



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 23-13

Rip Currents

A trip to the beach should be fun. Unfortunately, rip currents have claimed the lives of Sailors and Marines chasing the attraction of diving, snorkeling and surfing for years, particularly in the Seventh Fleet area of operations. More than 50% of fatal water-related mishaps in the last five years occurred in Hawaii, Japan or Guam. This dispatch aims to bring awareness to Sailors and Marines stationed, deploying or visiting that area of responsibility – or any body of water – to stay vigilant when participating in water activities.



- Four Marines who had been on an unfamiliar island for less than two weeks for a six-month deployment with their unit chose a local beach as a swimming location. Shortly after entering the ocean, they challenged one another to swim to a distant rock on the barrier reef. The swim distance was estimated at more than 500 yards (1,000 yards round-trip). Approximately 3/4ths of the way to the rock, the Marines experienced rough water conditions and were overcome by strong rip currents. Two of the Marines in the group were able to return to shore and call for help, while the remaining two Marines clung to an inflated dry bag. The Marines were caught in the current and struggling for survival for 2-3 hours before the local Coast Guard rescued them. —*Humans are no match for strong seas or rip currents. Know what you are getting into – literally.*
- Two Sailors arrived at the local marina to rent kayaks for the day. The rental attendant gave the safety brief consisting of proper donning of flotation devices (vests), use of kayaks and boundary limitations. Once the Sailors exited the marina with the kayaks, they went ashore and removed their flotation devices. Minutes later, one Sailor entered chest-deep water to swim but lost situational awareness and entered depths of 13-15 feet with a strong current. The rising tide and current quickly overcame him. Sailor #2 noticed the friend struggling in the water and yelled for help. A nearby civilian boater heard the calls for help and proceeded to the Sailor's location, but lost sight of him in the murky water. Fire and emergency services deployed a sonar and weighted marker in the last known location, and an unknown bystander assisting in the search wearing a mask and snorkel was able to locate the Sailor's body. —*As with the first narrative, knowing the area can be a lifesaver. If you're unfamiliar with the local conditions, or not a strong swimmer, keep that life jacket on.*
- A group of Marines decided to rent surfboards from a local surf shop to enjoy the waves. Arriving at the beach, they went to the water to observe the conditions (*good plan!*) – *but apparently did not see the rip current.* As they raced into the water, one Marine led about 50 yards ahead of the group. When he caught the first wave, he realized they needed to go out farther because the water was too shallow on top of a reef. The other Marines caught the next wave, hit the reef and yelled to the group to go to a different spot. At that moment, four Marines were pulled into a rip current accompanied by 10-foot waves, throwing them around like a "washing machine" until all but one of them escaped from the current. They heard their friend yelling from the top of a rock as the waves rushed in and swept him away. They called for help as they searched for him. An hour later, first responders found him submerged. —*Yet again, this is an example of not knowing what they were getting into. This beach was well known for dangerous rip currents.*

Rip Currents



- Two Sailors were on liberty to check out a couple of beaches on the island to snorkel. When they arrived at their selected beach, they noted that outside of the reef the surf was strong due to the waves crashing, but overall, it was not in terrible condition. They also searched for wind direction and reef break to determine water conditions. Both Sailors decided to enter the water and swam to one of the beaches. As they swam back, Sailor 1 was caught in a rip current, which pulled him out past the reef. Sailor 2 tried to guide him back over the reef break but was unsuccessful. Sailor 2 saw that he became unresponsive and signaled for help

while he attempted to pull Sailor 1 to shore. A boat in the area rescued Sailor 2 (who made a full recovery). Search and Rescue teams eventually recovered Sailor 1, who was unresponsive. He was pronounced dead at the local hospital. —*This tragedy occurred in a region known for dangerous currents. Local news outlets report on the conditions regularly. Wherever you are stationed, use base and local resources to stay informed about the conditions before you swim. Your life could depend on it.*

Key Takeaways

The tragic examples in this dispatch should drive home the importance of knowing about rip currents, especially in unfamiliar waters. Consult with local lifeguards or local beachgoers that are familiar with the surf. In many regions, like the Seventh Fleet area, units will have specific safety briefs about dangerous surf and currents. Here are some additional tips to consider before you hit the water.

1. **Heed the warning signs.** Consider the time of day you're going into the water because of the tide and current changes. Observe the water break and wind advisories that increase current strength. Look for warning signs posted by local authorities about hazards in the water area and posted warning signs at the beach. Often, the best signs are actual signs!
2. **Overconfidence can get you in a pickle.** Confidence is understandable if you are a strong, experienced swimmer, but you are no match for the mighty rip current, which has claimed many lives. The sea state can change very quickly, so know your limits.
3. **Consider Personal Flotation.** We get it, flotation is not cool, but it saves lives, especially if you become unresponsive while participating in water activities. The ability to stay afloat increases your chances of survival against rip currents.
4. **Not alone.** Choose a lifeguarded beach, and always swim between the flags or buoys and not alone. If in doubt, don't go out.
5. **Tips about the rips.** Rip currents do not pull people under the water; they pull people away from the shore. They occur more at low tide when waves break over a sandbar near shore. August is the deadliest month for rip currents because ocean temperatures are the warmest of the year. Rip currents typically form at low spots or breaks in sandbars and near structures such as groins, jetties and piers. If you get caught in a rip current, swim parallel to the shore until you are out of it, then swim in to the beach. Learn more about rip currents from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration here: <https://www.noaa.gov/jetstream/ocean/rip-currents>

And remember, "let's be careful out there"