

Text by Simon Pridmore

Readers of my Scuba books often say how useful they find the stories I tell to illustrate key messages. The stories are all true. I wish I could say I made them up, but I am not that creative. Fortunately, life tends to be able to conjure up real situations that are far more instructive than those I could ever invent.

The stories I tell include events I experienced myself, things I have observed happening to others and incidents that fellow divers tell me about. Many concern close calls, and some recount events in which a series of apparently minor issues combine to create a near-disaster.

This is one of those stories. It took place in the islands of south Penghu a couple of years ago while I was doing research for the Dive into Taiwan book.

In search of barracuda

We joined a boat heading out to find a huge school of yellowfin barracuda that were known to gather at a particular site when the current was running. The moon would be full that night and the tide charts looked promising, so everyone was hoping for action. One of the groups on board was from a local club and consisted of a

dive leader with six divers in his charge.

An hour out of port, we reached our destination off the southern tip of a rocky outcrop, and the boat captain executed a search. He sighted a large mass of marine life on his fish finder and issued instructions to his crew. The divers were

divided into three groups, and we were teamed up with the divers from the club.

On a signal, we dropped into calm shallow water in a small bay nearby, descended and swam out to sea, with the club divers just ahead of us. As we emerged from the protection of the bay,

the current picked us up and swept us away. We soon found ourselves drifting fast along a seabed at a depth of around 20m, passing a succession of coral mounds of various sizes, all surrounded by schools of small fish.

When we found a bommie that

seemed large enough to provide a little shelter from the moving water, we tucked in behind it, set our reef hooks and floated up to hang above the reef in the "wind," gazing out into the blue and hoping for a barracuda sighting. The dive leader and his team were doing the



The Barracuda Dive

KYO LIU



same thing above a larger bommie a few metres away.

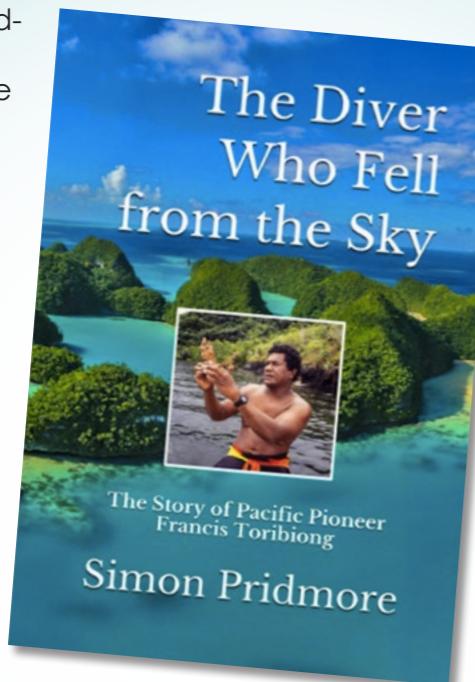
After 20 minutes or so, a rotating school of a couple of hundred barracuda appeared in the distance. The mass of long, silver, yellow-tailed, chevroned, sharp-toothed predators approached and started circling around us. It felt like

we were in the vortex of a cyclone, the eye of a fish storm. We hit the shoot button on our cameras and got some great video as the barracuda came close enough to touch, sometimes obscuring our vision of the reef completely.

Eventually, the school moved away. We glanced over at the dive leader and his

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Toribiong was the first Palauan ever to seek and seize the international narrative. No Palauan, in any context or field, had previously thought to go out into the world and say: "This is Palau—what we have is wonderful. Come and see!" This is his astonishing story.

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him this title, people were speaking both literally and figuratively.

Toribiong was so completely different from all of his contemporaries in terms of his demeanor, his ambitions and his vision, that it was as if he had come from outer space. Palau had never seen anybody quite like him and there was no historical precedent for what he did. He had no operations manual to consult and no examples to follow. He wrote his own life.



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team. They unhooked from the reef and started to drift again. We followed their example. Who knows? Maybe we would come across the barracuda again?

Ascending pair

Then, we saw two members of the team start to ascend. We guessed they might be low on air, due to a combination of the excitement and the effort of staying balanced on the end of their reef hook lines in the face of the current.

The dive leader did not seem to have noticed, so we glanced at each other and moved a little closer to the ascending pair, prepared to lend help if necessary. At the same time, we noticed that the seabed was falling away and guessed that the bommies below were now at around 25 to 30m. We had no desire to go any deeper at this point in the dive. We had seen what we came to see.

Then the school of barracuda returned, swimming around us again as we drifted serenely along in midwater. However, the

two divers who had broken away from their team immediately dropped to the seabed when they saw the barracuda come back, presumably so they would have a more stable platform to take pictures from. They were both breathing heavily as they struggled to redeploy their reef hooks and get into position. They were both generating an almost constant stream of bubbles.

We watched from above, finning steadily to stay in place above them. This time, the barracuda did not stay long, and we saw the two divers begin to ascend again. One kept looking at his pressure gauge. The dive leader appeared, swam over to the anxious diver and, after a brief exchange of signals, they started sharing air and began to ascend slowly together. The dive leader kept looking over at the second diver, evidently concerned but powerless to help.

Second diver

We approached the second diver and

signalled to ask if he was all right. The diver replied OK, but we were dubious and decided to stay close by. Nevertheless, we were still not close enough to do anything when he suddenly started heading for the surface, apparently out of control. All we could do was hope that he would manage to arrest his ascent before he hit the surface.

This he did, by deflating his BCD. Then he reached for his delayed surface marker buoy (DSMB). Good, we thought, he will now do a safety stop, then go up.

Unfortunately, the diver seemed to be having difficulty attaching a small reel to his DSMB and was concentrating so much on sorting it out that he did not notice that he was descending again, and fast. He must have just emptied his BCD completely. We were at about 13m when he came plummeting past us, heading quickly back towards the seabed. Finally, he got his reel attached, added air to his BCD to halt his fall and started inflating his DSMB. Having inflated

opinion



Diver deploying a DSMB

New e-Book

Author Simon Pridmore has just released a new single volume e-book that brings together four books in his bestselling Scuba series:

- **Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way**
- **Scuba Confidential – An Insider’s Guide to Becoming a Better Diver**
- **Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and**
- **Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations**

As Simon puts it, this is “a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits.” Nothing is missing. Scuba Compendium gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary

on every dive is to complete the dive safely, not see big fish or take photos.

4. Practise raising your DSMB from depth while staying neutrally buoyant until this skill also becomes instinctive.

5. Be aware of your depth as you are raising your DSMB. Turn your computer so that it is on the inside of your wrist, so you can easily see the screen while you manipulate your reel and line.

6. Know how much line you have attached to your DSMB. Measure it on land and write the length in indelible marker

on the body of the reel as a reminder.

7. Never clip a reel off to your BCD. Keep it in your hand so you can release it if something goes wrong. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way, Scuba Confidential: An Insider’s Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and Scuba Professional:

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Simon Pridmore

tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

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Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations, which are now available in a compendium. He is also the co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His recent published books include The Diver Who Fell From The Sky, Dive into Taiwan, Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again! and the Dining with Divers series of cookbooks. For more information, please see his website at: SimonPridmore.com.