



# What do you do when

## Diving incidents, the *Titanic* and a couple of suggestions

by Dr Keith Cardwell

In 1975, one of the students from my first basic scuba class, a clever young engineer called Ken, decided that after all this praise I'd heaped on going to the Poor Knights (PKs), took it on himself to go to Tutukaka and was able to cadge a trip out with a group who were obviously loading up to go there. Lucky Ken. On the way back (half way apparently) he asked the trip leader, where the 12th man was. He'd been left behind and was nearly hypothermic when recovered. The interesting thing and why Ken was so excited/stunned about the whole incident was that he appeared to be the only diver

on board below One Star Instructor. Says something doesn't it?!

Quite a few years later when I was in the Maldives, and a couple of days after taking on the job of 'Dive Base Leader' at one of the atolls, I was advised that divers often go missing and if that happened on my watch, to do a runner as soon as possible. Ever had hairs stand up on the back of your neck? A week later, on another atoll, two instructors did disappear, one within an hour of the other. They went down to release a stuck anchor. The first didn't come back so the other followed, also doing the same magic trick.

Back closer to home, in 1998, the Queensland diving industry suffered a devastating blow when a dive operator left two divers behind at the Great Barrier Reef. The repercussions were catastrophic. So frightening and fascinating an incident, it was probably the prime mover in making a movie (*Open water*) about it.

I can recall details of many, many more incidents and I'm sure that many of the readers of this magazine have plenty of other related and interesting tales to tell about similarly awful diving situations.

My bet is that there are a lot of things in common with all of our stories because it appears to me that things haven't changed too much over the years. Perhaps the saying *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* or a more loosely and often used interpretation: *'the more things change, the more they stay the same'* – is the very

reason we often need to be reminded about what to do, and what not to do when we do things that matter.

So why do diving incidents occur?

Apparently, according to data produced by the Queensland Government, exactly the same issues that have been taking and maiming lives of divers since when I was first preaching the diver training gospel in the 1970s are still the same today – poor health, age, lack of skills, inexperience, unfamiliar environments and over confidence – not necessarily in that order.

An essay could be written on each of these issues, but in brief, the culprits (and a bit about them) are:

### Poor health

If you aren't well, even stamp collecting may be a chore so let's leave the very obvious aside. Get a regular medical by an accredited doctor trained in hyperbaric medicine. Please don't go to witch doctors peddling 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine. Get a proper job done. This should also cover the 'Age' issue. I personally feel in spanking good health for my age but know that I have to be a lot more careful with what I do. I can't run for buses like I used to so I make sure

I take a yearly medical just for diving alone. Although a dive medical is not a requirement for everyday divers, ignorance is not bliss if there is some creepy little heart murmur you don't know about. Get a medical performed annually!

diver should not stop formal training until at least (the equivalent then) of rescue diver. I support that philosophy. Even so, if it's been a while since your last dive/s, and you don't want to cough up for another certification course, do a simple refresher programme. They usually only take a couple of hours and are relatively inexpensive.

I often hear scenarios where something learnt in basic dive training but not put into practise has resulted in needless loss of life. It's been as simple as forgetting to inflate a BCD or drop a weightbelt.

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Today, advancement in technology provides us with terrific gear and gadgets to make diving so much easier. I just love my wrist computer! But as brilliant as this new, super-duper, whizz bang stuff is, it needs regular maintenance and servicing. Although gear failure doesn't appear to figure much in the accident data as human failures, get an annual service check for your equipment. Maybe set a date and do it the same week you get your service check with the doctor.

### Unfamiliar environments and over-confidence

Again, I'm not going to waffle on about the discreet differences between these two but although we are urged to 'push the envelope', 'think outside the square'

*in the industry, I merely say uneventful. I have never been in an accident of any sort worth speaking about, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in disaster of any sort.'*

This was the Captain of the *Titanic* – Edward Smith 1907. So 'it won't happen to me' can be turned upside down if too much is taken for granted.

**So what to do?** History provides us with a wealth of information about the way things can be done to be safe and live and dive to tell the most extraordinary of tales. We also have information that gives

us some fairly horrible stories. Fortunately, the latter is in the minority.

We must always stay on guard and be prepared to deal with situations that may, for reasons sometimes beyond our control, get out of hand, but there are some issues we can obviously do something about, so in short:

1. Get a regular (annual) medical from an appropriately qualified doctor – the older you are, the more important this is.
2. If not diving for a while, do a refresher course – inexpensive with only a short time demanded of you.
3. Regularly service your dive equipment.
4. In unfamiliar territory, get local knowledge, do your homework and be prepared with the appropriate training

# it fills up with water?

### Lack of Skills/Inexperience/ Equipment failure

I'm lumping these together because they appear to go hand-in-hand. In those early days of training it was not uncommon for divers to have no diver certification at all. My best friend fell into that category. When I first met him he was quite ignorant of the fact that breath holding on ascent wasn't the best thing to do for a long life. Sadly, there are many today who do have a certification and although knowing stuff like this, show a remarkable lack of basic skills proving that they probably received their c-card from a breakfast cereal packet. Good basic training is important but don't be sucked into the mythology that once that has happened there's no need for formal review/refresher (like getting another medical!). One of my early mentors suggested that every practicing

and follow other similarly motivational expressions, when it comes to diving in different places and/or with different gear, **stop!** Pause for a while and take a couple of smart pills. Consult local knowledge, dive with a guide and suck in your pride. Especially if you think you are very experienced and qualified. The earlier anecdotes reflect what happens when we take things for granted and presume that we're too smart to either be told or to do some basic homework. I didn't mention French Pass in 2000 did I? Just Google it. Better yet, read the coroner's report at [http://www.divenewzealand.com/upasset/%7B1D2C4E10-60AA-47DF-866C-23C92C24DC4E%7D\\_frenchpass.pdf](http://www.divenewzealand.com/upasset/%7B1D2C4E10-60AA-47DF-866C-23C92C24DC4E%7D_frenchpass.pdf)

Here's a better warning still. The bloke who said 'When anyone asks me how I can best describe my experience of nearly 40 years

and equipment. Cave diving isn't just about using a rope and carrying a torch.

5. And finally, watch out for those who you dive with. The suggestion that you don't stop training until you are at least a rescue diver is a pretty smart one.

With all of this considered, it's a bit like insurance – better to have it (annual medical/servicing/continuing education) and not need it than to need it and not have it.

Not sure?

Have a read through some of the diving accident and coroners' reports and you'll realise just how easy it is to become a statistic.

<http://www.divenewzealand.com/index.aspx?s1=safety&ts2=Coroner%27s+and+Accident+Reports>

