

Text by Simon Pridmore

When divers face unforeseen conditions, the actions they and the dive crew take at the surface can significantly impact the outcome. Simon Pridmore shares his personal experience and insights on handling challenges on a dive.

The genesis of this story was a friend asking me if I had ever been frightened on a technical dive. My answer was, “Not at the time.” There have been a few occasions when fear only arose after the dive—after I reviewed what had happened and realised how differently things could have turned out. That’s when the cold sweat formed on my forehead, a chill ran down the back of my neck, my face began to flush, and I got that familiar “uh-oh” sensation in the pit of my stomach.

On the actual dive, I was just too busy to realise the position I was in. I was thinking so hard about how to get out of it that I did not have the headspace to be frightened.

Here is the story of one of those dives. It happened several years ago, but my memory of it is still crystal clear.

The main thing I recall about the lead-up to the dive was that this was

just a fun dive with a friend named Toyo, who was visiting us for a while. The dive took place at a site I knew very well, close to the dive shop. There was no training and minimal planning involved, and the job I had given myself to do that day was not urgent. It could have been done anytime.

The plan

It was a beautiful day in Guam. It is always a beautiful day in Guam—except when it isn’t.

I am pretty sure we did not even check the weather forecast before the dive. We should have checked.

Toyo and I got together early to

check gases and load the boat. It was going to be a long dive, and we wanted to get back in time for lunch. We were headed for a place called Facpi Point to the south of Guam’s Agat Bay, where, off the tip of the point, there are caverns at the bottom of the reef wall at depths of 60

to 70m (200 to 230ft). We planned a 40-minute bottom time, with an emergency provision for 45 minutes if we ran long. We were using manifolded double cylinders of trimix 18/35 and two side-slung decompression cylinders containing nitrox 40 and nitrox 80, respectively.

Surface Support

The Most Important People in Your World



The main purpose of the dive was to have fun. The secondary purpose was to collect sand samples from the furthest inner reaches of the deeper caverns. We had been asked to do this by researchers at the University of Guam's Marine Laboratory, who were excited at the prospect of discovering tiny ancient fossils that had lain undisturbed for aeons. We were armed with taped collection tubes and markers to record depth, all stashed away in zippered harness pouches. So, we were doing science—or rather, we were facilitating science. Other people, smarter than us, were going to do the science.

We had placed a mooring buoy on this site in the past, but the buoy kept getting stolen. The line was still there, though, looped around a rock

on the reef top, just a short swim away from the wall. What we would do before the last decompression phase of a deep Facpi dive was attach an orange delayed surface marker buoy (DSMB) to the free end of the line, inflate the DSMB to lift the line to the surface, and use this as our ascent platform. Then, once everyone had surfaced, we would remove the DSMB and let the line drop back down to the seabed to wait for our return.

The dive

We arrived at the site and assembled our dive gear. The sea was not flat calm, but it was not what anyone would call rough. I do not know if the sky was clear, but I know that neither I nor Captain Chris or Crewman Chuck were at all concerned about the

weather. It was about 10 a.m. when I told Chris and Chuck that we would be up in about two hours, but they should see our DSMB pop up with the line attached long before that, probably at around the one-hour mark.

Chris waited until we were ready, then manoeuvred into position and dropped us in the perfect spot right above the mooring line. The visibility was fabulous, as it often is in the deep ocean off Guam's coastline. On the way down, we made a mental note of exactly where the line was, then swam across to a sand channel at the edge of the wall and headed down to the first of the caverns.

A nurse shark was lying at the cavern entrance, but it swam away as we approached. I went in as far as I could until my chest was on the sand and my tanks were scraping the roof, then reached out to scoop up some sand into one of the tubes.

The ascent

We cruised west and then south around the point, going deeper, sightseeing, fish-watching, collecting from the caves, and just having a nice, relaxed dive. After a while, with all our tubes full of sand and stowed away, we turned around and ascended a little to explore the wall as we went back to our starting point.

We crossed the channel, found the line, fixed and sent up the DSMB and watched it rise to the surface. It was then that we noticed that the ocean 40m (~131ft) above us seemed more disturbed than when we had left it. As we approached the line, we could see it moving around even at that depth, so we kept our distance from it, just using it as a guideline as we ascended, switching to our first decompression gas as we passed 30m (~98ft).

