

"STICKYBEAK"
Provisional Report on Diving Deaths in 1972
DG Walker

The eighteen (18) divers who died in 1972 were taking no more risks than many who had uneventful, or at least non fatal, dives. This report is based in part on evidence given at Coroners' inquests, but in greater part the source is newspaper reports. Despite the (present) incompleteness of the information, the facts available seem to justify publication in the hope that others may thereby avoid the same mistakes.

Failure to follow the accepted rules for safe diving appears to be the critical factor that enables a mishap to end fatally; one should always try to learn from the 'almost got into trouble that time' dive incident. Most divers have learnt to choose an exit before entering the water, or to choose the dive boat 'cover' with care, after an occasion on which they omitted such a precaution. Not everyone is granted a second chance. It is not sufficient to have survived, the good diver has learnt.

These eighteen divers cover the entire gamut of diving experience from first time in the sea to 'pro' abalone divers. All made the fatal mistake of overestimating their ability to manage the water conditions, though some were the victim of mistaken decisions made by those they trusted.

The only bright spot was the absence of hyperventilation deaths, there being no deaths reported in champion spearfishermen this year. It is hoped that this form of self-destruction, the result of a desire to excel coupled with a belief that 'it can't happen to me', will be controlled by education through clubs plus a realisation that a buddy can only save you if he is both nearby and looking at you when you pass out. Relatives seem to expect clubs to be safety-conscious nowadays.

As deaths were three times as frequent in 1972 as in 1971 there seems to be need for more effective diving instruction.

Table 1

(Diving Deaths (so far known))

Year	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972
Deaths	6	5	10	7	7	8	6	18

Table 2

(1972 Deaths/States)

State	QLD	NSW	ACT	Vic	SA	WA	Tas
Snorkel Divers	-	2	-	1	-	1	-
Scuba/Hookah	-	2	1	5	4	1	1

TOTALS = 18 - 4 1 6 4 2 1

Too much regard should not be given to the 'league table' as small factors may, and do, decide whether the outcome is survival or multiple deaths. As the information gathering system is far from efficient I appeal to my readers to supply information of cases known to them: hence the project's title! In reading the reports of incidents employ charity for those involved, to whom the events occurred unexpectedly and without apparent justice.

Breathhold divers, by which is meant swimmers using fins, mask and snorkel, appeared in four fatality reports. Two had been washed by surf or wave action under shallow water rock ledges, there to drown. Another, said to have been a good swimmer, suffered cramp and drowned despite the valiant attempts of companions to rescue him. The final death was of a sole swimmer who suffered a fatal heart attack. None apparently wore lifejackets. They were all examples of the ever present dangers common to all swimmers, though the rescue failure was especially distressing. The cramp may have been caused by the wearing of too small size fins, plus cold water conditions at the time.

Scuba divers, in which group are included the abalone divers (as information is not yet available as to whether they were using Hookah air supply) demonstrate in death the necessity to carry out the rules for safe diving that are taught by all good instructors, written in all the diving books, and largely ignored by the majority of Australian divers. Their sins were venial but the penalty was death. The inescapable conclusion must be that all these deaths could have been avoided by forethought but had become highly likely by the time the index mishap occurred. Safety starts before you enter the water.

One pupil died during his first sea dive, his fourth ever time in water wearing scuba, in the presence of his fellow pupils and the instructor. The pupils seem to have made valiant but unavailing rescue attempts, managing to drop the victim's weight belt and scuba pack. The basic fault appears to have been a failure to recognise the risks involved in teaching a group of pupils in open water and a failure to react adequately to events. The wearing of lifejackets could have prevented this death, while a recognition of the danger period associated with the changeover from scuba to snorkel on the surface in those new to the procedure would have made the trained divers present more alert and ensured, at the very least, that they kept the class close together at all times. The instructor is morally, and possibly, legally, responsible for his pupil at all times in training and is truly his buddy. This death occurred despite excellent efforts by some of those present, but the chain of safety is tested at the weakest link. One day a legal case will occur and thereafter the Insurance companies will regulate those they choose to insure.

To teach yourself to dive can be fatal. One death occurred in the

presence of the victim's equally inexperienced brother. They were returning towards shore with empty tanks, the buddy leading by 20 feet when the victim called for help. He had panicked and dropped his weight belt and tank harness. His buddy dropped his also and swam to give help. But help was unavailing as the victim has tied his weight belt to his hired harness and the whole mass was caught on his knife, on his leg. The weight dragged him underwater. The fact that the tank was hired to him without questions as to his diving fitness was only one factor. No lifejackets appear to have been worn. Once again, it is demonstrated that the diver is not 'home and dry' when he reaches the surface. It will be of interest in later stages of this investigation, 'Stickybeak', to see whether more divers die underwater or after surfacing. This report may alert some to the dangers of this period of any dive.

Few details are available at this time concerning three of the other deaths, though inexperience and lack of lifejackets were suggested as important factors. One surfaced short of air, with a similarly panicky buddy. They were tired and 'half-drowned'. The victim-to-be apparently took a snorkel from his buddy before they were separated. Only one survived. The other two divers were drowned after failing to exit safely onto rocks, being washed back into the sea. In one of these cases the victim's lifejacket is said not to have functioned, a not unknown failing of the CO₂ inflation type, and the weight belt was not dropped. The other incident occurred despite diving club organisation of the outing. The divers were paired, with an experienced diver in each pair. The dive was by four pairs from a boat. But none wore lifejackets and the weather conditions apparently worsened while events revealed than an insufficient surface watch was exercised. The divers found the area uninteresting and soon surfaced, finding themselves not only unable to regain the boat but also unable to attract the attention of the occupants of their boat, despite using a makeshift flag. The other divers were also requiring recovery from the water by the boat crew. Because of cold and exhaustion (yes, COLD) the distressed pair made for some rocks. The adverse conditions, waves and surge, made leaving the water difficult; the absence of lifejackets made it essential. In fact only the experienced diver was successful, the other being washed back off the rocks and drowned. Such at least is the newspaper report, and having myself once been washed also from a boat, and also experienced the sudden realisation of helplessness in the grip of white water over oyster rock, I find the story all too probable. It takes a very good diving officer to cancel a dive which is possibly dangerous for some of the group.

