



opinion

Text by Simon Pridmore
Photos by Andrey Bizyukin

In the book *Into Thin Air*, journalist Jon Krakauer tells the story of five people who died near the summit of Mount Everest in 1996. Two were expedition leaders, one was a professional guide and two were their clients.

The clients, like most people who sign up for Everest expeditions, were not mountaineers or hard-core climbers. They were folk with little advanced climbing experience, but plenty of money, plenty of guts and a dream. They died primarily because they placed their lives in the hands of professionals, who then failed to keep them safe. On that day, the professionals broke rules and departed from set procedures, which they themselves had established and which had previously contributed to their exceptional safety record.

What does this have to do with scuba diving?

When people sign up for scuba diving courses, they also put their lives in the hands of an instructor. Non-divers are incapable of saving themselves if they have a problem during a training dive. They rely upon their instructor to ensure as far as possible that nothing goes wrong and, if it does, to make sure they do not come to harm.

The same thing applies in respect of

more experienced divers when they embark on technical diving. Until they acquire the skills and knowledge to identify the risks and learn how to deal with them, they are placing responsibility for their survival in the hands of their instructor.

Here is an example of a dive where something did go wrong and the instruc-

tor failed the student in that respect.

In the mid-1990s, technical diving was still in its early days and an instructor in Florida had a student named Charlotte, with whom he had been working for some time, as she made her way up the ladder of technical diver training courses. Charlotte's primary ambition was to do a

300ft (90m) dive. The instructor signed her up for a trimix diver course and invited her to join him and a number of already-qualified trimix divers on a dive the following weekend.

The descent was uneventful. The group reached the seabed at just over 300ft (90m) and the instructor shook

Charlotte's hand, congratulating her for having achieved her goal. Her big smile was clearly visible behind her mask. Having reached the target depth, the divers began their ascent through blue water. They had no anchor line or shot line to follow. On the way up, as they approached their first required decom-



Look After Your People





opinion

...until [instructors] see that the students can handle the higher risk points of the dive, such as the latter stages of the ascent, they must be all over them like a rash. They do not leave them to their own devices.

pression stop, the instructor attached his reel to a delayed surface marker buoy (DSMB), which he then inflated and sent up to the surface, to give them all a temporary ascent platform. He held on to the reel and line, while the other divers gathered loosely close by,

using the instructor as their depth reference. Charlotte did the same but, after a while, the instructor noticed that she had drifted away from the team and was having difficulty staying neutrally buoyant. He signalled to her that she should ascend a little, but she did not

respond and kept sinking.

Aware that something was wrong, one of the other divers swam down to try to catch her but she was now falling faster than he could swim and he eventually gave up the chase, worried about his own dwindling gas supply and increasing decompression burden. The instructor and the rest of the group all watched in horror as Charlotte sank out of sight. All they could see was a thin stream of bubbles rising from the depths. Eventually, the bubbles stopped coming. Her body was recovered a couple of days later.

Like the climbers who died on Everest, Charlotte put her life completely in the hands of someone whom she had every reason to believe would look after her, and died because that person did not follow a number of standard, established safety procedures and completely neglected his duty of care.

Anticipating risk

Going back to the 1996 incident on Everest, extreme climbing guides know that the vast majority of people who pay them to be taken to the top of the mountain and brought down again are not capable of doing this without them. Therefore, they need to babysit them all the way. They have to know where and how problems are likely to occur and anticipate and mitigate the risk at these points.

Instructors—and technical diving instruc-



tors in particular—must have the same mindset. If they have students embarking on a new level of training, they have to babysit them through lesser dives before attempting bigger dives and, until they see that the students can handle the higher risk points of the dive, such as the latter stages of the ascent, they must be all over them like a rash. They do not leave them to their own devices.

Liability

Last year, I had the huge pleasure of going to Palau to research the biography I wrote on Francis Toribiong, the scuba diving pioneer who single-handedly changed the face of his country. During a late-night chat reminiscing about the old days, he told me about a salesman who had approached him once, offering liability insurance for his dive guides. He told me he had declined and sent the salesman away. I asked him why.

He told me: "When I trained my guides, I used to tell them: 'Rule number one—look after your people! That's the most important thing you have to do. Look after your people!' I didn't want any of them getting the idea that, if they had

insurance, they could relax and be less attentive, believing that their insurance would protect them if any of their customers had an accident."

Now, when I was teaching people to dive, I always had liability insurance and so did my staff. But, I understood the point Francis was making. Of course, having insurance does not mean you can neglect responsibility. Neither does having customers sign a waiver of liability before they dive absolve you of blame if you are negligent. But, there is a danger that some people will think it does.

