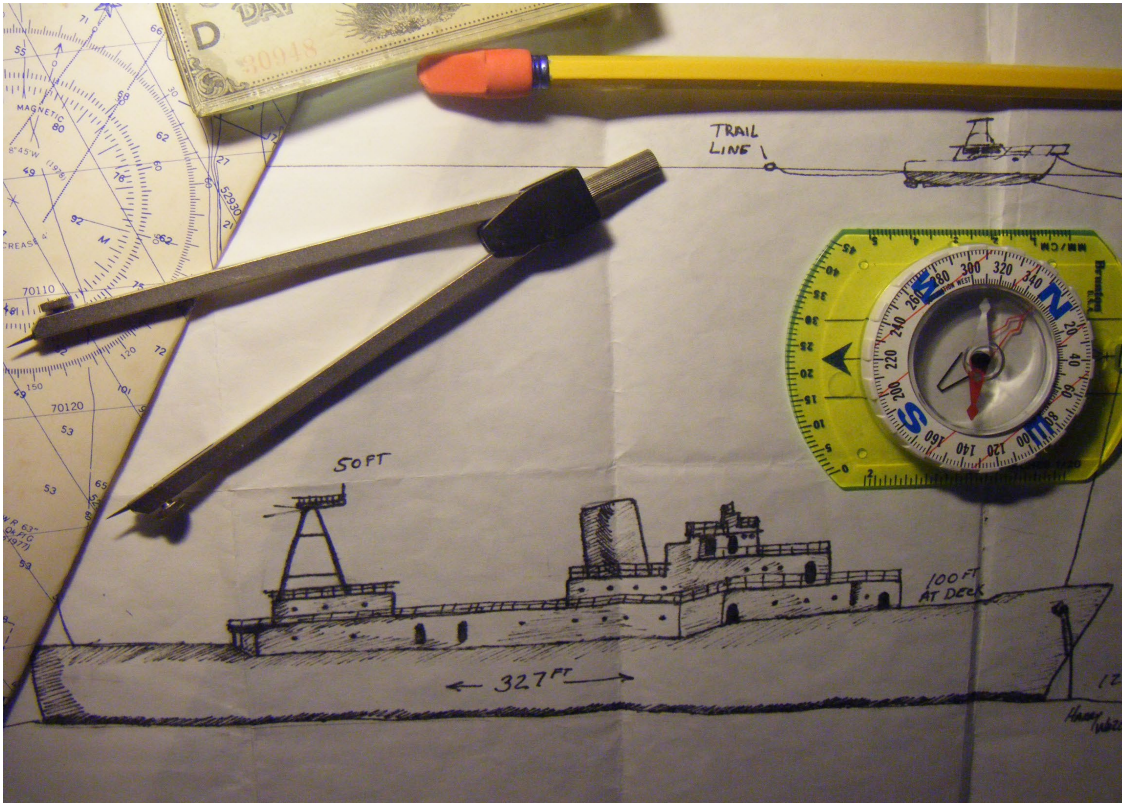


Almost Buying it on The Duane



"I distrust summaries; any kind of gliding through time, any too great a claim that one is in control of what one recounts. I think someone who claims to write with emotion recollected in tranquility is a fool and a liar. To understand is to tremble; To recollect is to re-enter and be riven...I admire the authority of being on one's knees in front of the event."

– Harold Brodkey in Manipulations

I finally read *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's eye witness account of the 1996 disaster on Mount Everest that killed nine climbers. Krakauer notes Brodkey's passage above on page 227.

As an adventure buff, it got me thinking about my own comparatively normal life, and how close I ever came to facing the same type of life-or-death decisions as they did.

My answer is “one time- June 27, 1993.”

I even know the exact time because I logged it: 10:47 am. It was my 76th SCUBA dive and my 52nd hour under water.

I was on a deep certification dive for my Divemaster’s certificate. My instructor was Skip Dawson and my dive buddy was Lori Hutchinson from Denver Colorado.

We were on the wreck of the Duane, six miles off Key Largo in the Florida Straits. A popular wreck dive, the Duane is an old Coast Guard cutter, completely intact, resting upright in the warm currents on the edge of the Gulf Stream.