There is a strange human desire to achieve magic numbers, in our sport shown by the interest in depth achievements by inexperienced divers. They are often unappreciative of the significance of the depth in

terms of loss of buoyancy, cold, nitrogen narcosis, rate of use of air, and possible decompression problems. As few are equipped with air contents gauges or constant volume lifejackets, any mishap can turn to rapid tragedy. The following cautionary tale is of a diving outing to an offshore wreck in about 150 feet of water. The sea was rough enough to induce a degree of mal-de-mer in the victim on the trip out to the dive site. He was 'an experienced diver', though not for deep dives; neither he nor the diver organiser recognised the significance of this fact. The divers were paired and noted as they entered the water, each being responsible for his own safety checks as there was no Diving Officer in control. There was a strong current and surge, which caused the victim-to-be, the first to enter the water, difficulty in reaching the anchor chain from his point of entry near the stern. He was here subjected to the movements up and down as he held on, waiting. As he had no snorkel he was forced to use his air supply while he waited for his buddy to complete his preparations and enter the water. The initial descent was made hard by the sea conditions, effort and air being generously required. At the wreck, sea floor depth 160-170 feet, the buddies separated though remaining in sight of each other. The victim was seen to pick up and swim with two light anchors before suddenly signalling his air lack and to swim the 15 feet or so that separated them. The attempt to buddy breathe failed when the strap holding the demand valve mouthpiece twisted so that neither diver was able to obtain air. In the confusion and natural panic, with both now in danger of drowning, the buddy activated his 'Fenzy' type lifejacket and ascended in a cloud of bubbles. When he had recovered and cleared his mouthpiece and checked his ascent, he was alone. Having surfaced and given the alarm, he attempted to descend again but found himself short of air. There was no safety diver ready to enter the water immediately, though it was probably already too late for effective help. Search failed to locate the victim that day. From evidence later available it is known that the victim failed to activate his cylinder reserve, drop his weight belt or make an attempt to 'free ascend' by holding onto his buddy. Whether this was due to panic, narcosis or because he aspirated water can never be known. He was not helped by being some distance from his buddy at the critical time, having excess weight (21 lbs) not having a lifejacket or snorkel and having over-exerted himself both on the surface and on descent. This type of dive organisation here recorded is not unique to this dive, I fear. It is most unwise to ascribe this death solely to the twisted strap, a factor though it was. The entire dive pattern was an invitation to disaster.

In one incident a diver was seen to suddenly go rigid and die. This occurred in a sea cave, in the presence of his buddy. No explanation can be given as the equipment was not recovered and the body was lost at sea for several days.

Cave Divers continue to received unwelcome publicity, with further deaths in the Mount Gambier water-holes. It seems reasonable to suggest that notices be displayed warning that the visibility can rapidly fall to NIL when mud/sediment is disturbed; there are four graves to prove it. In one case the victim had a line but had thought it unnecessary to use it; his buddy escaped by luck. In the other incident four divers suffered a 'rats in a trap' dive, here again one diver finding the exit by luck as his air ended. Neither were organised club dives. Clear visibility lured them to dangers they never expected. One survivor said that his training in nil visibility diving enabled him to avoid fatal panic in his terrible predicament.

Abalone Divers are tough guys who think decompression tables are for amateurs, or such is the impression they like to give. They dive frequently so are 'adapted' to tolerate nitrogen absorption problems better than the 'tables' suggest; but they still pay the penalty for overtaxing their systems with nitrogen. It seems likely that many will suffer aseptic bone necrosis in years to come, their disablement being the price of their present financial success. The details of one death are unavailable at this time but the double fatality from decompression sickness received wide press coverage. Both these victims were said to have received recent treatment for 'bends'. It was reported that the divers' association in the area seeks safety facilities for more rapid treatment of decompression sickness, but better diving routines would give better results for life and health.

Summary

Snorkel divers - 4 2 drowned, waves washing under rock shelf
 1 cramp; buddies failed to effect successful rescue
 1 heart attack, alone

Scuba divers - 14 1 pupil under training, on surface
 1 inexperienced, untrained, entangled in equipment when panicked on the surface
 1 inexperienced, washed off rocks; lifejacket failed
 1 inexperienced, washed off rocks despite buddy (who already managed to land). Had been unable to regain dive boat
 1 drowned in sea cave, cause unknown
 1 drowned, deep dive; panic when air supply low
 4 drowned, lost in fresh water (Mount Gambier) when visibility suddenly to nil
 2 decompression sickness
 1 abalone diver. Cause of death at present unknown
 1 drowned - in distress on surface; separated from buddy

Conclusions

Scuba divers

5 of these deaths occurred at the surface, wearing scuba
4 deaths were due to lack of lifeline in freshwater hole;
2 were due to severe decompression routine failure;
2 were deaths in learning stage of scuba diving.

Lifejackets would have saved some of the victims.

Mask and snorkel divers

Two of these divers underestimated the sea conditions. Another, though said to be a good swimmer was unable to survive the seas conditions when affected by cramp; he would have survived had he or his companions worn lifejackets. The fate of the fourth diver who died might have been different had he had a companion with him when he was taken ill.

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All those who can assist with this ongoing investigation are invited to write to:

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