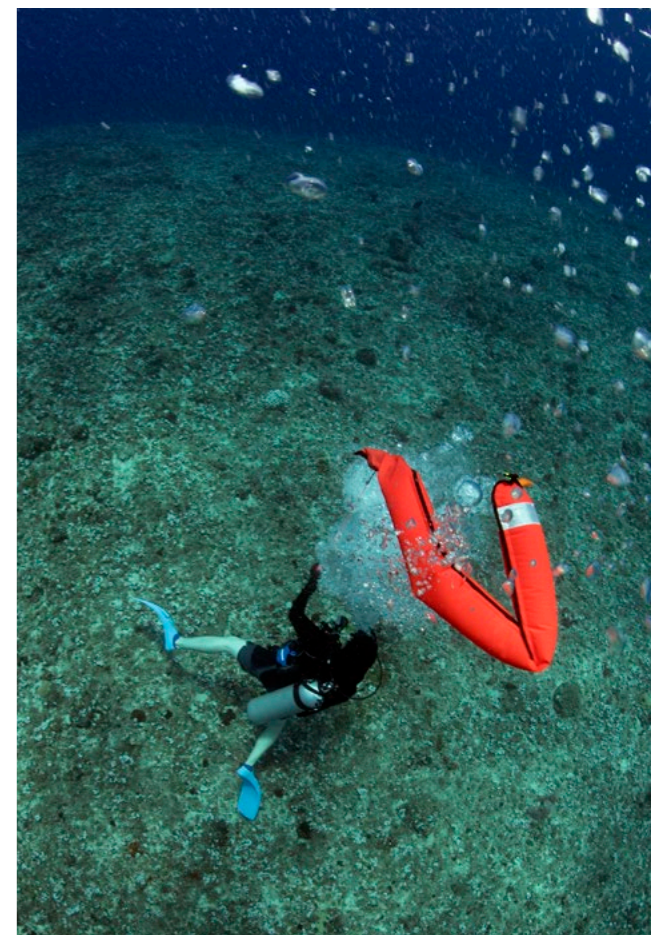
Closer to the surface, we could see that the ocean was in absolute turmoil. The line was bouncing up and



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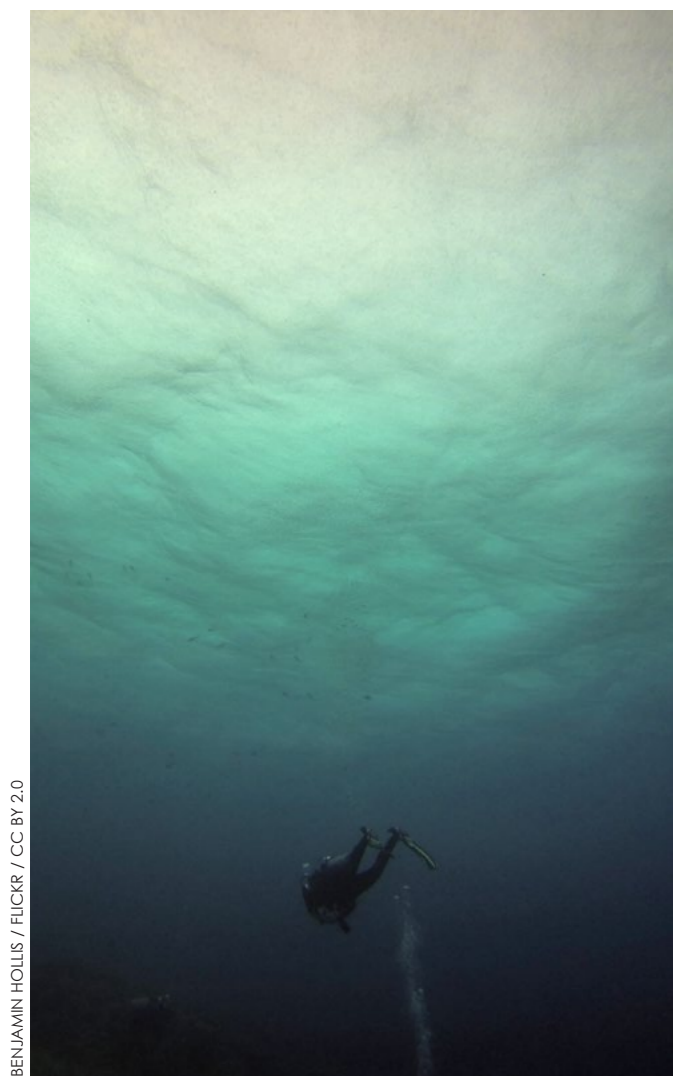
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Diver deploying delayed surface marker buoy





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Stormy seas overhead

down. Everything was calm where we were, but a few metres above us, all hell had broken loose.

