



The *Valerie Queen* circa 1922. Source unknown.

## Landfall: 21 May 1962

Organized diving began on Bonaire 21 May 1962, at 1630 hours. How do we know the exact time? "Well, we cleared customs at 1430 and I would guess it took me about an hour to greet the local officials and visitors. Then another hour to move up to Heit's pier, secure my vessel, gear up and get into the water," says Captain Don Stewart, recognized as the father of Bonaire diving. "I could see the reef as we tied up. I could hear it calling my name."

In 1962, there were only 4,000 people living on Bonaire and about 300 cars. There was no compressor for filling air tanks because there were no tanks. Except for the six Captain Don brought ashore.

That year, about 2,000 people visited the island. The export of goats was the second-largest industry, after a small clothing manufacturing effort. It would be another five years before the first modern cruise ship would visit.

Now, 34 years after Captain Don first enjoyed the reefs of Bonaire, tourism is the primary industry with 70,000 visitors a year. And the core of that tourism is centered on diving the still-magnificent reefs. Thanks, in large part, to Captain Don.

Born Donal A. Stewart in California in 1925, Don was the son of a Scottish inventor who had 37 patents to his name. His mother was an actress, as were a great aunt and cousin. This combination of drama and invention would be two key factors that would shape his more than three decades of contributions to the island of Bonaire and its diving trade.



*Geraldine Martijn (Dammers) at Don's first dive shop. Note the six original tanks and the cascade arrangement beside her.*

The third key ingredient has been his love of adventure, which was first fed when he joined the Navy medical corps during World War II at the age of 17. He left the Navy three years later after being treated for Hodgkin's Disease. Don worked briefly in a fix-it shop, then opened his own business, Stewart Screens. In 1948, Don patented a sliding door screen and, with a few years, Stewart Screens was operating three factories. But where was the fun? Where was the adventure?

Despite his success, Don took a sabbatical from his business for a full year to explore the Mississippi River, searching for the adventure he needed. Satisfied for now, Don returned to California and his business but not for long. In 1955, before he had turned 30, Don sold it all and left the window screen for the silver screen. He had decided to become a film star.

As with everything in his life, Don had a plan for breaking into Hollywood. Part of that plan called for a barter deal with his dentist. Don traded boat rides to dive Catalina Island for a set of caps and a celluloid smile. And he learned to scuba dive in the bargain.

But in a few years, when the movie roles didn't materialize and Don was broke, it was time for Plan Two. He sold all his belongings to buy a two-masted, gaff-rigged, 70-foot schooner; a wooden hull built in 1912.

With this sturdy boat he would offer sailing charters and adventure tours. He might even make his own movie aboard ship. As a matter of fact, he had already written the script. So, in 1959 he set sail from San Francisco with a charter to the Panama Canal and South America. Time for some real adventure, but that's another book.

Plan three kicked in en route from South America to Antigua after almost three years of chartering. Why not settle down on a quiet little island where the people are nice, the weather perfect all year and magnificent reefs surround you?

Why not, indeed, if your 50-year-old boat needs to "rest a while" for repairs. Don dropped anchor and then dropped onto the reefs of Bonaire. There was no need to travel on. Everything he needed for his recently started aquarium fish business was here. And besides, he couldn't go backward because he had been "invited to leave" both Aruba and Curaçao for working without permission.



**Captain Don was encouraged to stay by the governor of Bonaire on a "produce you stay, a bum you leave" arrangement, with no mention of work permits. Sounded fair, so in early 1963 he became manager of the Flamingo Beach Club, a former World War II detention camp of wooden barracks turned into a hotel. To Don, it was a resort in need of a dive operation, among other things.**

**With the six tanks he brought with him, Don started the first official dive operation on Bonaire. For several months, air was ferried in from Curaçao and cascaded down into these now**

**infamous tanks One of the cascade tanks, which Don has to this day, was first used in 1916. He thinks it could still pass hydro.**

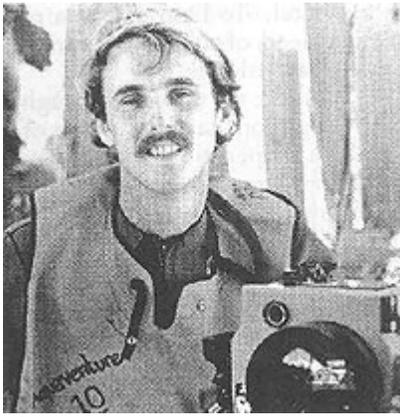
**All of his early diving activity was without depth gauges, without any kind of gauge for that matter. So Don invented his own. When he needed to measure depth, Captain Don would simply tie a red ribbon to his mask strap. As the red turned darker the color gauge in his head would tell him when to turn back.**

**Bonaire's first dive "boats" were whatever old trucks were available. These rusty vehicles would rattle over the rutted dirt roads that led to Bonaire's famous, close-in dive sites. Truly, "getting there was half the fun."**

**Later he got three dive boats - but only one motor. That didn't stop him from putting three boats of divers in the water each day. He simply towed two boats and dropped them at various sites along the way. Divers had to swim their boat over to the mooring, take their dive and then wait for the sea-train to pick them up on the way back.**

**Shore dives were much simpler. Divers only had to push the truck up every other hill. But what wonderfully outfitted trucks they were, with benches built around the perimeter and individual, hand-crafted wooden boxes for gear.**

**During those early years developing the diving trade, Captain Don would often have to improvise: plugging leaks in the tanks with chewing gum, jury-rigging the compressor to keep on pumping, patching gear and endlessly tap-dancing.**



*Some of Bonaire's best-known dive operators started with Captain Don.*

*Here, Bruce Bowker, now owner of the Carib Inn, gets ready for some underwater photography. Bruce joined Don in 1972 and has been a part of Bonaire diving ever since.*

By 1972, Captain Don moved up the beach from the Flamingo to help reopen the defunct Hotel Bonaire. It was then that he started AquaVenture, one of the Caribbean's first diving companies.

It was not until 1976 that he opened Captain Don's Habitat, a 100% dive and ocean-oriented resort. His concept of "total diving freedom" has since been copied around the world. But in 1976, it was Visionary.

When Habitat opened, rooms cost \$7 per day! Not only was Don the manager and dive guide, he also served as plumber, electrician, gardener, bartender and, sometimes, cook.

As he struggled to establish the diving industry, he also worked hard to foster protection of and responsibility for the reefs of the world. He co-founded CURO (Caribbean Underwater Resort Operators) in the early 1970s, uniting 18 Caribbean islands to encourage total conservation.

But Don didn't restrict himself to the reef alone. He was equally concerned about the environment above water level. A great portion of the Habitat property was converted to a nursery where Don raised local and well-adapted species of plants. He placed these, with his "wicked mind's eye" in arrangements that seem so natural, it's hard to tell where they begin and nature ends.

Another dramatic Captain Don contribution was the Bonaire Regatta, held each year since 1968. It started as a two-boat race around Klein Bonaire between Captain Don and Ebo Domacasse to see whose boat was faster. The winner got 27 cases of beer. Ebo won that first race but generously shared the beer.

The stakes are somewhat higher today for the week-long international event which annually brings nearly 100 boats from around the world to Kralendijk.

In 1980, Don seriously injured his leg during a salvage operation and had to wear a cast for six years. This didn't stop his diving, though. Dive Master Dave Serlin simply rigged a spring-loaded fin to his cast and Don jumped back in.

It was during the early days that special dive sites were discovered and named. Sometimes they were named for the people who were present that first time out. Or, just as often, they were named for some adventure that took place there.

What follows is a collection of short stories about many of those first favorite dive sites and how some of them got their names. In all, Captain Don has had a hand in naming almost 30 percent of Bonaire's dive sites.



*Don with son, Kevin, and daughter, Gwen.*

**More important than naming the reefs was Captain Don's vision for protecting them, so that Bonaire continues to be one of the top dive destinations in the world. No spear fishing. No anchors. No touching or taking of coral. All these actions were promoted by Captain Don.**

**Despite the "Nos" his vision was not restrictive. Don still believes that, with careful management and protection, the coral reefs of the world can accommodate all the divers who want to enjoy them.**

**While he doesn't dive regularly now, Don is still very busy trying to preserve his vision for Bonaire, above and below the water. He writes and speaks regularly about reef protection, and runs a landscaping business called Island Grower N.V.**

**In 1995, Bonaire was rated the Number One environmentally preserved dive destination in the world. Although many people have worked hard to make this possible, it all started with Captain Don.**



## The Magic of the '60s

Spring 1962. It was a clear afternoon when I found this enchanted island lying just over the horizon from the mountains of Venezuela. A small, sparsely populated piece of land, crescent shaped and barely 30 miles long.

As a buffer against the trade winds that stream from the east, the island had turned its massive humpback into the wind, making the western shore a protected lee.

It was here I found the glasslike bay, flat and calm, displaying an extraordinary spectrum of shimmering blues. Near the center lay the small, flat island of Klein Bonaire.

To the south the hills sloped gradually down to end in a flat spit of coral-rimmed beaches. And there, spread beyond to the far edge of the world, was a very special sea. Magnificent, with bright shafts of afternoon sun reflecting through it. This is what I came upon that afternoon in May.

I set my schooner at anchor in the roads of Kralendijk, a former outpost of the Dutch West Indies Company. Under my keel were coral gardens the likes of which I had never seen before. I sensed that here lay the future for this small island. And maybe for me.

The '60s in Bonaire were magical years, when everything yet unborn was on the verge of reality. There was an excitement here that never stopped. Every day new packages of surprises jumped open. I loved it. And I somehow knew I had been born to be involved in it.

While the rest of the world drowned in hippies, wars, assassinations and worse, the magic of the '60s was ours to dive into. It was the era of our first loaf of sliced bread, a second ice machine and more than two planes landing a week.

Things were happening fast. The airport was expanded, three hotels were operating, two of the most powerful radio stations in the hemisphere were built and a new tourist road to the north cut through.

The tourist trade had just begun when I joined over 2000 other visitors to Bonaire in 1962. Everything seemed to be happening then as Bonaire was emerging from



its cocoon. The history pages now turned quickly as the island moved forward to accept its new karma.

This little island would soon become a world leader in reef ecology - a drawing board for conservation while at the same time becoming one of the world's top-ranked scuba-diving destination.



