

PERSONAL VIEW
THE CLOGS-TO-CLOGS SYNDROME AMONG
BARRIER REEF DIVING PROVIDERS

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When the general public was first made aware of the existence of that very special breed of men the naval "Frogmen", there was an immediate and correct understanding that such activities were dangerous. However the introduction of the Cousteau-Gagnan reducing valve after World War 2 made the Aqualung a simple to use and seemingly safe alternative to the use of oxygen rebreathing units, where Oxygen Pete was only one of the dangers. Adventurous, physically hardy, youthful swimmers of many maritime nations quickly developed an interest in both breathhold and compressed air diving once this new and unexplored world was made known to them. These activities were dangerous and uncomfortable, equipment was self made or obtainable only with difficulty, and the small numbers initially involved fostered a great camaraderie. Information and advice was shared. As numbers involved increased and equipment was both improved and made readily available, many were able to enter into scuba diving without the testing phase of spearfishing off rocks which taught a proper respect for the sea. It became possible to literally "jump in at the deep end". Not all survived the problems they encountered. It was soon accepted that instruction would add to safety and increasingly fatalities were noted to occur almost solely among those who were untrained and inexperienced.

By early 1954 at least one Sydney dive shop noted that customers who bought a Porpoise scuba unit were given a book of instruction, and in the December issue of the Australian Skindiving and Spearfishing Digest the shop was offering "personal instruction" to their customers, a service anticipated by another store earlier in that year. Articles were published in which both instruction and the need for a medical assessment were noted, a theme repeated over subsequent years. In 1955 the Underwater Research Group (URG) Sydney were already involved in offering instruction to their novice scuba diver members, providing club equipment on occasion. Later the URG undertook carefully supervised experimental deep diving, both breathhold and scuba, till warned of the dangers by the RAN.

It was not until the 1970's that public opinion reached the stage where novices acted as if seeking instruction was the reasonable thing to do, not a sign of timidity. They also ceased to regard the wearing of buoyancy aids as "sissy". A few even followed buddy diving principles! There was a developing realisation of the need to have some sort of guarantee of the worth of the instructor additional to his personal belief in his own capabilities. The growth of the several instructor organisations, with their examination of applicants before granting membership, followed this shift in public attitudes to scuba diving, a belief that with correct training one need come to no harm. Maturity had come to Scuba diving, it was no longer "sold" as a danger sport but as a means to reach the wonders of the underwater world.

The very achievement of high safety factors in modern equipment has had some inevitable disadvantages. Some no longer believe that dangers still lie in wait capable of rapidly changing a pleasant and interesting experience into a short trip with a fatal conclusion. The rapidity with which death can occur in water allows little margin of safety should misadventure occur. Here it is that training and experience is lifesaving. Naturally some are put at risk through the peer-pressure situation giving them no face-saving let out. Ray Barrett has admirably described just such a situation. "I arrived on the set to shoot an underwater scene in *The Troubleshooters* and asked 'where's the stuntman?' and they said 'You're it.' I was given some instruction by a naval frogman with a thick cockney accent. 'Nah 'ere are your tanks, sir, strap 'em on dahn right, 'ere is your dee-mand valve, and you will bite on this and breath through you mouth because you can't breath through your nose, har, har, An' remember you 'ave got to ex'ale when you come up to the surface. Ex'ale. Otherwise you'll blow yer lungs. Awright, nah get in and 'ave a go.'"

As readers will be aware, Ray Barrett survived this "lesson" and the diving. So do most others who similarly receive little or no instruction, thanks to the excellence of the equipment and the element of good luck which so often protects us from our own foolishness. But it is not an approach favoured by insurance companies, coroners, nor by the family left behind. It is not much praised, either, by other divers who catch the odium when another diver kills himself. Yet it is an approach which seems to have appeal to resort dive shop proprietors around the world, and now it has reached our shores. "Only" one fatality has been recorded so far from the day-trip-and-dive packages available to all comers to some areas of the reef, and available to more unless a fatality, or greater caution, eventuates. Hopefully the latter.

It will be tragic if the excellent safety record of present day scuba diving, for which the instructor organisations can take much credit, is to be thrown away for the sake of a short term commercial gimmick. There is surely no place for any diver, let alone a certificated instructor, taking more than one (or even one?) complete novice into open water using scuba however calm, warm and clear the water may be.

There is a saying in Lancashire which encapsulates a shrewd observation of human behaviour and seems apposite to this situation. "Clogs to clogs in three generations". This can be translated as describing how the first generation works hard, long, and often unglamorously to achieve success, the next is close enough to the founder to understand and appreciate the effort they were not required to make. This generation seeks to maintain and build on the achievements, but the third generation has no understanding of how the results were achieved or appreciation of how easily they may be lost. Often the founder generation is ridiculed for its rough simplicity, or even thought "square" and old fashioned. The family group/organisation is now ripe for disaster. Hopefully those involved in diving will realise in time that it is not merely an in-water commercial enterprise. Otherwise the insurance companies, law courts and the coroner will soon remind them.