

I've heard the wah-wah

by Bob Raimo

as told to aquaCORPS

Joe Odom asked me, "How deep are you gonna go? We want to go deep."

I said I'll go as deep as I feel comfortable with. I don't care how deep you guys go. When I say that's enough for me, I stop, and I come up, irrelevant to what you guys are doing. I said I'm not here to set any personal records, or industry records. I'm here to have a good time.

They all dove single 80s. I was very uncomfortable diving with single 80s, so I juryrigged some telephone wire to an 80 stage bottle because I refused to go deep on a single 80. I wanted to at least have a back-up bottle.

On the first day I dove deep I was completely in control, I was completely capable of helping somebody else...which is my measurement of my comfort level. If I feel that I cannot help somebody else, I'm in over my head. I don't like being able to just take care of me. I like to take care of someone else if there's a problem. If I can't, I have no business being there. And I did not feel that way at 300 plus feet. I felt fine. I mean, I was narked, but I checked my gauges, and stopped at 250 feet on the way up in case somebody needed air.

On the second day, I'm diving a Dive Rite transpack with a travel wing, which is only 30 lbs. of lift, and I'm in an eighth-inch shorty. When we did the second dive, we were out on this cable-it's in 7,200 feet of water, over 21,000 feet long, and is approximately 75 feet in diameter. It's big. You could have a party for a 100 people on top of this thing. There is no bottom reference.

I made two big mistakes. I grabbed my weight belt from my rebreather instead of the weight belt for my single 80. So there's an extra eight pounds of lead on my belt, and I'm completely oblivious to it. Bret wasn't diving this day. Bret and Joe were saying that one of the things that you need to be able to do if you're going deep is you want to get down there fast, and get out of there fast. I said, well, I couldn't keep with you guys. They asked how I came down? Well, I kinda floated down like I normally do. Joe said there's a lot of drag that way, you kinda have to go down head first. I'm like, I never go down head first. I said I'd go down head first and try and keep up with you guys. So I jump in the water and go behind Joe Odom, and I'm swimming upside down, straight down. I'm kicking to go down to keep up with Joe. I couldn't keep up with the sucker; the guy is quick.

I never discussed with any of them how they do it. And none of us went to the Bahamas with any of this in mind. If I'd have known the week before, I'd have

brought some clips and hooks and stainless steel tank bands. I'd have come ready to make real stage bottles, not telephone wire.

I have no concept of how deep I am... 'cause I don't look at my depth gauge. If I know I'm going deep, I just try to stay in tune with my body. When I don't feel good, it's time to come up. And sometimes if you look at your gauge and you see a big number, it scares you: Oh, omigod, and all of a sudden, adrenaline, a little bit of CO₂, and it makes you worse off than you are. So I like to go down, I'm comfortable. But what was uncomfortable initially was my descent. It was an abnormal descent for me. I'm used to floating down, now I'm swimming down. I'm exerting myself kicking trying to keep up with this sucker.

At one point I'm saying, this is about my tolerance. I was really getting narked, I'm at the limit. If it gets worse than this, I won't be able to help anybody. And as I'm starting to think about this, I look at my depth gauge and it says 340 feet and Joe Odom turns around-he was below me, he was the lowest guy on the line, and I don't know who's behind me at this point, if anybody-and Joe looks at me and I give him a clear as day signal of "I'm stopping here." I take my arm and sweep it slowly back and forth saying I'm leveling off. Joe gives me the okay sign. I start inflating my BC. After Joe sees me inflating my BC-because I could see him watching me, making sure that I was okay-he then turned and continued going deeper, figuring I was okay. Which at that point I was. I don't know that if Joe had had a problem that I could have helped him going deeper, but anybody at my depth and shallower, I was okay.

So, I'm inflating my BC and I'm going deeper and deeper...348 feet, 350, my BC's full, 352, and I'm not feeling too happy. I went from feeling really good to feeling really narked. This is where I made what I believe to be the second and almost fatal mistake-I kicked. I used my legs, which is the normal diver reaction. At that point, I just wanted to stop. Not even to go up, just to stop.