*At the Kunuku*

*In 1988, Don moved away from day-to-day management of Habitat and, with First Mate Janet Thibault, founded Island Grower N.V. at their kunuku (farm) on Kaminda Lagoen. Here, Don and Janet continue their nursery business and have designed many of Bonaire's most natural gardens.*

But before that happened, those early days saw my ruthless spear fishing as a way of life, robbing the reefs of the small tropicals and ripping away living corals to sell as souvenirs. We were all raping the reef without concern for future impact. Until, one day, the penny dropped. I began to realize that the reef wouldn't last if we continued at this pace. I began to see that this was a no-go way of life.

The spear guns went into the landfill, and indiscriminate destruction of our reefs came to a halt. I made sure that all those within my influence joined in these protection efforts.

In time, good sense won out as the magnificent bay and its surrounding seas were designated the first totally protected island in the world.

I've set down a few of the fun stories from that magical era, both for your knowledge and amusement.

*These yarns are at least 85 percent true, which leaves the rest to my imagination. Exactly which 15 percent that is, I leave for you to decide*



## Heit's Pier: the First Dive

*Cleared customs at main pier in center of town at 1430 hr. Turned into a carnival. Loved it. Set anchor in the roads of the township, just off a small wooden ramp called Heit's Pier. A wonderful place. Township neat, clean. Feels like wearing old familiar shoes. A perfect fit. I see to the north the craggy silhouette of small mountains which slope southward to a flat spit of coral-rimmed beach. An abundance of tropicals, all varieties. Looks to be a fantastic underwater island.*

From the log of the schooner *Valerie Queen* 21 May 1962, 19:30 hours

Later that evening, I couldn't help but smile as I recalled our arrival. Our quarantine flag was aloft as we ghosted up to the pier on foresail alone, seventy feet of ocean-going splendor, tons of timber with masts scraping the sky. Percy leaped to the dock and cleated a heavy warp line to brake us to a stop.

Then a wave of people washed onto the pier; it seemed as if the whole of the island was there. The officials made little ceremony about boarding. The beer they brought was cold and their hospitality was genuine. We were the first American ship for more years than they could remember. A small celebration was called for.

Frankly, I was relieved when the party broke up, as it had been a lot of hours since I'd slept. I struck the quarantine flag as we left the dock and sailed up the coast a half mile to anchor just off Heit's Pier.

Our move had been at the invitation of Jules Heitkoning, a holdover from the WW II internment camp, now a civic leader. He felt we should have a landing stage for our shore boat. Heit's Pier was the only one around: twelve feet long and missing several pilings, just enough to provide a little excitement.

The best part of the day for a sailor in port always seemed to be that special time just after dinner. In today's case, dinner was a can of cranberry sauce, weak coffee and maple syrup. The canned goods stored in the bilge, wet and damp, had lost all their labels and created one big grab bag. Only one can tonight since the crew, both of them, were eating ashore.



Percy and local kids at Heit's Pier,  
1962

Percy, a 17 year-old champion bicyclist from Aruba, had taken a fancy to my *Valerie Queen* and the promise of wealth and adventure. I was concerned about *Ciro*, who had just signed on and was treasure-bent for this island. He was never without a coil of rope carried over his shoulder, bandoleer-style, ever ready to pull up treasure from "the wreck" whose coordinates lay somewhere inside his head.

The knocking, of a block against the tall mast, a call from high in the rig of a chafing line, the groaning of a strained timber deep within the hull - all the wonderful sounds of a good ship. A slight swell had crept around the point giving the ship an easy thwart motion that sent the tall mast gyrating smoothly through the crisp evening air. The low parading cotton-ball

clouds had long given way to a clear moonless sky.

The sextant lay in its box. The chronometer lid was secured. My *Queen* was now at rest, rather than a free hull racing through deep seas. She fetched at her anchor from a haughty cross sea, then once again settled calmly to a comfortable roll. Below, the watch lantern filled the salon with a soft yellow light that gave the interior the warmth of a rosewood womb. I sat at the chart table and reread my log entry.

So peaceful. So quiet. So natural. A forgotten island with barely 4,000 souls. A baby goat bleated from the decks of an inter-island schooner at the main dock. A pack of dogs was making a ruckus over by the dock. It had been a wonderful day.



But the very best part had been our first dive. Using some of our precious air, Percy and I jumped from Heit's Pier, swam under the *Queen*, and glided over the drop-off which bottomed around 125 feet. The dive had been just a step from shore into the richest of corals. On our return, we were enthralled by an enormous jewfish that had taken station beneath the *Queen*. Maybe three feet off the bottom, just resting in the ship's shadow, and not the least

bit scared.

I wondered to myself just how many more landfalls I would enter into the old book. *Well, Don*, I thought, *you're getting sentimental*. But there would come a day when we could go no farther. I was still young, only thirty-seven, healthy, and probably could go on forever. I couldn't say the same for my beloved old ship. She was leaking badly and needed so much work. I closed the salt-stained cover, turned down the lamp and went on deck.

I made forward and nestled myself into a fold of the staysail, sort of a fanny hammock. I laid the *Queen's* tobacco box on my lap, undid the ties and looked inside. Had I not badly needed a smoke, I wouldn't have touched this stuff with a fork. All butts from days gone by. I selected a *Pearoja*, a Colombian cigarette, because it was the longest.

As I enjoyed the smoke I heard a rumpus forward. Anchor chain smacking a bobstay, grunting, and a flow of bad words in Papiamentu, the local language. Then a stomping down the deck, heading for the main companionway, plunging down into the ship's salon. Percy, fully clothed but very wet, spilled ocean all over my interior. *Ciro's* eyes were rolling like loose cargo.

"What happened to our treasure hunter?" I asked.

"That no good... him and his treasure!" Percy glared at me from lowered brows. "One beer. One damn beer!" He gave *Ciro* a final push and gave me another dirty look. "Do you really believe he knows where to find gold? Huh!"

"Of course I do. Put him below, Perce, then come on back up for a smoke."



When he returned, I handed Percy the "making box" and he looked inside for a reasonable butt with enough tobacco for a couple of drags. It had been a good day. Between the leavings of the customs and police, we had enough tobacco to last several days. I was beginning to hate filters, never even a puff leftover. I now settled for an old Camel about an inch long.

"God, I hate this stuff," Percy said. I only smiled.

"Percy, I have to talk with you ... these are the facts ... we only have 63 cents in the kitty, 18 cans of I don't know what and 23 gallons of maple syrup. Tobacco is just what you've got in that box. But I think this afternoon's dive is one of the best I've ever had.

"Right here in the center of town are some of the best coral gardens in the world. Enough marine tropicals here to fill 50 aquariums. I vote we give it a try. All you got to do is get some fish and I'll go find a diver or two. We'll be in clover if I don't get deported first."

Percy pondered, "Cappy, did you see that jewfish under the boat? Eight, nine feet easy. But we don't take it till I find some buyers."

That fish was so tame I figured I could put two feet of steel in its forehead without him moving a foot. Percy had the same thought. But then we got to talking sailing, and let go of the idea. Oh, but some day! Yeah! Some day that fish would be ours.

I fell asleep dreaming about Ciro's treasure, the most pristine coral reefs and the biggest jewfish I'd ever seen.



## Playa Pabou

June of 1962. We were anchored just off-shore of Heit's Pier. We'd been there since our arrival the month before. Still had a date in Antigua, but Bonaire was nice and the hurricane season had just begun.

We also needed a third crew member, but could find no Bonairean who wanted to go to Antigua. Just one more reason to stay put. We couldn't even guarantee food for the trip. Percy, my partner in all things wet, couldn't understand how I could own a ship like the *Valerie Queen* and be as broke as I was. "63 cents ain't broke," I would tell him. "Should a been around during the depression. Zero was broke."

This part of the beachfront was called Playa Pabou, a section of waterfront that stretched from the custom house to Playa Lechi. Just a little over a mile. It was explained to me that it was called *pabou* or "west," because the sun sets on this side of town. Playa Pariba ("east") was the other side, where the sun rises. It all made good sense to me, except that the front street ran north and south.

We came to know every rock, coral, fish and piece of junk on Playa Pabou, from the surface to the base of the drop-off. Collecting small aquarium fish was what it was all about; the main reason we were diving. But Percy and I were always on the lookout for that elusive fish which would be the first "whatever" and bring a golden price. A guy can dream, can't he.

The salt water aquarium business was big in Europe and there never seemed to be enough fish to supply the demand. We had several European accounts clamoring for them and could find most of the species we needed right here in Playa Pabou.

It was a risky business at its best, sometimes dangerous. While it involved difficult collecting skills, it also required a huge amount of luck when shipping. A freight handler breaking a container in Curaçao, maybe a plane lay-over in Venezuela, or a cold snap at the Amsterdam airport ... As I said, risky. Some days, Percy and I would free dive along the drop-off. This was good for the Rock Beauties and Pygmy Angels. I was still struggling to best 80 feet while Percy, with ease, was free diving to a hundred.

We had developed a special technique for netting the deeper guys, like the Royal Grammas. They like 50-foot-plus water where usually more than a minute was required to net them.



Photo © Coles Phinizy

I would drop down using two small hand-held sweep nets and would start playing the fish. When my minute was up, Percy, who had been hyperventilating as he watched me from the surface, would dive down and hover above me, then slide his hands down my arms to take the nets without missing a beat. The fish would be ours.

Financially, our whole venture was a mess. Chartering the *Valerie Queen* for day sailing was impractical because of her size. In those days the sport divers who would pay to dive with Captain Don were few and far between. Ninety percent of the divers were hunters but I found that a no-go sport and always lost the sale.

Percy had shot a few Yellowtail Snappers in those first weeks which we sold for enough money to buy several breads, a can of butter and five pounds of funchi. The ship's stock of maple syrup was inexhaustible, more than enough to last forever. Percy hated the stuff, but I found energy in every spoonful. While in Colombia, maple syrup and bananas had been my mainstay for months.

By September, I had a compressor that was putting out almost breathable air. I had made a cotton filter and exchanged mineral oil for the hair oil I'd started with. This was a big improvement. We had received a telegram to ship Pygmy Angels now if we wished to keep the German account. Since

we needed this money to eat, there was little choice of what we had to do.

Just north of a dry *rooi* we had discovered a wonderful colony of pygmies. They were deep on the side of a steep sandy hill dropping off into several hundred feet or more. An unimaginative dive, just a dirty hill littered with old tires. But the pygmies thrived there.

We had been at 80 feet, give or take a yard or two, for some minutes. My trusty red ribbon had long since gone black, and the curious side of me wondered just how much air I had left. Free ascents were considered normal for me and Percy, but jumping for the surface raised hell for the little fish held captive in the bottles. I had collected maybe a dozen pygmies and a few grammas when I realized that Percy was no longer around.

