

Man survived without oxygen for 25 minutes thanks to controversial rescue

Years ago, a commercial diver from Terrytown spent nearly a half hour at the bottom of the Mississippi River with no oxygen. Today, he lives a normal life with no health problems. [See pictures](#)

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NEW ORLEANS Years ago, a commercial diver from Terrytown spent nearly a half hour at the bottom of the Mississippi River with no oxygen. Today, he lives a normal life with no health problems.

Now a local doctor says the mistake that saved his life and prevented brain damage could also be used to save the lives of people who have cardiac arrest and keep them free of brain damage as well.

It was on a very hot August day in 1983, when Ray Parrish, a 35-year-old commercial diver, went to work in the middle of the muddy Mississippi River around Destrehan. His mission: go down to the bottom of the river, nearly 90 feet down in pure darkness, to find and hook up cables to a new tug that sank on her maiden voyage. On top was a barge and crane waiting to pull her up.

'This boat had a whole lot of sand and mud around it and it was too much to get anything underneath the bow,' said Parrish, who now lives in California.

So Parrish used an air lift, a huge vacuum hose suspended from a crane, to suck up silt and sand and mud with a tremendous force to clear the tug.

Then something went terribly wrong.

'Something was killing me,' Parrish said.

He couldn't take in any air.

'I wasn't breathing. I wasn't even trying to breath,' he said.

The large hose came in contact with the top of his helmet. He was being sucked up by a couple thousand pounds of pressure.

He then realized he had to act then or die 89 feet below the city.

No panic set in. He realized he had to do whatever it took to survive.

'Strictly survival. It was 100 percent live through this situation, nothing else. There was one brief flash of, 'What about my wife and kids?' you know, but it was just that, and it's back to work. I got to get out of this,' said Parrish, fighting back the emotional tears.

Then his tender, the member of the diving team on the surface, lost contact.

'Everything is just white, very bright, warm comfortable feeling. I see nothing but white, don't have any sensation of anything. There's no pain. There's no nothing very pleasant, very, very pleasant. Then the white that I see just starts to shrink, goes down to a dot and then it's gone,' he described of the last moment he remembers under water.

When a diver brought Parrish up, there was no heartbeat, no respiration. He was without oxygen for 25 minutes. Doctors say in four minutes, the human brain suffers severe damage. After 16 minutes in cardiac arrest, in normal temperatures, when no blood is pumping so the brain gets no oxygen as well, no patients survive.

'The trauma actually lifted the face and separated it from the skull and then the blood rushed in with bleeding underneath the skin to fill the area with almost a current jelly clot,' said Dr. Keith Van Meter, the head of emergency medicine at LSU Health Sciences Center.

'Oh, you picture a big, ole watermelon, overripe and that's what my husband's face looked like,' said Cheryl Parrish, Ray's wife.

'He was swollen to the point that every facial feature was indecipherable, and there was just a little area for his mouth and it would be very hard for him to breath,' Van Meter said.

The tender on the barge got into a diver's decompression chamber with Parrish, taking him down to 165 feet of pressure and putting a mask of pure oxygen on him. He was getting six times the amount of normal oxygen.

'Six hundred percent oxygen. It is so toxic that you would seize in a minute or two of breathing it,' Van Meter said.

What happened to the diver went against conventional medicine and was even considered dangerous. It caused his tender, a man named John, to go into convulsions. But by surprise, it brought Parrish back to life with no brain damage.

Van Meter was brought to the barge within 45 minutes, got in the tank and began treatment. The three men had to live in that small oxygen chamber on the barge for two to three days so the oxygen level could be normalized slowly, or their health could have been in danger, possibly with a fatal case of bends. They could only see out of a small port hole.

'Dr. Van Meter said, 'Your wife is here.' And Ray looked up and he had to open his eyelids (with his fingers) to see me, and I said, 'I love you.' And he said, 'I love you too.' And I knew he was going to be alright right then and there,' said Cheryl crying tears of joy as she remembered that moment.

Parrish's bruised face was still purple and swollen three days later. But since this medical mistake saved Parrish, Van Meter has done years of animal testing and has published his scientific findings showing that animals without oxygen for the same long period of time survive when resuscitated in high pressure oxygen.

Now he wants to do human testing. He envisions one day all EMS workers with small oxygen chambers on board to save cardiac arrest patients from brain damage and death.

But he fears many will die before this method is accepted as standard of care by the medical community.

'I think they (doctors) are unfamiliar with it (this resuscitation method.) I think it is reasonably convincing if they read the published literature,' Van Meter said.

'My husband is a living, breathing proof that this treatment does work,' Cheryl said.

Van Meter continues to fund his own research treating many different types of brain damage with hyperbaric oxygen chambers, but state funding cutbacks are threatening to close the unit at University Hospital. That could hurt treating oil and gas workers as well as anyone who has a cardiac arrest or other severe injuries, according to doctors who use the unit.