



The Long White Cloud

WORDS *Mike Grummell*
PHOTOGRAPHS *Perrin James*

IT WAS SURREAL FINDING MYSELF SWIMMING IN NEW ZEALAND NEXT TO TERRY MAAS, A WORLD CLASS SPEARFISHING CHAMPION, AS HE WORKED TO LAND A 250 POUND STRIPED MARLIN. REMINDED OF A LINE FROM A TALKING HEADS SONG, YOU MAY ASK YOURSELF, WELL, HOW DID I GET HERE? A SMILE CREPT ACROSS MY FACE AS I RECALLED A CHANCE MEETING WITH COLLEEN.



14

I MET COLLEEN GALLAGHER, FOUNDER OF DIVING FOR A CAUSE (DFAC) at the 2012 U.S. Spearfishing Nationals in Mendocino, California. DFAC is a humanitarian, non-profit organization created to help children and communities in need around the world. While we spoke, Colleen's commitment to community involvement was clear, and her enthusiasm was infectious. She asked if I would be interested in traveling to New Zealand, explaining this trip would assist the local Maori community with our labor and our fish harvest. Count me in!

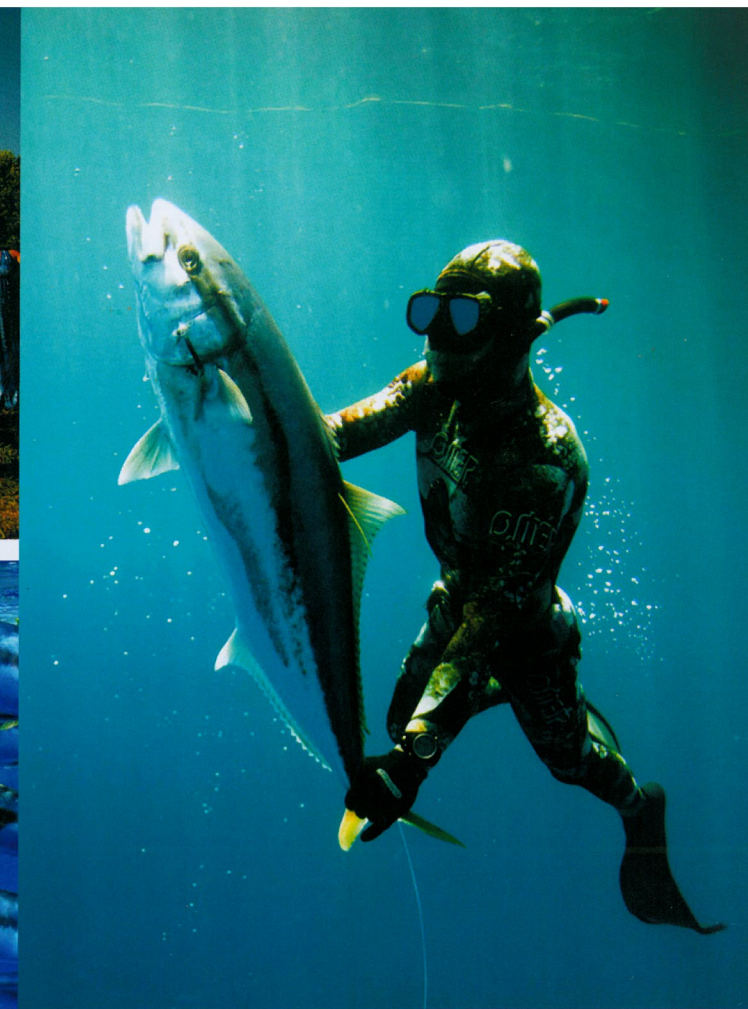
January, 2013, our adventure began. I knew our boat captain and host, Joe Burk, as an urchin diver from California and now a Powa (abalone) diver in New Zealand. We had been friends for years. I knew Terry Maas by reputation as a national spearfishing champion and the inventor of the Freedivers Recovery Vest. I first met Mike Scaglione and his wife, Denise, when we crammed into the undersized "standard" car for a 4-hour trip driving on the wrong side of the road. We joined the rest of the group at Joe's house. He introduced me to his lovely wife Kura (who would be our ambassador to the Maori community) and his two sons, Joe (little Joe) and Walker (Waka). Next, I met Ray Powell, an accomplished freediver and the manufacturer of the DiveR fins. I learned that Ray is not only an incredible diver, but a genuine, personable, and a humorous host as well. Ray shared guide duties with Joe and proved to be a great asset for us all.

