entire recreational diving industry needs to reevaluate its thinking on visual signaling devices. In particular, *In Depth* calls on the instructional agencies to consider revising their training standards. Every new diver should be taught to carry visual signaling devices for daytime *and* for nighttime in open water.

The fact is that neither a flasher nor a tube adds much to the total load, in terms of either weight for travel or drag in the water. How about the cost? It's peanuts. The total for a Scuba Tuba and a flasher together, \$40, is less than the cost of one typical boat dive. New divers would just consider it part of the \$1,000+ package that most of them buy anyway.

Divers don't object to spending \$40 on a dive knife because training agencies have taught for years that everybody should carry one. What's the difference between line-cutting insurance and drift-away insurance? In either case, you're not likely to need it but you can die without it. In both cases, the cost is so low that it should be virtually mandatory.

And how about the rest of us old salts? I suppose you could make a helmet-law argument ("It's my brain and I'll mash it if I want to!"), but some of the fallout from this accident is that you can expect to see dive operators insist that their clients carry visual signaling devices. Operators are the guys who take all the heat when there's an accident, and it would be in their interest to lessen the chances. What's good for them would, in this case, be good for us, too. After

all, most operators insist on BCs, alternative air supplies, and so forth, and most of us are okay with that. Dive operators will probably sell, loan, or rent tubes and flashers to visiting divers who arrive without them.

We must all learn from the Palau disaster. Ever since I floated away in New Guinea, I've carried a Safety Sausage

and a little Helix flasher on every dive. There's nothing like a few very long minutes adrift to humble you. As for the rest of you who are pretty sure you won't ever need to use emergency devices, kindly send me your octopus, pony bottle, knife, regulator tools, and bicycle tire patch kit c/o the publisher. . . .



Flotsam & Jetsam

Cayman Diving Lodge

Dear Editor:

Thank you for the accurate description of CDL. The lodge is quiet and peaceful, and the diving was good, but I too was exceedingly disappointed in the dive format. I was treated like a novice diver even after diving with them all week. I felt cheated on every dive because I always had over 1,100 psi at the end of the dive with plenty of time left on my computer. Most of the staff had a negative attitude about my using my own computer, even though they all used a computer. Be sure and check your own surface interval to be safe. The staff use *their* computers to determine everyone's surface interval before the second dive. I had the feeling we were all on a *nice* cattle boat. Unless the dive program changes, I don't plan to go back. — Mark Berger, San Diego, CA

Dear Contributing Editor Shark:

Your review didn't quite get the flavor. East End and CDL have been advertised as the

"best diving on Cayman," a no-frills lodge for experienced divers. Not true. The North Wall is just as good and you don't have to fool with the currents.

This operation is the most regimented I've dived with (Kona Coast is #1). Captain Bligh (Dan) has a love affair with himself. He thinks he's funny. This is not an advanced diving lodge. Unless you are honeymooning, like to read a lot, or can spend most of the day B.S.ing, this is a boring place. — Louis Blas, M.D., P.S., Lewiston, ID

Monitoring the *Monitor*

Want a job monitoring the *Monitor*? The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says it's looking for a company to manage recreational diving at the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary off the coast of North Carolina. NOAA wants to receive proposals from anyone interested in overseeing the diving and ensuring that the wreck is not damaged by divers. Keep in mind that it's a 230-foot dive known for its tricky currents.

In Depth

In Depth is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising.

In Depth (ISSN 0895-2302, USPS 001-198) is published monthly with the December and January issues combined by Insightful Newsletters Corp., 175 Great Neck Road, Suite 307, Great Neck, NY 11021. Second-class postage paid at Great Neck, NY and additional mailing office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *In Depth*, P.O. Box 292, Old Westbury, NY 11568. Copyright ©1994 Insightful Newsletters Corp.

Staff

Editor



East Coast Editor



West Coast Editor



Contributing Editors



Letters/Submissions

To contact our editorial office, write *In Depth*, P.O. Box 90215, Austin, TX, 78709. Call 512-891-9812. Fax 512-891-9813. Please send stamped self-addressed envelope if submissions are to be returned. We are not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts.

Subscriptions/Address Changes

To subscribe, renew, change address, order books or back issues, call 800-326-1896 or write *In Depth*, P.O. Box 292, Old Westbury, NY 11568. One year's subscription is \$39 and two years' is \$68. Residents of all other countries add \$15 per year for surface mail or \$25 for airmail.