Then I saw it ... a bubble train well off in the blue. I knew he was fooling around again at the bottom of the hill. This wasn't the first time he had slid down the mountain and I worried that one of these deep dives would be his last. When you start with only 1100 pounds of air, you should avoid the deep stuff.



Photo © Coles Phinizy

I had just collected one last pygmy and was stuffing it into my holding bottle when Percy slid up past me, easily kicking his way up the hill. I looked at his plastic bottle as he went by and thought it was empty. *Damn him*, I thought, *sightseeing when we needed fish for the German account*. I knew some anger as I turned and followed him up the hill.

Slow and easy was the name of the game when bringing fish from depth. At maybe 50 feet, my ribbon turned a dirty red, and I stopped for a little decompression, mostly for the fish. Then I stopped again at around twenty. Percy was waiting at ten feet, and I thought it strange that he was doing a third stop.

Percy was smoking and sitting on the beach when I crawled out of the water. I shucked my tank down to the sand and then turned to face him, holding up my bottle for him to see that it was full. He just watched me for a moment, then reached down and lifted his bottle.



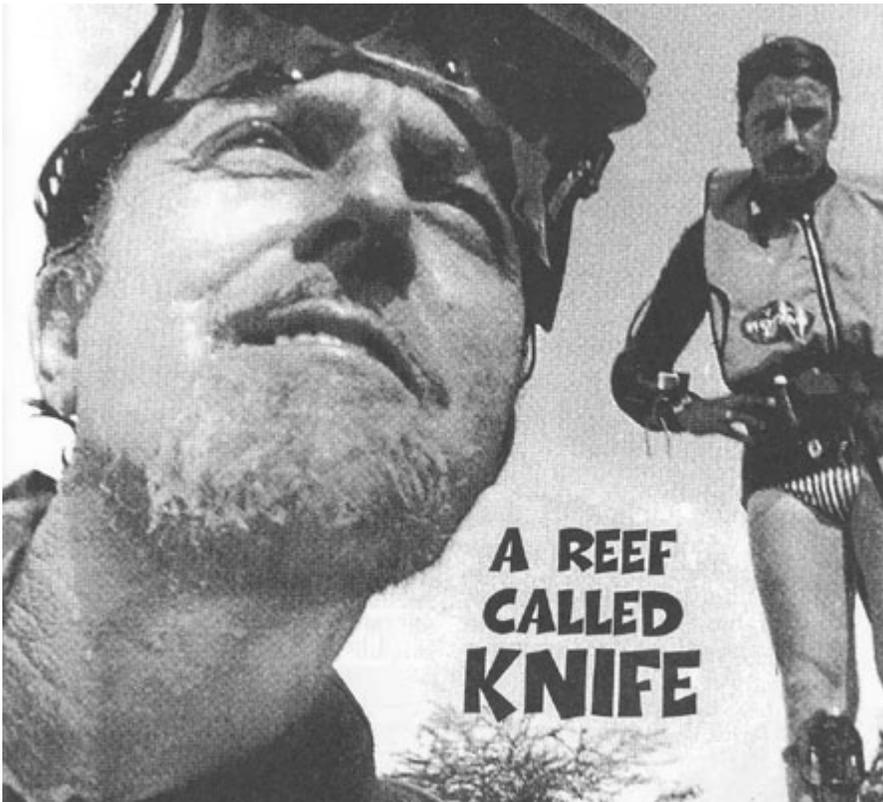
*From an old postcard.  
Photo credit unknown*

I had to move closer to see what it was he was trying to show me. There was only one fish in his bottle. My first impression was pink, red, some yellow, and long and narrow with black spots on the fins. "Sweet Jesus!" I whispered.

Percy laughed and flipped his cigarette out into the water.

"Mardi Gras," he said. "Meet the Bonaire surprise, Mr. Mardi Gras."

*A year later in a 1963 scientific paper "Studies on the Fauna of Caribbean Islands," Dr. John E. Randall described a new species: one of the most complexly and beautifully colored of West Indian fishes." He named it *Chorististium carmabi* in honor of the Caribbean Marine Biological Institute (CARMABI), adding that a colored drawing by Donal A. Stewart of the fish, first discovered by Percy D. Sweetnan in September 1962, "leave no doubt of the identity of the fish as carmabi."*



## A Reef Called Knife

One dreamy morning in '64, a stranger showed up at the shop and asked if I would take him diving. In those early years, I was the only dive guide around.

He was a long, willowy fellow, the kind who usually swims like a snake; about fifty and seemed pleasant enough. I asked if he had ever dived before. He told me that he had, in Florida. I said that was nice and inquired how many dives he had. He told me seven, and I asked if he was certified. He asked what that meant, and I told him I really didn't know, but it was something new in the states that I intended to look into some day when I had time.



"I would like to dive someplace new and exciting; somewhere no one has been before."

"Well, now, I think that can be arranged." In those years, that could be any place on this island. "How about something over there?" I pointed to Klein Bonaire, the little island just across the bay from us. "I think we can find just what you're looking for." I studied him for a moment, then asked, "Are you sure you can dive?"

The stranger reached into a large sail bag, fussed about for a few moments, then pulled out a new single hose regulator. That really impressed me. *Maybe he does dive.*

We boarded the beat-up old Boston Whaler with its wheezing engine and fetched the island some 15 minutes later. I was mostly naked, but he was decked out in white woolen Long John's, butt flap and all. I was amused, but he at least would keep warm. We ghosted around the island a half mile or so and then nosed into a lovely little bight, rich with hard corals and a liberal sprinkling of gorgonians in the shallows.

I killed the engine and, while we slowly drifted toward the drop-off, I tied the anchor line to my wrist. I waited until we passed over a large solid plate, heaved the anchor as far out as I could and followed that piece of iron right over the bow and down into the rich corals some 30 feet below. I blinked several times, cleared my

ears, then found the ledge and solidly hooked in the anchor as gently as I could. Saving coral in those days was not yet a part of my dive concept, but having that boat waiting for us on our return sure was.

I heaved myself up and over the shallow gunnel to flop into the bottom of the boat. In the brief moments that I was gone, my diver had geared up with everything but his tank and fins and was patiently waiting.

I guess the thing that caught my eye first was the woman's flowered bathing cap he wore. The kind that looks like a big nudibranch. He had hitched it tight with a string, giving his large-beaked nose and bulging eyes the look of a gargoyle.

I knew I was looking at a very determined fellow. He was grim and challenging, with the expression of a kamikaze peering from within his wraparound mask. The glued-in quarter-inch lenses and heavy gauntlet gloves just added to the effect.

And there were knives, lots of knives, an eight-incher on each calf, and a wicked-looking thin stiletto strapped to his right forearm.

Then, without warning, he eeled over the side and disappeared into the sea. I quickly looked down and saw him messing around on a coral head under the boat, leaving me above without my gear.

I clamped on my mask, quickly pulled on my fins, pulled the tank from under my seat, grabbed the regulator, and threw the whole mess overboard, following it all down just as I had done with the anchor.



*Don was in just the right spot to capture this diver's three perfect air rings*

With regulator hoses flying and my mask filling with water, down I dropped. When I had cleared my mask, I spotted my man. Then remembering about breathing, I fought my tank on, all the while still dropping. I lifted the mouthpiece up and over my head to clear it and then realized that I had not yet turned on the air. Almost dislocating my shoulder, I took care of that. Still dropping, my God, I took a breath and cleared my ears and started to look around for my traveling nudibranch.

And there, at about 60 feet, was my buddy, ambling along slowly, his legs grinding a bicycle kick, his fins knocking off the tops of brittle coral as he went. I swam alongside him, looked over his gear, cocked up his reserve valve, and took a closer look at that bathing cap. I had been concerned at how tightly the rubber closed over his ears, but then I saw that a neat hole had been cut just over each ear. My respect for him grew a little.

I was briefly distracted by a lame gorgonian which had fallen over, so I took the time to put it up-right and brace it with a sizable stone. When I looked up again, my buddy was still riding his bicycle just above the precipitous drop-off. Then I saw that his harness was riding loose, with his tank hanging like an airplane wing. I quickly finned over to straighten his gear.

All of a sudden he swung to the left, hung for a moment, then put his head down and pedaled vigorously over the wall, plummeting for the bottom and... beyond.

A new one for me. What the hell is he up to now? Then both hands flashed down to the sheaths on his legs, and knives jumped into his fists like magic.

Here, in a wink, were two eight-inch blades of hardened steel thrust out before him like swords. He continued to drop, down and down, into the waiting depth.

*Oh, no.* Down and down he goes, round and round he goes. Hell you get the idea. Legs jerking. Knives gripped in the gauntlet gloves. And all the while, his damned tank trying to eject. *Thousands of safe dives, I thought, and here comes my Waterloo.*



When I caught up to him at about 180 feet, he was still dropping like a rock. My red telltale ribbon had long since gone black, but he kept heading for deeper water.

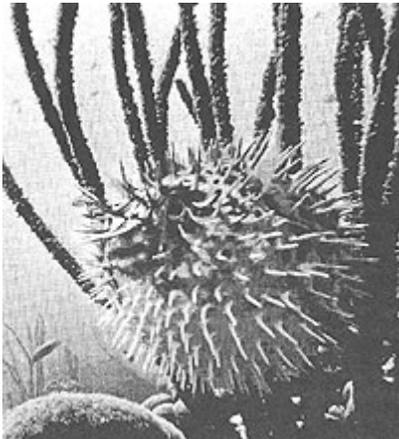
Then suddenly he turned and came at me with the flashing knives. Instinctively, I threw my arms up in defense, and one of the blades flicked me on the forearm. When a bit of green passed my mask, I knew that I had been slashed, and I backed off.

*Enough!* I thought as I put my back to the wall and held my stranger tight in my vision. I had to coax him up from the deep. No way was I going to touch him.

The knives came on, both pointing at my heart. God almighty, I'd found myself a ringer!

Somewhere around the 70 foot mark he calmed down and returned both knives to their sheaths. Then, coolly, he wandered along the reef and back to the anchor.

At about 25 feet my green trail of blood had turned to red and I pointed toward the boat, indicating him first. At the boat, I helped him off with his tank, then helped push him up and over the gunnel. Then I shucked my own tank and muscled it into the boat.



"You okay?" I asked. He nodded and I turned to dive back down to unhook the anchor. It was a lousy way to get off the reef. My general rule was, never unhook until the engine was running so I could be reasonably sure that we wouldn't make a trip to Curaçao. In this case I made an exception.