In the evenings, we gathered at "the big house", a beautiful home with stunning views of the ocean, White Island and the bay. Joining us was diver Juan Palma (who would provide us with most of our lighter moments); diver Norman Jolly and his mother, Blanca Jolly (who made sure we behaved); Shannon Truax and Joungson Kim (nurses who worked with Colleen in Redwood City); Veasna Elstrom and her friend Miho Miyahara, also nurses; and freediver, photographer and videographer Perrin Franta. Miho, Shannon and Veasna came as non divers but surprised the group by putting on a wet suit and getting on the boat on the last days to help harvest fish as well - and they did!!

After a wonderful meal prepared by Joe's boys, it was time to talk about our purpose: to help the local Maori community. Taking seats on the deck overlooking the ocean, Colleen introduced Kura to us. Our first organized event was a meeting with the Maori elders. We needed to follow certain protocols and procedures and Kura, a Maori herself, guided us in the traditional welcoming ceremonies.

Outside the sacred ceremonial house, which was akin to a church, we were welcomed within by song. By tradition, women precede the men. As we approached the house, we stopped and lowered our heads for a moment to reflect on our own departed family members. Once inside, we remained segregated. Women sat on the right and men on the left. The dialog was very precise. It started with a welcome prayer steeped in reverence to God, the environment and the ones who had passed. Often, Maori prayers come in the form of song, and we were treated to some beautiful singing. By tradition, we were expected to respond in song. Our rendition of America the Beautiful was followed by one last bit of protocol -- a Hungi -- where one shakes hands, grabs another by the shoulders, leans in to simultaneously touch foreheads and noses, all while avoiding a head butt.

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The Maori are proud. In spite of their modest means, it was important to them that they finish the welcome with a wonderful meal. With the welcoming ceremony complete, we were considered part of the tribe's family and they part of ours. We enjoyed a nice meal and got to know each other better. Afterwards, we divided into two groups for the beginning of our service. Some of us went to a community garden to help with weeding and repairs, while the rest went to a local volunteer firehouse for more weeding and cleaning.

The next day, diving began at White Island, an active volcano with a cloud perpetually spewing from a cauldron not far from excellent diving. I had dived at this location once before and recalled having good luck there. It had some beautiful structure and a lot of fish. I hoped the kingfish would be swimming today. Juan and I partnered for the first dive. Ray put us on a spot that looked good and had a reputation for holding big fish. Plunging it, I was met with a palette of blues. Everything was blue, from waves of the baitfish (blue Maomao) to the clear blue water to the sky. Even Juan's swimsuit was blue. For a moment I was mesmerized by the baitfish and the kelp swaying on the bottom like rhythmic dancers. The moment was broken when Juan swam up to me and said, "This area has a lot of current. Let's swim out and around the point." The idea sounded good, but the current proved stronger than both of us. "You guys want a lift?" Ray taunted from the wheelhouse of the boat. I looked at Juan who was already swimming for the boat. "Good idea," was all I could get out as a wave filled my mouth with salt water. Once on board we compared notes. "You see anything?" "Nah, no Kingies. You?" "No, just the Maomao." Ray suggested a nice spot a little past the point with a steep drop off.

