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Swept Away

Readers Respond to Palau Tragedy

After writing in the April issue about the six divers who lost their lives diving at Peleliu in Palau ("Lost at Sea — Learning from the Palau Tragedy"), I was surprised to see a letter by William (Bill) Douglas of Brisbane, Australia, published the same month in the Journal of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society citing three other incidents in which groups of divers had been lost at Peleliu.

"Six companions, including the dive guide, were swept away. The man in charge of the dive boat was unable to see them due to the sun in the west and, not having a radio and being nearly out of fuel, he returned to Peleliu for assistance.

"Boats and a sea plane searched the area. The pilot flew up and down to Angur on several occasions without sighting the seven in the water,

who had tied themselves together with their weight belts, blew their whistles, held up their colored fins and put up a safety sausage which fell to pieces after half an hour. [*This raises another issue: how reliable are inflatable tubes? Looks like we need to test the various brands. In the meantime, carry two.*] By an absolute fluke, the pilot was returning to Peleliu from Angur after giving up the search when, tilting the aircraft towards the west, he spotted a strobe from the camera of one of the seven divers who were being swept southwest towards the Philippines. They were picked up at 7:30 that evening. [*For more on this incident, see the July '93 issue of In Depth.*]

"The Filipino pilot later told me that he had no idea which way the currents were taking the divers but that he had found five other divers some

months previously who had been swept as far south as the reefs immediately north of Angur Island in an area where the currents are so bad that the fisherman can fish there only two weeks each year. He also related an incident in which five American divers were carried away from Peleliu and by chance brought ashore near Blue Corner by the current."

Our article prompted In Depth reader John Siedel of Carbondale, Colorado, to send us his Palau story:

Dear *In Depth*,

We recently returned from a semi-yearly dive vacation, this time from Palau. My wife and I consider ourselves experienced divers, with more than 200 dives over the past eight years

in many parts of the world. We have survived a few equipment emergencies, lost boats, and downcurrents. Our Palau diving was with Fish 'n Fins. We dove with five different dive-masters over five days. We had a great time; the crew and dive-masters were very able and cheerful. However, there seemed to be a very casual attitude about safety.

We were never asked for a "C" Card or a logbook or how much experience we had. There were minimal briefings, usually the name of the dive and maybe a direction. I would ask about currents, depth, what to expect. Sometimes I got some information, but sometimes it was only "Keep the wall on your right, come up when you're down to 500."

The week we dove Palau was within a couple of days of the full moon — the closest moon of the year. It affects the tides more on this full moon than any other of the year. I told the dive-master about this on the first day. He was interested, but we never dove with him again.

After five days of beautiful dives we dropped into Ulong Channel for what was supposed to be a drift dive into the lagoon. The tide was going out and we ended up clinging to the reef at 70 feet, watching the sharks and barracudas feed on the outgoing food buffet. On this dive I watched the dive-master take out a 4-meter length of nylon rope, loop it around a chunk of the reef, and hook it to his BC. He then proceeded to surf the current. I hadn't brought my climbing rope along. After the dive, I asked the dive-master why the current was running out. He said it was supposed to be high tide at 9:30 and the tide should have been running in. The hotel charts had listed high tide at 10:30.

After a 3-hour surface stop for lunch and snorkeling, we headed north and dropped in on the south wall of Blue Corner. The dive-master mentioned that if the tide had turned we might encounter some current that would take us up over the reef. He told us to just swim out

I watched the dive-master take out a 4-meter length of nylon rope, loop it around a chunk of the reef, and hook it to his BC. He then proceeded to surf the current.

away from the wall to get out of the current.

