



Moving to the dark side

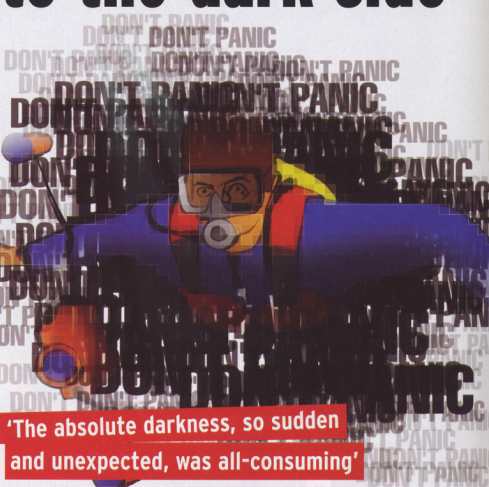
Small incidents can change a fun dive into a scary experience. As **Piers Townley** discovered, training provides a way out

It took only a few seconds to transform an exhilarating and relatively easy Red Sea dive into a moment of sheer terror. Our party was diving from the Shalkamy liveaboard, enjoying three dives a day at some of Egypt's most pristine sites.

To further my interest in photography, I had hired an ageing but capable underwater camera, complete with housing, support arm and flash unit. The camera was an excellent piece of kit, although it was unnecessarily bulky, compared with modern underwater cameras. However, although it was bulky and required an extra degree of concentration and guidance, I was certain that by the end of the dive trip the results would be more than worth the trouble.

On the fourth day of the expedition and the third dive of the day, we anchored alongside the partly submerged wreck of the Sea Star (some records credit the wreck as the Lentil). The conditions were becoming choppy, but only in comparison with the calm we'd experienced all day. It was supposed to be an easy wreck dive to round off the day.

The plan was to have a gentle scoot around the outside of the wreck, practising various techniques, make a brief and shallow entry into the cargo bay and then surface in time for tea. Descending the shot-line, we noticed that a fairly strong current had built up, but the crystal afternoon waters offered perfect visibility for a few outside photographs. The familiar snake-line of divers assembled ready to enter the wreck, while I stayed at the end of the line snapping away.



'The absolute darkness, so sudden and unexpected, was all-consuming'

In we went. It was amazing – all the colours streaming down through broken hatchways, the dark, rusted frames of the boat standing out from the clear, blue water, and silver fish in their hundreds. I motioned to my buddy to frame himself in the doorway of the wreck for a picture and then, with him leading and me at the very end of the line, we went in. Because of the size of the camera, my torch was attached to my wetsuit. My buddy's lit the way for us and up ahead the rest of the diver's torches were blinking like cats' eyes in the darkness.

Suddenly it went pitch dark. Not slightly, but completely. My buddy had turned the corner through an opening; my torch wasn't switched on and in an instant all sense of orientation had disappeared. I could feel my breathing rising and I couldn't see any bubbles – I didn't know which way was up. In a moment, a huge surge of fear had enveloped me. I remember banking to one side and then 'clunk' – my tank had caught

on the inside of the wreck. In total darkness I couldn't move forwards, backwards or to either side. 'This is it,' I thought, 'I'm stuck!' The bulk of the heavy Nikonos camera didn't help, it clanged off the side of the unseen metal and wedged tight. It must have been only seconds but it didn't feel like it. The absolute darkness, so sudden and unexpected, was all-consuming. I kept repeating to myself the mantra of 'Don't panic, don't panic.' I managed to calm my breathing and adjust my buoyancy. I felt the camera housing slip round the bend in the passageway and very slowly I eased round and forwards. I've never been so happy to see torchlight in my life.

My buddy was swimming back to the hatchway to look for me, but in those few seconds I had thought my number was up.

What have I learned from this? Don't panic, assess the situation, and stay calm. It's the best lesson I've ever learned and one that no diver should ever forget. ■