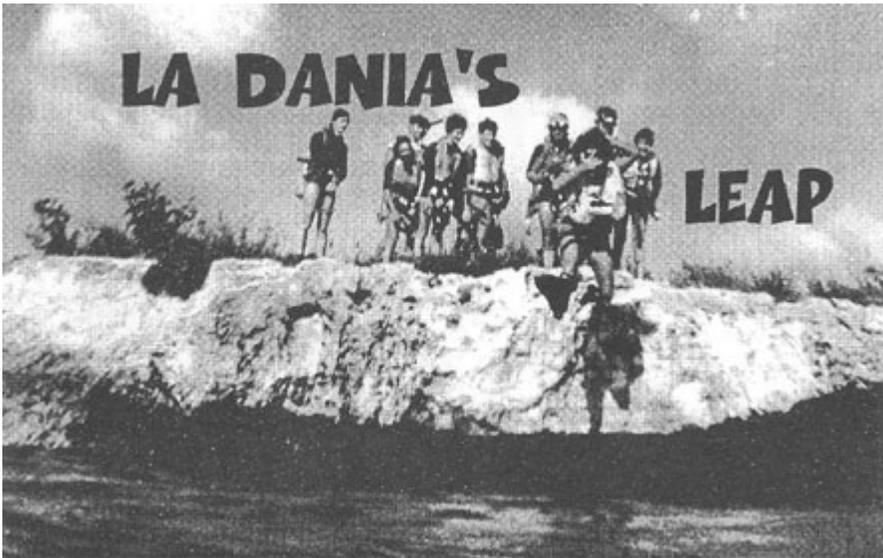
I motioned to him to pull in the anchor and stow it under his seat. When we were underway he put his back to the wind and looked at me. His bathing cap was still in place, the mask still on his forehead.

"What happened to your arm?" he asked casually. I brought my attention back to him and studied him for a moment. He seemed genuinely concerned. "Coral - yeah - sharp coral," I slowly replied.

He never said a word to me about the knife incident. He cleaned up his gear, thanked me for the dive, and strolled off down the beach to join his wife. Never, never again will I trust a man who wears a flowered bathing cap.

Some time later, a guest asked me where we should go for a pleasant little dive.

I thought for a moment, before answering. "Knife," I said. "A reef called Knife."



## La Dania's Leap

November of 1966. I had checked in a small group who informed me that they were "NAUI hard-core divers." They wanted the best, no matter how scary or difficult, because they were certified, and *he* was their instructor. They pointed to a gruff looking little fellow who just bristled with authority. They called him 'Jock.'

"What's your certification ?" Jock asked as he glared up at me. "You are Captain Don, aren't you?" I pushed the guest register a little closer to him and motioned to the pen. "No, not any longer. My ship sank a few years back. And my certification is that I've done more than a thousand hours and I'm still around to check you in." My antennae were up; it was going to be a very interesting week.

I made some small talk with the group on the pier, then motioned Jock aside. "Get your people comfortable. Then everyone meet me down at the dock. Just mask, snorkel, and fins. No spear guns, please. We don't do that here anymore."

There was a little growling among the troops; they wanted to dive *now*. "A little warm-up," I said, "is the best thing for travel fatigue." I herded them toward the ocean and then, as they entered, I watched each one's water skills. Jock was barking out orders like he was still a Marine sergeant.

They all looked fine ... then I saw her. She swam beautifully but repeatedly brought her head up out of the water and yanked the snorkel out of her mouth. She would gasp, look around to see the others, then, reassured, return to her snorkeling. I made a mental note and returned to the business of running a hotel.

The following morning was squally, and the rain came slamming down, remarkably cold. I hunched my shoulders and put my back to the wind. A sky shadow darkened the small beach, and my hangover was giving way to a sour stomach. My arm ached from a tussle with a drunk the night before and, quite frankly, I felt rotten. The pounding rain was just what I needed.

"Cap'n Don?" I turned to see a figure approaching up the small beach. Female, buxom. Blond hair, tangled and matted, like dead bayou moss, and with a cajun accent to match. I returned my attention to our old Boston Whaler, out on a mooring and quickly filling up with rain water.

"Cap'n Don! Why you standin' out here for?"

I turned, giving her my full attention. Her mask was so fogged that I was unable to see her eyes. "Is that you, La Dania?"

"You 'membra me? Why you standin' out here for?"

"Yes, I remember you." After a moment I added, "I'm decompressing. Can't you see?"

Then she said, "You cain't be decompressin', Cap'n Don, 'cause you ain't certified." I had to think that one through. Then I stepped off the dock into five feet of warm tropical water and floated over to the Whaler.

The squall had passed, the warm winds had returned, and La Dania moved off the dock onto the beach, then waded out to stand alongside me. "Cap'n Don, I 'fraid ... In a little while I do my open-water dive, and Jock he so demanding he. What happens I git salt water in the eyes?" All their training had been in fresh-water pools and this was her first time in the ocean.

"Did you know," I asked her, "that your tears are saltier than this sea?" I cupped a handful of water and dashed it onto my face. "The sea," I told her, "is like part of us. As long as we can breathe and control our temperature, we can become part of this wonderful ocean. Of course, there are a few other little things like pressure and such, but as long as you are in control, you can handle it."

I turned to leave, then swung back, and added, "I watched you yesterday; the way you handled yourself in the water. I knew that I was watching a natural. You have nothing to be afraid of. You're part mermaid. Just be yourself." This girl was in desperate need of confidence and support, and her instructor was failing her.

Their first dive went well. The reefs were great. The water warm. The mere fact that it kept Jock quiet made it even better. La Dania's final test was completed, and she was a full-fledged certified diver.

The teaching had stopped, and she had a "C" card which entitled her to join the pros, or get herself killed jumping off some damned fool rock on the coast. The learning, though, was just beginning.

The following morning I asked her to gear up for a hike up the street. She looked at me oddly, but she showed up half an hour later, fully geared.

She had flip-flops on her feet, and I told her to shuck them and put on her flippers. I had prepared a rag with some red paint and smeared it on the end of one fin. "For the rest of your life, this fin is on the right."

Then I tied a four-inch red ribbon onto the edge of her mask. "This is your depth gauge. Bright red here, black at depth. Read it like litmus paper. The deeper you go, the blacker it gets. Understand?"

"Stick that snorkel in your belt and hang your mask over it. You were overweighted yesterday; take off four pounds, then balance your lead front, left, and right."

I looked at her yellow Mae West life collar that Jock had stolen off their incoming plane. I was about to ask her to shed it, but on second thought, decided otherwise, but the lights had to go.

"This tank and you are going to get married. Wherever your backbone goes, so does your tank."



La Dania's secret lessons had started. Entering tank first, then feet first, even head first. Every trick for entering the sea became hers. She learned the sea and could swim a mile without effort. She was becoming the mermaid I told her she was.

Day six, the final day of the vacation, and Jock was still barking. "Well, Captain Don, our last dive. Got anything really different?"

"Well, now," I said, "I think I have a special dive for you. In fact, I'll even name it in your honor. How's that for a finale?"

The little Marine eyed me from under lowered lids and smirked, "Jock's Reef. I love it."

"By the way, Jock, this is a 'total commitment' dive, Once set upon," and I paused for emphasis, "there's no turning back, Kind of like the Oregon Trail. Okay?"

Nine-thirty. The old truck ground to a stop where I had stacked a bunch of rocks at the edge of the road for a marker. It looked like a mile from the sea, and I ordered, "Let's go, folks," They just stood there, bewildered. All but two, La Dania and me. We geared up, fins and all, tanks tight to our backs, masks hanging from our snorkels, all loose gear stuck into our belts, and moved out onto the cactus trail, iron shore rock and all.



Within twelve minutes, we had fetched the breathing rock, and a minute later, the ledge from which we were to leap into a frothing sea. La Dania looked over the edge and down into the swirling water and said nothing. I felt her eyes on me and I turned to meet a questioning stare. My smile was her only reward, and she swelled with a primitive confidence.

Some minutes later, Sergeant Jock arrived with his patrol. He looked over the edge of the cliff and said, "You're nuts! Nobody can survive this!"

He called his platoon back from the ledge. "Madness!" he screamed. "Sure death!" They all pressed back from the cliff.

I took La Dania gently by the hand and led her to the ledge, glanced down at the sea, then at her. "Let's go. A safe dive, everybody!" I flung my body far off the cliff, returned to the surface, and hollered, "Let's go, Jock. We

have some great diving down here." The little marine just peered at me over the edge and repeated, "You're crazy!"

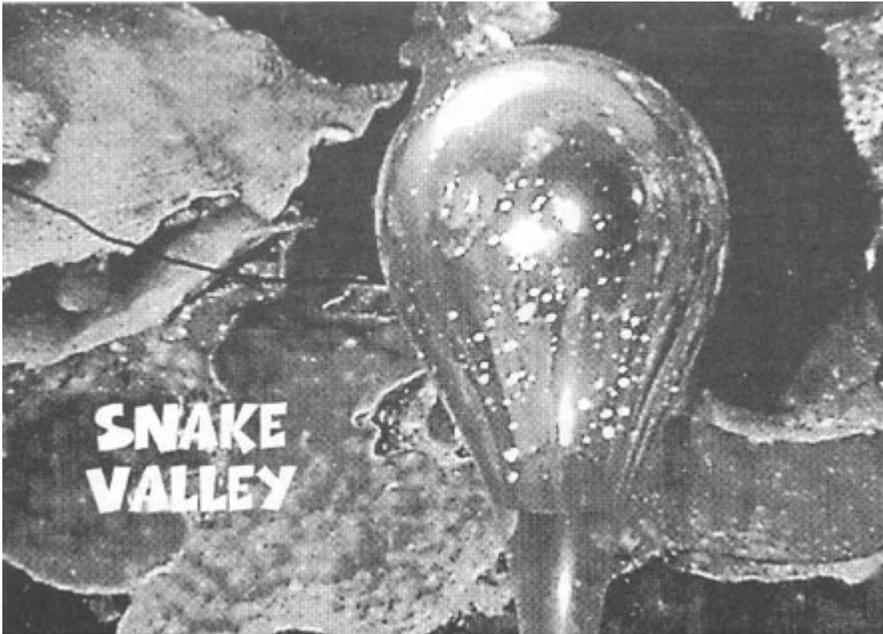
My eyes sought out La Dania, and I pointed to her, shouting, "In!"

There was no lingering; no delay. Her mask came down. She made two steps to the ledge, cocked her knees, did a little spring, and forward-roiled off that ledge into the next coming wave. That even surprised me a little bit.

