

History Making History

By Janice Raber

THE HISTORY

History can be made with planning, and this time the plan was to put a recreational diver in the water in historical gear, an authentic Mark V hard-hat helmet and the actual diver's "dress" that goes with it. True, it's been done before and the Northeast Diving Equipment Group leads the way in giving local divers the opportunity to experience this gear during the year, but this time it would be different. This time would be much more realistic. This time the diver would enter the water off a boat and explore a shipwreck out of history, the *Black Warrior*. The event would be filmed and become part of a presentation expected to premier at the Beneath the Sea Exposition in the Secaucus, New Jersey Meadowlands in March 2010.

THE IDEA:

The project was the brainchild of Bob Rusnak, the spearhead behind all of the Mark V dives that take place in the Long Island area, and Captain Steve Bielenda, retired dive boat operator. These two stalwarts of Long Island diving are always looking for new adventures. "Let's do it!" enthused Captain Bielenda, and they reached out to qualified contacts to make it work.

The whole thing was organized, funded and completed by volunteers. Captain Bill Reddan obliged with his *Jeanne II* charter dive boat and 35 years of experience. His crew, George Schramm, Pete Polischuk, John Chominsky and Esther Askins, were ready and willing.

The *Mark V* setup and air compressor was Rusnak's. Gene Ritter from Cultural Research Divers operated the underwater communications system donated by Connie Morgan of Kirby Morgan Systems. Ray Tucker of Beneath the Sea Exposition brought his commercial Superlight 327 surface-supplied helmet for the backup support diver.

Captains Maureen and Steve Langevin, along with Bjoern Kils of Dive Voyager Expeditions, would use their expertise as videographers, recording the whole operation above and below the water.

Bill Pfeiffer, President of the Long Island Divers Association (LIDA), was to be the Mark V diver, and other LIDA members, Wayne Collins, Bob Auteri, Bill Cadden, and yours truly Janice Raber, along with Barry Lipsky, Steve Neumann, and Frank Laricchia of Bayport Rescue Divers each had varying responsibilities providing underwater scuba support and topside tenders..

THE SURFACE

Everyone was psyched and ready. The *Black Warrior*, a wooden steam-fitted paddle wheeler that was also rigged for sailing was waiting for us in 35 feet of water, since she had sunk in 1859, in a fog, trying to enter New York Harbor. Only Mother Nature was uncooperative, giving us a chilled, cloudy day, northeast winds and three-foot waves to cope with. Still, this hardy group of experienced divers was not to be discouraged.

We left Pier 5 in Brooklyn, NY and in less than an hour Captain Bill brought us to the wreck site. George expertly set the two hooks for the 47-foot *Jeanne II*, despite the difficulty of doing so in a following sea that caused us to be farther from the wreck and at a more difficult angle than we had hoped.

Ritter and Tucker fine-tuned the communications while the Dive Voyager trio prepped their cameras. The scuba support suited up and tenders assisted Pfeiffer while he climbed into the "dress", as the bulky canvas



Bill Pfeiffer, President of Long Island Divers Association in the Mark V after a successful historical dive, flanked by Bob Auteri and Bob Rusnak.

suit is called. Steel and copper boots were laced up and the metal breast plate was fastened over his shoulders. Collins methodically counted aloud as he turned the 12 bolts that would hold it in place. Next, 85 lbs of leather and lead were harnessed over it all to keep the suit from filling with air, and the helmet was placed over the diver's head. "It's getting hot in here," said Pfeiffer. "I'll cool off when I come up, so turn that blender on high."

The umbilical line that would provide air and surface-to-diver voice communications was tied to the diver in strategic places with true Mark V knots. Rusnak reviewed last minute instructions and the helmet was lowered and tightened so Pfeiffer's big smile could be seen. "Zip it up," he said, and the face plate was closed and bolted. The Mark V diver was ready for his walk to the ladder and his giant stride into history for Long Island recreational hard-hat divers.

Tucker, in the commercial superlight 327, had already slipped into the water to evaluate the conditions and reported topside that it was a "go" with maybe 10 feet visibility and some surge, but doable.