This is where the instructor in Florida and the guides on Everest went wrong. They did not look after their people. They failed to carry out their number one task.

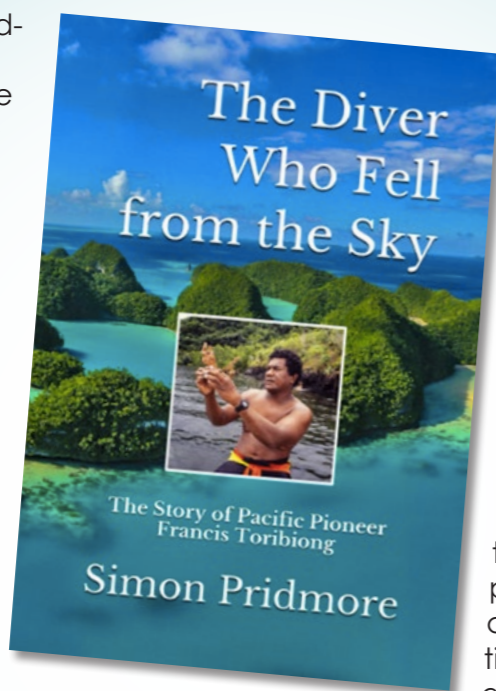
Checklist and pre-breathe

In my book *Scuba Exceptional*, I wrote about recent developments in rebreather diving and focused on two paths to increased safety: the technological path and the human path. In terms of the human path, for the past few years, the mantra for rebreather divers has been "checklist and pre-breathe."

Now, if you have never dived on a

A New Book from Simon Pridmore

When his country needed him most, Palauan Francis Toribiong came along and helped the Pacific island nation find its place in the world and become an independent, forward-looking 20th century state. And he achieved this, improbably, via the sport of scuba diving. This is the inspiring tale of an absolutely unique life, written by Simon Pridmore and illustrated with images of the beautiful islands of Palau, above and below the water.



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.

Toribiong was born poor, had no academic leanings and no talent for diplomacy. Yet he was driven to succeed by a combination of duty, faith, a deep-seated determination to do the right thing and an absolute refusal ever to compromise his values. And, as well as all that, he was Palau's first ever parachutist—known by islanders as "the Palauan who fell from the sky." In giving

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.

Available in paperback or ebook on: **Amazon, Apple, GooglePlay and Kobo**





opinion



rebreather, it may be that the word "pre-breathe" and the concept of using checklists in dive preparation are new to you. However, it is absolutely IMPOSSIBLE that anyone involved even peripherally with rebreather diving, is unaware of the fact that every single expert in the world of sport rebreather diving, in both the manufacturing and training worlds, advocates doing a pre-breathe and using a checklist when preparing for a rebreather dive.

Nor is it possible that any rebreather instructor could be unaware of the number of rebreather divers over the last two decades who have died, but who would not be dead if they had just done a pre-breathe and run through a checklist before the dive that killed them. Every one of us in the sport rebreather diving world knows that pre-dive checks and pre-breathes have

prevented accidents AND that incomplete or absent pre-dive checks have contributed to fatalities. We have all lost friends in this way.

Every one of us in the sport rebreather diving world knows that pre-dive checks and pre-breathes have prevented accidents AND that incomplete or absent pre-dive checks have contributed to fatalities.

Yet, in Hawaii, in mid-2018, a young man on a trimix rebreather training dive, with his instructor on board the boat supervising dive preparation, managed to enter the water with the valve on his oxygen cylinder closed. He passed out on the surface and drowned, leaving behind a wife and three children—a terrible waste of a young life.

The instructor in this case had failed to verify that the diver had performed his standard checks and a pre-breathe before going into the water and the diver died.

For someone to die like this on a training course is unthinkable and unforgivable. This is not an accident. This is simply a case of an instructor completely failing to look after his people.

All dive professionals claim to offer safe diving. It is a standard selling point. Some clearly lie. Incidents such as those I recount here, make it apparent that there are dive professionals out there who just don't care. They don't care about their people. They don't care about doing a good job. And they don't care enough to make sure that those in their charge do not come to harm.

One of my aims in writing my books is to help divers make the right decisions when employing dive professionals to teach them or guide them—to help them sort the wheat from the chaff in the scuba world.