Jock finally did get himself and his platoon into the water, and with some difficulties, finished the swim. However, for him, the last thousand feet were on the surface.

La Dania accompanied me as I walked back up the road to get the truck. Halfway there she asked me timidly, "How'd I do, Cap'n Don!" I smiled to myself and kicked a rock off the road.

"Well, La Dania, no less than Jock would have expected."



## Snake Valley

*Snake Valley is a part of the Alice in Wonderland double-reef complex that includes Punt Vierkant, Lake [Bowker], Angel City, Alice in Wonderland and Invisibles. Captain Don explored and named many of the sites there, marking his trail with inflated condoms as seen in the photo above.*

"Look out! It's loaded!"

I looked up to see several people move quickly away from the bar. Wancho Obersi appeared to be right in the midst of the confusion. His hands in the air as if warding off a hold-up, he danced away from the bar and cried out, "Be careful! It could explode!"

"Let me see that thing," a strong voice shouted. "I'm NRA and there's not a gun made I don't know about." He picked up an old flintlock pistol from the top of the bar.

Odd that Wancho no longer appeared to be involved. Then I saw him slip a bottle of Dewars from the shelf, pour several fingers of booze and move over to a table to watch.

I rounded the counter and took a chair opposite him. His chest was heaving as he stifled a laugh, but I remained silent. Nothing, but nothing, ever surprised me. However, when it came to Wancho ...

He was openly laughing when Mr. NRA moved over to the table. "Very funny!" said NRA as he rudely dropped the pistol on the table in front of us. I glanced down at it, looked at NRA, and then at Wancho.

"Very funny!" I mimicked and picked up the pistol to examine it. A flintlock, cocked, and in pretty good condition, considering the remnants of coral still clinging to the butt.

"Deep?" I queried. Wancho stopped laughing, looked me directly in the eyes, and replied, "Two hundred plus." He waited for my reaction and then asked, "Want to go?" I poured some more hot I whiskey into his glass, chucked it down, and then handed his glass back to him.

"Weather side?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Willemstoren?" I tried again. I thought for a moment, then growled, "You bastard. You got the 1 *Sirene*." The *Sirene* is a Dutch Man-o'-War that went down off Bonaire in 1831 and was lusted after by 1 more of us than I care to imagine. My old crewman *Ciro* spent many a day looking for her when I needed him on board the *Valerie Queen*.

"Don, if I found that one, would I be here talking with you?"

Insulted, I asked, "Is that so? I Where would you be?" *Wancho* thought about that and added, "You're right. I'd be right here drinking whiskey with my old friend Captain Don. Except I'd own this place, and you would be working for me."

I never coaxed him, but finally, *Wancho* did leak a clue. "The new Trans World Radio tower... straight out to the second drop-off." I cleared my throat, tried to relax and appear nonchalant.



Photo © Bruce Bowker

*Wancho* chuckled and shoved the pistol across the table at me. "Now where was I?" he questioned. "At 250 feet!" I exclaimed. "Awwww yeah, 250 feet..." he said. Then he picked up the pistol, knocked back the rest of the whiskey, and headed for the door. "Ciao!" and he was gone.

I sat in thought until the NRA fellow came over to the table and said, "Sounds to me like that fella's setting you up." NRA appeared to think a bit, then added, "Maybe!" I could see he was thinking about the pistol, too.

It was several days before I got free for a private little dive. I loaded the old '57 VW van, topped off my tank at a full 2400 psi, tested my "J" valve, bought a pack of Trojans at the gift shop, and finally cut myself a 10 inch piece of red ribbon.

The route south could scarcely be called a road and the old VW knew it. I reached the tower and pulled close to the water's edge. There, almost unseen, was a motor-bike, leaning against a rock. I gave it little attention until I saw the NRA sticker on its fender.

*What the hell*, I thought, *he's probably fooling around in the shallows. Forget him and get on with the dive.* I secured the ribbon to the left side of my mask, the Trojans in my coin pocket, and my archeological hammer in my belt. I had never felt so overdressed.

It wasn't too long before I was over the drop-off and looking for reference points. Then I saw my guy, down in the corals, resting like a lizard fish, legs spread for balance. He had a spear gun about six feet long, and his breathing was deep and slow. I knew I was watching a hunter.

I shoved my regulator in my mouth, exhaled deeply and started to drop. At 40 feet I touched down in a sand clearing just ten feet behind him. The speargun was an SMG with a balanced grip. Its stainless-steel shaft had an NRA sticker wrapped around it and was armed with a power head big enough to take out a small whale.

With my hammer, I smacked the bottom of my tank. The sharp ringing brought him off the bottom like he'd been snapped by an elastic band. His body swung like a gyro and he aimed that gun directly at my solar plexus. At that moment I thanked God that Mr. NRA was a conscientious hunter who never pulled the trigger until the kill was certain.

Once my breathing got back to normal I pried out the Trojan box, fingered out a single rubber, carefully inflated it to about two feet and secured it to a soft coral where it shimmered like an inverted teardrop.

We'd have to get rid of that gun and I had some problems signaling that to a hard-core hunter. Then I found myself staring down that underwater mountainside and wondered if the *Sirene* was really down there or if *Wancho* had set me up.

We left the spear gun with a Trojan standing sentinel on the edge of the precipice, started down the slope and coasted just above the reef. Soon we came to a flat sand platform. I pulled the ribbon away from the mask to study it: hundred, hundred-ten, maybe. The second Trojan was to take station there.

Visibility was excellent and I wondered how far the sand flat went. Maybe to Curaçao. There was nothing out there at all. Except for the snakes. Sand eels, actually, by the millions. The flat was alive with 'em.

We lifted from the sand and swam out perpendicular to the reef only three feet above the floor. I was exhilarated by the snakes. I stared them down and they glided back into their holes.

Five minutes into the crossing, I sensed company. There were two eight-foot sharks, coming in like gangbusters. I looked at Mr. NRA; no fear in his eyes, but lots of hostility because I'd made him leave that gun behind.

But he was all hunter; a gleaming knife, the size of a small sword, jumped into his hand. The sharks were now closing in and I began to understand his anger. I was defenseless with only my hammer; then, I thought, *and my buddy*.

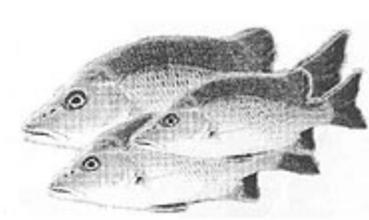
Those damned sharks had us spinning like tops. Then as quickly as they arrived, they left. It had been a good show, but had cost us time. More than that, it screwed up our sense of direction. Like being at sea with no landfall in sight.

Then I remembered the current ripples in the sand. We had moved perpendicularly across them before we met the sharks.

As the ripples came and went, I knew we were getting closer to the pistols. I was fascinated by the snakes again, their tails deep in their burrows. I watched the back of their heads turn as we approached. And then the penny dropped.

It had been their faces we watched as we crossed, not their backs. I was 180 degrees off course. *Don, you're an idiot*, I thought, but NRA had known it all along. He was swimming furiously toward his gun and the shore. I bid him farewell, turned, and regained my course out across the wet Sahara.

Wancho was right. I did find the second reef, gliding over it to the far drop-off where I set my third and final Trojan then pointed my nose down at the *Sirene* and Wancho's pistols.



My ribbon was growing darker by the minute and I knew I had entered the forbidden zone beyond 250 feet when it went coal black. Every breath screamed and I had long forgotten how to recite my narcosis "pome." No pistols, but it was time to go up.

The trip back was uneventful. A vertical ascent to 20 feet; watching for the reflected beacons from my Trojans and enjoying what I could see of the double reef far below. The snakes in the valley were too deep to see, but I

thanked them anyway for their help.

When I saw Mr. NRA the following day, I thanked him for his help and told him I thought that he dived rather well. He smiled his thanks and reached inside a large paper bag he was holding; his eyes never leaving my face.

Then, with a jerk of his hand, he pulled out a primed and cocked flintlock pistol with a brand new shiny NRA sticker across its barrel. "Wancho! You bloody pirate!" I screamed



## Windjammer



*Windjammer is the wreck of the Mairi Bhan, a 239-foot bark, built in Scotland in 1874 and sunk off Bonaire in 1912. She was out of Trinidad with a load of tar; her next port of call is unknown. Discovered in 1968, she lies beyond the range of sport diving. These photos were taken by Don with available light at 225 feet. The diver in the inset gives a sense of scale.*

"I'm L.A.-certified," he said proudly. "So let's do it!"

I was impressed. Los Angeles County certification was the ultimate from what I'd seen. The roughest-toughest came from that club. Somehow he had heard about the Jammer and wanted me to take him down. I looked at him, thinking of others I had taken and was about to decline. But I changed my mind when I saw the pressure gauge attached to the first stage of his single hose regulator.

"Hey this is great!" I really was impressed now. It was the first of these gadgets I'd seen. At a glance a diver knew exactly how much air was still in his tank. Better than the J-valves that shut you off at anywhere between 25

to 1000 psi.

I knew I had to have that gauge for my visiting divers. Not only didn't we have gauges, we didn't have octopuses either. At least once a month a diver would frantically swim over to me, the whites of his eyes running together like eggs in a skillet, and grab for my regulator. This wasn't fun. I would have to shuck my tank, pull down the J-valve, take a few fast breaths to hyper and give him my regulator, tank and all. Then I'd pat him on the head and split for the surface.

"Okay," I said, prying my eyes from his gauge. "Be here. Tomorrow morning. 0900 hours with a cold tank at 2400 psi." Next morning I was on the breakfast line by 0730. Had a beer and a peanut butter sandwich. Diving the Jammer itself was no big deal, but swimming the 1600 feet to the site was. Snorkeling down, returning at depth. That was a lotta work for a seven-minute dive. Truth was, I never really knew just how much air I had at any given time. This gauge could be my breakthrough.

The truck was loaded and ready to go by 0830 and we drove way off into the boonies. The old truck called for mercy as we fell into the deep, axle-breaking chuck holes along the way. At a small pile of rock I pulled off the road. We could have been at the edge of the moon.

"Is the Jammer out there?" L.A. asked, pointing out to sea. "Sure," I returned, "it's out there just a couple o' thousand feet." "Thousands?" he exclaimed. "Then why're we parking way up here?" I thought I detected a tremor in his voice but ignored it. "This is as close as we can get. Here's the plan."



*The cave at Karpata, 116 feet  
with available light*

I dropped down on my knees, cleared the coral rubble aside with my hand and found a clean sand table beneath. Then, with a long coral branch, I drew the dive program out in the sand.

