

ANSWERED PRAYER IN LA PAZ

The four of us sat silently as we absorbed the rhythmic pounding of our panga against the wind-chopped seas. It was the second morning of our three-day trip and Captain Javier guided us with precision through the low-lying fog. Our journey to the north point of Cerralvo Island would take two hours. We were headed east towards an expanse of sky that blazed with hues of red and orange. My thoughts of the hunt were interrupted as the sun appeared over the dark jagged cliffs that surround La Paz bay. The cool sea air was dense with moisture as the bow wake crashed along the rails of our open boat. Squadrons of pelicans paced our flanks as if to lead the way to the prime hunting grounds.

The day before we had explored the waters around an offshore rock known as La Reyna. The excess tension we had brought from home dissipated as we spent many slow hours in the seventy-five degree water. Blue water fish were scarce, but we managed to share sightings of marlin, sailfish, tuna and dorado. Mike Marsh, a skilled member of the Long Beach Neptunes, made a perfect kill shot on a seventy-pound amberjack during a deep dive. Todd Anderson, an accomplished blue water hunter and fellow Neptune, remained patient as he searched for a large yellowfin tuna. I attracted a shy but playful manta ray with a wingspan of nine feet. Taking a breath I dove down past the left wing tip and inverted myself just below the manta. We glided together face to face for thirty seconds. As I slowly returned to the surface for air, the manta mimicked my movement and inverted itself a few feet below me. We again swam face to face until the manta broke formation and faded off into the depths.

This morning seemed different however. Captain Javier slowed our speed as we coasted onto the spot. Todd yelled and pointed from the bow at the thousands of baitfish boiling on the surface. The bait jumped in streaks, forming rooster combs from the passing attacks of predators feeding below. The daily battle for survival amongst the creatures of the sea had begun. With the intense action before us, Mike and I stumbled over each other as we hurried to jump in. We left Todd behind with the Captain to nurse his infected ear and await our scouting report.

I expected to jump into a feeding frenzy as I slid over the rail of the panga. I kicked around the area but the bait had disappeared. All that remained was small reflective fish scales drifting with the current. Taking a deep breath, I dove into the empty blue searching for the feeding predators. At a depth of thirty-five feet, a school of tuna raced past me forty feet to my left. I looked to my right and noticed Mike at the edge of my visibility, fifty feet away. I could see that tuna were passing him also. Ignoring the burning urge to breathe, I stretched out my normal dive time and anticipated the tuna's return. Many seconds passed and I finally accepted that they weren't coming back. I streamlined my body and kicked with a straight, slow rhythm to the surface for air.

At the surface I continued to scan in all directions for movement below. I took slow and deep breaths to shorten my recovery time. My heart was pounding from the long dive and the frenzied tuna action. Looking to my left and directly into the sun, I saw the silhouette of a torpedo gliding my direction some forty feet away. It appeared to be cruising at a depth of about fifteen feet. I immediately turned my gaze away from the fish and thought to myself "big tuna". A few seconds later I slowly peered out the corner of my mask and realized that it was a giant wahoo. Shocked by its size, I suppressed the urge to analyze the situation and allowed my subconscious to take the lead. Pulling in a few more deep breaths, I heard my inner voice say DIVE! I slowly kicked over and dove down smoothly while turning my back on the approaching fish. Keeping the outward appearance of disinterest, I paralleled the path of the wahoo on my slow decent and

gradually rotated my body toward the passing fish.

The wahoo became suspicious and began to drift down and away as I entered his caution zone. At a depth of twenty-five feet I pumped with a few strong but narrow kicks and closed the distance between the fish and me to fifteen feet. Extending my Heindrich tuna gun I took aim. Almost subconsciously I eased the trigger back, only to be blasted by the wrist-spraining recoil as the spear released. All I saw was a flash of the mid-body entry wound and bungee line accelerating away into the blue.

As one of the fastest fish in the ocean, the wahoo easily towed a hundred-foot line and the two attached Riffe floats across the surface as he sped away. I checked myself from head to fin making sure that I was free of the line, and then kicked upward. I exhaled as I ascended the last few feet and sucked in a full breath as I broke through the surface. I grabbed the last float just in time as it passed by. Shouldering the twenty-pound gun, I straightened my body profile to reduce the excessive drag on the fish and to improve my chances of landing it. Wahoo are so powerful that they often tear all but the best-placed shots free and escape. All I could do now was hold on.

