



Scuba Confidential

Breaking the Chain



Text by Simon Pridmore

Last year I was invited to deliver a lecture at the Oztek show in Sydney, Australia. I spoke on the topic “What Makes a Good Technical Diver”, and one particular point I covered on accident avoidance drew a very positive response and provoked a number of questions from the audience. It applies not only to the technical community but to divers of every level.

Every diving accident has a chain of events that lead up to it, but often the chain is only visible afterwards when you reflect on what happened. You don't always see a chain before an accident takes place, but if you do see one or if you only think you see one, you need to have the courage and determination to break it, even though you might be criticized by others for doing so.

Cave divers have a rule that seeks to eliminate the fear of recrimination and saves lives. This rule is that any diver can abort any dive at any time for any rea-

son without having to explain themselves to anyone. When one of your team gives the up signal (or turn signal in the case of cave diving), the rest of the team acknowledges and complies immediately—no questions asked, either at the time or subsequently. You can always offer an explanation, of course, but no one has the right to demand one.

It does not matter if the threat to safety is genuine or not. For example, a diver may abort a dive simply as a result of misreading his contents gauge. The principle is that if one member of the team believes there is a threat, then that belief in itself is enough to put the team at risk if it continues.

This is a rule that all divers could apply to their diving whether technical or otherwise. Here is an example of an instance when I felt I had to break the chain even before the divers got into the water.

Bad news

A few years ago, I was at my dive centre in Guam with two students preparing for

the final dive in our TRIMIX course when one of my dive-masters arrived with the news that a diver that we knew from another dive centre had died in the recompression chamber following an incident that had taken place the day before.

The students were nearby and overheard the conversation but said nothing. On the boat, they were quieter than usual and I was concentrating on keeping everything normal and following the pattern of their earlier training dives, but the news of the diver's death was playing on my mind. He was a friend and we had dived together plenty of times.

On arrival at the dive site, I saw that a strong current was running and that it had carried the line and buoy, which was to be our ascent platform, underwater. I noticed the students exchange a glance of concern.

I knew that the fact that they were undertaking a big dive would already be creating a certain level of anxiety, and that a strong current might lead to additional task-loading. I also guessed that the news of the diver's death might be a distracting factor for them, especially if they started to become stressed during the dive. I was also concerned at the impact the news might have on my ability to concentrate fully.

I went over to where they were preparing and explained that I was cancelling the dive, citing all the reasons, including my doubts about my own state of mind. I was afraid that they might be unhappy and object to this change in plan as they were due to fly out the following night, and this cancellation would mean they couldn't complete the course on schedule. But instead, they

responded with smiles of relief and thanked me. The diver's death had been weighing on their minds, but they had not wanted to say anything.

In the end, they managed to change their flights, and a couple of days later, we ran the final course dive and everything went perfectly. Who knows? Plan A might have turned out fine, but aborting the dive before any of us had even entered the water made it absolutely sure that what looked like a steadily cumulating series of stressors didn't end in disaster. ■

Simon Pridmore has been around the scuba diving industry in Asia, Europe and the United States (well, Guam) for the past 20 years. His latest book, also called Scuba Confidential, was published in September 2013 and is available on Amazon. He is now working on the follow-up book, provisionally entitled Scuba Professional.