"We enter here, wade in thigh deep and launch yourself into a good-sized wave. Snorkel out to sea until you're over the first shallow drop, turn right; now the waves are at your back. Set your bezel for 17 minutes and enjoy the reef as you go. Don't push it. Save your strength. At exactly 17 minutes you turn around and head into the waves.

"Relax for 2 minutes at least. Hyper-ventilating all the time to build up a good oxygen supply. Then swim down. Mask clear, all gear snug. That's when I practice reciting my little 'pome':

*Starkel Starkel little twink,  
How the hell I are you thing?  
I'm not on inkahol like thinkel  
peep I am.  
For the sitter I drunk here the  
longer I get;*

*So home me the way to go show.* His mouth gaped as he looked at me, and for some reason I thought he was holding his breath. "OK, you got that? Every diver's got to have his 'pome'. When you think you're getting a little deep, recite the 'pome'. If you stumble on even one word or can't remember how it goes, you're too deep, Pappy. Get your ass out of there now!

"Okay, now here you hang at the edge. Reset your bezel for 7 minutes. Blow out all your air and dive off into space. Keep your lungs empty and you'll drop like a stone. Don't want to waste any of that bottom time.

"The Jammer is lying on her starboard side so you'll hit the port side first, that's 140 feet. Take a few breaths, swim to the edge and look over. You'll see a mast, a lotta wire and the crow's nest. Say your 'pome' and drop off again.

"At 180 feet you will be on the cargo, Trinidadian tar. From there you can admire the entire ship. Recite the 'pome' some more. Turn left, towards the bow and stop to admire the beauty of the bow sprit, a hanging anchor and all that stuff. That's 225 feet." I looked up from my drawing to see if I still had his attention. "Okay?" He nodded and I continued. "Here is not the time to screw up. When that big hand hits the zero on your bezel it's time to go home. Take a long shallow angle up to the right

"Stay against the wall; in about ten minutes you should be at the edge of the drop off, stay there until you see a huge pillar coral. Then turn left and swim until you hit the beach. You're now back to Go."

Silence. Then a scrambling noise in the coral rubble.

"Hey! Where you headin'?" I said to L.A. as he heaved his gear back onto the truck. "What are you doin'? We gotta dive to do."

He turned, leaned back onto the truck, looked at me sadly and said. "I can't go. I don't know any poems."



## Regatta One

Zee Bad was the original name of the Flamingo Beach Club. It was the kind of place that one didn't go to, but rather "wore." I had often been quoted as saying, "It's a frame of mind and not to be mistaken for a hotel." I would guess that in the early days, had Bonaire been a wheel, this is where you'd have put the axle. I loved that place.

I was in there the other day and saw the Gouden Verrader, nailed to the wall in the foyer. The ancient ship's figurehead used to stand sentinel at the head of the bar, watching over all Zee Bad's happenings, both good and bad. I, like many, had quite a crush on her and I wondered if she remembered me.

Standing there in the lobby, I put the question directly to her ear, then waited. I watched for a sliver of a smile, for a nod of recognition, but none came. I backed away from her in utter disappointment. But just as I was turning to leave, I saw, mind you, just from the corner of my eye, I saw her wink at me.

That made me feel great. Nine years we'd been together, long interesting years, and I turned to go back to her. Standing at her side, I put my back against the concrete wall and talked to her softly so as not to disturb the passing guests. Even then, eyebrows climbed, and an occasional step in a stride was missed. But I was with an old friend and I didn't really give a damn what they thought.

We reminisced about old friends. The Aad Machels, the Jimmy Oliemans and many others no longer here who had made the long voyage. The crazy tower workers down at the salt flats, my trusted friend Larry who owned a boat with me. The guys who built the pier, the Zinky Smiths and their bulldozers, and the guys who built the new tourist roads.

I asked her if she recalled Cowboy Royce, and I thought I felt the wall vibrate as if she was going to dislodge herself from her bracket. That made me laugh, and that made a tourist bolt ahead to get out of possible harm's way.

"You remember Cowboy, do you?" and the wall vibrated some more. Paul Maduro stuck his head out of the office door, sensing trouble but I signaled all was well. Only an emotional tremor.

Old Cowboy, what a rascal he was, built short and tempered like a spring. Can't ever recall seeing him without his plastic hat on and wondered if he slept in it.

He would spring up on his toes, give me a cocky Floridian grin and say, "I'll betcha!"

One such time, sitting at this very bar, out of the clear blue he said it. "I'll betcha!"

So I asked him, "What?" After all, I was an innkeeper trying to be polite.



*Ebo Domacassé*

"Betcha Ebo can whap ya." Now I was surprised. "Whap me? Why in the hell would Ebo want to whap me?"

"Because I said so!" he yelled. I looked over at the bar top to see how many empty Amstels were in front of him.

Ebo was at the cash register and looked over at me with a *hende bai loco* expression on his face. I prodded, "Beat me at what?"

He laughed. "Sailing of course."

*Well now*, I thought, *that's an idea*. Ebo's boat the *Vilia* is a super boat but mine, the *Sislin*, had a history. *Hmmmm!* Jimmy Oliemans was fast on the uptake. Though he didn't take sides, being a banker, he sure did a great piece of organizing with the wager.

"Well I'll betcha 10 cases of Amstel," Cowboy crowed. I had to think about that for a moment. I looked over at Ebo again who smiled that wonderful smile of his and shrugged his shoulders.



*Sislin,*  
from a painting owned by Larry  
Thielgard

"Okay, you're on," and a cheer went up at the bar that had now become packed. The loyalties of friends, family and neighbors were being split at that moment. There was no question that Ebo and the *Vilia* were the favored team. It made me feel unwanted until Larry Thielgard came in and heard of the bet. "Ten more cases in favor of the *Sislin*.." Naturally, as half-owner of the boat, Larry was somewhat biased. By midnight, the bets were complete: 27 cases of beer were now the prize.

More important things had to be done. Secret sails made. Ballast trimmed and checked. Crew lists prepared. Shrouds tightened. Bottoms scrubbed. And most important, the designing of the flags.

By day two, enthusiasm was running high, and the date was set for the coming Sunday, September the 8th. I was happy to see that more Bonaireans began to have confidence in their old Captain Don. Surely he knew all there was about sailing because his schooner was so big. Yet on the other hand, some shyly said, "Ebo knows the waters." I should have paid more attention to that.

It seemed that all was in readiness, except for one small detail: the rules! There was no question that we were to circle Klein Bonaire. But in which direction, and how to start and where to finish?

"The rules!" I kept screaming. "What are the rules?"

The bar went quiet, and the Gouden Verrader waited. All of us looked at Cowboy and waited some more. Then he sprang off the bar stool, landing on his toes and hollered, "*There are no rules!*"

I looked at Ebo, who registered nothing. Then the both of us looked at Cowboy Royce and broke out laughing

"Let's do it!"



## 1,000 Steps

The Flamingo Beach Club, May 1968. Hattie, the breakfast waitress, roughly set another beer on the table in front of me. I stared at it, then at the Queen's Birthday party clutter lying ankle-deep in the dining room. I pleaded, "God, Hattie, get me a lotta ice." I looked out the window at the blue Caribbean and wondered if the coin from the party had been worth it.

As I watched, two divers jumped off the end of the dock and swam the few feet to the reef. I could see the exact place where my wonderful ship *Valerie Queen* had sunk. Growing nostalgic, I thought about our days in San Francisco, the crazy weekend parties in Sausalito, wines until dawn at the No-Name Bar, and how some things never seem to change.

Baldi, the leader of a small group diving with me, pulled up a chair, sat down, looked at my beer and hollered, "Hattie - a lotta beer, and a lotta ice," Suddenly becoming aware of naked flesh in the vicinity, I turned to find Baldi's traveling companions at my elbow. Pointing to some empty chairs, I tried a smile, and said, "Sit."

The tall one said, "Happy birthday, Captain." I rolled my eyes and tried to explain, "It was our Queen's Birthday, but I'll pass it on." I wondered how I was going to make it through the day.

I watched Baldi knock back his beers across the table and knew I had found a guy crazier than me. Good with people, he taught diving well, told tales of building brick walls for a living in Baltimore, and traveled to Bonaire for some great diving and lots of fun.

Then the redhead asked, "Captain Don, were you really a pirate?" I tried another smile and said, "I've been called that when checking out a guest."

I still had to get through the dive, then lunch and be back in time to check out departures, greet new arrivals, get dinner started, and then, maybe, get some sack duty. Lunch would be a simple thing: steak sandwiches, fried potatoes, sauerkraut and Brussels sprouts, all washed down with beer. Cheese cake for dessert. A serious diver's meal.

The garbage truck arrived, and I coaxed it back to the dive shop to load up with benches, tanks and beer. I hustled Baldi's ladies up into the cab with Ephraim and yelled, "Okay, guys and gals, let's load up for some good diving."

Normally, I preferred a clean truck, but today the tongs on the truck bed were festooned with bits of garbage and a lingering odor. Unfortunately, they were the only wheels around and we had a dive scheduled. "Okay, Ephraim, let's get this show on the road."

Then came the screaming. *"Don! Don!"* Maria, head of housekeeping ran toward us panting frantically. Ephraim put the truck, into neutral and looked out the window.

*"E yu di Doktor Binkhorst tin lolo den zip,"* Maria breathlessly reported. Ephraim leaned back and switched off the engine with a sigh. I gently lowered myself back down to the pavement



Baldi stuck his head over the side of the truck. "Whad she say? Whadda she say?" Silently looking up at him, I briefly considered my options, then decided on a literal translation.

"Baldi, she just told me that Dr. Binkhorst's kid has his ... his ... penis caught in his zipper. That's what she said. Grab your tool box and get your butt down here to give me a hand. Dive is delayed briefly, ladies and gents."

It didn't take long, and things ended well. The kid most likely grew up and had a big family. Just another day in the hotel business.

"Okay. Baldi, get your people back on the truck," I said. "We got a dive to do."

In '68, divers were still a novelty, so heads turned as we moved through the heart of town and on to the Queen's new tourist road, which ribboned north and made the entire shoreline available.

Near Barcadera was a small coral beach about 85 feet below the road; stone steps had just been built down to the water. The truck pulled off the road near Radio Netherland's transmitter site opposite the steps.

Horrified, I watched as tons of modern dive gear fell out of the truck. These certified divers sometimes surprised me.

