

SCUBA TROLLING

The lessons learned from an unusual — and frightening — out-of-air emergency

BY KEN BONDY

Life was good. It was late October, the best time of the year to be on or under the Sea of Cortez. I was on the second of what would eventually be four live-aboard trips on the marvelous old *Baja Explorador*, now, sadly, in dive boat heaven.

I was diving with my daughter Coleen at one of my all-time favorite spots in the whole world, a little speck of an island called Las Animas, about 60 miles/96 km north of La Paz. Las Animas (wonderfully named — it means “the spirits” in Spanish) has provided me with some of my most memorable moments underwater, including my very first sighting of schooling hammerhead sharks.

But a freak incident almost took my life that afternoon at Las Animas, and the experience taught me a lesson about diving and myself that will be with me as long as I live. Here’s what happened:

Diving off the *Baja Explorador* was done from *pingas* — fiberglass skiffs powered by outboard motors and driven by one crewmember, the *pangeiro*. Each *panga* carried about six divers. The *pangas* would motor us from the *Explorador* to the dive site, which at Las Animas was a set of small pinnacles that break the surface off the north end of the island. Our *panga* pulled right up to the small outcropping of rocks and we prepared to dive.

On this particular afternoon, the surface current was flowing at a pretty good clip. When the current is up, all of the divers need to enter the water at about the same time and immediately descend and head for the wall. If you spend much time bobbing around on the surface, the current will sweep you away from the rocks and make it impossible to get back to the dive site.

It turned out that we divers didn’t do a very good job that afternoon, because when everybody finally got into the water and was ready to descend, we were all too far from the rocks, and the current was sweeping us out into blue water. Not to worry. The *pangeiro* had a solution to such a problem. It involved a heavy knotted rope, about 33 feet/10 meters long, secured to the transom of the boat. The *pangeiro* merely hauled this rope behind the boat, and each of the scattered divers would grab a knot. When all of us were holding on to the rope the *pangeiro* would then slowly tow us back to the dive site.

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If I had known that our young *pangeiro* was on his first *Explorador* trip, I might have predicted what happened next. Without once looking back at his divers he floored it. It didn’t take long before the big 75 horsepower outboard had us divers clipping along in the wake at about 5 knots, way too fast for us to hang on. As divers in front of me let go, I would see their big dark shapes zipping past me on either side. I was pretty sure that I was the last one hanging on when I decided it was hopeless and let go too.

Almost immediately upon letting go of the rope I felt a violent, twisting jerk to my body, and suddenly found myself hands free, blasting along, head first and

face up in white water, surfing along at about 5 knots. I was gasping for air, forcing my head above water as best I could, but it took a monumental effort to get a breath — one that consisted mostly of rushing water instead of air. I reached back to my first-stage to recover my primary regulator, and it was only then that I discovered what had happened: I was being towed by my second-stage which had snagged on a knot in the tow rope!

I desperately tried to twist my body and get my head above water, frantic to get a breath and to yell to the *pangeiro*, but all I succeeded in doing was gulping down more salt water, choking and getting exhausted. The *pangeiro* was just not going to stop or look back until he got back to those damn rocks. I was within seconds of the point where I had to have a breath of air or I was going to pass out and drown.

I distinctly remember thinking that this was going to be a really dumb way to die when, finally, it registered that my rescue from this bizarre predicament lay no farther away than my chest — my alternate inflation regulator at the end of my BC inflator hose! I grabbed the back-up regulator, stuck it in my mouth and sucked in the sweetest breath of air I have ever tasted! Saved now, I relaxed and breathed almost normally while I was towed for what seemed to be another full minute to the pinnacles. As you might imagine, it was a weird exchange of glances between me and the *pangeiro* when he finally stopped and looked back.

What really frustrates me when I think about this incident is that my alternate regulator, the redundancy that eventually saved my life, was never more than a few inches from my left hand during the whole affair. Granted, this strange event

wasn't the typical out-of-air emergency; nonetheless, the air was just as necessary! Using my backup regulator was not my first action, and I didn't think about it until it was almost too late. In 10 years of diving, I had never needed to use my alternate air source, and when I did, grabbing it was not the first thing that came to my mind. I simply wasn't prepared for a diving emergency.

So what have I learned from my Las Animas experience? The main lesson, of course, is to be ready for emergencies and more aware of actions and equipment to use in an emergency. Here's how I have put that into practice: I now run through an emergency checklist before every dive. Mine is just mental, but there is no reason it couldn't be written down. I think about the following things:

If I get no air from my primary regulator on this next dive, I will immediately go for my alternate air source — in my case, the alternate inflation regulator. I remind myself where that backup regu-

lator is (at the end of my BC's inflator hose) and what it feels like to retrieve it.

I think about dropping my weight belt, not just how to do it, but also that I might have to do it on this next dive.

I think about clearing or even losing my mask on the next dive. I remind myself what it feels like to lose your mask — the fuzzy vision and the shock of cold water, and that it is completely manageable as long as I don't panic.

I remind myself what a broken hose sounds like (it can really be a shock) and what I will do if one breaks, starting with not panicking.

In addition, I practice emergencies underwater on a regular basis, either in the pool or in an appropriate ocean location. I flood and clear my mask, I breathe through my alternate air source and I locate my weight belt buckle, unbuckle it and then rebuckle it without letting it fall. I open and close my BC pockets underwater, practicing the removal and replacement of items I keep there (a

knife, scissors, safety sausage, etc.). I try to do this routine every few months, once every 10 dives or once on every major trip, whichever comes first. I don't always make the schedule precisely, but I am at least now conscious of the need to do this on a regular basis.

Finally, I try to do a refresher course with an instructor every two years, regardless of how often I am currently diving. This can be as simple as diving with an instructor friend and asking him to observe me, run through some emergency procedures and critique my diving. Or it can be a formal refresher course at my local dive center. I have never dived with a diving instructor without picking up something valuable about safety, equipment management or technique.

Surviving an emergency like mine at Las Animas is often the best learning experience, because it burns itself into your memory like nothing else can.

I'll be ready next time.



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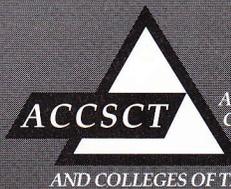
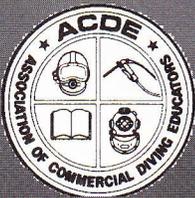


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