

Costs for transport and medical treatment are expected to be covered by health insurance or alternatively transport will be charged at cost to the patient. In cases of hardship, the National Safety Council of Australia maintains a non-enforcement policy. It is expected that medical practitioners will submit their own accounts to the patients.

The National Safety Council of Australia is well experienced in such operations and has been running ambulance helicopters for the Latrobe Valley District Ambulance Service and a number of other emergency transport systems for some years. Our King Air aircraft has excellent endurance and can travel from Morwell (Victoria) to Sydney (New South Wales) in 1 hour, 40 minutes and from Morwell (Victoria) to Brisbane (Queensland) in 2 hours, 45 minutes.

The system will be operational from mid April 1983.

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COVER STORY

HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN SPORT DIVING MIGHTY MEN IN DYED SANDSHOES

Edward du Cros

In the 1920's "Goff" Gapp and Denzil Wells, as schoolboys, were among the first spearfishermen in Sydney Harbour. The former later became a doctor and served in Vietnam with a civilian relief unit, while the latter continued to be active as a diver and invented a number of devices which became important in Australian skin diving. Even in 1947-48 there were possibly no more than two dozen skin divers in the whole country. They were regarded by the general public as lunatics, for who else would swim out there with all those sharks? Some of the pioneers were men who had served in World War II with New Guinea or Torres Strait Islanders, who had been pearl shell or trochus divers, but most would have been novices who had heard or read about the wartime "frogmen" or the sport divers of France, California or Florida.

There were only two books available on skindiving at this time. One was in French and described underwater hunting, the other was Guy Gilpatric's "Compleat Goggler". In addition to the belief that large packs of hungry sharks

would eat anyone who ventured more than 20-30 metres from the shore there was a groundswell of antagonism from both amateur and professional fishermen who feared that the activities of this handful of spearfishermen would scare the fish even from their offshore locations of longstanding. Nobody thought of them as heroes.

The first spearfishermen wore sandshoes stained green to avoid attracting sharks. They had neither snorkels nor fins, unless they imported them privately from overseas. Skin diving items first started appearing in shops after about 1947. If you needed it, you made it. There were no wet, or dry, suits to protect you from the cold so gradually divers started to wear a wrap-around tunic of rubber inner tube over their woolly jumpers. Weight belts were relatively heavy, 6-12 lbs being common, and survival might depend on dropping the weights quickly. The spears used were often without lines and, like the belts, often required recovering after loss. There is a story that one spearfisherman took down a small hydraulic jack to move rocks to reclaim a lost spear! The technique was to enter the white water from the rocks and hope to meet one of the large fish to be found there. One imitated a large bag of garbage on the bottom and then surprised the fish! A popular method of coming ashore was to be taken to the rocks and dumped by a large wave. This looked hazardous and it was. The basic technique was to allow the surge to take one from place to place rather than to try to propel oneself.

These pioneers included a number of eccentrics. Their retirement and the introduction of commercially manufactured equipment, gradually resulted in the less colourful (and much less dangerous) spear fishing methods practiced today. The introduction of fins and snorkels led to a change to the cruising techniques used overseas and a reduction in weights carried. Discontinuation of the climbing about on rocks underneath huge waves was one of the factors associated with a great increase in the popularity of the sport. Another factor was the realisation that there were alternatives to hunting fish. These included diving to locate wrecks, underwater photography (both still and movie) and marine research to assist museums and universities. Yet another new element was the number of very attractive girl skin divers being added to the scene! In the early days of only spearing fish, the sport had been almost totally a masculine affair.

Not all the pioneers were resolute, brave, rash or stupid. One individual I remember was a rich young man who bought the latest model Studebaker every year. He was equipped himself with gear imported from France. It was his habit to load his equipment into his impressive car and to proceed to a place where there was sheltered water. Before entering the water he would take a measurement of its temperature. If the result was below his expectations he would reload his gear into the car and return home.

Another eccentric of the late 1940's was a successful and experienced spear fisherman with a strong dislike for the masks and snorkels available. He had a cast made of his face in a light alloy and he strapped this to his head. There

were two tubes from the mask. One was a short hose with a one-way valve, for the exhaled air. The other was 5 metres of hose which ended with a funnel air intake mounted on a six metre long alloy raft/float. He used to float for his fish, thus keeping any hungry sharks well away from his position. It could also serve as a lifesaving float if he became washed away, though he usually fished in calm waters for flathead so this emergency was unlikely to occur. Naturally he could only breathe if at less than 5 inches depth. He was a man of massive build and used this strange device for over seven years without any trouble.