One of my island divers, nick-named The Goat, was going with us that day. A real Captain Don diver: steel tank high and firm on her back, snorkel through her belt, mask strap hung over the snorkel, and the flippers where they belonged, on her feet. She was already moving down the steps, while Baldi's people were fumbling and dragging their gear down, one piece at a time.

This area, like most other beach entries, had been totally blocked by antler coral which grew tight to the shore. I had cut paths from the beach to deeper water where the antler coral gave way to star coral and gorgonians.

My normal procedure on every site was to mark the channels with inflated Clorox bottles secured about three feet from the bottom. I also used inflated condoms tied to the soft coral. They were more visible, but fragile and very expensive.

The chromies and yellowtails with their endless appetites never failed to entertain, and one of Baldi's princesses was bitten. Otherwise the dive was an uneventful 35 minutes and back to the beach for sun and warm beer. I moved on down the shore to give Baldi the shade of the tree and some private time with his divers.

Suddenly, loud words, some bad and a few in Italian, were hurled. Then the coral stones began to fly. I became a shield for the guy who was the target. The first two stones missed everything, the third killed a cloud, and the fourth clobbered me.



*Photo © Susan Davis*

**I never saw it coming; never felt it hit. Moments later, a red Texas gusher welled from my head.**

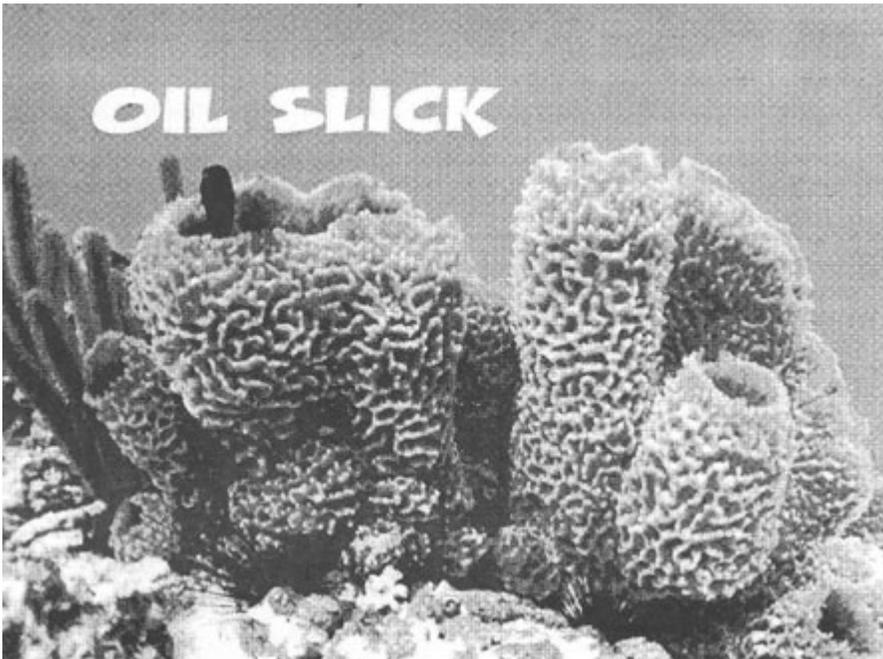
**The guy behind me said, "Oh, Christ!" And Baldi yelled, "Hey! Why the hell did you get in the way." The Goat, always practical, said, "That's a big hole, Captain Don. I can see inside your head."**

**The last of my secrets gone! "Okay, fix it," I moaned. I really needed this, as if my head didn't hurt enough already. She quickly gathered some hairs from each side of the hole in my head, twisted them together to form string, then pulled the string until the cut closed. She then poured some beer over it, and said, "Come on, let's go swimming." All part of the cure.**

**When it was time to go, it took a full 20 minutes before the truck was loaded. I nodded at Ephraim to get moving. As we pulled away, a guy with sea urchin spines' in his hand whined, "That's a bunch of steps - must be a thousand of 'em."**

**"Only 67," I gently corrected.**

**He looked up at me and replied, "Yeah, down! And 933 back up!" I glanced at The Goat who was laughing, "He's right, Don. A thousand steps!" I signed ten logs that afternoon; dive location: '1000 Steps.'**



## **Oil Slick**

Captain, there's someone looking for you," Henky said as he slid my drink across the bar. "Over here." A dozen people stood where he pointed. I already knew eleven of them so the twelfth must be *her*.

I walked over and introduced myself and she handed me a black plastic business card with gold-embossed letters. The print was small the light was bad. I looked at the card, squinted, moved it to full arm's length and gave up. "What's it say?"

She laughed. "Sorry. I'm Diane Cumberland. I'm with the outfit building the new 35 million-dollar oil terminal here on Bonaire, and I have an important job I'd like you to handle for us." I'd heard rumors of an oil depot here and my face must have shown how I felt about it. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked.

My friend Aad quickly jumped in saying, " Don is a self-imposed conservationist and doesn't like hearing about spear fishing or coral collecting, let alone oil depots coming to Bonaire."

"Well, we can't stop progress, can we? Also, this means 125 jobs for the island. Plus, our technology has advanced to a point where pollution is virtually impossible. Environmentally speaking, it's one of the safest businesses in the world." Her set speech. I guess my look hadn't changed because I felt her gray eyes come down on me and I sensed her molars grinding.

"Okay Buster," she hissed, "are you going to help us or what?" I was going to remark that her eyes were the same color as reef sharks, then thought better of the idea.

"I'm always ready to help a pretty lady," I said. "When do I start? What's the pay? Where do I have to go. What do I have to do?"

Just then, the band started and the conversation stopped. Drink, dance or go home. I did a little of all three and made an appointment for the following evening in her room where she said she had this screw device that she wanted to show me. I was interested.

The next day's meeting was short and to the point. I found her completely unconcerned about my experience in California's oil-polluted Long Beach harbor. She assured me her terminal was safe. I cautioned that even the vibrations from hammering in the pilings would kill coral polyps. She countered with more about the new technology. Neither of us was convincing the other.

The screw device tuned out to be a fifty-pound core drill that had to be rotated by hand. What she wanted, in five days, were core samples of the bottom from 110 feet for which she would pay me \$300. That was the "when" and "what." I was the "how".

"Okay," I said, but inwardly I worried whether the risk was worth it. Yes, I wanted to be inside the enemy camp, but I would still have to lead three to four guided dives each day after this deep early morning dive.

Still, something was missing. "And exactly *where* do I take these samples from?" She was hesitant and wouldn't hold eye contact. "Where?" It came out harder than I had intended. She was silent, then looked up from her notes and said softly, "Colombia."

"Colombia?" I had to think. "Oh, yeah, big plantation. Cuts right across the middle of the island, a beach on both coasts. Right?" She didn't say a word, just sat listening to me, her eyes never leaving my face. "My God!! You want to build a deepwater terminal on the weather side of the island? You're mad"

She still didn't speak, but only watched me. I started to say something, and then the penny dropped. She wasn't thinking of the weather side at all. I felt the blood rush from my face, and slid back into the chair.

"Barcadera! You wouldn't! You couldn't do this to our island."

"No, Don, not Barcadera. A little farther this way. Just south of the Dutch World Radio Towers," she said. "The tank farm will be on the cliff, above the loading docks." There was nothing to say. We both sat in silence for a bit.

"Well, Diane, 'progress' will put your damned docks right in the middle of some of the finest coral gardens in the world. "Progress" you say!" I snatched up the core drill on the way out, not bothering to look back. I knew that the drilling would be done with or without me. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

The dive itself, 110 feet, wasn't any big deal; 210 would have been another story.

First step was to plan the dive. Drag the core drill down to location, set up a 15-foot decompression stop where I'd tie off a second tank. Set a static line from the drill site to dive entry. And then, I needed a way out. While a nine-foot giant stride entry was no problem, a nine-foot jump back out of the water was a bit much. Day one found me cutting footholds in the cliff-face at 0630.

During the dive I allowed myself 20 minutes at depth. Swapped tanks at 15' and spent my decompression time scouting out the reef. This is when I had time to do nothing but observe and to think.



Looking out over the rich wonderful living corals, I knew it would all be destroyed. It was depressing. Nothing could survive the building of a pier of this magnitude. I had a serious talk with myself and I knew that it was time to stop thinking and take some action. But what?

Four more days passed like the first. Twenty minutes of furious drilling followed by 20 minutes of decompression, looking at the doomed reef and trying to think of what to do.

Day five, the last day of core sampling, went as the others. I finished my decompression stop, hauled my tank to the base of the cliff, secured it to the rope, hung the core sample above the tank and swam over to the ascent area. I muscled myself over the top and found that I was not alone. Diane was intently peering down from the ledge into the transparent sea that was alive with shallow-water corals.

Neither of us spoke. I pulled up the core sample, "Number five," I said. "Wish you dived, or even snorkeled. It would be nice for you to have a memory of what this place is like."

I held out the core to her. "Take this damned thing, will you... I wish you nothing but the worst of luck with your pilings," and turned my attention to gathering my gear.



She said nothing but stood looking down at the core sample. Then she opened the plastic tube, slid the short core into her hand and raised it to her face for a close examination.

Finally she spoke. "So these are the roots of this island?" she asked and looked up at me. "To build an island on these in two million years is Progress. She flung the core out into the sea. "Buster, this is a small island and you can't afford to lose a single root."

Then she smiled. A real smile; the first I had seen. Slowly shaking her head, she said, "You conservationists are going to drive me crazy some day!" She turned and looked up at the silent, looming radio towers and laughed. "Thank them, Buster. They saved your precious dive site."

The oil depot had been moved further West due to possible danger from the strong radio waves and also because the frontage proved to be too short for safety.

*On 17 September 1975, the first pier was finished and, as promised, the Bonaire oil terminal became one of the finest in the western hemisphere. And, in its new location, has had practically no impact on our dive sites.*



Photo © Bruce Bowker

## Sampler

"Captain!" I opened an eye to see Peter Schroeder, who I knew best as Diver No. 43, take a seat on the lounge next to me. He was what we called a "Golden Tank," which meant that he was a frequently returning visitor to Bonaire.

This was about his eighth trip, so he was no stranger and knew his way around the island as well as I did. He had been onboard a week, and the evidence was his deep tan. And his carefree attitude. The real world was a week behind and forgotten.

Peter was a good man. I liked him, and hoped the feeling was mutual. I found him an excellent teacher in matters of psychology, diving techniques, and jungle warfare, and wondered if women thought him better looking than me. The way he parted his hair, held his age, spoke a precise English and, above all, acted like a gentleman. This brought me to the conclusion that he must be a square.