THE DIVE

Videographer Steve Langevin described it as pretty wild. "I went down there, right where George tied in the downlink and there was a little bit of surge, so I wedged myself in so I wouldn't be bouncing off the bottom, held the camera as steady as possible and just waited...then I felt somebody coming down the line. You could feel somebody going hand over hand on the line and all of a sudden there was Tucker with the yellow hard hat. He signaled that Pfeiffer was coming down."

Over the com box Pfeiffer sounded positively joyful asking for more line on the umbilical as he walked to a piece of the broken-up shipwreck. We were tied into the boiler. "There is a pipe on top of the boiler,"

Pfeiffer reported. "I can stand there. Give me some more scope." He was almost maxed out, with little to spare. It had been a long distance to walk to the wreck.

Meanwhile, topside the seas were building, a light drizzle had started and the boat was rocking. Would there be problems getting the heavy diver up the ladder in a heaving sea? "No more slack," instructs Rusnak. "Turn around diver. Time to come home," Ritter said into the mike.

"It's nice down here. I want to stay," Pfeiffer moaned with reluctant obedience.

The trip back to the anchor line became arduous. The tension in the line got tighter as the boat pitched on the surface, and it was yanked out of Pfeiffer's hand, creating a potentially dangerous situation. If he couldn't find it again, he would have to come up on his umbilical, not impossible, but more difficult than climbing a fixed line. There was not enough scope left to go looking for it and now there was less than seven feet of visibility. The slack on his umbilical was pulled back on board as he walked. His ascent took the strength of all available hands.

The Mark V Diver began to climb the wide sturdy ladder, one heavy copper and steel 35 lb. foot at a time. Like a monster from the deep, he emerged and klumped over to the waiting bench where his three tenders, Auteri, Cadden and Collins, undressed him. "Can I do it again?" he asked, not the least bit disturbed by the excitement of his ascent.

BACK ON BOARD

"So what happened?" we asked.

In an exuberant mix of excitement and relief, Pfeiffer's words flowed like the streams of water off his suit. "The rope came out of my hand, and once they took it away, I fell like a stone. I had the umbilical pulling one way and the line got backed-up going the other way. I got about half-way up or so and we caught a good wave and it just took that line and stretched it tight, pulled it right out of my hands and I plummeted

right back to the bottom again at that point. I had to start pulling up on the umbilical.

"What was that like?"

"It's interesting. You know you're hanging on this thing, and you're bouncing all over feeling every single wave, all the surge and everything. There was a lot of weight. I was trying not to get myself so positive that I would blow up and float to the surface. It was

just negative enough that I could climb myself hand over hand."

"How was coming up the ladder?"

"That's a great ladder. Once I actually got to the ladder, which was the awkward part, obviously with no fins you are not maneuvering around, you know. You



Wayne Collins assisting the Mark V diver back on board the "Jeanne II" Charter Boat after the dive.

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have the dynamics of a blowfish. Once I got to the ladder, piece of cake. Nothing to it.”

“What did you do and see down there?”

“I was on the boiler and there is some kind of a big pipeline that I found. I did a little bit of digging underneath, popped over it, went on the other side. Just basically strolling around on the bottom. It was very cool.”

“Were you able to see the scuba divers?”

“Occasionally. There wasn’t a whole lot of visibility to begin with and the guys that were wearing brighter colors, like the yellow helmet on the safety diver, I could see every once in a while. I could see the bright lights from the video camera. The rest of them were out of my field of vision. It was kind of dark. There was very little visibility with such a small little hole in the face plate. But it was cool.”

“Could you see what you were stepping on?”

“The bottom is sand, rocks and debris. Sometimes it was by feel and sometimes I cranked the air up and used the spit cock and got the lens really defogged, but we had relatively light weights down there and I was always concerned that I could get inflated enough to get the fogging to go away and blow up to the surface and damage the bottom of Captain Bill’s boat with the top of my head, so we didn’t want to have any of that. I basically tried to deal with the fog, go by feel, toeing stuff around and then when there was relief and there was something on the bottom, I could see. I’d find my way around it or hop over it.”



