

I Nearly Choked to Death

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Leave tropical, freshwater fish in a fish tank where they belong. That's the lesson I learned the hard way one September Saturday.

With nothing to do that evening, some shipmates and I strolled down the hallway of our barracks to visit a friend. We had a few beers—on top of the ones we already had drunk—and I was feeling good. Suddenly, I noticed the fish tank and saw some fish swimming around in it. I couldn't resist tapping on the side of the tank and watching the fish run around scared. I thought it was hilarious.

My friend warned me to stop. He knew his roommate, who owned the fish, took a lot of pride in them and wouldn't like what I was doing. I kept playing, though, and got bold enough to stick my hand inside the tank. I caught one of the fish, a gourami, and took it out of the tank. It was silver, except for a black dot on its tail.

Caught up in the excitement of the moment, I took a firm grip on the gourami, raised it close to my mouth, and started teasing I was going to swallow it. I then made the mistake of taking my eyes off the fish for a moment and ever so slightly loosened my grip. Before I knew what had happened, the fish was in my mouth.

The room fell silent. A look of surprise was on everyone's face, including mine. The gourami was halfway down my throat before I tried to cough it up. By this time, I was choking, and I felt someone slap me on the back. Next came a blow from a closed hand, then another and another, but none of the blows worked. I tried to swallow the fish, but that didn't work either.

Someone then performed the Heimlich maneuver on me. Still, the fish stayed stuck, with its tail wagging furiously. I didn't know if the gourami was trying to wiggle free or just was enjoying its revenge for what I had done. In any



When you see tropical fish in an aquarium, the smart thing to do is leave them alone.

event, we both were learning the horror of what it feels like not being able to breathe.

I still was coughing and gasping for breath when two shipmates rushed me back to my room, where Airman Emilio Carter performed the Heimlich maneuver on me. (*See Airman Carter's comments at the end of this article.*) This time, it worked. The gourami popped out of my mouth onto the floor.

I started coughing up blood, so my shipmates called an ambulance that took me to an emergency ward. Thanks to my foolishness, I had suffered lacerations to my throat.

Everyone at the emergency ward that evening got a good laugh on me. Incidentally, the gourami is back in its tank, swimming around happily but with part of its black dot missing.

I was beefing up my Sega skills when two of my friend's shipmates burst into the room, holding him up. They said he was choking and asked me to keep an eye on him while they went to get help. Watching my friend bent over and gasping for air was horrifying. Panic set in at first, but then I calmed down and decided I needed to do something. I couldn't let him die. I told him I was going to do the Heimlich maneuver, then stepped behind him. It took four thrusts because he at first tightened up his stomach muscles. Once I was successful, we shared a laugh. Because of this incident, I have decided to expand my CPR training. I'm now planning to become a CPR instructor. What a story I'll have for my students!—Airman Emilio Carter. A