

# EARLY DAYS AT THE KNIGHTS

-from the pages of Wade Doak's Dive Magazine 1963-1975

**Dive Magazine** began in Christchurch in 1959 with the enthusiasm of Canterbury Underwater club divers including Kelly Tarlton, Keith Gordon, Jim White, Jaan Voot, Rob Davy and myself. But gradually each of us shifted to the far north attracted even then, by the diving fame of the Poor Knights Islands. With their help I edited the magazine while we dove together as a team exploring a world where every fin stroke opened up a new marvel. Now I want to share the adventures of those early days at the Knights as they appear in the pages of our magazine.

The May 1963 issue of "Dive" describes my very first dive at the Poor Knights - quite a momentous occasion for me. I am still in love with those seascapes as I write this in 2001, some forty years and many scuba tanks later:

'At 120 feet, in search of something for the pot, Rob Davy and I settled on a rock outcrop jutting from the base of a near vertical cliff face. Nearby was the entrance to a huge cave into which game fishing launches often sweep, outriggers, masts and all. An enormous cave, both above and below water. Heavy in our compressed wet suits [no buoyancy devices in those days] we teetered precariously on flipper tips. All around us in a 100-foot sphere of vision, masses of fish interwove as we peered through in search of kingfish.

'A twenty-pounder swept in and Rob transfixed it. At this depth we could not use our floats so Rob attached his quarry to a short line. During his struggle to subdue the fish and extricate it from the stumpy kelp plants, a five-foot bronze whaler shark nosed into view. Rob's first meeting with a shark. We exchanged 'OK' hand signals and waited to see what would develop. While Rob was poking the cheeky little fellow away from his catch with the gun barrel, he did not see its twelve-foot brother looming on his right side, where I stood. Then I realised: his glass-eye, of course. How would my buddy react when he realised there were two sharks interested in his catch? Any panic could lead to disaster. With steely strength the huge beast glided in towards us, accompanied by a cloud of sprats. Rob saw this shark as it made its first pass. I breathed with relief. Rob took it calmly, just readying his knife to sever his catch if things got nasty. Now we settled down to brazen things out. Backs to the cliff we waved the two sharks off each time they veered too close. Belligerent movements made them wary. Fascinated by their grace and majesty in this silent duel of nerves, we had almost exhausted our air supply before they gave up and vanished beyond the blue curtain. Had we made a wild panic rush to the surface it might have been a different story.'

I recalled the case of Maurizio Sarra, an Italian diver who had just completed a book, 'My Friend the Shark'. Scuba diving on the coast between Rome and Naples with three companions, Maurizio was at 100 feet when he speared a grouper. Cutting his line free he left the gun on the bottom and swam up with his catch. Those in the boat advised him they had seen some sharks nearby. 'I'm just going down to get my gun. I'll watch out...' He dived. Scarcely a minute later he burst to the surface which crimsoned rapidly around him. Despite a degree of protection from his wet suit he was fatally mauled.

That episode at the Poor Knights, coupled with the Sarra story from a very similar area, stood me in good stead. Thereafter I was ultra-cautious about spearing fish when there were sharks around. Not surprisingly, during our spearfishing days sharks were frequently seen at the Knights and on a few occasions divers were so scared they rapidly scaled the steep cliffs. But now that the area has become a marine reserve, sightings of sharks out there are very rare. And to my knowledge no diver has had a shark scare out there since spearfishing ceased.

During the early sixties, exploratory dives at the Poor Knights were intensive. Winter and summer Kelly and a hard core bunch of Whangarei Underwater Club members would rock and roll over that twelve-mile stretch of sea from Tutukaka. In those days only one charter skipper was

happy about taking 'damned divers' aboard. Fred Cotterill of 'Matira' was a very special skipper and most of us from that era count him as a strong influence on the development of safe, deep-diving techniques. Our group had quite a major role in pioneering deep-water scuba diving. We developed our own low-cost buoyancy compensators to give us neutral buoyancy at depth and a fast ride to the surface in an emergency. In this respect our compensators were in advance of such equipment in the United States. When the Italian decompression meter came on the market American 'Skindiver' magazine was happy to republish my 'Dive' articles on the Poor Knights deep-diving techniques and several other technical pieces, all the result of experiences gained by that band of fanatics centring around master photographer Kelly Tarlton, Fred Cotterill and the Poor Knights.

In those days Kelly would question everything. He built a high-pressure test chamber for evaluating decompression meters, depth gauges and other equipment for 'Dive' magazine which gladly published the results of his tests. With every diving fatality we would make a special effort to learn all the circumstances, as in an aircraft disaster, and publish them fully. This displeased some of the advertisers in the magazine, who did not appreciate anything that might discourage people from diving, but we managed to get by and felt that for our own personal safety, as well as others, it was essential to learn whatever lesson might be gained from every diving tragedy. Consequently, over the years as deep-diving activity accelerated, the fatality rate diminished. These days proper training is obligatory and instructors can draw on the many fatality reports we published as object lessons in teaching safe diving patterns.

During this developmental period of scuba exploration we set out to explore other offshore islands too, in the hope that we might find some area that surpassed our beloved Poor Knights: although we visited them all I saw nothing that convinced me to concentrate my efforts elsewhere.

Now I invite you to explore these facsimile pages of early DIVE magazines and trace the growth of knowledge about the Poor Knights over a quarter century ago.