

A Deadly Combination: Wind, Waves and Currents

By Carol Parks

As warm weather returns to many locations, Marines and civilians emerge out of winter hibernation. Eager to catch some rays, they'll hurry to their favorite local beaches, rivers and pools to wet their fins. For many avid swimmers, divers and boaters the fun is only beginning, but oftentimes the sweetness of summer turns sour when reckless fun on the water kills Marines.

From FY97 to 01, 12 Marines died while participating in water sports. These water deaths, seven of which occurred in Japanese waters, could have been avoided.

Dangers lurk not only in the deep but close to shore, as well. The words "carried away by currents" and "swept out to sea" are frequently listed as causal factors of drowning. Water can appear deceptively calm, but what lies beneath will bite and not let go. You might not see a dorsal fin, but indicators of such dangers are more obvious than you think—strong winds, pounding waves and steep drop-offs can spell trouble. Just because the surf isn't big doesn't mean there aren't dangerous currents and rip tides..

Currents are created when water rushes through restrictive channels and depressions in rivers and between sandbars or troughs at the beach. Survivors tell stories of terrifying fights when caught in these fast-moving waters. Survival requires control. Swimming against a strong rip current is exhausting and next to impossible, even for the strongest swimmer. Instead, focus on swimming across the current, diagonally back toward shore. Eventually, you will swim out of it and reach dry land. The best line of defense is to stay in areas where lifeguards are on duty.

Spring through fall marks a dangerous time: hurricane and typhoon season. Sustained winds of 74 mph or stronger and dangerously high water and waves are possible. Water conditions commonly continue to rage even after winds have abated. During or immediately following hurricanes and typhoons, rogue waves may appear and sweep unsuspecting swimmers out to sea.

Think prevention. Use risk management to identify hazards and to rank them in order of severity. Mention the hazards of severe weather, rough surf and currents in local waters during all inbriefs of newly assigned personnel, including those on TAD.

Next time you hit the water, watch for flags indicating dangerous beach conditions. Don't swim alone and, above all, don't mix alcohol with swimming. ☀