There were eight divers: my wife and I, a couple from the Bay area, and two Japanese couples. The two Japanese

women were not experienced, and one had had trouble with her BC on previous dives. Two dive-masters jumped in, one to lead, one to bring up the rear. After leveling off at about 50 feet, we followed a big Napoleon down to 70 feet. We rounded a corner and the current started to pick up. I was already away from the wall watching the Napoleon. I looked back and the four Japanese and one of the dive-masters went zooming up the wall and over the top at 40 feet, looking like Raggedy Ann and Andy out of control. My wife and I kicked out and down at the angle the fish were swimming to counter the current. I checked my gauges when my ears needed equalizing and sucked a little extra air when I read 104 feet on my computer. We had been caught in a downcurrent. I swam toward the wall and the current turned upward. When I finally grabbed the wall I was at 77 feet. My computer was beeping, telling me I was a bad boy. I had only one glove on because I don't like to grab the reef and one is usually enough. I grabbed onto

South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society

Members of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society (SPUMS) are mostly physicians who dive recreationally or who treat divers. While Australians and New Zealanders constitute the bulk of the organization, SPUMS has a sizable number of North Americans already associated with it. Individuals may join as either full or associate members. Full membership is only open to medical practitioners and costs \$50 per year. All other individuals with an interest in diving safety are welcomed as associate members; for \$30 per year, they receive all member-

ship benefits except voting privileges. Benefits of membership at either level include a subscription to the *Journal of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society* and admission to the Annual General Meeting and Scientific Conference. The *Journal* is a lively publication that contains articles of interest to anyone concerned with diving safety.

Anyone interested in joining the North American Chapter of SPUMS should contact Steve Dent at 3565 Sherbrooke Drive, Evendale, Ohio 45241, for more information.

anything I could and hung there upside down on the wall flapping like a flag. I was cutting my ungloved hand, so I tried to put the other one on. It is very difficult to hold onto the reef with one hand and put on another glove. I jammed my fins into the underside of a ledge and let the current push me up against the ledge. I looked up and saw my wife clinging to the reef at 55 feet. She was trying to climb down my way upside down, hand over hand in the current. The current kept flooding my mask and trying to rip it off. My wife lost her mask and her regulator but was able to recover both. Hanging onto the reef, we gathered our wits and walked up the reef on our hands. Sometimes whatever I grabbed would break loose. This was one time I wasn't worried about the reef.

Once we were over the lip of the reef at about 40 feet, the

current was somewhat less, but still stiff and still going up. We hung out there by hanging onto the reef, but that was as shallow as it was going to get. We sat there until we were down to 700 psi and then let go. We headed up *fast*, trying to fight it by kicking down, but we both popped up way too fast, with my computer beeping all the way.

The dive boat was 300 yards away. Another boat from Fish 'n Fins was nearby and came over and picked us up. Our boat then spotted us and came over. I told both boats that we had really hit some strong currents and that the four Japanese had been swept up over the reef. Five minutes later one divemaster and one Japanese girl showed up. The girl was out of air and breathing on the divemaster's octopus. She was exhausted and shaking as I

helped her into the boat. The couple from the Bay area showed up with the other divemaster about a quarter mile north. We finally spotted the two other Japanese men and one girl one-half mile south. Out of eight divers, we had come up three-fourths of a mile apart.

The divemaster exclaimed about the currents, saying he had never seen them like that before. I told him about the moon. He thought that was very interesting. He pointed out a 20-foot-wide line stretching along the edge of the reef that was slick. It was flattening the 2-foot chop. He said that was where the current was coming up.

The story of the five Japanese divers who died was the hot topic for discussion on the boat all week and around town in the restaurants. It doesn't seem to have caused any "tightening of the ship," as they say. One of the divemasters claimed they shouldn't have gone out that day and one should never dive Peleliu without two boats.

We learned long ago not to depend on anyone but ourselves while diving. **WARNING: PALAU IS NOT FOR NEW DIVERS.** You are on your own. You should have your Safety Sausage, Dive Alert, and a Helix flasher strobe. One of those giant orange trash bags with the Halloween face wouldn't hurt. Oh yeah, don't forget your climbing rope and carabiners. I figure a big aluminum hook would work the best.

As I was hanging onto the reef trying to survive at Blue Corner, I looked across the canyon, and there was the divemaster, hooked up and surfing the biggest tides of the year.

You Can Flash Your Nikonos and Your Mirror

In response to our commentary in the April issue on using a photographic strobe as a rescue device, photojournalist Doug Perrine writes this helpful hint for anyone diving with a Nikonos.

If you've reached the end of a roll of film, the shutter will no longer depress. In order to keep flashing your strobe after you reach the end of the roll, just turn the shutter-speed knob to "R." Of course, if your life has become more important than your film and camera, you don't have to bother with that step — just push the film advance hard enough and the film will break off the spool, and you can keep

on flashing until the strobe batteries run out.

