

Down Under

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I ARRIVED in Melbourne in December, and early in 1951 was able to christen my Siebe-Gorman unit in Port Philip Bay. To my best knowledge I was the only recreational diver with an aqualung in Australia or New Zealand at that time. Edward du Cros, in his book 'Skindiving in Australia' mentions that probably the first aqualung to be used by civilians in New South Wales was a Cousteau-Gagnan unit brought from France by Emile Landau and lent to members of the Underwater Spear Fishermen's Association of New South Wales in the summer of 1952-1953. Again, I mention these details only to clarify the historical record as I understand it.

Along with others who had become interested in diving, we helped form the Underwater Spear Fishermen's Association of Victoria. For my first shallow dives in Australia I used oxygen as we had done in Scotland. When we progressed to deeper diving we decanted from 200 cubic feet air cylinders. We had no portable air compressors.

We acted as volunteers for the police in searching for and recovering the bodies of drowned persons, because in those days the police had no diving equipment. An unfortunate incident occurred during a line abreast sweep when I spotted the remains of a little girl drowned only two days before.

I called out to the two detectives on their boat:

"There's not much left".

I was later told that one of the 'detectives' was actually the girl's father who was upset by my blunt report, intended only for the police. However, he was not the only casualty as I can still see that tiny elastic costume strung around the empty rib cage as I carried her to the surface. The creatures of the night had been busy! Searches usually took place at dawn. A police car would pick us up in time to arrive at the drowning site by first light, then after the search we would be dropped off at our places of work. On occasions we had to search after work as the sun was setting and our thoughts would turn to sharks gliding around in the gloom! We felt lonely and exposed, but not game to give up and be seen as cowards.

A fresh water exception was the case of a young boy drowned in the Yarra River, which is deep and muddy. An idiot who knew nothing about diving told the boy's father that we would search at midnight if he would rig up a sealed beam headlight with a cable to a battery in his boat. With the boy's father ready and waiting we could hardly refuse to do anything.

Lindsay Gordon helped me on with my aqualung and immediately there was a loud bang as the pressure gauge pipe exploded. I quickly shut off the air, removed the gauge pipe, and the take-off was plugged with a disk of lead. I felt my way to the bottom 5 or 6 metres down in the mud. My worry was that I'd get snagged up in submerged tree branches. Silt in the water reflected the light beam in my face and I could see nothing. For the father's sake I stayed down to give the impression of a search.

For sport, however, we dived all around Port Philip bay, a very large expanse of water which was warmer than the open ocean. We also covered much of the Victorian coastline, sometimes to quite remote locations.

In 1952, Lindsay Gordon, Kevin Rowe and I holidayed in the Whitsunday Islands, between Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. I had a home-made perspex underwater case for my Bell and Howell movie camera and a modified aluminium cooking pot for my Voigtlander still camera. This was our first introduction to diving, or rather snorkelling, in tropic seas. However the only really clear water was to be found on the outer Barrier Reef, and there we experienced for the first time the ultimate in diving conditions.

After the Whitsunday trip, Bill Young heard of our activities and joined our group. He was a young electrician who later explored for oil in New Guinea, and voyaged in a double native canoe from Port Moresby to the Trobriand Islands where among other things he assisted the

local surgeon, then back to Moresby taking 5 months to complete the round trip.

Later still, Bill sailed aboard the Australian Antarctic Division's ship as the electrical mechanic, and wintered over in Antarctica. He performed so well that he was made Expedition Leader for his next winter on the ice. His endeavours were recognised by the award of the Polar Medal - a very high honour - and he was also made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. Not bad for a humble 'sparky'!

With nothing but the tools in his home garage, Bill made a replica of my aqualung. Aqualungs were not yet on sale in

air all the way from Brisbane to refill our aqualungs on the island.