At the time, in the ferment of continuous underwater training, I didn’t think much about it. But now, regardless of what Mr. Brodkey thinks of the exercise, recalling it gives me a clearer view of what happened- and the facts make me shiver.

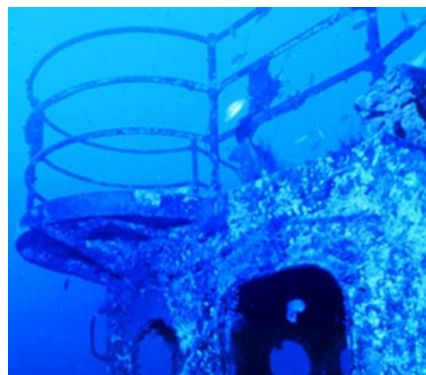
While in no way am I comparing my experience on the Duane with the epic drama of those world-class alpinists made legend in Nepal, although indeed there were more prosaic backgrounds represented

on the mountain as well, my accident happened for much the same- albeit the opposite- reason.

It is called Dalton's Law and every beginning SCUBA diver and every aspiring high altitude climber learns it if they want to stay alive to enjoy their sport.

My day with Skip and Lori started out on a sunny but freakishly cool Florida Keys morning. We were heading out of Garden Cove Marina on board the *Coral Princess* heading east-southeast for what would be my second trip to the Wreck of the Duane. It was an incredible wreck fully intact and sitting upright with more than seventy feet of relief if you include the crow's nest. This means that from the sand at 120 feet, the top of the wreck came to within 50 feet of the surface. The dive texts describe the dive as

"... strong currents, deep water and overall conditions demanding experienced divers only."



- NOAA/FKNMS

It was my second trip to the wreck, a very clear day, and with water clarity at around 100 feet of what divers call *vis*, we could see the shadow of the hulk immediately upon entering the water. As usual, there was a strong northeast current running that day, due to the influence of the nearby Gulf stream.

That meant that you made your descent to the wreck by moving along a down line, in this case a kind of mooring ball attached to the wreck. As you got deeper and closer to the wreck, the current would lessen a little in the lee of the ship's hulk. Then you could "fall off the line" and look around the wreck. If you let go of the line too soon, however, you could be swept half way to Miami before anyone knew you were gone.

After checking our watches and setting our timers, we made our way down the line.

Time is crucial when you are deep, thanks to Dalton's Law. I won't bore you with the details of partial pressure and all the rest- you can google it if you like- but the bottom line is that when you descend into the ocean, your body absorbs much more oxygen and nitrogen than you do breathing air at sea level. Conversely, mountain climbers get much less of these gases when they breath air at altitude.

As we all know, just as you can do too little of

something you can also have too much of it- neither is good; oxygen and nitrogen both become toxic at depth. Ambient sea level amounts of oxygen will kill you as you approach 300 feet of seawater (which is why you never hear of divers going that deep on regular compressed air or SCUBA) and at considerably lesser depths, the nitrogen in SCUBA air will get you higher than a Bob Marley joint. In diving its called *nitrogen narcosis*.

So in mountain climbing (above 20,000 feet), you dumb down due to hypoxia or *lack* of oxygen. In SCUBA diving (starting at around 100 feet) you dumb down due to too *much* nitrogen.

Long ago, the U.S. Navy established guidelines that tell a diver how long you can stay at certain depths on compressed air. They are called the Navy Dive Tables. If you violate the tables and stay too long at depth, or ascend too quickly, the decreasing pressure will send the excess nitrogen bubbling out of your bloodstream like a soda bottle being shook up and opened. This is called The Bends, which can kill or cripple you as well.

Thus, you have to be extremely careful when approaching a hundred feet or more in a dive. This is a very simplified primer, but it is exactly what nearly happened to me on June 27, 1993. The scary thing is,

as Krakauer notes in his book on Everest, sometimes you don't know it's creeping up on you. Here is what happened to me:

As the navy tables dictated, our time on the wreck that day was to be a maximum of 20 minutes at a hundred feet. As we descended closer to the wreck at around 75 feet, things were going great. The current fell away and we dropped off the line and started exploring the main deck of the ship.

