

## A LONG DAY DRIFTING IN A ROUGH SEA

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It was supposed to be a dive with no problem. One the Trimix dives you really enjoy doing. At least it was what I thought. A few hours later, I knew I was wrong.

Thailand, August 2006. Everything is prepared for a Trimix dive near Pattaya. The weather is not perfect but nothing bad, and the two Open Circuit Trimix divers I dive with don't find anything to worry about during their dive planning. I just trained them as Instructor Trainers and they both come from Hong Kong where the conditions could be similar. A little bit of wind, small waves at the surface and some clouds in the sky. That's it.

The small boat that brings us is handled by a very experienced Thai captain and his sailor. They daily deal with technical divers and know the procedures and the area since many years. And as a matter of fact, the dive runs smoothly as we explore the bottom. There is a mild current on the bottom, mainly due to the tide, but the captain is aware of that and he knows that if we can't come back to the boat, he will have to follow us during our drift deco.



After 20 minutes on the bottom, we decide to ascend, everything being exactly according to the plan. Both my OC divers send their SMB very soon during the ascent and I stay close to them. Unfortunately one of them gets his reel jammed but we manage to pull the SMB back down. We'll have time later to un-jam it. Time to sort out the all thing and we're now almost 35 minutes into the dive. I have the feeling that we drift quite fast and I decide to also send my SMB to make sure that the boat follows us.

75 minutes Run-Time and it's time to surface now. We slowly ascend the last few metres to discover that the sea is quite rough now. We also understand that we drifted quite far from the island we dived on. And we can't see anything that looks like a boat.

After a few minutes to consider the different options, we try to evaluate the actual direction and speed of the current. Still no boat anywhere. I guess the skipper decided to protect the boat on the other side of the island when the weather picked up, and didn't see the SMBs because of the waves. But whatever the reason, the situation is quite clear: we drift offshore in a sea that becomes worse and worse as we are not protected anymore by any of the small islands of the area.

We think about different options but we finally end up with two: drifting or swimming. If we drift, we can use the SMBs, our lights, a mirror or an air-powered whistle to signal any boat, but there is no sun, the waves are quite high and more important, there is still NO boat!

So we decide to swim. Where? 90 degrees of the current, toward the nearest island, a small rock with only cliffs but a small beach with a little house. The dive site where we were is now more than two kilometers away. The island is maybe at the same distance, but the current is pushing us further to both of them.

My two Chinese friends don't swim very fast, mainly because of their equipment (twinsets and 2 sling tanks). As I can swim faster, we decide that I should try to make it to the island and get a boat to pick them up. I keep my rebreather on my back as I want to keep some gas to inflate my wing (but also because I don't want to lose my Meg) and I clip my big bail-out tank to an SMB. I let it go, slowly drifting at the surface near the Open Circuit divers. When necessary, the equipment is disposable.

In a matter of a few minutes, I can't see the two other divers anymore. I have the feeling that the waves are even higher than before and the surface becomes all white. Still no boat anywhere. That's now more than an hour since we surfaced and the boat should be looking for us. Obviously not in the right place...

I'm on my own and I swim as fast as I can, trying to estimate my route and the location of my two friends. I need to know where they go in order to pick them up later.

As it's a tide current, its speed should be close to its maximum very soon. The wind is in the opposite direction, the reason why the waves are nasty. Still swimming as fast as I can to avoid any further drift, I also try to use the wind and hold my SMB horizontal above my head. Using landmarks to check my location, I have the feeling that my very rudimentary sail helps a little bit, but I'm not sure about it and the position is very tiring and looks stupid. I rather lay on my back, my Full-Face Mask on to protect my face from the waves.



After another hour and a half swimming against the current, I'm definitely closer to my target. I can clearly see the small house on the beach but it doesn't look like there's anybody over there. Will I become a Robinson Crusoe less than a kilometre from the civilization?

It has been three hours now that we surfaced and I don't feel that good. My swim pace is slower and I wonder if separating our team was such a good idea. In three hours you have time to think about many things. Some of my thoughts are about movies, mainly "Open Waters" and "The perfect storm". It keeps me mentally busy but my feet are painful in my Jetfins and I start to have leg cramps. Fortunately I'm now somehow protected by the island and the waves are smaller. I don't have the feeling that the current is weaker but I clearly come closer to the beach.

Roughly 100 metres of it, I suddenly see a fishing boat that slowly goes back to the harbour. Time to re-inflate my SMB and wave my arms like a madman.

I feel so good when I see the bow turning to my direction. And I honestly don't care when I discover that the boat is very high and doesn't have any ladder. They throw me a dirty rope and I do my best to climb on board, my rebreather still on my back. Nobody really helps me, maybe because I look like a ghost. When I finally manage to do it, I have a big cut on my leg. The boat is very unstable and smells rotten fish but I love it.

Let's pick up my friends now. Unfortunately nobody speaks any English at all and my Thai is quite limited. They finally understand that two other divers are drifting nearby but the captain doesn't want to go very far, even if I pay him quite well. After 10 minutes of an inefficient and unsuccessful search, he decides to head back to the harbour. I can choose between going back in the water or find some help in the harbour. I guess the second option is more logical.

15 minutes later, they drop me on the wharf, standing with my diving equipment like an alien. I smell fish, look exhausted, cannot walk properly as my feet really hurt but I quickly have 10 people around, all speaking at the same time to better understand what happened.

Nobody has any news about our dive boat or even knows the skipper. Someone gives me a cell phone for calling him and I have a hard time to explain that I don't dive with a list of phone numbers. Like most of the people, I simply use a list of names in my cell phone and I don't memorize the phone numbers (maybe something to write in my wetnotes in the future). Someone even asks if I can call the 2 other divers!

I speak about Search & Rescue team, Thai Navy and emergency call with a VHF radio but I already know the answer: it's too far, too difficult, too late, too etc...

And it actually starts to become too late, as the ambient light seems to be decreasing now. I worry about my Chinese team. I finally find three skippers who accept to rent their fishing boats to do a search. They all refuse that I come with them so I have to explain where to look. Twenty minutes later, we receive a phone call that all divers have been found.

When they arrive at the harbour, we all feel relieved. Nobody is hurt. Tired, very thirsty but safe and happy. I spent 3h15 swimming against the current and they spent 4 hours trying to minimize their drift.

Our dive boat will not show up before another 30 minutes, the captain trying to explain that he was looking in another direction. Not really convincing.

So what could be the lesson we should get from this story? This kind of situation should be thoroughly considered during the dive planning.

Some tools to have?

- An EPIRB (Emergency radio beacon) could be good to have, but it depends on the location where you dive. If there is no real emergency service, it's useless.
- All the signalling devices (mirror, flares, lights, whistles, etc) only work if there is a boat, a plane or a helicopter in the area.
- A list of phone numbers to keep in the wetnotes. Some kind of snacks or candies in the pocket.

Some procedures to follow?

- A good pre-dive planning with the boat crew (and if necessary a better boat crew) is a nice wish but maybe not a very realistic one, depending on the region you dive.
- It's better swimming than drifting offshore, and the last thing you want to happen is to spend the night floating in the dark.
- Equipment is disposable and can be ditched if it helps. By the way, 10 days later, a fisherman found a dive tank clipped to a yellow SMB and gave it back to its happy owner!

Divers lost and drifting at the surface are more frequent than we think. Two months later, six Thai divers will drift for six hours before being picked up by a fishing boat! Unfortunately we don't have so many solutions that could work anywhere and in any circumstances.

