

The 327-foot USCGC *Duane* was sunk as an artificial reef off Key Largo, Florida, in November 1987. It sits upright at 130 feet and is often exposed to Gulf Stream currents prevailing bow to stern. There is significant lee to the amidship structures, including the wheelhouse, but sometimes divers have an arduous swim against the current to get there.



DIVE GEAR AS LIFE SUPPORT

Text and photos by Stephen Frink

WHEN I WAS RECENTLY DIVING the *Duane* shipwreck off Key Largo, Florida, we tied up at the stern buoy because there didn't appear to be any current. If the flow picked up while we were down, that would be the best mooring for the prevailing current.

It was a fine plan, except the current picked up almost immediately after we hit the water. It was not bad enough to abort the dive but not good enough to have a casual descent. We went hand-over-hand down the line to the deck at 100 feet and then had an arduous swim before getting into enough superstructure to have sufficient lee to allow us to relax and take photos.

I sensed I wasn't performing as well as I should be while swimming against the current. One of my frequent dive



buddies even commented that I was uncharacteristically lagging behind. I won't argue that I'm getting older, but it turns out my fins were really showing their age. Between a few years of sun damage and hard use, the blades had given up enough structural integrity that they were no longer efficient.

They were still fine for the reef diving I'd been doing lately, plus they had a comfortable foot pocket, and their light weight made them great for travel. Yet it took only one dive of not performing their most fundamental task — propulsion — for me to get a new pair. We share the obligation to get ourselves back to the dive ladder at the end of the dive, and anything that compromises that task is an issue.

That was the premise of a conversation I had later in the week with Rob Bleser, a longtime friend and dive operator in Key Largo. I asked him what problems from his thousands of dive boat trips he could directly assign to scuba gear. We agreed that the quality of modern scuba equipment is outstanding, but operator error or inexperience could create a dangerous situation for one diver yet not bother another diver with a different skill set.

He named mask issues as the biggest problem. I was surprised, because I consider a foggy mask annoying at worst. Bleser contended that anything that creates anxiety could escalate beyond annoyance. A mask that doesn't fit right, leaks, makes it hard to equalize, or even burns the eyes because of inadequately rinsed defog can be

problematic. Once a diver gets overly anxious, bad things can happen.

Another common issue is auto-inflators that don't work right because they aren't hooked up correctly or haven't been serviced in a long time and are corroded. The issue isn't so much that the auto-inflator doesn't work but that the diver doesn't know how to manually inflate their BCD. Whether the inflator hose keeps pumping air into the BCD or the BCD fails to auto-inflate, there is a manual solution. Divers need to remain calm and let their proper training kick in.

An improperly inflating BCD isn't the only buoyancy problem that divers might face. Bleser said he often sees divers carrying too much weight, which then puts undue reliance on the BCD. Being overweighted can also be rough on the coral reef when a diver's trim is affected to the point where their fins drag along the bottom.

When divers get in trouble, they sometimes don't think to drop their weight belts — if they are even using belts. With a weight-integrated BCD, which might be rental gear, a diver might not even know how to get the weights out of the pockets in time to respond to an emergency.

The same day we had the strong current on the *Duane*, we did a second dive nearby on Molasses Reef. Only two boats were on the horizon when we saw a pair of divers floating on the surface who were not from our boat and were impossibly far from the other boat. They had their safety sausages inflated and were awaiting a pickup. The water was calm, and there was no hazard for them, but we picked them up and returned them to the other dive boat, which still had other divers in the water and couldn't release their mooring to retrieve these two. If there had been 6-foot seas with a ripping current and they had not had an surface marker buoy, it could have been a different outcome.

The bottom line is that we need to do everything we can to get back to the dive ladder at the end of the dive. Our gear is designed to optimize that task. When it doesn't, you need to ask yourself: Is it because my gear is old or poorly maintained, or do I not know how to use it correctly? AD

Stephen Fank

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