About three minutes later, at around eight and a half minutes into the dive, my mask started to leak. No big deal, you are trained to clear a flooded mask under water your first day of basic open water training. My mask however, kept flooding. Also not a big deal, as we were also trained to dive without a mask when necessary.

Part of my Dive Master training had been to swim the length of a pool underwater without gear, which was left lying on the opposite end in deep water. We were required to find the gear and put it all on and take a breath before broaching the surface.

As a result, none of this bothered me much until we dipped below the railing of the main deck at 100 feet.

All of a sudden, the bubbles coming out of my

regulator started getting into my mask, which was already flooded. I became increasingly uncomfortable, my breathing rate skyrocketed and I started to hyperventilate. I could not control my breathing. As a result, my lungs became more buoyant, and I started an uncontrolled ascent.

To the average person swimming in the ocean, the surface is your friend. Not so for a diver breathing compressed air at a hundred feet. The diver at depth must come up slowly so as not to “uncork the bottle of soda” inside them or they will get bent.

Due to my mask problems I couldn't see a thing, but the minute that the pressure difference in my ears told me I was ascending quickly I fought off the rising fear inside me and did the three things I was trained to do in this circumstance; I dumped the last minute amount of air left in my BC (buoyancy compensator- a kind of inflatable vest), flared my legs to slow my ascent and tried to exhale slowly. The slow exhalation lessens the chance of a burst lung or pneumothorax, akin to blowing up a balloon until it pops.

I was starting to get it together until I felt my leg brush up against something metallic and I realized it was probably the crow's nest I had just hit. If this were true, it meant that I was already at 50 feet and

still rising, and at the same time, drifting down current in a big hurry. Out of options, and still blinded, I finally started waving my arms like a mad man, trying to get Lori's attention so she could help me. Unfortunately by that time I had drifted too far away from her.



- NOAA/Wiki

In the next fraction of a second, I thought of two people I knew. One was Captain Spencer Slate, my ex-wife's boss and Godfather to my son. He runs the largest diving operation in the Upper Keys and has been featured on Discovery Channel and others. He's been dive-restricted to under 100 feet due to getting bent in an accident on the Andria Doria many years ago which killed his best friend. I also thought of Slate's most experienced boat captain and instructor, who just months before, had spent over an *hour* on the Duane trying to save a young lady whose asshole

novice boyfriend convinced her it was OK to penetrate (go deep inside) the wreck. They got lost, she died, and Slate's dive captain is now spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Suddenly I felt Skip's strong grip on my arm and he pulled me back down to the railing and clamped my hand around it. Once I knew I wasn't rocketing towards the surface, I calmed down, got my breathing under control again and we actually finished what turned out to be a great dive, although we didn't have much bottom time left by then.

What had caused me to freak so? I had been in situations like that before and had been trained many times to deal with those types of scenarios. And I was normally very comfortable under the water.

I kept apologizing to Skip on the way back in, telling him I did not know how or why I had screwed up, and kept thanking him for saving me a possible trip to the recompression chamber.

We had dove often together. I was not even close to diving in Skip's league, but he knew I was a competent, experienced diver.

"You were narc'd buddy," he finally said.

My initial reaction was "bullshit" but the more I

thought about it, the more I agreed with him. I had not gotten much sleep the night before and I was just getting over a cold- plus it was very cool that morning. This was a certification dive as well- all things that increase your stress level and can lower your threshold to Nitrogen Narcosis. While I had dove 100 to 115 feet many times before in the Cayman Islands and elsewhere with no ill effects, this time it had got me. If it weren't for a good partner in Skip Dawson, I might have had real problems.

Most SCUBA diving is done in 20-50 feet of water or less, with little danger, due to the fact that it's still only about one additional atmosphere (a measurement of pressure) on your body and on the air you are breathing. So I am not discouraging those who wish to try it. Indeed, done intelligently, it is an extremely safe and wonderful sport. Like most worthwhile endeavors, however, it is at the margins where things can get dicey if you are not serious about the rules, and sometimes, even if you are.

It took me a while to come to terms with what happened that day.

Nature has supplied humans on earth with just the right amount of what we need to survive. When we demand more or less, we venture into a no man's land where the rewards and highs can be immense,

but do not come without risk or consequence.

