

Silt!

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I had been told about a stack of stone Rum jars and I wanted to take a look. They were in an open room very close to the edge of a torpedo hole at a depth of 62m. When I got to the torpedo hole I staged my scooter by the entrance and moved forward about 2m to where I was told I would see some Jars and glasses sticking out of the soft silt. The area was quite badly silted out because earlier several other divers had taken a look so I moved slowly through the silt cloud the few meters or so from the torpedo hole.

My hand fell upon a jar but in the silt out I couldn't see it so I decided to turn around 180 degrees and head straight back out. I had found the jar less than 2 m away from where I had staged my scooter – perhaps two fin kicks. The room the jars were in has along with three other deck levels one whole end exposed and open to the sea through the large torpedo hole making the room more like an exposed terrace. The openness of the room and the fact I was only a few meters away from the edge of the opening had made the use of a reel seemingly unnecessary. I would go in, turn 180 degrees and come out. Simple.

The visibility where the jars were was zero and with no current to clear the silt clouds away they hung around filling the room and billowing thick yet motionless white clouds out into the sea.

When I turned to head back the short distance to my staged scooter I was surprised when after a few fin kicks I was still in zero visibility clouds. I covered my HID light and scanned around but could see no daylight. The silt cloud was obscuring it. I had only moved a meter or so from where I had been looking so I kicked back my hands falling back onto the large stone jar, and then went out the same distance in another direction. I hit a steel wall kicking up some more silt so headed back and tried again. At this point it crossed my mind to tie a line and do a search but I reasoned that as I was not more than a few meters away from the edge of the ship it was overkill. I was, after all, only seconds and a few fin kicks away from the edge of the opening. I swam blindly into steel again,..... and again,..... and again each time probably adding more to the silt out. Ever few moments my hands would fall on the jar so I knew I was going around in circles, literally a few meters away from the torpedo hole.

I covered my light and looked again to see if I could see any daylight. But I couldn't. I couldn't believe silt could obscure daylight when I knew I was only a few meters away from clean water (it later became apparent that a storm had blown in and the dark clouds and rain had reduced daylight significantly, not helping.)

Again I crawled out scrabbling blindly to find the edge of the ship. I found myself in a corner and realized the ceiling to floor (silt) was narrow- less than a meter. Even with utmost effort in this situation my movements were kicking up more silt. A jolt of fear shot through me as I recognized the potential for me to go deeper into the wreck in the zero vis and get really lost/trapped. Suddenly what had been a little momentary snag had the potential of turning into a nightmare. I crawled out of the corner and turned 180 degrees. Upon finding a wall I reasoned that the wall would run across the ship so If I follow the wall it will take me in, or out of the wreck. I choose a direction and started blindly following the wall with my hands. The wall ended shortly after, so unsure if this was the way I turned and headed the other way. It crossed my mind that I had not come across that jar for a while now, suggesting I may have stumbled blindly into a different area. I then swam into something that hit my head and I realized it was too tight to continue. Why was it tight? I started on an open terrace like area, now I seem to be getting myself into small confined locked in areas??? This didn't bode well. Head height was down to 1 to 1.5m, the floor filled with a thick bed of soft silt that billowed with the slightest water movement. It was impossible to move through without silting out; I was completely blind, feeling my way with my hands. I had long since lost all sense of direction.

I knew I had been going around in circles for about 5 minutes because I kept feeling that jar but for the last few minutes I had sensed with escalating concern the increasing confinement. Was I moving deeper into the wreck?? I stumbled blindly around the labyrinth feeling with my hands, trying desperately to work out which way I should move. After what felt like hours of searching my hands stumbled across an opening. I hoped that it might be an opening I had seen before next to the area leading out of the wreck

As soon as I passed through it I knew I had screwed up. Instead of leading me out of the ship and into clearer water the opening led to a small room. The room was clean. Suddenly there were no swirling silt clouds, and this could only mean it was a room I hadn't been through before and therefore a room deeper inside the wreck. With sickening horror I realized I had indeed been going the wrong way and putting more maze like obstructions masked in zero visibility between me and the outside.

The room was very small - only around 10 feet square - and the soft silt that lined its floor had filled up all but a meter and a half of height that I now occupied. As I entered the room I knew at once it would silt out quickly so my eyes feverishly scanned its perimeter for any exit with daylight as I quickly pirouetted around 180 degrees whilst keeping my trim as horizontal as possible and looked to see where I had entered with the mind set to quickly exit and head out in that direction.

