

ROB PARKER REFLECTIONS

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I learned of Rob Parker's death from Wes Skiles who phoned after receiving a call from the Bahamas. Parker and five others, including his diving partner Duffer Mallone and Rob Palmer's widow Stephanie, were there to shoot a documentary film about Blue Holes in honor of Rob Palmer, who himself had mysteriously perished during a dive into the Red Sea some four months earlier. Parker and the others had been working hard for two weeks, diving daily on compressed air to 60m depths.

On August 17, 1997, Mallone and Parker decided to make an exploration dive in Four Sharks Blue Hole, a well known ocean hole which continued, unexplored, at substantial depths. Because of a narrow restriction at -50m they dived open circuit side mount rigs with one tank each of trimix and air.

They staged bottles of oxygen at -10m and nitrox at the constriction for decompression, and then continued on through the fissure and into a large rift. There they descended to a depth over 100m and into virgin territory where they explored some 120m before calling the dive.

During the ascent, the trimix gas supplies ran low and a switch was made to compressed air at a depth of 67m. Shortly after this switch Mallone observed Parker to be falling, uncontrolled, back down the shaft, unconscious.

Mallone made a desperate descent to 80m, breathing air, to retrieve him and succeeded in getting the both of them back to the head of the restriction. He believed Parker to be awake, though drowsy, at that time.

The restriction, unfortunately, precluded side-by-side passage. Mallone motioned to Parker that he was going through first and that Parker should follow. On the en-

trance side of the restriction, Parker failed to materialize. Mallone's gas supplies were depleted (due to the emergency descent) and he was forced to ascend to decompress.

The best analysis of the accident indicates that Parker blacked out from severe narcosis after switching from a helium-based breathing mix to compressed air at 67m. Despite Mallone's recollections, it appears that Parker never fully regained consciousness after that moment. He was later found wedged in the fissure.

I first met Rob Parker in Jacksonville, Florida in the autumn of 1983. He had come to join the team returning to the Cueva de la Peña Colorada on the southern flanks of the Huautla plateau. That project required a rare mix of skills including cave exploring, rock climbing, SCUBA diving, and long range camping beyond sumps. The latter had never before been attempted. Young Parker, then just twenty-one, had shown up with minimum traveling kit and a personal recommendation from Martyn Farr.

Being some ten years the elder I initially looked on Rob as an enthusiastic rookie—to be good-spiritedly exploited for hauling tons of tackle underground. It did not take long before everyone realized that a prodigy was among us.

On our way to Huautla at the beginning of the four-month project the 8-ton truck carrying our equipment broke down. Parts were sent for, but in Mexico, nothing happens swiftly. Parker came up with a morale building diversion and rigged a 100-meter rope tyrolean across a nearby canyon. People were still riding this as the truck prepared to roll on.

It was a three kilometer gear-laden trek in February 1984 from our basecamp up a dry river bed filled with table size boulders to

the entrance of the cave we intended to connect to the Huautla system, and through which we hoped to establish the world depth record.

It took the average team member ninety minutes up and sixty minutes back. Parker, being the nimble athlete, soon observed that it was possible to run from boulder tip to boulder tip with far less energy expenditure, albeit with more adventure. I noticed this too and, without saying a word, a silent competition began wherein we might independently make that run and then walk into basecamp and mutter a number to the other, the number being the latest time in minutes. By the end of the project Parker proudly announced the number "Fifteen," which was little short of Olympic speed over boulders. This would not be our last competition.

He and I became fast partners on that trip, each matched to the other's skills and stamina. We explored, side by side, territory never before seen by humans. Often climbing was involved, and he was very, very good at that. I would always be the belayer, he the leader. One day he led an exceedingly difficult route up a blank 70m-high section of canyon wall, whereupon we entered a new cavern we named Vine Cave.

When I arrived Rob was looking stunned and thoughtful. "What's wrong?" I asked. He pointed silently to the floor and there, imprinted into the hardened dirt, were bare footprints . . . no doubt hundreds if not thousands of years old. When I asked him how someone without the benefit of modern technology had managed to "scoop" his route, he nodded a few times in respect and said, "Religion, man . . . religion."

On that same expedition Rob

pioneered the climbs leading to Narrows Cave, Cueva del Altar, and Gourd Cave as well as the first exploration of Sumps 3 and 6 in the Peña Colorada.