Meanwhile, in the southern summer of 1952/53, Bill and I dived with Ted Eldred who was developing a closed-circuit oxygen breathing unit on the same principle as those used by frogmen in wartime, but with the innovation of a pressure cut-out to prevent the diver exceeding the safe depth for oxygen.

Ted hoped to market his design, but I suggested to him that for a public untrained in diving, air aqualungs were probably safer. After trying my lung, he went on to design his 'Porpoise' aqualung which differed from the Cousteau-Gagnan model in that he combined the demand

valve with the mouth-piece, replacing the French style corrugated tubes with a small bore medium pressure rubber pipe. This system was a world first, and was rapidly adopted by manufacturers in other countries.

In order to ensure safety following the sale of his 'Porpoise' aqualungs, the first produced in Australia, Ted Eldred organised the first recreational diving school in Australasia late in 1953. Commander 'Batts' Batterham, OBE,

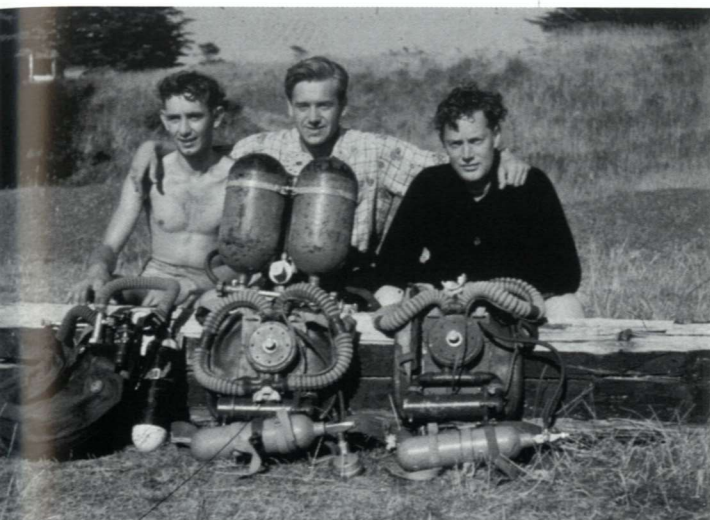
RAN, the navy's diving expert, acted as honorary instructor, and a Dr. Gray checked our fitness and explained the physiology of diving.

Late in 1954, a family emergency required my presence back in Scotland, and my final dives were made the following year near Aberdeen with the Siebe-Gorman single cylinder 'Essjee' kit. I had come full circle and the diving scene had changed completely - it was all so easy now!

When I returned to the Antipodes it was to spend the rest of my life in New Zealand. Diving became a memory as

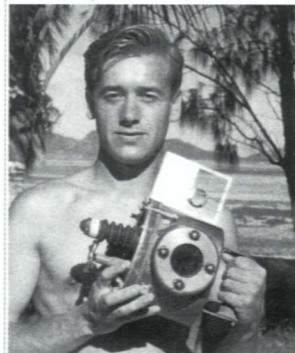
family commitments absorbed all our energies, and finances.

For those wishing to read more about pioneering work with breathing apparatus I would recommend 'Deep Diving and Submarine Operations' and 'Breathing In Irrespirable Atmospheres', by Sir Robert H. Davis.



Australia. We joined forces to design and build pressurised camera cases of chrome plated brass. Pressurisation would expose leaks as air bubbles and thus safeguard our cameras, and the chrome plating would reflect the hot sun. These were used successfully on our Heron Island expedition in November 1953, amid the corals and clear waters at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef.

Walt and Jean Deas, underwater photographers of international standing, set up the proper dive facilities on Heron Island between 1975 and 1980, but in 1953 we had to transport 200 cu.ft. cylinders of



Photographs: Aqualunging off Heron Island (other page top), Brian Adey felt the sun - Heron Island 1952 (other page bottom), Bill Young, Ivor Howitt & Ted Eldred (this page left), the author in the 1950s and still the keen photographer today (above). The photograph of Ivor Howitt in 1999 is published courtesy of Jean Howitt.

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