I thought about the dive boat. We never intended for it to hook up to the mooring line when we sent the surface marker up. The plan was for Chris and Chuck to just stand off and watch for us to eventually make our final ascent and be alert in case we sent an emergency yellow DSMB up. This would mean we had a gas supply problem and needed them to drop an extra cylinder down the line for us.

We had no way of knowing if the ocean conditions were so bad that they had to seek shelter somewhere. If they did this, it would not be a decision taken lightly, as it would mean leaving us with no surface support. However, given that our safety was predicated on the boat remaining functional, I could envisage circumstances where seeking shelter might be the wiser course of action. Protecting the boat came first.

We might be alone in the ocean. We looked at each other and shrugged. We had over an hour to

spend at our last couple of decompression stops, and we had plenty of gas to breathe. We would face that problem if and when it arrived. The surface conditions might improve.

Then, the current picked up.

Challenging conditions

It was gentle at first, but we soon found ourselves kicking to stay close to the bouncing mooring line. There were two choices. We could put up another DSMB and drift with the current, which seemed to want to take us out around the point and out to sea. Or we could use our jon lines to hook onto the line and remain where we were. We would still be where the boat would first look for us, and Chris and Chuck would not have to search for us in rolling seas.

I took out my jon line. Toyo nodded in agreement and did the same.

So, there we hung, side by side, doing our deco, with the ocean frothing and churning above us and the mooring line going up and down. However, our jon lines allowed us to stay in place without having to fight the

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current and prevented us from getting bounced up and down too badly.

The hour-plus of required deco passed, but the conditions did not improve. We still had plenty of deco gas, so we just stayed there a little longer. A bit more deco would do us no harm.

Neither of us was looking forward to dealing with the storm on the surface. Down below, we were fine. Up top, we would have a whole bunch of problems to deal with. I did not know exactly what those problems were going to be. Assuming the boat was nearby, getting us and our gear safely back on

board was going to be a nightmare. If the boat was not there, we had a long, uncomfortable wait in prospect.

Exiting the water by swimming to the beach was not an option. Although the shore was not far away, trying to cross the fringing reef would be suicide. I guessed there would be surfable waves breaking over it.

I was sure Toyo was thinking similarly. Better down here than up there.

Then, a thought struck me. We knew where we were, and the boat would assume we were where we should be a few metres under the DSMB, but if we extended our time underwater too

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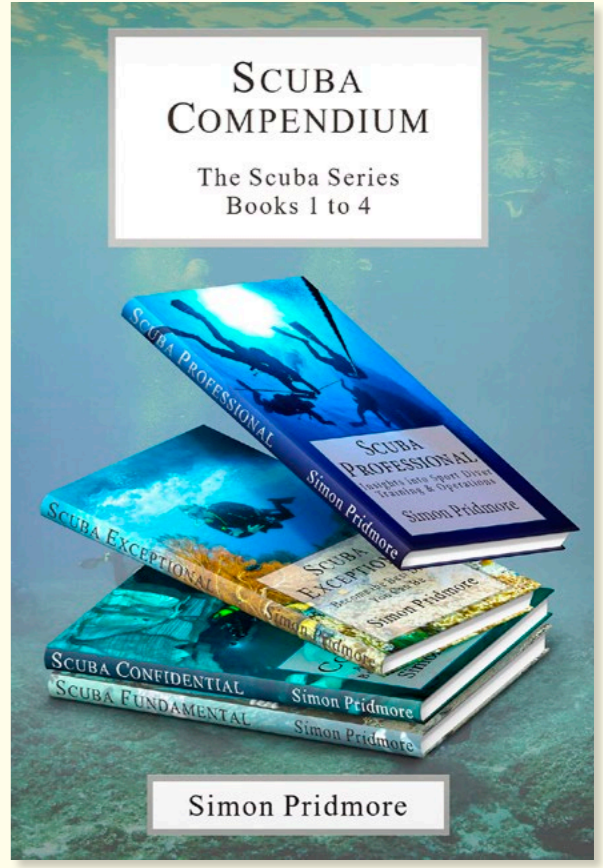
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“Brilliant,” I thought. Here we go. Toyo removed his deep deco bottle, made sure the regulator was secured beneath the bungee cords and turned to look behind him. Here came the boat, and here came the rope uncoiling into the ocean and skipping towards us over the waves as Chris skilfully manoeuvred around us. Toyo grabbed the coil, whipped it over the cylinder neck, pulled the slip knot tight, and let it go.