Rob was not without his limitations. We soon discovered his one, his only, phobia: peas. Yes, I'm talking about the little round green vegetable. There ensued great debate among several team members as to just how sincere, clinical, and sensitive this malady was. Seeing as how many of us were scientists, we set out on a devious, multi-year series of experiments during which we tested the hypothesis under controlled conditions.

We injected sautéed peas, powdered freeze dried peas, canned peas and just about every other possible permutation that could still be called peas—into various foodstuffs—all to be detected by Parker's unerring sense that something was not right with the world. The ultimate "Parker and the Pea" story was his discovery, without so much as a quaff, of a single pea at the bottom of a pint of Guinness. Had we been able to isolate this detection mechanism we could have all retired rich.

Rob was always adept at unorthodox means of getting by between expeditions. He often built furniture for his foreign hosts in order to earn money to purchase a return plane ticket to England. And he knew how to turn county bridges into spider webs (for the sake of a few pounds from the local television station that was running a science story about spiders), and churches into climbing centers (which he later turned into a handsomely profitable business). But always, his life centered on being out there on the frontier, on expeditions with the few people in the world who really understood what made him tick.

Over the course of time our personal "competitions" became the substance of folklore in the exploration community. No project went by without some sort of challenge—whether several hundred push-ups over pools of sweat in the 40°C swelter of Río Santo

Domingo basecamp, push-ups with SCUBA tanks on our backs in Florida, or pull-ups from the diving tower at Wakulla Springs in full dress, with the loser (that is to say, me) falling unceremoniously eight meters into the drink after matching Parker's count, but not his ability to get back on top of the platform!

Usually Rob won, but I managed to catch him off guard on just enough occasions to keep him on his toes. And so, when the British press asked him, on the eve of his record breaking descent into Wookey Hole in 1985, "How long have you been entering into these competitions?" we both wondered how the paparazzi had come to learn of our push-up contests.

After his pioneering work at Wookey, Rob's name and deeds spread far and wide. He was a leading explorer of the Blue Holes of the Bahamas along with Rob Palmer (also now deceased), and pioneered the exploration of such places as Conch Sound, Stargate, Mars Bay Blue Hole, and scores of others. He was a key member of the 1987 project at Wakulla Springs, led the first cave diving expedition to China, and was flown in by military transports in various countries to assist with rescues and recoveries.

His taped accounts of the first missions up B-Tunnel in Wakulla in 1987 still make for riveting listening. In his joking, self-deprecating manner, he would describe underwater vehicle collisions, unintended barrel rolls, camera snags, catastrophic loss of buoyancy control and other adventurous happenings at more than 100 meters underwater—while still completing the exploration and filming mission—with such runaway enthusiasm that you believed in your heart of hearts that this man was not only indestructible, he was also totally unflappable.

Others took stock of Rob's growing talent. Sheck Exley once told Leo Dickinson that had Rob lived in Florida, instead of England, that he would likely have risen to the status of the world's preeminent underwater explorer.

Seven years later, at thirty-two and a member of the 1994 San Agustín expedition, he was far more mature, yet just as capable. Having business matters to attend to with both his successful climbing center—"probably the best plywood crag in the world"—as well as becoming a talented adventure cinematographer, he arrived a few weeks late. We were short of personnel at the exploration front and were behind schedule in the transport of heavy equipment.

Within a day of his arrival, and with no acclimatization, he personally brought down a 30-kilogram hydroelectric turbine and deposited it at the Camp 3 depot along with a humorous note, and then, with offhanded ease, proceeded to rocket to the surface in three hours flat.

Lesser mortals took between ten to twelve hours. When we returned from Camp 5 later that day to discover his delivery and note I remember writing in my log that night, "The cavalry has arrived and they are British!"

Over the following years Rob diversified his interests. He climbed Everest, became an extreme technical rock climber who toured the world in that pursuit, and shot films of sharks. His climbing business in Bristol had become so successful that he was freed of the requirements of working a regular job. To fill the gap he had become Leo Dickinson's protégé with an eye on a second career in adventure film making.

In April of 1997 we renewed our friendship at a technical diving conference in Coventry, England. Over many pints of stout and a few napkins for sketch pads we planned bold future expeditions to both Wakulla Springs in Florida and a return to the Peña Colorada in Huautla.

I was greatly looking forward to working with him once again in the field. I could sense that we both knew that such projects were what we lived for: to chart new territory in extremely remote places with a few close friends. That is, in fact, what he was doing on Andros.