

Underwater Public Safety Diver

by Barry Lipsky

Drowning is the third most common cause of accidental death among adults in the United States and the second most common cause of death among children and young adults. Bayport Fire District's Water Rescue Public Safety Divers are engaged in the activation of these unfortunate calls to save lives in the waters off Long Island. Today, Bayport public safety divers cover the waterways off the towns of Bayport, Blue Point, Sayville, West Sayville, Oakdale, Patchogue and Great River. The United States National Parks Service for the Fire Island National Sea Shore includes the areas of Watch Hill, Talisman/Barrett Beach, Sunken Meadow and Sailor's Heaven, all of which are serviced by Bayport's Water Rescue Program. In addition, Bayport's Water Rescue boat is the only boat available in these areas during the winter months. It is the public safety diver who must personally enter this alien realm to fulfill an objective. His actions are driven by the needs of the world above.

Public safety diving entails underwater operations with a definite purpose. Searches are often conducted in black water, where a diver may not even be able to see his hand in front of his mask. As if such conditions were not dangerous enough, public safety divers must cope with dead trees, fishing line, nets, and a myriad of other hazards that might snare and entrap them. Whereas sport divers can plan when they want to dive, the public safety diver has no idea when an emergency call will come in. Sport divers tend to dive in good weather, mainly in the warmer

will be called to operate in any condition, any time of the day or night, any day of the year.

He may know nothing in advance about the site or the water in which he must dive. All too often, that water will be contaminated, black and very cold. Using solo, tethered— diving techniques, the diver must often deploy rapidly and face an untold amount of stress. For example, three Bayport Fire District pub-

hand bumps against a soft object that could be a decayed log. Visualizing it through your fingertips, your mind's eye then tells you that the ob-

ject you've found is actually an arm and that you've discovered the victim for whom you've been searching. Taking one brief moment to calm yourself, you alert the personnel on shore. Your tender tells you to surface slowly, and you

follow his instructions, carrying the boy with you. On the surface you inflate your buoyancy compensator device as your tender begins pulling you to the dock. You cradle the young boy in your arms, protecting his face from a light chop and a steady drizzle of rain. As you reach the dock, you help to place him gently onto a waiting backboard covered with blankets. The EMS crew whisks him away, wrapping him even more and quickly initiating resuscitative procedures. As you watch the boy leave, your thoughts are with him.

Still, you know that as a public safety diver, you've already done all you can for him. You've returned him to the world of light and air, and perhaps you've given him another chance at life. You have brought him back to his waiting



PSD team makes a car rescue



lic safety divers were engaged in a rescue dive at 1 a.m., on a winter morning in the waters off Oakdale. The water temperature was 38 degrees Fahrenheit, the visibility was zero, the depth of the mud underwater, which the divers had to enter, was two feet in thickness, and there was ice and snow covering the docks where the divers entered the water.

All of these factors separate the public safety diver from almost everyone else who ventures underwater, but in one significant respect he is exactly like all the rest: He has to go home at the end of the day.

Why Do Public Safety Divers Perform This Service?

Surrounded by impenetrable blackness, you slide your hands and body over the soft mud of the bottom. The only sound is the hiss and gurgle of your regulator, punctuated at intervals by the voice of your tender giving you directions by way of an underwater communications system. As you push your way through the mud, your



New Public Safety Diver's truck

family and loved ones. Now it's time to get out of the water, take off your gear, and go home. The operation is already a success in that you're out of the water, safe and sound.



Bayport's water rescue boat

months. They can select the type of environment in which they dive, and they bear none of the emotional stress of the public safety diver. The sport diver requires only basic gear and basic skills. The public safety diver, on the other hand,

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