We agreed to split up, I would work one end of the reef and he would work the other. After several unproductive dives I surfaced to the frantic cries of Juan calling, "Mike! Mike! Mike!" I saw him about 30 yards away, and I immediately started kicking toward him with everything I had. Was there a shark trying to get his fish? Was he wrapped in his line? Did he shoot himself? Did he have a cramp? As I approached he said, "Go down and get a second shot!" I dropped down and saw he had a good holding shot on a fish, and it was tiring. "You've got a good shot in him. He won't pull off," I told him. Back on the boat, we estimated our first blood, a kingfish, to be 52 pounds. It was a nice fish for sure. Ray told us that Colleen had been diving with Joe, and she too had landed a fish close to the same size. It was shaping up to be a pretty good day. Later that day, I ended up shooting a smaller 45-pound kingfish which would round out the day with a total of four nice-sized fish.

The next day we dove near Mayer Island, an hour's drive along a very scenic road that wound through mountains, along green pastures, and occasionally next to immense hedges, some of which were 40 feet high. On the way, we stopped at Ray's favorite coffee house for mochas and pastries. After the 2-hour ride to the island, our captains flipped roles, Joe piloting the boat and Ray scouting with us in the >>>>





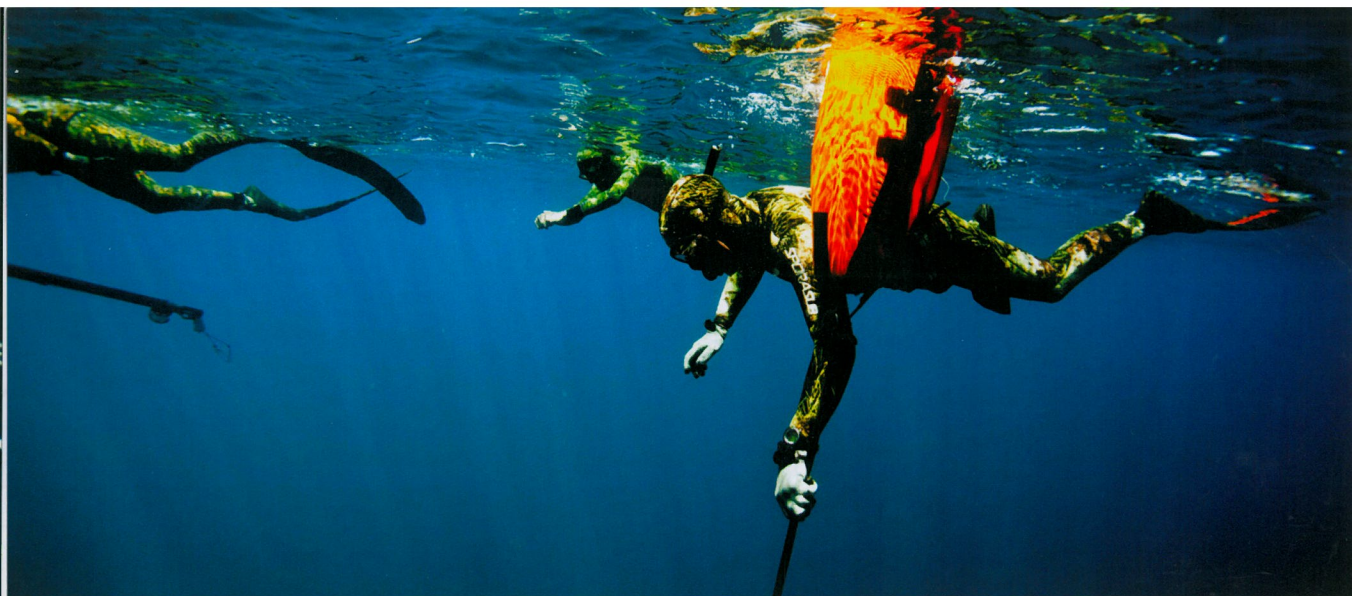
water. Joe parked the boat on the outer edge of a reef that jetted out from the island toward the open ocean with waves breaking on the middle of the reef. Our instructions for this site were to swim along the edge of the reef until we found koheru (mackerel) and maomao. Ray mentioned that if we saw any koheru with a bright yellow stripe along its back it meant there was a predator nearby, most likely kingies. I dove with Norman and we started off on the outer edge of the reef while Terry and Colleen, guided by Ray, swam to the other end of the reef looking for kingfish. Perrin was in tow as the photographer.