Prior to about 1949 skin diving items were not available from stores. The early masks were made from army surplus shaving mirrors: The silvering was scraped off and the glass was mounted, using the mirror's frame, in a piece of truck inner tube. Hints on making such equipment, also spearguns and quick releases were published in the magazine produced by the Sydney divers' group, the Underwater Spearfishermen's Association of NSW. (The name was later changed to Underwater Skindivers and Fishermen's Association of NSW). "The Association" was founded in Sydney and by 1953 had over 400 members, which made it the largest scuba club in the world at that time. In 1953 two clubs were started for users and owners of scuba gear, which had now become a part of the diving scene. Members of these clubs were also members of the USFA, though the Underwater Explorers Club (which was active for about four years) was not itself affiliated. The Underwater Research Group, which survived, was soon involved in running courses of instruction in the use of scuba and several of the shops which catered for divers began to offer instruction to their customers. At one time a Sydney dive shop dropped the course charge from 5 pounds to nil, but this innovation did not last for long! Meanwhile, the district clubs in NSW, not specifically scuba clubs, became sub-units of the USFA of NSW and the USFA of Australia. These were the predecessors of the Australian Underwater Federation. The AUF is itself the parent body of the Federation of Australian Underwater Instructors. The complicated evolution of the present day diving groups is mirrored overseas, and certainly not to Australia's discredit.

Early speakers to the Association members included Siebe-Gorman staff, hard-hat divers and Lt Cmdr Baterham, the senior "frogman" officer of the RAN. Those who attended these meetings soon became aware of the fact that several members had purchased oxygen rebreather diving units, ex-armed forces, from disposal stores in Sydney. The name used was "Salvus Gear" or "Salvus Suit" although it was an appliance and did not include any piece of clothing. It is a pity that this short phase of our (amateur) diving history is not documented and it is hoped that anyone with any information of any kind will come forward. It would be of great interest to know what decided each owner to give up using oxygen and what became of the sets. Were they taken to the tip, given away to poor relations or sold to unwary later buyers?

The early users of oxygen sets soon realised that they could be lethal, through oxygen poisoning, especially if used

deeper than 33 feet. This was particularly so because the users were untrained, unsupervised and often used poorly maintained sets. One set was known to have been sold containing damp, used soda lime, with the suggestion that all that was needed to regenerate it was to leave it in the sun on a rock for a time. One successful user of such equipment was Don Linklater, a diving pioneer still with an active interest in diving matters.

Until the introduction of scuba, there were few women divers, but thereafter their numbers began to increase rapidly. Some, like Valerie Taylor, achieved an international status later.

The first divers, whether as spear fishermen, users of oxygen units or home-made hookah apparatus, were mighty men. It is hoped that people with knowledge of this important period of discovery of ways to enter the underwater world will make their information available to this and future generations. They deserve such a memorial.

(EDITOR: An article by Don Linklater will appear in the next issue.)

HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN DIVING THE DICK CHARLES SAFETY BELT

An important instrument in distributing information about divers, their problems, and their equipment was the Australian Skindiving and Spearfishing Digest (ASSD) (under various titles). From the first it contained advice on ways to improve safety. In October 1953 its readers were informed that one of the best known divers of the time, Dick Charles, was starting to manufacture a safety belt capable of supporting a 15 stone man wearing 15 lbs of lead. It was inflated either orally or through activating a CO₂ sparkler bulb. The first advertisement seems to have been published in February 1954 and by April it was claimed to have saved two lives. The last advertisement traced was in September 1961, by which time 21 lives were claimed saved as notified by grateful users to the originator of the belt. Nobody else seems to have produced an alternative belt, though an inflatable bag, the Aqua Pak, was advertised once (January 1958). It is probable that the market was small and interest in safety belts minimal because there were no belts visible on divers pictured in the magazine's pages over the succeeding years. Healthways started to advertise their halter type vest, also an oral or CO₂ inflator mode in October 1964. There was no advertising of vests by other sports shops however, even then.

It is possibly worth a passing mention that by May 1954 the appropriate Government department had started to apply a 12.5% Sales Tax on the belt!

Dick Charles always encouraged users to report their findings and one user had his case reported in the ASSD