Also, don't forget a mirror; they don't run down batteries, and they don't flood.

Danny Dobbs of Safe Signal also read our article "Lost at Sea — Learning from the Palau Tragedy" and sent us a sample of their emergency signal mirror. It's a small (2-inch by 4-inch) mirror that comes in a floating case. One side of the mirror is tinted red for use on cloudy days or with a flashlight at night. The unit retails for \$11.95 and is available from your local dive store or from Safe Signal, P.O. Box 5551, Tucson, AZ 85703-0551, telephone 602-743-7322.

Bret Gilliam, president of Ocean Tech and chairman of the board of NAUI, sent us his thoughts on our article.

Dear *In Depth*,

You guys were right on point with the article on the deaths of the divers in Palau. Surface signaling apparatus should be a part of every diver's standard equipment for *every* dive. We have the economical tools to provide at least a fighting chance for rescue if an inflatable "sausage" and a flasher are carried. As you note, these items are small enough to be carried without intrusion and cheap enough to remove a financial obstacle.

I have spent far too many occasions in my career abandoned by third world boat drivers (through a variety of scenarios). If you have not experienced the singular pleasures of watching the sun set over the Yucatan as you drift north at 4 knots past Cozumel while your boat steams anxiously in the opposite direction . . . well, you really haven't seen the island with the same appreciation as one who watches the lights of Carlos & Charlie's fade between wave crests. After my last thrill-packed drift into oblivion in 1989 that lasted nearly 4 hours, I went out and bought a carton of "Com-2-Me" floats and gave them out like cigars from a proud dad. Now I also carry the Helix strobe for possible night situations and some orange smoke flares for the day whenever my schedule has me in real or potential drift situations, or if I don't know the boat operator. And I've used them every year when Mr. Murphy inevitably strikes.

I'm going to see that we place more emphasis on such devices within NAUI's courses and particularly in the new training texts and videos which we are developing for introduction at DEMA 1995. Thanks for an excellent article, long overdue for many.

The issue is not that the waters of Palau and Cozumel are unsafe. The currents are what makes the diving so good, because they attract and support a huge variety of

marine life. When we dive these places, we expect strong, variable currents. However, we don't expect the dive operators to leave us with our legs dangling in the water. As we pointed out in the April issue, it's our responsibility to carry safety devices. After listening to more stories of drifting off into the sunset, I believe it may also be our responsibility to demand that the boats we hire to take us to such spots be equipped with radios and have an emergency plan ready to implement quickly if something goes wrong.

Flotsam & Jetsam

See the Whales

New England, the West Coast, Hawaii, Argentina, and the *Coral Star* in the Silver Banks all have good whale watching. After you've seen all of those, try the small town of Kaikoura, on the eastern coast of New Zealand's South Island. The area is known for 15 different species of whales (including sperm whales!) and dolphins that usually hang out less than 12 miles from the coast. Contact Nature Watch Charters, tel. 64-3319-5662, or Kaikoura Tours at tel. 64-3319-5045.

Tuna Melt (in Your Mouth)

It was Friday night at a sushi bar when I first tasted *toro* — the fatty belly meat of the giant bluefin tuna. As the Japanese waitress explained, *toro* is to *maguro* — ordinary tuna — what a Steinway is to a Yamaha.

I'm no pianist, but the Steinway of fishes was indeed remarkable. So it was with my

usual sense of bad timing that I found in the next day's mail the June *Harper's*, featuring an article by John Seabrook with the guilt-inducing title, "Death of a Giant: Stalking the Disappearing Bluefin Tuna." The article is the Stradivarius of nonfiction: required reading for anyone interested in the ocean. Now I'll have to add *toro* to the list of undersea creatures, like squid and *tridacna* clam, that cause me more shame than satisfaction to eat.

Consider these facts before next you dine on tuna at the sushi bar: Since the Japanese market for giant bluefin opened in the mid-'70s, the Western Atlantic population (chiefly off New England and Canada's Georges Bank) has dropped from 220,000 to 25,000 — a 90% plunge.

A single bluefin sold for \$83,500 a few years ago. Another one that might seem identical to you or me could