Mike surfaced from a dive just as I was pulled past him. I raised my head while jerking the snorkel from my mouth and yelled to him that I had a big wahoo on. The fish turned hard to the right and straight out to sea, passing Todd and Javier in the drifting panga. As we moved out into deeper water I began to picture sharks ripping apart my wounded fish. The area wasn't known for shark activity, but we had heard that local fishermen had spotted a large one a few days before. I stayed mindful of the need to get the fish in fast once the fight was over.

I was holding the leash of something completely wild. All I saw was blue water and streams of bubbles rushing past my mask. I relaxed, letting the fish pull me across the surface as it swam for its life. I concentrated on breathing as I prepared my mind and saved my strength for the end of the fight. The fish continued to swim. I looked back at the island to see that I had been pulled over two hundred yards. The fish finally came to a slow stop. In one continuous motion, I pulled hand over hand as the first fifty feet of line came up easily out of the blue. Once I had brought the slack in, the line felt anchored to the ocean floor. The bungee was stretched thin across my gloved hands as I pulled and kicked with a mixture of adrenaline and determination.. My legs burned as I fought to keep my head and snorkel above water. The fish continued to fight and pulled me under twice with slower but still powerful tail thrusts. I willfully triggered my last reserve of strength, which surged through me as I began to gain line. I kept the pressure on and the wahoo gradually materialized as it rose from the depths.

Clipping my float at the stainless steel shooting line I carefully made my way to the spear shaft. I could see that my Alexander five-inch tip was firmly toggled and holding the fish securely. To be safe, I held the shaft, line and fish away from me. I grabbed the tail to test for the fish's reaction. I was amazed to find that my hand would only stretch around one side of the base of the tail. I gave the tail a squeeze, but the wahoo showed little sign of strength beyond a slow kick. "Big Jim" Christiansen's words echoed in my mind: "A fish is never dead". I had seen many seemingly dead fish come back to life before. Once, it even resulted in a life or death struggle at the surface with a thrashing five-foot yellowtail. I survived that time, but I wasn't about to risk it with this monster.

While holding the spear shaft with my left hand, I grabbed for the gills with my right. The wahoo powerfully clamped his gill plates closed and stared at me in defiance with its huge eye. It felt like forever as I hung there without secure control over the fish or my immediate destiny. I knew the fish would eventually have to open its gills for a breath. I finally forced my hand into

the gills and grabbed a firm hold. The razor sharp teeth were clearly visible as the wahoo opened its massive jaws a foot from my face. Somewhat intimidated, I hugged the fish to my body with my free hand, but my arm did not reach around it fully. With an uncertain sense of control, I swam the fish the twenty feet to the arriving panga. With Captain Javier's help, I lifted the head of the wahoo out of the water and slid the fish over the rail.

I had the shakes from the residual adrenaline for the rest of the day and was given the nickname of "Shakey" from Mike and Todd. A couple educated guesses were offered but I really had no idea of the wahoo's weight. It wasn't until we were back at the Cortez Club that its size and weight became real to me. The wahoo weighed in at 125 lbs. on the certified scale. A crowd gathered as I was told that it might qualify as a new World Record. That night, a group of us celebrated by sharing the wahoo at a dinner prepared for us by the La Concha Hotel chef.

New record or not, I realized it was a special fish for other reasons. My thoughts were of my mother, who was awaiting surgery for breast cancer. Before the trip I had specifically prayed for a 120 lb. fish to come straight at me from the left and to turn broadside. I knew it would encourage my mother to see how God delights in answering the prayers of his own when it fits His plan. Even prayers for small things-like a prayer for a fish. With my mothers surgery a success, a big prayer was answered also. I give the glory to God, my Creator and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I also want to give a special thanks to Jonathan Roldan's Adventures and the entire staff at the Cortez Club for their first class service.

I also thank the many divers that came before me and contributed to my knowledge, skill, equipment and opportunity along the way.

BRUCE GAUDINO
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