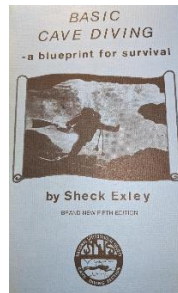


The Curious Case of Safety Sam

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INTRODUCTION: When the late Sheck Exley’s now-classic cave diving accident analysis, Basic Cave Diving: A Blueprint for Survival was first published in 1979, it ultimately became the basis for all cave diving training in the United States. Later, with the rise of what we today call “technical diving,” it became the foundation upon which all specialized sport dive training was conducted. This analysis, and book, actually saved the sport of cave diving from being banned in the United States. How so? At the time, so many people were dying in Florida’s underwater caves that property owners and the State of Florida itself were calling for an end. Some property owners were using explosives to shut the entrances to cave systems on their land. The late Sheck Exley was a pioneering cave explorer who wanted to save his beloved sport. He thoroughly analyzed all recorded cave diving deaths in Florida to determine whether there were common root causes and, if so, whether something could be done to prevent diving deaths. He found that there were, indeed, common threads. From this, he developed the “Rules” of safe cave diving; ten, in all. Once these became the basis for all cave dive training and taught as the foundational principals of the sport, cave diving deaths dropped dramatically, and literally saved the sport. These and other Rules apply to all diving situations. Divers who ignore these Rules are greatly at risk for becoming fatality statistics. An incident or fatality might not result the first time a diver violates the Rules, and may lead to what is known as “the normalization of deviance.” (Deviance, in this case, being a disregard for the Rules.) However, consistently ignoring, bending, or treating the Rules callously greatly increases the chances of an incident or fatality occurring. Sort of like playing Russian Roulette. Remember the movie, “The Deer Hunter”? Don’t be the Deer Hunter!

Plan well,

Dive safely.

The most important thing you’ll ever bring up from a dive is yourself!

When the Rules came to hand,

They were taught as the basis,

To keep life in stasis,

When divers plunged off of land.

When the Rules came to hand,

They made divers,

More than survivors,

And lead them far deeper.

When the Rules came to hand,
they used gas to go steeper.
Though that wasn't cheaper,
it made life a keeper.

Now that Rules were to hand,
with knowledge the stronger,
divers went deeper and longer.
And all followed the Rules of the Land.

All, except Safety Sam.
He signed on for courses,
though thought Rules were not forces,
even when given the sources.

He'd agreed to the Rules of the Land.
(Though only, thought he, if not out of
hand.)
And while he sought to be wetter,
about the Rules he knew better.

All his agreements (in writing or word)
to him were absurd!
All agreements he'd break.
He knew how only to take.

His decisions were many,
ranging worse upon bad.
To watch it was sad.
Every mistake that he made,
he'd always blame those who stayed.

Way out at sea,
surrounded by water,
and far from his daughter,
he thought "Rules apply not to the free!"
("And certainly not to me!")

His instructor told him, astonished:
"The Rules you must follow!"
"That's what you've agreed!"
Yet, Safety Sam could not concede.

Back on the land, he'd toss back a few,
then drove amid lights red and blue.
The Rules of this land he knew.
So, to jail he was sent to stew.

Safety Sam now was not free.
But did ever he think:
"The Rules might apply to me!" ?

He was forced to be dry for a year and
half again.
Upon his release, that's when
he demanded a card, there and then.
No Rules could ever apply to him.

Once he was free,
no matter how long a time dry,
a spot to dive a deep wreck he could buy.
He thought "The Rules don't apply to
me!"

To finish the course,
 he'd had every chance.
So, he took now a stance:
 he'd do it by force.
No matter the Rules of the Land.
"What payments I owe?"
"You should do it for free!"
"Though I owe an exam and money to
boot, never mind the check bounced!"
"And though I broke a big Rule,
 they don't apply to me!"
Though it's a fact:
 there was no contract,
 and though he'd never paid,
 he expected a grade.
Since the course had elapsed,
 he'd have to sign a new paper.
To which he agreed.
But his agreement was only a caper.
He said he would train,
 and past fees he would pay,
though to start, a ride he would need.
And it was offered, indeed!
On the day of their re-start,
 he wasn't too smart:
avoidance he'd turned into art,
 and, again, couldn't start.
But a card he still wanted, with heart:

"Never mind I won't sign,
 "for the card I'll still whine."
"Never mind I won't pay,
 "the card shouldn't be kept at bay."
"Never mind the work I won't do,
 "the Rules shouldn't be followed
 by instructors like you!"
And though the course was far lapsed,
he insisted the Rules were too taxed.
Though many Rules he had broken,
 he demanded a card as a token.
"Though for my card you did strive,
 "though in quarry and ocean,
 "you've done every dive,
 "the Rules are only a notion."
"And if a card you won't give,
 "because the Rules won't forgive,
 "though I was idled,
 "you know I'm entitled!"
"Though the work I won't do,
 "I'll say the fault was on you!"
"If a card you won't give,
"Because you think I won't live,
 "I'll say it in stealth,
 "and blame your health."

When he shared his delusion,
there were those in collusion,
for their noggins,
they just weren't a usin'!

Many years he tried.
Two instructors he'd fried.
Was he ever issued a card?
Or, for him, were the Rules too hard?

Though he thought he knew best,
he fell far short of a test.
For him, the Rules were always too
stressed.

He should give it a rest.
For him, it's now time to suggest:
Stick to your Word, stick to the Rules,
and you'll always be blessed.

Bernie Chowdhury has been a member of the NYC Sea Gypsies since 1988, is past-president as well as former editor of the Sea Breeze. He became a diving instructor in 1988, and holds instructor rating with NAUI, PADI, DAN, SDI and TDI. He has taught a wide range of courses, from basic Open Water, up to and including Advanced Trimix, and Advanced Wreck (Penetration) Diving. Bernie has taught and certified many past and present Sea Gypsies. He was named an Explorers Club Fellow in 1995, and has carried the Club Flag on expeditions in Iceland and in India. His awards in the sport include Beneath the Sea's "Diver of the Year for Education" (year 2001) and the New York State Marine Education Association's "Gene Ritter Aquatic Education Award for Extraordinary Service to Education" (2019). He is also the author of The Last Dive (non-fiction, HarperCollins, 2000) which has been published in eleven languages, as well as audio and e-book versions; it is still in print.