

## **It's Not the Fall that Kills You: Security Lessons from Near-Death Experiences**

by Ira Winkler

I live a fairly exciting life. Part of that includes an above average number of near-death experiences. They range from walking away from a high speed accident with a tractor-trailer, to finding myself two feet from a wild leopard in South Africa. Maybe the secret of walking away from these experiences is that I never thought of them as being near-death experiences. I just did what I thought I had to do, while other people who witnessed these things later told me that I was lucky to be alive.

Recently I went SCUBA diving in some fairly rough surf in Curacao. The waves were running about 10 feet, with some larger swells. When a diver is underwater, waves aren't much of a problem, given that you are generally at least 30 feet down. To exit the water, though, I had to go into a small, protected cove along the rocks of a breakwater where the water was shallower near the entrance to the cove. As I entered the cove, a large swell sucked me up and I found myself on a small rock ledge, about three feet above the normal water line. Ten foot waves pounded the rocks, and me.

The first thing I instinctively did was grab onto a large rock and hug it tight. After all, the waves weren't the problem; it was being thrown into the rocks that could hurt me. The edges of the rocks were very jagged, and I could feel one tear into the side of my thumb. I obviously didn't want to cause more damage to my thumb, but being at the mercy of the waves throwing me against the rocks was even worse.

I was in a Catch 22 situation. The best solution was to drop my equipment, so I could climb to the top of the breakwater. However, if anything went wrong, I would be in very violent water without my equipment. That strategy violated the very basics of SCUBA training.

Because I do volunteer work that involves diving in zero visibility, I'd received special training in getting safely through small openings. So, when I saw a gap in the rocks, I saw an opportunity. It seemed large enough for me to get through with all of my equipment and I decided that this was my best escape option. Ironically, I had to wait for the bigger waves to come so that the water was high enough for me to get to the opening. One got me to the opening, and then the next - combined with my own efforts - got me through. I was in the calm breakwater.

When I got out of the water, I was really embarrassed and wanted to get out of there. I had blood dripping from my hand, and I wanted to clean myself up. I walked away dejected.

During my crisis, I never thought my life was on the line. I just assessed my situation and continually made the best decisions I could, given the information available. It wasn't until later that I was told by people who observed the situation that they thought I might die. Maybe if I realized how dire the situation was, I would have panicked and I wouldn't have made it. At the time, though, I simply focused on finding the best thing to do, one step at a time. Even my "unrelated" training suddenly became a lifesaver.

I've learned in my security work that bad situations often result from human error. Even well trained people slip up, and the consequences of their mistakes tend to be worse than those of amateurs' errors.

Here, I probably shouldn't have gotten into the situation in the first place. I should have stayed further away from the breakwater, which would have allowed me to stay deeper and not be caught in the swell that sucked me up.

When faced with a security incident, you have to determine the biggest source of potential damage. Frequently, it may not be anything you were trained for, or have any background in, and you have to go with your gut. The more damaging the situation, the more quickly you have to act. Here, grabbing onto the rocks is not something they tell you to do in your normal open water SCUBA class. It's not even something they tell you to do in a divemaster class. However, I made the decision that the greatest risk I faced was being smashed into the rocks, and to protect myself, I needed to reduce that risk.

In security work, sometimes you have to spill some blood for the larger good. Grabbing onto the rocks caused me to tear my thumb open, but it was the best thing I could have done. Protecting my thumb and hoping for the best wouldn't produce the larger good, saving my life.

In my book, *Spies Among Us*, I discuss how most organizations are hesitant to reveal losses of intellectual property. The loss could be devastating, but most frequently, companies hope that if they don't tell anyone, there won't be a perceived loss. The fact is that once people acknowledge a loss, they can then take aggressive action against the offenders. While they may not be sure what that action should be, company lawyers and officers can look to similar incidents and legal precedents to get an idea of what they can do to stem real losses. The typical response, though, seems to be to hide the loss and hope for the best. This is similar to hoping that when you fall, there won't be a landing.

The embarrassment I suffered as a result of my diving situation was similar to the embarrassment organizations suffer when they are the victim of an incident. I felt embarrassed that I got into the situation in the first place, but in hindsight, I should be proud of having the skill that let me walk away from the whole thing. I strongly recommend to companies that when negative events occur, they use the events to their advantage and embrace what they did properly. In the worst case, they can use the incident as justification to implement stronger security measures.

This also brings up the issue of training and experience. While I may not have been trained for this particular type of crisis, my experience and other training led to the correct instinctive action. The more training and experience a person has, the more likely he or she will react effectively to unforeseen problems. Gut instincts come into effect when you are faced with unfamiliar situations that you haven't been trained for. Those instincts, while seemingly originating in the unconscious, are a result of previous training and experience.

Additionally, more training and experience allowed me to choose the option of going through a relatively small opening in the rocks. Training and practical experience will allow security staffs to choose options that other people would not feel comfortable pursuing. This attests to the hiring of seasoned professionals, as well as investing in training.

The most important issue, though, is mental focus. During this and my other near-death experiences, I constantly focused on what actions to take next. I wasn't wasting brain cycles trying to decide how bad the crisis was, which would have likely caused it to spiral downhill quickly. While it is important to realize that a situation deserves immediate attention, as long as you give the situation all required resources, the scope of the situation is irrelevant. When responding to critical situations, the focus has to be on maintaining life support (in my case, keeping my equipment in place) and then on determining the best way to deal with the crisis. This is important in all security incidents.

There's an old joke that goes, "It's not the fall that kills you; it's the landing." While it may be intended as a joke, it is a very important distinction. The fall means that you are experiencing some crisis that could have disastrous results. However, until you land, you can create ways to survive. You have to focus on softening or avoiding the landing. In most crisis situations, you have the time to make rational decisions, and you should do so. If you start contemplating the landing, instead of focusing on the actions to take that are appropriate at the time, you will experience the worst. Consider that if you are falling off a cliff, wouldn't it be great to have previously taken a skydiving course, and to be wearing a parachute?

In the ideal world, I would have never gotten into the near-death situation I was in, and no organization would ever have a security incident. That is not the real world. As another old saying goes, "A ship in port is perfectly safe, but that is not what ships were meant to do." The more you put yourself out there, the more you will experience problems. You are not in control of what will happen, but you are in control of how well you prepare yourself and how you handle the problems. You'll have a better shot at a safe landing.

*About the Author:*

Ira Winkler is the author of *Spies Among Us* and a renowned security professional.

Email: [ira@isag.com](mailto:ira@isag.com)



West Coast Office:  
1673A SW Montgomery Drive  
Portland, OR 97201  
Phone: (503) 248-2233

East Coast Office:  
279 Veleros Court  
Coral Gables, FL 33143  
Phone: (305) 205-5042

email: [info@crisissimulations.com](mailto:info@crisissimulations.com)  
web: [www.crisissimulations.com](http://www.crisissimulations.com)

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