

A Dream Fulfilled

Ever since being a small boy, I dreamed of being a “Deep Sea Diver”. I recently came across some old Primary school work my Mum had kept. Every other page in the book seemed to have drawings of black clad divers with twin tanks and twin hose regs! I had forgotten quite how long diving had fascinated me. I remember the old Jacques Cousteau films on TV on a Sunday evening, and wearing my brothers old mask and fins, and (in true Blue Peter fashion) a pair of washing up liquid bottles, fastened with string, to my back.

Then of course there was Action Man! I had a number of these guys, and converted an early 3-cylinder flamethrower backpack, to a twin set. I think my parents twigged, and for my next birthday I got the diver kit, a real rubber wetsuit, twin set and double hose regs, mask and fins, and the all important divers



knife, strapped to the leg. For Christmas, I got the ultimate set, standard dress kit, complete with lead weight belt and boots. I remember getting my Dad to fill a

large bucket that afternoon, to allow Action Man to go diving! The helmet had two hoses attached, which you could blow down, and adjust his buoyancy. I still have Action Man in standard dress sat on my bookshelf.

I recently had the opportunity to play Action Man myself. I was in contact with Phil

Thurtle, of the Historical Diving Society, having met him at the London Dive Show. I asked him to identify a helmet I had filmed inside the Saratoga, at Bikini. I was reliably informed (after some searching through his library) that the helmet in question was an A J Morse, shallow water open helmet. This company, I believe, had the US Navy contract to supply the classic Mark V helmet.

Anyway, as a result of our meeting, I was asked along to a HDS rally, in Lincolnshire.

I met Phil at Covenham reservoir, where he was busy setting up his equipment. This consisted of a hand cranked air pump, and a Siebe Gorman 4 light helmet. Phil was also trying out a brand new twill suit he had acquired from China (where the Navy still use standard dress!). As he survived a brief foray into the reservoir, I felt fairly safe in accepting his offer of a “go” myself.

Due to my height, another suit was produced, this time an original Siebe Gorman twill suit (he also has a suit specially made by Otter, made from trilaminate). The suit is a water-proof canvas twill, and smelt like an old Icelandic tent from my Scouting days! As with the tent, it took more than one person to sort it out.

I had three dressers, to lace up the 18 lb boots, fit the corselet (brass collar), chest and back weights, belt and

crutch strap, and not forgetting traditional divers knife!

Finally it was time for the helmet to be fitted. Once attached to the corselet, a smell of olive oil wafted through the vents.

This is the lubricant used on the leather pistons on the pump. Once the air hose and telephone cable were tied to the helmet, it was time for the face plate to be screwed into place. Once it was fitted, you suddenly felt quite detached from the outside world, and it certainly wasn't an

experience for the claustrophobic.

I was helped to my feet, and into the water down a slipway, bearing the full weight of the 170 lb load.

Once in the water, however, you could adjust the air pressure, which took the weight of the helmet, and reduced suit squeeze. I was using a three light Admiralty pattern helmet, which reduced visibility when walking forward, as there was a tendency to lean

forward, so you could only see down, just beyond your feet. Some



helmets had a 4th light fitted above the head, so you could actually see where you were going.

All too soon it was time to turn round and walk back, having reached a maximum depth of around 4m. It was at this point that I wondered what I would do, if

there was a problem. I had been shown how to dump the chest and back weights, but I still had 36 lb of weight attached to my feet, and a heavy brass helmet on! I quickly decided not to dwell on this point, and made my way back up the slipway. The equipment seemed to have suddenly increased in weight, as I gradually lost the support of the water. I questioned my decision to manfully forego the shoulder padding under the corselet, as it felt like it was slowly dismembering me!

I finally made it to the trestle where I was guided to be “de-quipped”.

What a fantastic experience, I had a broad grin on my face for the rest of the day!

It certainly gave me a new found respect for the chaps that used to have to work in such equipment. I recently read a short book on Ernest “Dusty” Miller RN, who used the

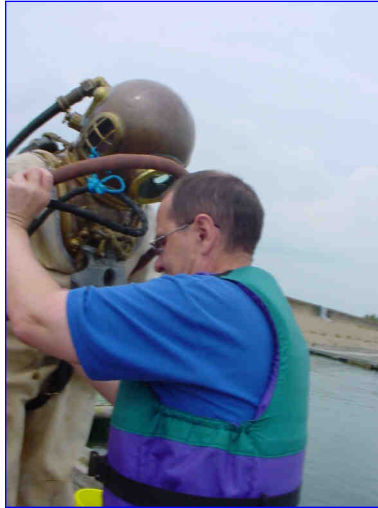
same equipment to enter sunken submarines during WW1. How he ever got into the likes of the UC39, and many others, I will never know. The equipment is so alien to that which we use today, and we even complain that our new equipment is often too restrictive.

They were certainly a breed apart.

I am grateful to Phil Thurtle and the HDS for the opportunity to dive such historic equipment, and in open water, rather than a tank. I also shot some video of the day, which will be appearing on my web site shortly.

Chris

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