"Don! Were you in a fight last night?" He was looking at the numerous scuffs about my head and shoulders, then brought his attention to my swollen ear where my earring had been rudely yanked out.

How could I have told him? He never would have believed about the drunk who had stumbled onto his girlfriend and me in the middle of the night, down on the dimly lit beach, pouring hot coffee over the naked foot of a beach-comber, a victim of a sea wasp.

Really it was all quite innocent, not as though there was any hanky-panky going on. Actually she was ...was my nurse ...yes, nurse. Everybody knew her. Some called her the Gypsy, a lady who had her own special charm.

Rich black hair to the waist. Skin the color of coffee with three milks. Eyes of emerald green, and a body from the pages of Omar. However, the extraordinary point of this girl's body works was her tattoos. Three to be precise, all similar in text, and reading almost like a country-western song: A wheel, a scarf and a set of high riding bars. Some wings and a chain with a one-eyed skull peeping over a hard, knobby tire. Each tattoo floated over a name. Like: "Mad Dog" or "Skullbreaker." One starboard, two to port. And if you were to ask any diver who swam astern of her what he had seen, he would have said, "\*@!#\$!+\$^%!"

"Don," Peter repeated, "did you have a fight last night?"

I looked him straight in the face saying, "No Peter, I didn't have a fight... but he did." I pointed to the boisterous biker-type fellow, tattoos and a hairy back, strutting on the beach. Peter, being polite, waited.

"He really didn't get mad about me on the beach with his girl. Until he asked me if I were an instructor or something. I told him I was *something*. When he asked me *what*, I told him diver, bartender and underwater fornication instructor. I think that's when he went for my earring."

Peter listened, absorbing what I had told him, then asked, "Was she the..." and he placed a hand on his butt. I looked down at my feet, no words, and just nodded my head.

Then he said, quite matter-of-factly and totally off the subject, "I want to name a reef with you!" I cleared my throat and blinked several times, then said. " Really! What makes you so special that we should do that?"

"I know the royal family," he boasted.

That one stopped me. "Okay," I said, "that gets you into the boat. What else."

"I can speak Dutch," he quickly added.

I had to laugh at that one. "God, I hope so. You've been announcing for Radio Holland for how many years? Okay, Peter, meet me on the pier about 3 o'clock, and you can tell me more about the royal family."

He was obviously determined and there was a place on the north side of Klein Bonaire that I wanted to scout out for a new mooring. As good a time as any.



Forty minutes later we were cruising at 40 feet. Peter had taken a liking to the kids I had brought along, shepherding them down the reef exploring on their own. I started looking around for a good mooring location. When half an hour was up I started down the reef looking for Peter and the kids.

I found them at about 60 feet, give or take several yards, gathered around a pinnacle. It was perhaps five feet in height and only six inches around. On the top there was a sizable platform, like a giant tray almost five feet in diameter. On this tray was an array of coral, one of everything, like a box of

chocolates.

It was a breathtaking display. Coral, sponges, gorgonian pups. I knew the table well and always enjoyed viewing it. "Time's up," I pointed to my watch and gave the "up." It had been a fine dive and the kids were enthralled.

"Will you pierce my ear?" Peter asked me as we were rinsing our gear. By now nothing surprised me. He seemed to always come at me out of left field. I finished with my wet suit and hung it up. "I have decided I would like an earring like yours," he continued.

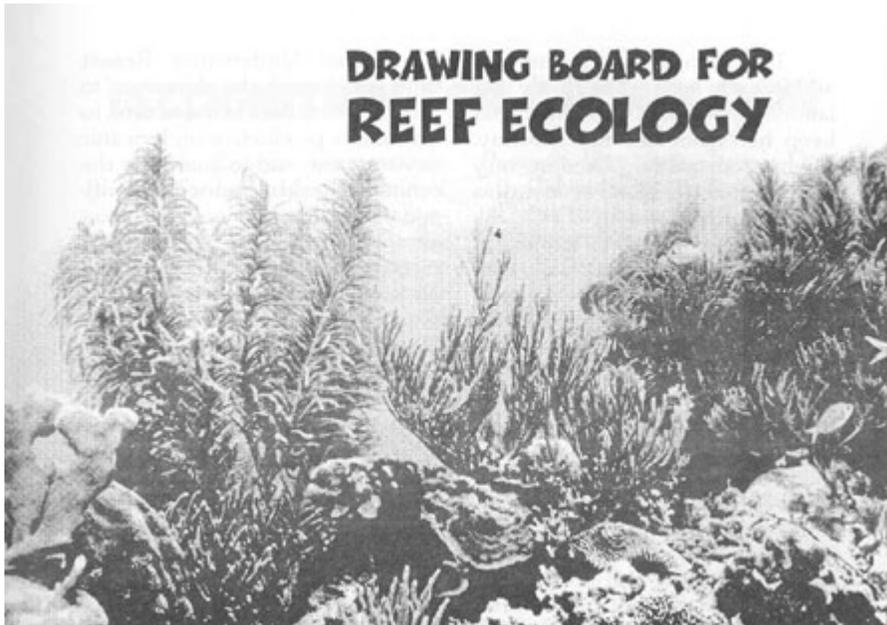
"Well Peter, why not?" and I turned back to the rinse tank, grappling about for my knife. I'm not sure that was the answer he expected and he sure didn't like the look of my knife. He left quickly.

Peter hadn't spoken about the naming of the dive site since our return and I chose to leave well enough alone. Then about mid-morning the following day he found me in my office. He stuck his head in the door and said only: "Sampler." Then he was gone. I smiled to myself knowing exactly what he meant. "Sampler" it is.

That afternoon, same day, I saw Peter again. He found me in the harness room fitting up a new diver. He came over and stood directly in front of me. His mouth was a slash of a smile, not saying a word.

"Hi, Peter," I mumbled and I started to move away. Then my eyes fell to the dollar bill neatly rolled and stuck through the shiny new earring dangling from his right ear.

"Don, can you arrange for me to get a tattoo?" He gave me a broad smile and placed a hand on his buttock. Guess he's not a square after all. Something of a Sampler himself.



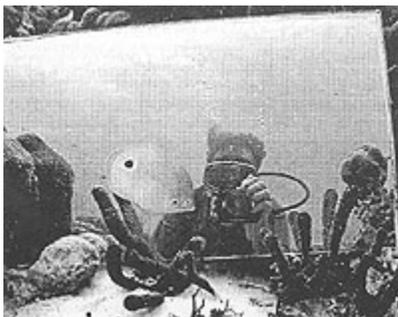
## Drawing Board for Reef Ecology

*Show me healthy reef administered by a progressive government and I'll show you a potential multimillion dollar industry whose income will generate sustainable development for an otherwise economically deprived island.*

*Captain Don, 1974*

With this vision, Bonaire lunged forward like the true pioneer she is, into the new and exciting industry of diving tourism. Divine providence had supplied the bountiful reefs, the island people spurred the need for development and a wise government fortunately took an intelligent look at reef preservation to make tourism a plausible undertaking.

Bonaire's dive operators did what every other island is now trying to do. But Bonaire did it first. Our self-imposed conservation started in the mid-sixties. By '69, we no longer spear fished, anchored or removed coral from our sea. It was only a matter of time before we had permanent moorings to replace the unsightly debris that made up our early efforts.



*Roy G. Biv, himself, would have approved of Don's mirror method for bringing light to the reef. In those days, he could only process black and white film. Even today, it's still Capt. Don's preferred medium and he has just installed a new darkroom at his kunuku*

We were protecting the sea, of course, but the fledgling dive industry was protecting its own interests, and the reefs as the tools of their trade, as well.

The writing was on the wall and Bonaire had moved firmly into launching position. Nothing could keep her from her new destiny. Diving tourism had become very important to the island economy as early as 1968 and by 1972, the divers were coming like lemmings. With the addition of a totally diver-oriented hotel in 1976, the need for even more reef protection emerged.

But how do you limit the impact on our underwater environment? Not to have been cognizant of the dangers would have been lunacy. Sharp eyes looked down long noses and questioned: "Who, in the long run, is going to be the winner? The reefs or the hotel reservation maps?" We were betting on both.

In 1977, we formed CURO (Caribbean Underwater Resort Operators), with the objective "to proliferate reef/sea management, to maintain a productive underwater environment, and to guarantee the economic health of our community and our industry."

Within two years, CURO had members in 18 Caribbean islands and 16 associate members in industry. CURO's mandate is "to successfully use, manage and *share* from this natural littoral resource with the maximum consideration to be that our trespass shall leave no mark."

Today, Bonaire has come to realize her dream, having established both the first island-wide Marine Park in 1979 and the first comprehensive marine ordinance of any Caribbean island. The diving and tourism industries' dreams have become accepted law. The island is one of the top diving destinations in the world, with over 35,000 divers a year. All this while maintaining flourishing reefs below.

Bonaire was and continues to be the leader, the pace-setter, the hero and the world's drawing board for reef ecology.

## Recognition for Captain Don

While Captain Don praises Bonaire for her leadership in reef ecology, Bonaire, in turn, has lovingly recognized his contributions.

For his 20th year on Bonaire the government issued a Certificate of Appreciation, "In recognition of your valuable contribution to the island of Bonaire and its people." In 1987, the island celebrated the 25th anniversary of Don's "landing."

Then on May 21, 1992, the 30 anniversary, was the biggest celebration of all. T-shirts were printed and Amstel Brewery brought out specially labeled bottles of beer for the occasion.

That same year, CURO presented an Underwater Bronze Plaque placed on a Klein Bonaire dive site named for Captain Don. There were special Regatta activities, a parade and the Marine Ecology Project presented him with a special award.

1992 was also the year M. Timothy O'Keefe dedicated his book, *Diving for Adventure* to Captain Don. Other diving and environmental honors include: The Foundation for Ocean Research John Stoneman Marine Environmental Award, 1985; Boston Sea Rovers' Walter Feinberg Diver of the Year, 1984; John C. Fine Medallion from the Underwater Society of America, 1988; the Ocean Charter Award "Ocean Ranger - Sentinel of the Seas," 1989; Ocean Realm Magazine award, 1983; Scuba Schools International Platinum Pro 5000 Award, 1993; Dive Travel Industries Association (DTIA) Hall of Fame, 1993; Beneath the Sea Medal of Excellence, 1994; and the 1995 NAUI Marine Environmental Award.



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As early as 1976 Captain Don was even featured in the syndicated newspaper comic strip "Dondi", by Irwin Hasen. In the series, Captain Don teaches Dondi to dive and to preserve the reef.