

feet high, another a little smaller, so I was game for whatever cliff we were after. We met, packed our things, and headed for a small place along the Toutle River.

When I saw the place we were jumping, I was a little nervous—mostly because I envisioned myself taking a few steps toward the cliff and tripping right before I jumped, then falling uncontrollably toward the swirling waters below. I took a breath, closed my eyes, and pushed the thoughts of unavoidable incident somewhere to the back of my mind.

In front of me, a tree grew about 15 feet out from the ledge, with two branches overhanging the 60-foot cliff—one below and one just within arm's reach of someone jumping out. As my friends drew closer, I flashed them a “what are we waiting for grin,” took a few steps, and jumped out. I knew if I didn't go first, I'd be much more nervous being the last to go.

It seemed like forever as I reached out, let my hands slide through the leaves of the higher limb, and then felt myself spin sideways—oh, what a mistake! I flailed my left arm in a sloppy attempt to right myself, and, after what seemed like a few more minutes, I thought I had been successful. Then, however, I felt a raindrop, and I knew my cloud had been following me all along. In no time, my freshly righted position morphed into a wicked side flop. All I could think was, “I hope it's not too bad.”

As I surfaced and tried to breathe, I couldn't help but notice that, while no air came in, a massive amount of blood came out. I was hoping I had a bloody nose or had bitten my tongue. Finally, I got a few breaths of air in, but the amount of blood coming up was gagging me, and I puked three times. A friend met me at the bottom, and one jumped from the top. I soon noticed my chest was getting tight, and a wheezing gurgle was interrupting my breathing.

We decided the situation was serious enough to warrant a hospital visit. After resting on the rocks, I walked back into the river and swam across to the side where the car was. We then hiked up the hill to the car and sped to the hospital. Three days, a bit of blood, and lots of morphine later, I left the intensive-care unit the proud owner of injured lungs—one massively contused, the other less serious—and a slightly bruised heart.

I spent the remainder of my time home on convalescent leave, sunken deep into the cushions of my couch, mocked by the crooked sunshine seeping through my open window. Fortunately, we are not all cursed with a black cloud, and the occasional rain visits mostly just to wet the ground. Most mishaps are avoidable and can be dodged with careful planning and constructive insight. Fully healed, I've finally reached my permanent duty station—home at last, where the dark clouds soar, and rain is just around the corner. ■

## “Testing the Water” Proves Fatal

By Ken Testorff,  
Naval Safety Center

A “No Swimming” sign was posted, but that warning didn't stop a 21-year-old E-3 from joining seven other Sailors and two local nationals from enjoying the waterfall at a park. Everyone except the E-3 previously had been to the 45-foot fall, which runs down an almost vertical cliff into a pool estimated to be 40 feet deep.

The water flow at this site usually is just above a trickle. This day, though, the waterfall was running very rapidly, following three days of rain. Witnesses said the fall and pool were far more turbulent than they ever had observed in the past—an observation that a photo corroborated. At the time, the air temperature was 84

degrees Fahrenheit, and the water temperature was estimated at 70 to 75 degrees.

Most of the group never had read the “No Swimming” sign [*written in two languages, one of which is English*] and reported they had seen both Americans and locals swimming there in the past. Two, however, said they had seen the sign before but just disregarded it because they had seen so many other people swimming.

By the time the E-3 arrived at the fall, two other Sailors already had jumped from a 25-foot rock ledge into the pool and were sitting in the pool area, near the side. A fixed rope assisted people in climbing to the ledge on the side of the

cliff. The ledge sticks out far enough from the cliff for one person to stand there and jump into the pool. According to witnesses this day, though, the rocks were slippery because of the heavy water flow and moss growth.

Two more Sailors climbed the cliff and jumped into the pool ahead of the E-3; one other waited behind him. When the E-3 first reached the ledge, he faced outward but then stepped back. He then, according to witnesses, moved forward again and jumped, shouting, “Woo hoo!”

The witnesses said it appeared the E-3 slipped just as he planted his feet to jump. Instead of actually jumping, he fell off the ledge and down the side of the cliff, with his head and upper back hitting the side of the cliff just before water entry. He landed on his back and failed to surface.

Four in the group immediately entered the water to search for him, including two who were rescue-swimmer certified. Their search continued for several minutes but was complicated by the strong current surrounding the waterfall. It was impossible for them to reach the position where the E-3 had entered the water.

Two other members of the group reported the emergency to a campsite attendant who called the local police. They arrived 20 to 30 minutes later with rescue divers, who started a search but had to suspend it after four hours because of darkness and the turbulent water. They resumed the search the next day and found the victim’s body.

What lessons were learned from this incident?

The area wasn’t safe for swimming, as evidenced by the posted “No Swimming” signs. The conditions on the day of the mishap, after several days of heavy rain, were extra dangerous. The victim and accompanying personnel failed to recognize that an area already posted for “No Swimming” had become even more dangerous because of environmental conditions. They failed to conduct sufficient risk management to prevent a fatality. Having seen others swimming without injury in the past, despite a posted sign to the contrary, was justification for them to do nothing more to assess personal risk. Everyone failed to reassess the impact of adverse weather on the probability of mishap and, therefore, didn’t recognize that the chances of a tragic outcome had increased dramatically.

Sailors need to be reminded during ORM training that just because someone else does something without getting hurt doesn’t mean



He landed on his back and failed to surface.

that risks don’t exist. All hands also need to be reminded to stay alert for changes in environmental conditions and to reassess their ORM analysis as those changes occur.

After this tragedy, the CO placed the waterfall off limits to all personnel for swimming. A safety stand-down also was held to emphasize recreational safety and to discuss the important role ORM plays in all recreational, home and athletic activities. The CO further started a weekly liberty meeting to discuss all weekend liberty plans, to conduct an ORM assessment of those plans, and to make adjustments as necessary, based on the risk assessment. ■