

Uncertified Dive Class

by
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The water was bone-chilling cold. Gary and I were on our very first scuba dive a hundred and ten feet below the ocean's surface on the edge of La Jolla Canyon. I ran out of air! I was sixteen years old and unprepared to die.

My dive partner, Gary was four years older than I was and this was his first dive as well. He had no more experience than I had.

We worked together at TLC Convalescent Hospital in San Diego's East County. He was studying pre-med at San Diego State, and I was a sophomore at El Cajon Valley High School. As part-time kitchen-aides, our job was to load the dinner carts, clean the kitchen, and wash dishes.

One day Gary brought a flyer to work for scuba diving lessons. Having never missed an episode of the sixties TV show, *Sea Hunt*, starring Lloyd Bridges, I always thought, "That would be fun." I jumped at the chance to learn to the sport. Gary and I signed up.

It turned out to be an inexpensive, uncertified class taught by an older San Diego State College student named Ken. Unlicensed as a diving instructor, he was trying to earn a little extra pin money. Ken held dive class in his off-campus apartment, complete with a swimming pool for learning to use scuba equipment.

We excitedly showed up for the first class. There was Ken, and three students, Gary, myself and someone else. To Ken's credit, he was an experienced diver and put together a class outline similar to an accredited class. He taught us the dos and don'ts including dive charts. The charts are a complicated set of formulas for figuring out air consumption, nitrogen buildup in the blood, and time & depth restrictions for consecutive dives.

To Ken's, or should I say our detriment, he failed to adequately teach us about all the variations in diving equipment.

After the first two Saturday morning classes, we were ready to hit the pool. Pool instruction consisted of an additional two Saturday sessions. We started with a swim test, went on to snorkeling, ended with equipment "ditch and dawn" and buddy breathing.

Completing the sixteen-hour class, we were ready for our first ocean dive. The following week, at eight in the morning, the four of us met at the south end of La Jolla Shores' beach. Ken borrowed a mess mash of equipment from everyone he knew.

We had our own fins, mask, and snorkel and of course, Ken had all his own gear. The other three split up the remaining hodgepodge at random.

The standard size tank holds 72cf of air. I ended up with the top half of a wetsuit, weight belt and, unknowingly, a 50cf tank. Both sizes look the same; you have to know which size you are using. Ken overlooked informing me that my tank was a third smaller than the others were!

Worse than the size differential, my tank sported a *K* valve. Tanks are fitted with one of two valve choices. A *J* valve has a reserve, which activates by pulling down a wire alongside the air

tank. The reserve gives you an additional two minutes of air, which is adequate for surfacing from any depth. A *K* valve has no reserve. Ken missed this lesson!

Finally, the last equipment omission was buoyancy compensators; a rubber vest that you can partially fill with air through a mouth tube. If you have too much or too little weight on your belt, you adjust your buoyancy by adding or removing air in the vest. Properly adjusted buoyancy allows you to swim freely or float without continually fighting to stay up or down. Critically, if you are too heavy and lose consciousness, you will sink to the bottom. Also, a vest contains an emergency gas cylinder that you can release to immediately fill the vest and take you to the surface. It would have been good for me to have a buoyancy compensator on this dive.

On that first, nearly disastrous dive, we were hundreds of yards offshore and just below the ocean's surface when the other student couldn't clear his ears. Ken used hand signals to tell us he was staying with him. Then he waved his hand in a circular motion. Gary and I both interpreted that gesture to mean, "Go and look around. Have fun."

Gary and I made our way deep to the edge of La Jolla Canyon, half a mile offshore. The six-hundred-foot deep canyon considered an advanced dive. It certainly not recommended for a novice let alone a first dive.

However, we were young and fearless as we approached the canyon's edge, which gradually sloped downwards for twenty feet or so before dropping straight off. We glided out over the pitch-black abyss. There was absolutely no visibility below, in front, or to the right or left of us. Looking up you could barely see the hazy ocean surface. Turning back it was hard to visualize the sand leading back to the safety of the beach. If we had swum a little further out, we would have been lost in complete, utter darkness. A terrifying experience!

Squeezed by pressure of more than three atmospheres, I run out of air.

Gary and I had just checked with each other to confirm everything was okay and he was swimming away from me. I breathed in through my regulator and nothing. No air, just a hard pucker! I swam after Gary as fast as I could. I managed to grab one of his fins, and he turned around, I did a slashing motion at my throat, giving him the "out of air" signal.

I felt for my reserve wire along the side of my tank and found it nothing. I turned my back to him, pointing to my valve, and thinking, "He'll turn it on for me." Gary spun me around and shook his head. Feeling the burn in my lungs, I knew I was in trouble. If I were going to survive, I had to initiate buddy breathing. It wasn't a big deal; Lloyd did it every episode.

As I was the one out of air, it was my job to orchestrate the buddy-breathing maneuver. To accomplish this, I was to remove my partner's regulator from his mouth, take two breaths, and return it to his mouth for his two breaths. Repeat until we were out of danger.

Being out of air for more than two minutes, I was critical. I fast exhausted the remaining oxygen in my lungs and bloodstream and seconds from drowning. I reached for his regulator, not realizing a neck strap attached it. I pulled on it and just snapped his head. Gary grabbed it back out of my hands and tried to reinsert it into his mouth. At these depths, things distort. Gary couldn't find his mouth for four or five tries.

While tragedy unfolded, we swam upward. In a last desperate attempt at survival, I reinserted my regulator into my mouth and sucked in with every living muscle in my body. We were so deep! The small amount of air left in my tank was expanding as we rose and I received a short but life-sustaining breath.

Gary, finally situated, motioned to me that he was ready to commence buddy breathing. We did and quickly ascended to the surface. Our ascent was too fast and dangerous, but the risk of drowning was imminent, so we kept kicking hard. Upon reaching the surface, we jetted out of the water to mid-chest level.

Ken, who had been trying to follow our bubbles, was only a few yards from us when we shot from the ocean depths. He was agitated that we were buddy breathing and demanded to know what we were doing. He interrupted my explanation and kept repeating, "Nobody ever buddy breathes. Nobody ever buddy breathes." I interjected that we had to and he had taught us how. Ken said that was just part of the class but "Nobody ever buddy-breathes. With modern equipment, you just don't get into those situations." Glaring at me, "Why would you go so deep and do such stupid things?"

Ken's rant suddenly stopped. Looking at me, he said that my ears are bleeding and I need to get to a doctor. The four of us swam to shore.

I didn't see a doctor until the next Monday. I was young and invincible, and I could still hear. The doctor said that my ears were fine. My ear canals had bled a little when they were adjusting to the pressure changes, but no permanent damage.

We were lucky. The only thing that saved me and possibly Gary's life was the fact we did not panic through the peril and did almost everything right.

I never saw Ken again, but I suspect that we were his first and last diving class and his only students ever.

I was not discouraged. I had survived my first dive - barely but barely counts.

Gary and I dove two to four times a month over the next three years.

We never did bother with buoyancy compensators. We made frequent Canyon dives consisting of between two and two-and-a-half hours, no floating, or resting, just constant swimming to stay off the bottom, or fighting to stay down. Those dives were physically exhausting. We would lose up to five pounds on a Canyon dive. The pounds stayed off only, until we got to the nearest Taco Bell, and stuffed ourselves with as much food as we could afford from our minimum-wage part-time jobs.