

Text by Simon Pridmore
Photo by Michael Rothschild

— This article is adapted from the chapter, “Situational Awareness and Developing Instincts,” in Simon Pridmore’s book *Scuba Exceptional: Becoming the Best Diver You Can Be*.

A term that has crept into discussions of scuba diving safety comparatively recently is “situational awareness,” a concept that originally arose in the field of aviation but has now been extended to a wide range of human activities, from medicine and motor-ing to personal security and law enforcement. Simon Pridmore offers insight and advice on safe diving and how to employ your scuba sixth sense.

Situational awareness involves being aware of elements in the environment around you, understanding what is happening in the moment and assessing what could happen. Somebody with a good sense of situational awareness might be described as having a “feel” or a “sixth sense” for how

situations, people and incidents will play out.

As an example, I often tell the story of a pair of experienced divers who watch powerlessly from a distance as a group of ascending divers drift

unknowingly into a patch of water where whirlpools on the surface are generating a downcurrent. The divers’ bubbles, travelling almost horizontally ahead of them as they drift, are being caught and catapulted

down into the depths and it is clear to the observing couple that the same fate will befall the divers if they do not take some form of evasive action.

The group remains unaware and is picked up and swept down into

the depths. Eventually, the downcurrent becomes weaker and relaxes its grip, allowing the divers to begin a new ascent out in blue water. They all survive the dive, nobody runs out of air or panics, but, back on the boat,

Developing a **Scuba Sixth Sense** *— The Importance of Situational Awareness*

MICHEAL ROTHSCHILD

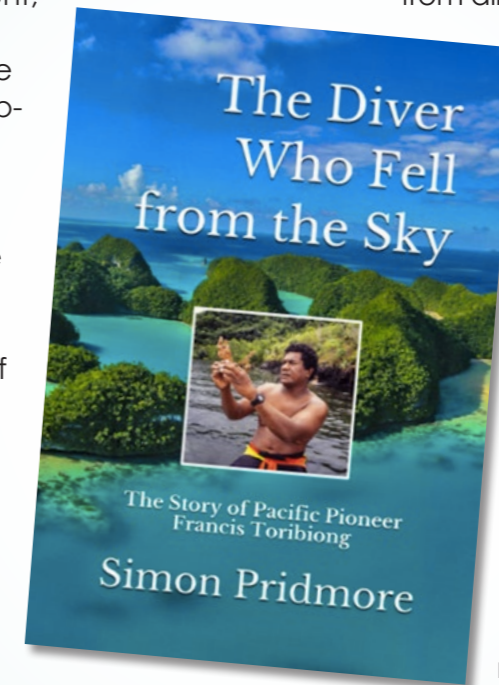




FRANCISCO DAVIDS / PEXELS

A Pioneer Story by 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.



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 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 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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they are all shocked and scared. They all agree that “it just came out of nowhere.”

In fact, of course, the situation did not come out of nowhere. It was there, but none of the divers saw it coming because they were not watching out for it.

The observers, however, were fully aware of the various elements in play: unaware divers, moving water, bubbles and downcurrent. They could see the situation clearly and could predict what was going to happen. They were exhibiting situational awareness. The divers who got into trouble were not.

Developing situational awareness

How do you develop situational awareness as a scuba diver?

When you first start to scuba dive, you do not pay much attention to what is going on around you during a dive because you are too busy just staying alive. You are trying to remember all the things you have been taught and all the advice you have been given. Even so, with every dive you do, you are unconsciously developing valuable experience.

Soon, you reach a point where you have mastered the essential skills and now have room in your mind to consider other things apart from your own

survival. The more you dive, the faster you should reach this point.

However, situational awareness will not then develop unaided. The group of divers in my story were not beginners but they showed no sign of being cognisant of their situation at all.

Building situational awareness takes work. Once you get to the stage where you are feeling more comfortable in the water, your fears have been replaced by wonder and confidence is seeping through your veins instead of adrenaline, resist the temptation to relax and switch your brain off.

Instead, always keep your mind on the dive. Concentrate at all times on

what is happening underwater. Avoid letting your thoughts drift away to other things that are unrelated to the specific dive that you are doing now. Instead, visualise yourself as an operational controller with a number of screens in front of you, which are displaying different aspects of the dive.

