

Tech training with the Air-Gun

Jamie Obern



Using the full repertoire of my ninja like skills I have stalked my prey, closed in completely unnoticed and now I am only inches away. I prepare to fire my gun, just behind the right ear of my victim, a lieutenant colonel in the NZ Defence Force. In other circumstances this could have terrible consequences, but everything is not as it might seem. The gun in question fires only a fast stream of bubbles and whilst my student 'the victim' is in real-life a high-flying military officer this isn't an army training exercise but a diving course - and we're simulating a simple valve failure. So instead of disappearing back into the shadows like a real ninja would I'm hovering above the dive team, watching their reactions to the unfolding drama, ensuring no major mistakes are made with the valves and providing feedback where necessary.

To properly explain what we're simulating we need to take a couple of steps back. When divers move onto using double tanks there are two main reasons, firstly to have more gas and therefore a longer dive and secondly to have more redundancy – more options in the event of a failure. By using double tanks joined together by an isolator manifold divers have the option to switch off one or other tank valve or isolate the tanks, the choice being determined by events. However, contemplating your options as you sit in a comfortable chair drinking hot chocolate is entirely different to dealing with the real world and what seems like a simple matter of 'just' turning off a valve takes practise.

In the real world you're turning off a valve which is behind you, possibly difficult to reach and which if not well maintained can be stiff and difficult to manipulate in cold neoprene covered hands. You also have 3 valves to choose from and maybe you know which one to turn off and maybe you don't – the bubbles are not always helpful. Additionally depending on which valve you choose your gas supply may abruptly stop - not the most comforting feeling whilst underwater. And finally, as this is one of my courses, you'll be doing all of this whilst neutrally buoyant. Dammit what a b**tard you may well think.

But am I really being a b**tard? Is all this hassle really necessary?

We could of course all knee in a circle on the sand, then when everyone is ready I could signal which post I want you to turn off and in a calm and dignified manner we can move slowly around the circle until everyone has successfully demonstrated an ability to close each of their valves – at which point the skill is complete and we move onto the next skill. But is this what you want? Is this how things are likely to happen? Maybe you view this skill as just a hoop to be jumped through in order to get another piece of meaningless paper, but if not and you have accepted that regs do fail and therefore there is a need to do this skill then surely you can also





accept that it should be practised in a manner as close to real-life as possible? Isn't that what training is about? The choice is yours of course, but if all you can see is hoops then please don't come to me for training.

Which brings me back to the Lieutenant Colonel and the air-gun. The scenario I'm running is one we have already briefed and practised on land, so in theory the team will react correctly. However, in my experience very few drills ever go smoothly at the first attempt and this one is no different. As expected the sight and sound of the bubbles creates an incredible sense of urgency, which leads to mistakes and misdiagnosed problems. I intervene, explain and we reset before the divers continue their dive – at which point I 'attack' another victim with a similar scenario. Over the course of an hour we repeat his drama many times, in amongst other events and scenarios and although by the end everyone is tired there are a lot of smiles. It's been one of the most eventful dives these guys have ever done, but skills have been learned and improved and they know it. Dammit, not such a b**tard after all.