Norman and I found a good location that we felt would be productive and started making some dives. While Norman was down scouting for a big one, I spotted a stingray swimming from the bottom to check me out. Seeing that I was of no concern to him, he glided over to Norman, who looked up just as he was preparing to surface for air. Both flinched in surprise and the ray floated casually back to the bottom content that neither of us would be a problem for him. We shared a brief laugh and resumed our dive. About that time, Ray found a school of large kingies and guided them past Colleen like the pied piper. Spotting the fish in tow, Colleen made an instinctive, fluid dive and dispatched the largest one with a clean kill shot. Ray burst into laughter on the surface, watching her reaction to his fish train.

Meanwhile, the boat motored up to us and Joe shouted, "Hurry, get on! Terry just shot a marlin!" Holy cow, I thought as I swam back to the boat. Norman was right on my heels. Neither of us took the time to unload our guns in the water. Joe simply grabbed them and hung them tip down on the gunwales. "How big?" asked Norman. "I don't know, but it's dragging Perrin all over," Joe replied. It took us about 10 minutes to catch up with them, and I could see Perrin being dragged through the water, hanging on two speeding floats. Terry was swimming frantically to catch up. I knew I was about to witness a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I wasted no time leaping into the water to join the other divers chasing the floats. As Perrin passed, I asked, "What's he got?" "A big f*&%\$n striped marlin! It swam right passed me! Oh.... and my camera is leaking." Undaunted, Perrin angled his camera down and kept shooting. We all swam alongside Terry as he worked to bring his prize fish to the surface. Using the handles on the lifeguard float for leverage, he pulled the marlin up a few inches at a time and tied his float line off to the handles to let it fight against the float and expend a little more energy. This see-saw game lasted for another 30 minutes until slowly we began to see its outline underwater as it gave up the fight. Borrowing Ray's gun, Terry swam down to administer the coup de grace. Terry pulled the beautiful fish the rest of the way to the surface where he brained it and swam it back to the boat. I watched from the water as they struggled to pull the fish on board. Although it was still, I could see its iridescent blue stripes shimmering in the midday sun. Once we were sure it was safely on board, we all climbed back onto the boat where Terry and Perrin shared their stories.

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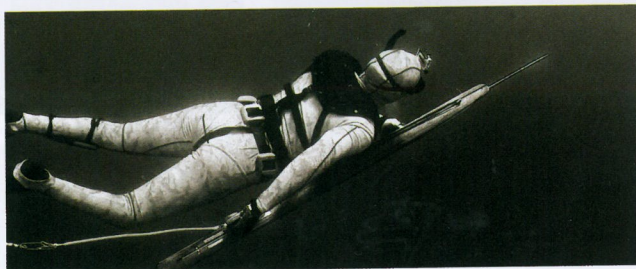
"Ray found me diving near a steep drop-off," Terry began. "I discovered that the deep-throat croaking technique I perfected for hunting white seabass in the kelp forests of Southern California was doing a great job attracting a school of small kingfish (small by NZ standards is 30 pounds). Ray called to me, 'Follow me and I'll show you where Colleen just landed a nice Kingy.' We traveled a short distance up the side of the deep drop-off to his sweet spot—a place close to a high point on the offshore reef. Ray patiently watched as I passed on a circling school of 30- to 50-pound kingfish. I was looking for a 'frog,' which Joe says is the appearance of a very large kingfish heading straight towards you."

