

Lessons Learned

Tragic Drowning Fatality

Type of Incident: Leisure related drowning fatality

Country: United Kingdom

Location: Blegberry Beach North Devon Coast

Date of Incident: 9th August 2004



Paul Martins, Head of Discipline Completions & Wells for BP died tragically in a drowning accident while holidaying with his wife, their two children and other relatives on the North Devon Coast.

Brief Account of Incident:

The accident occurred while Paul and his family were enjoying the sea at Blegberry Beach near the town of Hartland, Devon (see below). The group including Paul had decided to bathe and enjoy the surf at the end of the day following a family walk along the coast near the beach.



The surf though high did not initially appear to be unusual for the coast nor the time of year.

The first two of the group entered the sea and were enjoying the surf when they noticed a strong (rip) current flowing off the beach. They begin to take action to get away from the current.

About this time Paul entered the water. It appears that he had noticed the unusual conditions and was attempting to warn the other two. It seems that at this stage he lost his footing, the current took hold of him and swept him out into the surf where he got into difficulty and drowned.

He was recovered shortly afterwards from the water. CPR and first aid was administered while the emergency services were mobilized. He was transferred by helicopter to hospital where he was later pronounced dead.

What went well?

The response of those on the beach at the time to the incident was excellent including:

- The initial raising of the alarm and call of the emergency services.
- The search of the sea carried out by those present.
- The administration of first aid and CPR.

The timely arrival and professionalism of the emergency service including coastguard, ambulance, police and rescue helicopter is to be commended.

What went wrong?

- It appears that a storm in the Atlantic had created some unusual sea conditions on the day (there are reports of other incidents in the UK and France on that day). While this may not have resulted in higher surf it may have caused waves of longer periodicity. This may have caused the volume flow (and hence strength) of the rip current to be higher than normal.
- The group only noticed the unusual conditions once they had entered the water.
- The party on the shore lost sight of the victim in the surf.

Lessons Learned:

- When involved in outdoor recreational activities such as swimming, climbing, hiking etc, be aware of changes in conditions caused by weather, sea state or other climatic circumstances. Note: though the location may be familiar, the conditions may not.
- Before embarking on any activity take time out to assess the conditions and the associated risks. An ability to observe, identify and discuss unusual rip currents (see over) or fast tides will assist the process.
- If caught in unusual conditions, know what actions to take to effect your survival (see overleaf for specific advice on rip currents).
- Having people trained in First Aid, CPR and rescue techniques in your group or nearby can help mitigate the consequences of an incident.



Key Message Stop, think, assess prior to undertaking any new activity.

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Information on Rip Currents

What are Rip Currents?

Rips are strong currents running out to sea that can easily take swimmers from shallow water out beyond their depth. They are responsible for a number of drownings each year. Rip currents are particularly powerful in larger surf, but can also be found around river mouths, estuaries and man-made structures like piers and groynes.

How to identify a Rip Current

Note: Rip currents can be very difficult to spot by the untrained eye and indeed, even experienced Lifeguards can be caught out by the quick and unexpected formation of Rips when managing beaches.

However here are some common signs to look out for:

- Discoloured, brown water (caused by sand being stirred up from the seabed).
- Foam on the water's surface.
- A break in the surf line where the waves are not as big.

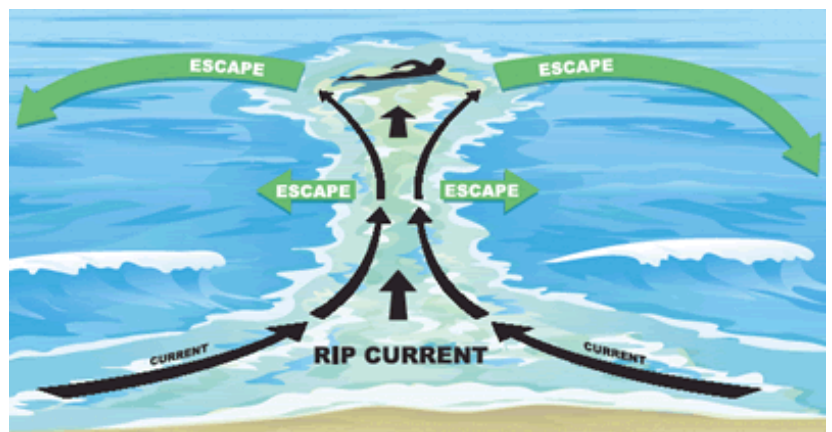


- Debris floating out to sea.
- A rippled patch of sea, when the water around is generally calm.

Escaping from a rip current

If you are caught in a rip current

- The most important thing is to remain calm and try not to panic.
- Keep hold of your body board, surfboard or inflatable and don't fight the rip current.
- If possible and safe to do so, wave an arm to attract attention. Shout if you are able to do so without ingesting water.
- If others have seen your plight, then you should relax, tread water, conserve energy and heat and float.
- Try and swim parallel to the beach until you are out of the rip current, then swim towards the shore.
- Never try and swim directly towards the shore against the rip current.
- If you can stand up, wade instead of swimming.



What to do if you see someone in difficulty in such circumstances

- Do not enter the water to attempt a rescue unless you have the skill, training and equipment to do so.
- Keep the victim in your sight and point continually at him/her.
- Raise the alarm. Find the nearest lifeguard or call 999 or 112 and ask for the coastguard.
- Shout encouragement to the victim only if there is a chance he/she can hear.
- Be ready to recover an unconscious body from shallow water, but only if this does not place you in danger.
- Be ready to give first aid and resuscitation immediately. (If you intend to swim at beaches without a lifeguard ensure that members of your party are trained in First Aid and CPR).

(Information courtesy of the RNLI and NOAA To find out more about beach safety visit www.beachsafety.org.uk or <http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/> or call 0800 328 0600.)