Chuck raised a hand, thumb up, and

started pulling the rope in as the boat disappeared behind the next wave.

Now, it was just a matter of time and patience.

It took six attempts before we got rid of our four decompression cylinders. Then we disconnected the jon lines and left them hanging on the mooring (we would collect them later, together with the DSMB), took off our doubles, securing the regulators and tying up loose harness straps, then sent them off with the next couple of rope loops,

much longer and failed to ascend, Chris and Chuck might worry that we had left the DSMB for some reason and had surfaced elsewhere. With all the surface spume, they would not be able to see us or our bubbles. They might leave the line and start searching for us elsewhere.

So, if our surface support team were still rocking and rolling around in the high seas nearby, keeping watch, and to avoid the risk of them thinking we should be up by now and leaving to look for us in another area, we would have to go up. I signalled to Toyo and could see from the look in his eyes that he did not fancy this any more than I did.

Surfacing and boarding the boat
Before surfacing, we extended our jon lines so we could float further away from each other and yet remain

attached to the mooring line. Then up we went. On the surface, even with our wings inflated, it was impossible to keep our heads out of the wave splash, so we kept our deco regulators in and looked around. There was no dive boat in sight, and we were just getting used to the idea that we might have to float there for a long time until the storm passed when the boat appeared nearby, way up above us on the crest of a passing wave.

Chris waved and pointed to Chuck, who was standing in the stern, holding up a coil of rope with a loop hanging off the end. He mimed to us that they would do a circle and come back around.

Toyo figured out their plan before I did. Removing his regulator, he spat and spluttered between waves splashes, “They’re going to bring us aboard piece by piece.”



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Deployed surface marker buoy



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one set at a time.

Now, it was just us left, hanging on to the mooring line, getting thrown around, spitting seawater out after every time we were dunked, then separating, first Toyo, and then me, and getting dragged by the rope to the stern of the boat, where we pulled ourselves up with a fin kick and lay on the deck next to the pile of gear and deco tanks like beached neoprene seals, completely exhausted.

Chris turned and smiled, "Well, that was fun!"

I grinned back as enthusiastically as I could and threw him a weak salute, "Yeah, let's do that again."

Back at the dock, I thanked both Chris and Chuck for their courage, quick thinking, support and persistence. They had been the prime movers in this episode. Toyo and I were just the potential victims.

Realisations

Writing about it now, it all seems so straightforward. But there were plenty of other ways this could have played out, many of them involving someone get-

ting hurt. Our successful recovery depended on some good decisions—most of them made by Chris and Chuck, although I think Toyo and I made a couple of good choices, too. Also, keeping the boat in place and guiding it carefully around us during the pick-up took a lot of courage and skill on their part.

My mind turned to the other possible outcomes that evening when the adrenalin had stopped flowing, and fatigue had set in. It was then that I felt the chills and the dread.

We could have been lost at sea. We might have panicked and tried to make it to shore, thinking that this would be a better option. We might also have been in the hands of a less creative, skilful and courageous surface support team.

Key takeaway

Many of my articles and book chapters end with a summary of key points or lessons learned. In this case, we should have been more wary of Mother Nature and her whims, and we could have done a better job of checking the weather forecast, but one

major lesson screams out from this story. When you dive, it is crucial to have competent, reliable and quick-thinking surface support. For all the many dives when the dive crew's job is just routine, there are also some occasions when they become the most important people in your world. ■

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: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations, now available in a compendium. He is also co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His latest 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, visit his website at: SimonPridmore.com.

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