

Brawlers of the Reef

- by Brett Craik

From the outset I could tell this was not going to be the frantic pre dawn hustle of five armed silhouettes drooling at the prospect of slamming some fish the picture that I normally associate with my dive trips, no on the contrary today it seemed was going to be a relaxing lazy day.

With the absence of the usual louts, Rachel (Doug's master) and I started the engine around 9am as Doug jumped onboard. The sun was out the sky was a rich Queensland blue as always, we both commented how it felt like a holiday to be leaving at this time and we seemed to take out time getting going having to stop next to every dolphin we went past so Rachel could wave and greet them probably slowed us down too, yep not a typical trip.

Arriving at the first reef Doug and I entered the water to find 25 – 30 metres of visibility a superb start to the day. Doug moved quickly at the surface beginning his first dive well up ahead of me and striking the bottom in about 15 metres where he was met with a wall of those blue tails synonymous with the elusive and prized snapper, there were approximately 50 of these magnificent reef fish all well sized but as is often the case out of range, seemingly a recurring problem in water this clean.

I watched as Doug made a second dive as he was half way down I could see a tusky approaching on Doug's blindside, having the camera in hand I raced down expecting Doug to sight the fish at any moment. Sure enough in no time he had the gun almost fully extended on the bottom in 20 metres I was still a bit far away at the 10 metre mark above him when Doug let the shaft fly. The tusky went absolutely ballistic heading for a large crack in the rocks, I had aborted the dive and headed up when I could see Doug had decided to stay and fight this strong fish holding it strong for as long as he could before releasing the rig to head for air. The tusky then made the crack in the rocks but did not have enough left in him to wedge in, so fortunately we were able to retrieve the fish from the surface not a bad start to the day, although the brawling tusky did have one last revenge rendering the spear as scrap metal.

Drifting a little further Doug began chasing some gold spot wrasse and had picked up a small parrot before we hit a ridge that was just humming with life, there were baitfish everywhere our attentions immediately turned to the flasher and the upper water columns. We have seen this situation so many times before we both instantly knew what was going to happen and what we should do without even talking to one another, the touch bottom dives had stopped mostly we were now waiting and watching the movement of the bait.

Doug Suddenly shot down beneath the flasher I could not see in the distance what exactly he was chasing although I presumed it would be a kingie based on the time of year. Doug levelled out his body language telling me the fish had moved from range and just as he did I could see two kingies move up to within 1 metre of his fins behind him, I began yelling through my snorkel but I quickly realised he was too deep to hear so I quickly reached for his rig line which just happened to be right next to me and gave it two strong tugs. Doug turned and responded in a clinical fashion, away went the rig as the pleased Doug returned to the surface. The fish was only small around 8 kilos and subsequently presented a short fight, a relief after the earlier tiff with the tuskfish.

The decision was made to repeat this part of the drift, it was a tough decision but someone had to make it. Two minutes into the drift several kingies moved up, Doug needed no further adieu taking leave immediately, I followed still armed with the camera hoping to capture an easy shot on film, when to my surprise Doug failed to fire instead plunging further down beneath the school of kingies. This threw me off completely I could not see what was going on there was simply too much happening. I levelled out and was hanging at ten metres when Doug came back up quite flustered I could tell by his body language so much so that he then subsequently proceeded to miss an easy shot on one of the Kings right in front of the camera and I. In a rather poetically irreverent display the kingfish Doug had missed then turned 90 degrees and swam straight back across the top of Doug's unloaded gun right in front of Doug's face, these fish always seem to have the ability to delight one

way or the other. After speaking with Doug at the surface I soon learned the reason why he became so flustered and ultimately duffed an easy shot, he had witnessed a large 25 kilo Spanish cruise in deeper below the kingies and the mackerel itself had one 10 kilo kingie doing circles around it much like a cobia on a ray, amazing stuff.

In the interests of trying new spots we moved to a reef found in 12 metres of water which we had not dived before where I performed a couple of scout dives as we call them a useful and efficient reconnaissance tool, the reef appeared relatively lifeless apart from one tusky I noticed partway under a ledge. I called over the boat grabbing a gun for a change and began to descend, unfortunately in retrospect I must have kicked too hard as the fish had sensed some movement half way down. He popped his head out and upon seeing me began to move, but too late I was on him and fully extended all I had to do was pull the trigger.....Damn safety! that gave the tusky a critical two seconds breathing time two seconds I could not afford to give, he was gone. In the rush to get a gun I had grabbed someone else's less familiar gun from our vast stockpile of weapons, a costly mistake.

One more spot was the order of the day so we made way to a ledge we knew of that falls from 14 metres to about 18 abruptly then to 23 further out in a more gradual fashion. The prognosis after my first initial dive to Doug was 'we are going to get fish here mate, it's happening', that was the last thing we were to say to each other on this spot as we reverted to pointing and sign language, its all that's required between a couple of experienced divers when the fish are on.

Doug had made a dive to the top of the ledge he was then half way back up when he pointed straight beneath him, although I could only just make out shades on the bottom so I could not see what was grabbing his attention since the visibility had decreased in this area. I dropped down eager to find the target, as I cannoned to the bottom a nice tusky of around 6 kilos moved straight in underneath me turning directly on his side to have a look at me. I aimed at him for a kill shot but then remembering that my spear was slightly bent thanks to an earlier disagreement with some rocks I decided to shoot the fish mid body not ideal but it would remove the doubt. The spear pierced the centre of the fish but not the spine, away he went the rig line screaming through my hands I could not believe it, didn't I just shoot a reef fish! I was in shock even more so when I hit the surface to see my float coming flying towards me. It all stopped very suddenly and the fight was over, but that explosive power was something to remember, I thought to myself "another brawler bites the dust".

The adrenalin was pumping a fair bit by now and my hunting stripes were on, I positioned myself over the top of the ledge and timed my descent so I could pass the ledge a couple of metres wide, as I approached the ledge a nice cod came into view I began to track him with my gun as I continued my freefall. The cod slowly turned to my flank, I continued to track him when out of the corner of my eye I noticed another cod hovering a metre or two off the bottom, then another and another, I did a full 360 scan of the area there must have been around about 10 good sized cod all hanging up off the bottom.

They began to all move slowly away I picked one at the back and shot past a couple of the fish before striking my target, after a few strong kicks he gave up pretty easily in the end to my surprise. By the time we started the next drift the current had changed and the reef that before was alive with activity now held a certain sleepy and dormant feeling to it, the show was over. Nevertheless Doug and I were quite happy with our spoils considering it was a short easy day and above all we had fun tackling the reef brawlers.

