



Even The Best Plans Go Awry

by Bret Gilliam

If, in a future moment of weakness, I were to ever suggest that I had seen it all in diving, please slap me and bring me back to earth. I should know by now that divers are capable of the most extraordinary behavior that can defy logic, nature, and occasionally the laws of physics. Some of them can even manage to do all of that at once. Sort of a divers' Triple Crown.

Surprisingly, many of the most memorable episodes I've had occasion to witness happened in training. In theory, instructors agree that mistakes made under supervision can be turned into positive learning experiences. Depending on the seriousness of the mistake, they can also lead to premature aging and migraines of biblical proportions for the instructor who must now leap to the rescue when the >>

class decides to behave like Forest Gump on acid. As ORCA computer engineer Paul Heinmiller once confided to me, "Bret, we've given up on trying to make our equipment foolproof. The fools are just too ingenious."

I envision Curt Gowdy announcing, "And now we come to the compulsory portion of the program," as entry level divers drop weight belts on their buddies, do face-plants into the dive platform, or simply mount their entire scuba package upside down all the while grinning insanely like a donkey eating briars. In technical diving we see fewer incidences of the classic blunders. No, tech divers have a lot more experience so they get a bye from the preliminaries and go straight to the medal round when it comes to screw-ups.

Consider the following tale of best intentions that swiftly took a turn into the *Far Side*:

Back in 1992, I was finishing up a training dive on the wreck of the *Hydro Atlantic* off Pompano Beach, Florida with Dave Hermel, an eager tech diver from Minnesota. Dave had already made several dives on the massive wreck and we had just completed some emergency skills and were making our way back to our up line when we noticed a big grouper acting strangely. The fish made repeated headlong rushes at Dave only to stop short and literally rebound from him. Displaying the usual caution shown by the inhabitants of states where cows outnumber people, Dave kept a respectful distance and sized things up.

It turned out that his antagonist had been hooked by a passing boat and managed to break the line. But the stainless steel leader, all eight feet of it, was still attached and had snared into a deck fitting on the wreck at 145 feet. Quick as a wink, Dave gave me a *Wild Kingdom* signal loosely translated to "I'll save this beast from a lingering death and free him." I should have known better. Marlin Perkins would have.

The tale of the tape would show a pretty even match. Dave dressed out at about five-foot-seven and a svelte 160 pounds or so. The grouper gave away some weight but had the edge in power, quickness, and probably youth. And, of course, the fish was in his element and Dave was decidedly out of his. Unless the venue could have been changed to a dairy products derby with the contestants diving on a giant cheese wheel wreck in a milk vat. Not a chance, the grouper had home field advantage.

Dave went hand over hand down the wire leader until he got about two feet from Mr. Big who was eyeing him with a look like I save for any doctor who starts pulling on a rubber glove. The two worlds collided when Minnesota Man reached for his knife and Cujo, the Grouper from Hell, decided that he was about to star in a watery re-make of *The Yearling*.

In the space of 90 seconds, the star-crossed pair disappeared in an explosion of silt and bubbles. Imagine what it would be like to be attached to the end of a giant air hose suddenly cut and whipping around like a twister ride at the local carnival. A 40-pound fish can totally humiliate a much larger man and let me say, with all charity, that Dave received a bondage and discipline lesson not to be found elsewhere... outside of New Orleans' French Quarter on a late Saturday night.

When the water finally cleared I was treated to the surreal scene of diver and fish neatly bound together and firmly wired to a deck cleat. It was a rigging job worthy of a bos'n's mate. Neither party could move. The

fish had even managed to ensnare both of Dave's hands in the leader and most of one leg so that he perhaps most resembled a neatly tied up boneless pork roast. A few weak squeaks bubbled out of his mouthpiece at me.

Now was the perfect time to renegotiate the course fees, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to take advantage of him in such dire straits. No, I'd shame him later back on the boat. A few minutes of diligent reverse wire sculpture freed Dave. He and the grouper parted company like Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier in that old chain gang movie. Not exactly friends, but they had to admit they'd miss each other.

Lessons were learned all the way around. And I never again would dive without a pair of EMT scissors capable of cutting through Kryptonite.

Another time I had a large group of tech divers on the same wreck who completed their dives and deployed their lift bags to do drifting decompression. My charges were routinely hanging out when another dive team began to surface beneath us. Warning bells went off in everyone's minds when one diver produced a lift bag the size of the *Hindenberg* and happily began to inflate it down around 40 feet.

Of course, as the bag gained buoyancy it began to do its own graphic interpretation of Boyle's Law and the hapless diver struggled to swim down against the apparition that was now starting to look like a figure from the Macy's Parade. He was almost holding his own when he fouled the line in his knife sheath around his ankle. At that point he was on a one-way ride to the surface... backwards and upside down. Harnessed to the lift bag now with the approximate displacement of Marlon Brando, the diver exploded into the atmosphere with a more than passable impression of a Polaris missile. He was retrieved by the boat crew and divested of his parachute none the worse for his brush with mortality. So much for the little quirks and subtleties of using lift bags and reels.

Finally, I still love the guy who was ready to enter the water from the high mid-section of a West Coast dive boat and realized he had forgotten to put on his weight belt. Under the burden of his double tanks, he backed up to a stanchion to steady himself against the boat's roll and proceeded to buckle up his belt around the stanchion. Stepping off, he managed to almost get this fins in the water before fetching up hard when the belt reached the bottom of the rail. Suspended like some mutant crucifix against the boat's hull, he rattled around helplessly until someone cut him free. Life's lessons are taught hard sometimes.

Although these anecdotes are humorous, there is a serious undertone to my message. Don't try to shortcut the learning curve. Get into a proper training program where a qualified professional will be able to show you how to avoid problems from the outset. And at least he'll be there to get you out of a mess if your creative imagination creates a predicament that neither of you had foreseen. Your instructor may save you some embarrassment or even your life. It's all part of the experience and everyone makes mistakes. The key is surviving them.

Now let's talk about the guy who tried to breathe off his argon bottle... he was unconscious, but extremely well insulated! 