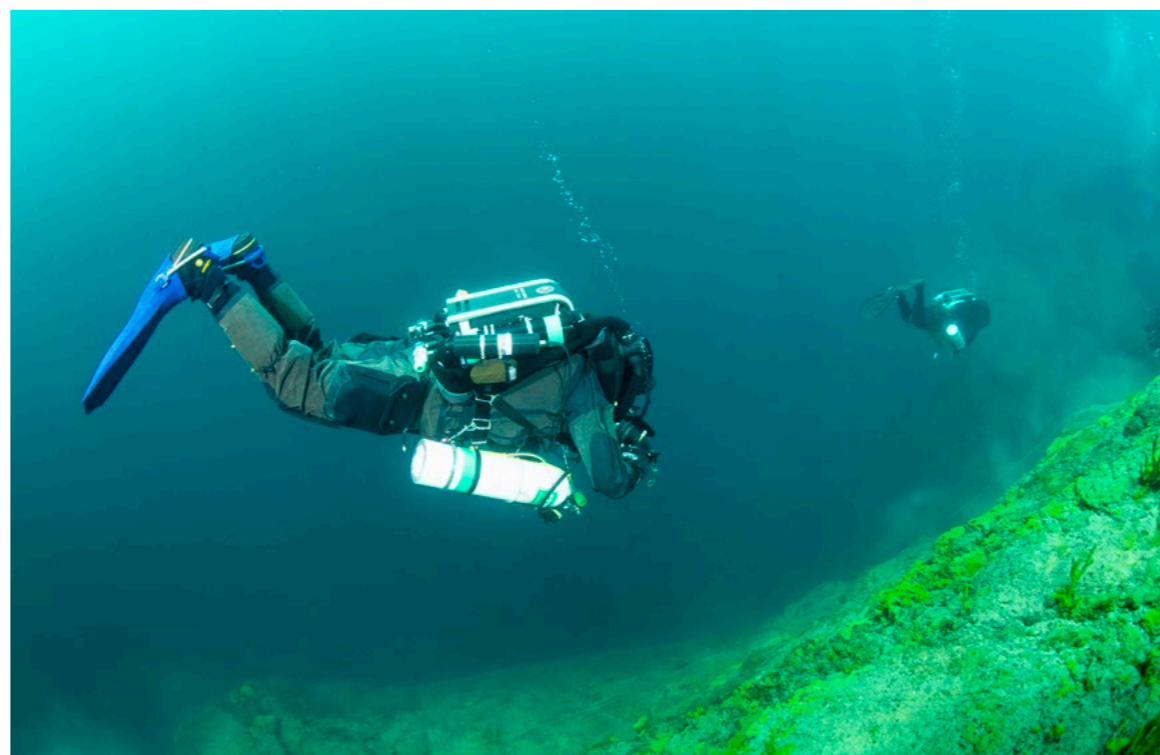
As a diver, know that no dive professional can be trusted simply because

they have an impressive qualification and an attitude. Know that you can only trust yourself and make it your duty to educate yourself as much as you can so that you make the right choices.

And, if you are an instructor or plan to become an instructor someday, I leave you with the words of my friend Francis:

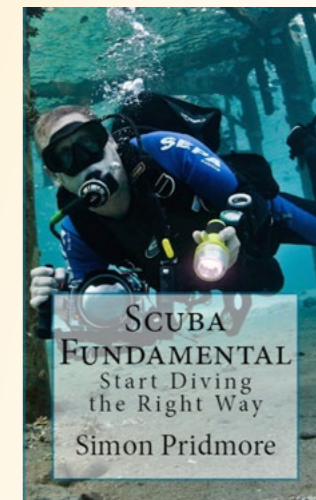
"Rule number one: Look after your people." ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations and Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His recently published books include The Diver Who Fell From The Sky, Dive into Taiwan, Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be, Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again! and the Dining with Divers series of cookbooks. For more information, see his website at: SimonPridmore.com.

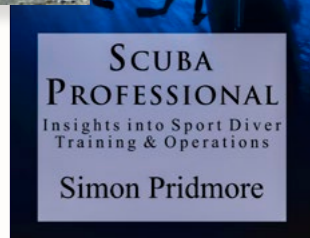


Get the series!

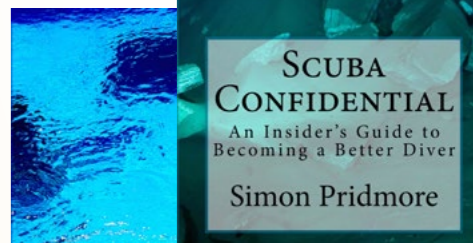
Essential books by Simon Pridmore that no diver should be without.



Available as paperback, ebook or audiobook at Amazon, Audible and iTunes.



Buy it today! Click on each book cover to go to its order page.



Learn more! Visit the author's website at:

SimonPridmore.com