Amazingly I could see no entrance! I swam forward with the billowing silt cloud behind me beginning to engulf the room. It was impossible to not silt up when working in such small confined spaces, and only 1.5m of ceiling to silt bed clearance. I soon found myself in this small room once again cocooned in zero viz searching the walls with my hands, groping blindly though surprisingly calmly for an exit. I was just getting myself deeper and deeper into trouble. I found a few small crumbling and ragged edged holes, one of which when I first looked through I could see more clean rooms and a corridor further through the wreck with crystal clear visibility. They looked so tempting, but I knew they headed deeper into the wreck and therefore not to my salvation. After a few fruitless moments searching and with my hands stinging and sore from the cuts and abrasions created by the rough corroded steel walls I stopped to collect my thoughts.

Ok, what was my situation? How is my rebreather? HUD says all is OK, how much scrubber time do I have? A couple of hours, how am I feeling? Very calm actually- surprisingly. Anxious certainly, worried for sure, but my breathing was slow, deep and steady, my actions methodical and thought out (I knew if I got stressed and panicked it would reduce my chances of making it out but I did surprise myself on how much I managed to have control over my emotions). OK, that's the good news; what about the bad news? I am in a small room with zero visibility. I am unable so far to locate the way out of this room although I'm sure I will do so shortly. But even if I find the way out of this room I am obviously some way inside the wreck – I have no idea how far or which direction, and I'm operating in zero visibility. Outside the room the maze like corroded corridors, rooms, bulkheads and equipment - all waiting to trap or misdirect me - is obscured in zero visibility. If I get out the odds of my stumbling upon the way out through this labyrinth is slim and the chances are I would end up repeating my earlier fruitless efforts that took me deeper into the wreck, or would send me around in circles again.

My scrubber is good for another few hours. If I can retain my calm composure, will the silt settle enough by then for me to see my way out? I decided to sit still and test the theory. I had often speculated that a rebreather diver in a silt out might be best to sit motionless and wait for the silt to settle to see his way out. I sat motionless in the little room and looked at the swirling silt in front of the mask illuminated by my HID light. I closed my eyes and relaxed. After what seemed like hours, but in fact was probably only five or ten minutes I opened them and saw no difference in the silt. I couldn't see the silt settling at all. I recalled on dives past where some parts of wrecks remained silted out for several hours. Could I really sit here and wait that long without going stark raving mad??

I began feeling that I was trapped in this little room inside a maze. Even if I did get out of the room, it would be a miracle to blindly stumble upon a way out

through the labyrinth of corridors, rooms, bulkheads and partitions that lay in front of me shrouded and masked in zero visibility.. I could be just a few feet away from the outside and never know it. I could be in some corner right next to the exit and never realize it.

With surprising calmness and acceptance I realized I was likely going to die in this wreck.

I felt foolish.

I felt embarrassed.

I felt guilty.

Usually people say that the fact rebreathers can support life for hours underwater is a good thing, and certainly had I been on open circuit with the additional stress of limited gas supply, increased breathing rate would likely have meant that I would have long since run out of gas and drowned. Part of what was keeping me calm was the fact I knew I wasn't going to run out of gas for hours. But here, faced with the horror of knowing I likely would never find my way out I imagined with growing repulsion the thought of desperately scrabbling around the wreck, blind in the zero visibility for hours just waiting to die. My thoughts then turned to a quick escape. I pondered fleetingly about taking my own life, I wondered to myself momentarily if it would be better to drown than to spend fruitless maddening hours blindly stumbling around the silty labyrinth in vain. If I were to drown myself how would I do it? I decided I would come off the rebreather and just take one big mouthful of water. Would it hurt? Would I lose consciousness immediately? Drowning myself I reasoned might be better than the slow maddening torture of waiting to die here.

So this is what it feels like to know you're going to die. No panic, quiet acceptance of the likelihood that death is coming and only thoughts of family and regret.

I recall reading stories about people facing their last moments on how they thought about their children. I always read that with some skepticism, thinking it romantic nonsense. So I was really quite surprised to realize that's who my first thought was about –my amazing 1 year old son Riane and how I was going to miss him growing up. I imagined him being told by my wife how his father died and imagined him hating me for dieing over something so silly. I thought about my dear patient wife and considered very momentarily to write a goodbye note to her (and Riane) on my wetnotes but then I recalled Tom Mount saying that often, faced with death, some people give up (and write notes to loved ones) where as if they spent that time and effort searching for an escape they might better survive.