Team members help remove Mark V equipment from Bill Pfeiffer.

“It was great! It’s something that I’ve wanted to do since the very first time I put one of these things on and I am just really grateful that I got the opportunity. It was absolutely phenomenal. I want to go back!”

“Diver coming up!” yells Polichuk. “Give the gentlemen some room to get by there before he wrecks everything,” and the crew sprang into action.

“Sit here”, adds Chominsky. “Let the air out of

your BC.” The support scuba diver followed directions, sat back and accepted their assistance in removing his cumbersome equipment. One by one they made their way up the ladder eager to tell their stories.

“It looked like something out of a Jules Verne movie,” said Lipsky. “I was waiting on top of the wreck. All I saw was the bronze helmet coming and then his face plate and I could just about see what’s going on down there and all of a sudden, I saw the rest of his outfit. It was really spectacular. I’m glad I got to witness it. It was a great experience.”

Rusnak described the Mark V as one of the safest dive systems ever made. “With umbilical air supply he could have stayed down there for two days,” he said. “I have full confidence in the US Navy Mark V dive equipment as it is over-designed and very safe with the right diver. Bill Pfeiffer was the right choice. He was calm the whole time and in perfect control.” Still, the furrows in Rusnak’s brow disappeared once everyone was safely back on board.

“I think the dive went very well considering the time we had and the weather conditions. I feel we accomplished something that has not been done to my knowledge since this equipment was in service many years ago,” he said. (The Navy stopped using this helmet in the 1970s.) “It proved that we had the ability to do something like this and that with the right dedicated people working together, we can accomplish almost anything. I was confident in all the equipment and also the crew we picked.”

And so turns another page in Long Island diving history.

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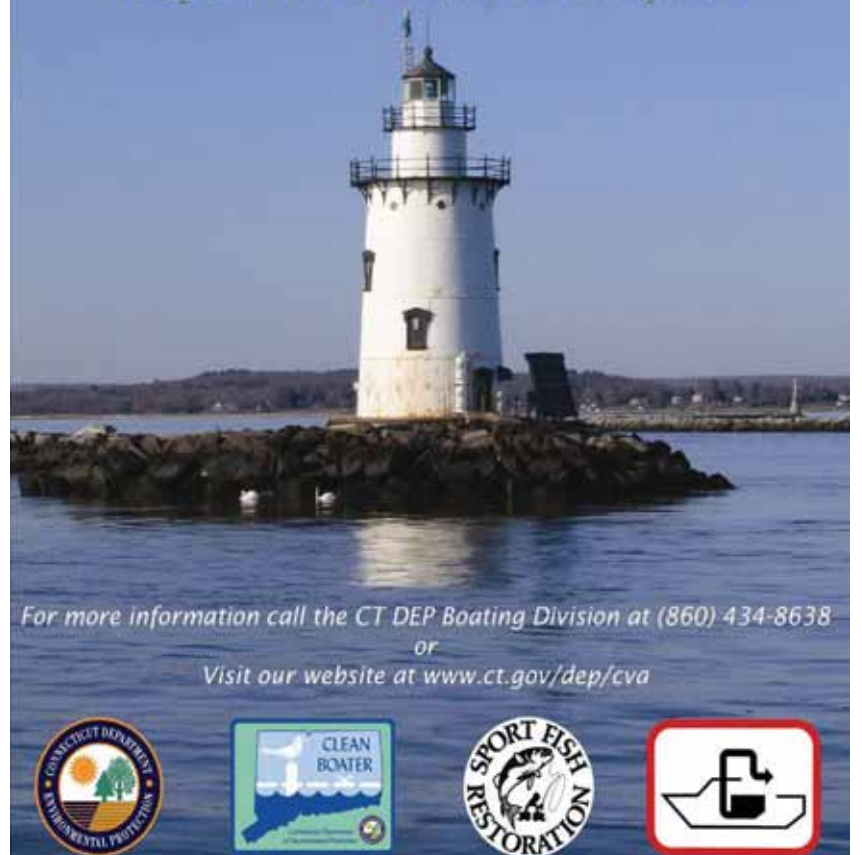
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