

A "Killer" Tan—

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It was my first time in Puerto Rico, my first squadron, my first time on detachment—I think you get the picture. Before we left and after we arrived, we had some training and safety briefs, and, of course, one of the topics covered was sunburn. We learned (and I use that word loosely) about using sunscreen and the dangers of getting sunburned.

I should explain here that before joining the Navy, I lived in Washington state, where the sun seldom visits. When I got to Norfolk, though, I started seeing the sun on a regular basis and figured I knew how much I could stand. So, when we left for Puerto Rico, I was sure I would return with a killer tan. I certainly wasn't worried about getting sunburned.

Here's what happened, however. I was assigned to night check and didn't have to be at work until 1700, which gave me an opportunity to spend all day on the beach. Without a worry in the world, a friend—also from Washington state—and I rented snorkel gear from MWR and headed to one of the beaches on base.

We arrived at 1100. The wind was blowing, so the sun and temperature didn't seem that hot. I decided not to use my sunscreen, despite all the warnings I had heard about the Puerto Rico sun. My friend, on the other hand, used sunscreen, but it provided only SPF-4 protection. Bottom line: We both were stupid!

From the beach, you could see a little island. I didn't know how far it was from shore, but I now know that anything on the water looks closer than it really is. We put on our snorkeling gear and set out for the island.

The water was cool and clear, and it felt great. On the way, we saw some fish, a lobster, and a



The Puerto Rico sun and no protection gives you this.

stingray that quickly buried itself in the sandy bottom. When we arrived at the island, a dark-purple, spongy substance, with long spikes, was growing everywhere, so we decided not to explore. Besides, it was only about 3 yards in diameter.

Instead, we swam around to the far side of the island and was checking the sandy bottom for sea-shells. Suddenly, however, we came to a drop-off that looked like it went straight down. The water

And Its Aftermath



The Puerto Rico sun and SPF-4 protection gives you this.

was a deep blue, and it felt much cooler than the surrounding water. I got a chill not being able to see the ocean floor, and my mind flashed to scenes from the movie "Jaws." We quickly swam back to the other side of the island.

After snorkeling for about four more hours, we headed to the barracks to get ready for work—and yes, I know what they say about spending four hours on the water in Puerto Rico. We had show-

ered, shaved, and arrived at work when my skin started feeling tight, which I knew was from my newly acquired tan. A couple more hours passed, and I started feeling blisters popping up on my back. Then, I started feeling sick, but I didn't say anything about it. After all, we had been told at the safety briefs that no one would get time off for a sunburn.

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My supervisor, however, figured out what was wrong and went to the mini-mart on base, where he got me everything they had for sunburn. None of it helped much, though. I didn't feel any better the next day—neither did my friend. We had to go see a flight surgeon, who gave us the bad news. I had second-degree burns on my back and the back of my legs; my friend had a few second-degree-burn spots on his back. I spent four days SIQ and still didn't feel like moving, let alone working.

The only good news that came from this incident is the fact I didn't get written up for getting sunburned so badly. Afterward, I learned just how stupid I had been: Did you know you can throw a rock and hit the equator from Puerto Rico? If I'm ever there again and you see me, wave and say "hi." You'll recognize me because I'll be the one with sunscreen rated at SPF 45. I'll also be wearing a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and a sombrero. 