This helped to jolt me out of my momentary self pity and spurred me to take action.

I realized by now that it would be purely an act of luck that would mean the difference between life and death for me now. I knew there was no logic, no process or protocol that I could rely on to expedite my escape. No, if I find my way out now it will be only pure luck that I blindly stumble on the right route out of this maze. Hey I had nothing to lose by trying – things couldn't get worse – I had already resigned myself to the likelihood of dieing here.

Blindly, methodically, calmly I ran my hands around the room walls once more, searching high and low around the room not even caring to keep a fins up position – there was no point - the room couldn't get any siltier... it was like being buried in mud. I felt two openings edged with crumbling metal. Both were too small to have been the way I came in. My hands eventually found another slightly bigger hole. This one was possibly just big enough to get through at a squeeze – but as I didn't recall any squeeze to get in I kept looking. In one corner of the room I my hands finally found what felt like a bigger hole. I reached my arm up through the hideous swirling silt that engulfed me and filled every corner of my vision and flailed it around to see how big the hole was. It was big enough to be the way I'd entered; I decided to chance my luck. I was conscious of the fact that I could be just going deeper into the wreck and reducing my chances of ever finding my way out even further, but I had put my faith in luck and had little choice. Also, it was bad enough being lost and blind in the maze, but that little room felt far too much like a coffin to me. If I'm going to die I'd rather not do it in that little room.

As I moved out of the room thorough my newfound hole I was reassured to see that the vis was still zero outside it. I reasoned that this meant I was in an area I had been in before on my way into the wreck. Counter intuitively, I reasoned that the silt that so far was doing its best to get me killed could now actually save me, for as long as I kept swimming into silted out areas then I would be heading out of the wreck into areas that I had silted by my movements upon the way in, and not clean siltless areas further into the wreck. I kicked forward blindly, the back of my unit scraped a few times against the ceiling. At times I was squeezing between the gap of ceiling to silt of less than a meter. I kept moving straight with increasing confidence as I was passing through still billowing silt clouds. I swam straight into a bulkhead cutting my head on the ceiling, or was it a room divider or corner of a room. I had a wall of some kind to my left. In this visibility I could be within feet of the outside but not be aware – I tried not to think about that. Swimming cautiously forward, one hand extended, my hands felt a bulkhead in front of me and found an opening, little more than a two feet wide - I couldn't have come that way. Next to the opening I could feel another wider one with a kind of frame between them. This jogged my memory; I vaguely recalled seeing an opening like

this earlier leading to the torpedo hole. So I squeezed through into more zero visibility and moved in what I hoped was a forward direction. I sensed that I was moving into a less constricted area; certainly the headroom was higher. Just as I had been doing all along but so far to no avail I covered my HID light to see if I could see natural light and suddenly, joyously, I could see a faint but glorious line of dark blue off to my left. I kicked forward and literally screamed into my mouthpiece as the silt slowly cleared and the dark blue line took shape and crystallized as the large opening of the wreck. I was out!!! YEEEEESSSS!!!!!!!

I will never forget the feeling of knowing I was going to make it. I was ecstatic and very very relieved. . I deliberately hadn't attempted to look at my VR3 from the moment I got lost, as I knew the time stress wouldn't help, although in all likelihood I wouldn't have been able to read the display in the silty soup even if I wanted to. I was quite surprised to see that I had only been lost in the wreck for 32 mins, all that time spent at 62m in absolute zero visibility.

I considered just how quickly ones thoughts can turn to those of death and how quickly actions and reactions come into play to possibly end ones life.

I swam up to the top of the wreck at 54m but then remembered that I had left my scooter at the opening. I dropped back down to the opening at 62m and realized I had to swim back into the still as thick as ever silt cloud to recover it. This time, taking no chances, I used a line to locate it. It sickened me to reenter that zero visibility again but the scooter was where I had left it, around 2m from the edge of the wreck and just a couple of meters from where I was looking for the jars. I clipped it on and headed on up. There was much beer drunk.

The lessons learnt and mistakes made are obvious to all.....still I can't help but wonder if I would have made it out alive had I screwed up the same way on Open Circuit.