"Ray left me to fend for myself as he went off to tend to some of the other divers. Slipping down to 40 feet, I leveled off into a mixed school of reef fish. My croaking brought them closer and more began to appear and condense around me. I had a sense that a large kingfish would soon appear. Then the fish surrounding me became nervous and darted toward the reef leaving me alone, hanging off the deep end—naked. Suddenly, a roar like a freight train passed next to me filling my senses as thousands of jack mackerel angled straight to me from the depths. The noise and the illusion of so many fish swimming at me and darting close by me caused me to feel disoriented and even dizzy. In the space of a few seconds, I was once again left alone hanging in the abyss. I extended my Daryl Wong gun (better suited for 60-pound white seabass) toward the open water, in the direction the bait had come from, hoping to line up on the predator that had frightened them so badly. Nothing appeared. I glanced over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of the bright blue neon bars of a marlin swimming between me and the reef. Dragging my gun over my shoulder, I fired for center mass. Instantly, I saw my shaft fully penetrate the large striped marlin and then get bent 90-degrees. I watched this powerful giant ungulate its mighty tail as my float line went taut, and my gun was ripped from my hand. My gun drifted by me and sank slowly while my float line departed. I quickly grabbed my gun and resurfaced after the 1:30 dive, to see my floats disappearing with enough speed that it left a wake. Already 100 feet away, I threw the gun bands over my left shoulder and began swimming with all my might. I saw Perrin grab my float line, and I hoped he could hold on and slow it down long enough for me to catch up."

GO TO P.95

Perrin chimed in, "After filming for a few hours I returned to the boat where I could see Terry desperately swimming after his floats. Joe instantly whipped the boat around to catch up with the buoy and strategically placed the boat about 50 yards in front. I grabbed my camera and jumped in only to be confronted with a huge striped marlin swimming straight at me! Dodging the fish, I grabbed the float and went on a wild 30 minute ride. Terry eventually caught up with me, and I transferred the reins to him. I wanted to record as much of this event as I could, so I kept the shutter rolling. Once he was on the surface, I continued taking pictures as they dragged the enormous fish on board. I knew this was something special, and I felt I was able to capture some awesome images."

Once the marlin was on board, the next challenge was to keep it cool. We covered it with wet towels and our shirts dunked in water. We used a bucket to occasionally pour water over the fish to keep it moist. The rest of the ride home was uneventful, but we were all fully engaged with the re-telling of the hunt. There was an energy on board that was unrivaled by anything. We weren't sure how much this marlin weighed, but there was a hope that it could have given the record a run for the money, if it weren't for the coordinated team effort it took to land the massive fish.



As we returned to the dock the question became: How do you weigh a fish that looked to be well over 200 pounds and nearly 13 feet long? Thankfully, another fisherman told us of a fishing club just a few blocks away. We loaded the boat onto a trailer and drove over to the club with Terry's trophy draped over each side of the boat. It officially weighed in at 250 pounds; not a record, but a magnificent catch just the same. Back home, Ray used his filleting skills and had the meat cut into neat little portions in no time. Next stop—the local smokehouse. All of the fish went to good use. The meat was smoked, frozen and given to the local Maoris so that they could feed their congregation during events such as funerals, weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies at the house of worship. A paper mill in the area had just laid off 300 people, many of them Maori. They would use the carcasses to make soup and poach the head to loosen the meat from the skull.

Later in the week, we returned to Mayer Island, but the winds kept us from the offshore reef. We finished with two wonderful days at White island, where we landed quality kingfish Terry and Perrin scored some amazing footage there. Each of us got to use Terry's prototype freedivers recovery vest. It was fun ending the dive day with an elevator ride to the surface.

The highlight of the trip was our parting gift to the Maori elders, about 1,200 pounds of fresh fish fillets and smoked marlin and backpacks full of school supplies for the local school. In turn, the Maori gifted us with a ceremonial Haka (the Polynesian war dance,) the last-day lunch, and hand-crafted gifts.

For me, this trip produced several once-in-a-lifetime moments, forged lifelong friendships, and birthed stories that will undoubtedly be told to our grandchildren. Most importantly, we will never forget the importance and pleasure of helping a community less fortunate. **PAU**

For trip video by Perrin James check visit: www.lastbreathfilm.com
<http://vimeo.com/61032460#at=0>