Cycling through multiple screens

One screen is showing your state of mind, a second is showing your gauges, a third screen is showing a movie of you as you swim along. Then, there are other screens that show the fish life on the reef, the route you are taking, the water conditions and the weather on

the surface. Still more screens are monitoring your fellow divers, showing their location, behaviour, breathing rate and finning style.

As you dive, keep your mind cycling through the screens. First, watch the fish swimming around you for a few minutes; then, check your gauges. Next, take note of a large rock you have just swum past. Will this make a good waypoint on the route back? Then, look around at your dive team. Is everyone still there? Is anyone lagging behind? Is anyone breathing faster than you would expect, given the conditions?

Then, give a little thought to your



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own status. Make sure that your fins are not brushing against the seabed, and you are maintaining a nice, long, slow breathing rate. Are you okay? Are you thinking straight? Do you sense any narcosis? Then, go back to looking at the fish. Is that a moray eel poking its head out from under that stone? Maybe your buddy would like to take a photograph of it?

Eyeing the whole and its parts

And so on. You keep your mind on the dive as a whole by focussing your attention on specific aspects of it all the time. Of course, you do not have to create a sequence in your mind. Nor does any of this need to distract

from the fun of diving. The cycling through the screens is going on in the back of your mind.

Think of what you do when you drive a car. You keep an eye on your instruments, at the same time as you watch the road, at the same time as you pay attention to changing weather conditions. But you are still listening to the music on the sound system and chatting with your passengers. Maintaining situational awareness on a dive is a similar concept.

On different dives, you will find you give more attention to certain aspects of the dive than others. On the first dive in a new location, you will give more attention to your route

and the landmarks. If you are diving with an inexperienced team, you will spend more time making sure they are not in difficulty.

Then again, if you are with trusted, capable buddies at a site you know well, in easy conditions, most of your time can be devoted to watching the marine life in all its glory and enjoying being at one with the ocean. But you never take your eyes off the other screens completely. You never know when the gremlins of the sea might come and bite you.

Even when you are diving with guides or instructors, do not devolve your responsibility for situational awareness to them. Instead, add

NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling *Scuba* series:

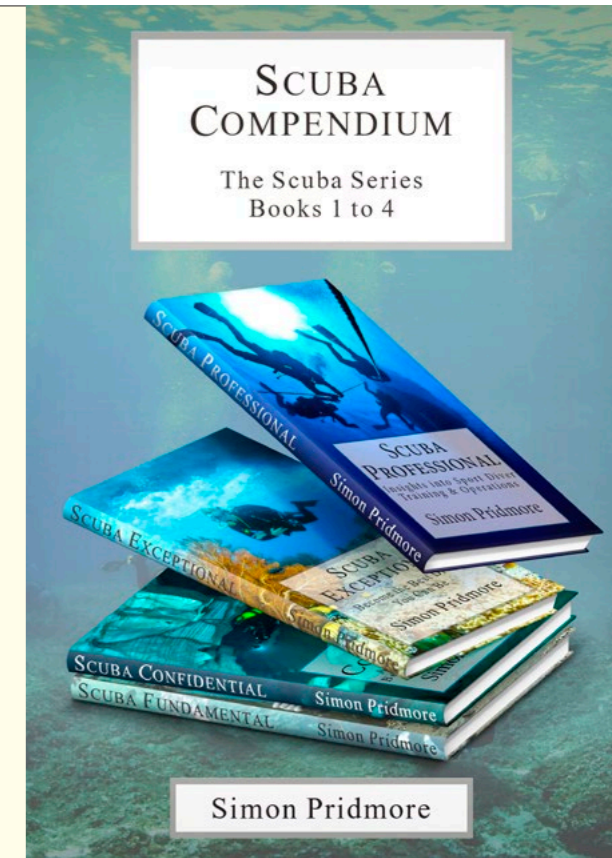
- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

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

them to your battery of screens. After a while, you will find that switching off your situational awareness is not even an option. Your scuba sixth sense will have become ingrained. ■

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



of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary 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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*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 Diving with Divers series of cookbooks. For more information, please see his website at: **SimonPridmore.com**.*