I took one or two kicks and I went from being completely in control and just about capable of helping someone, into a complete headspin. That one kick used so much O₂ and generated so much CO₂... And I was like, WHOA, man, I got really fucked up. And it happened again, and I went, WHOA man...and thank god for that cable. I just reached out with my right hand and-ka-chink-barehanded. This cable had fish hooks on it and was encrusted with all kinds of shit. But believe me, I was so numb, I didn't feel anything. I just grabbed on to this cable. I looked at my depth gauge again, and all the pixels were lit up on my screen.

I had no idea how deep I was. For all I knew I was at 500 feet. I knew I had inflated my BC and my BC wasn't going up. I had about 1400 psi left my main cylinder, and I've got the stage bottle on me. So I decide I'm going to kick and I'm going to pull on this cable. I've got to reduce the pressure. I want to scream out of here and I'm gonna stop when my depth gauge says 100 feet. Now, mind you, I can't read it.

By now, I'm assuming I'm pulling on the cable. Mitch Skaggs, who was at 325, said later that I went by him, but I never saw him. He could have been behind me when I passed him; it's easy to miss people going up and down. He said I had one hand up

in the air, my eyes were rolled up in my head, and he thought I would wake up on the way up. That's how I felt: I needed to wake up.

One thing that really scared me was this noise. When I couldn't read my gauges, I heard this noise-wah-wah-wah-wah-really loud. I didn't know what it was. When I heard the noise, I could not see my hand on the cable. All I could see was my gauge. I couldn't see anything else-everything surrounding the gauge was black. And I'm sure I started to breathe really heavy when I heard that noise...of course, more CO2 build-up. I'm thinking: the next thing that's going to happen is that I'm gonna black out, and I said to myself, "You're not gonna black out." When this gauge says 100 feet, you're gonna stop and do deco. That's what I said to myself my entire ascent, "You can't black out, you've gotta do deco. You can't black out, you've gotta do deco." I kept kicking-at least I think I was kicking, I might not have been. This may have just been my thought process. I have to go on what other people say because I don't know.

I had a very, very strong desire to live. I really believe staying focused on going to 100 feet to do deco saved me. I haven't spoken to a lot of people about this, but at the worst point when I was really fucked up, I can understand how people give in to the euphoric feeling and die in deep water black-outs. Because as scared as I was, I felt fuckin' good. I don't know how you can say you feel good and think you're gonna die at the same time. But I can say this: I could have very easily said, "Oh, fuck this." And die.

But I've got a two-year-old boy, I've got a wife. I thought about that when I starting to get that blacked-out feeling. I saw my son on that dive. I said, I'm not leaving the kid, what am I stupid? I'm going to 100 feet and I'm doing deco.

So, I think I'm pulling myself up this cable, and at about 175 feet, I can see blue in the background, everything's clearing up, I'm starting to see some divers again up above me at 130 feet, 150, and I can read my gauge, I can read my pressure gauge-I've got 1,000 psi. 175 feet, 150, 140. I get to 100 feet, I dump the air out of my BC, and I say thank the fuckin' Lord. I do my "Hail Mary"s and "Our Father"s, I swim up to 40 feet, I start my deco, I go over to the 60/40 mix, and I do my deco.

During my deco, Joe Odom swims over. I write on my slate: "Scared myself today," and pass the slate over to him.

He writes down: "Were you in control?"

I write: "I thought I was, but wasn't."

So we get out of the water and I describe to him what happened on the dive. And he says that noise is very typical. If someone hasn't heard that noise, then he hasn't been that deep on air.

That's called the "wah-wah." He says when you hear that noise, you've been fucked up on air, you've been deep on air.

I'm a damn good diver, but I don't do deep air diving. If it wasn't for all of my years of training, all of my years of acquiring knowledge, and general good diving skills, and the strong desire to live, I can understand how people just give in and die.

I probably learned more on that dive that I could do in a hundred dives...about dive ability, about the physiological true effects of gases on one's body, why we shouldn't be diving deep on air. I learned an awful lot about my own ability, tolerance, and desire to live.