

S.P.D. GOES DOWN DEEP

By Des Hennessy, P.O., S.P.D.

Clear, cloudless skies, clear, deep blue seas with a slight swell—perfect conditions existing for the final dive in a deep diving programme by members of the Sydney SCUBA Club, South Pacific Divers.

The aims of these divers were to familiarise members with the conditions and problems involved in deep diving. In the past, members have been to depths up to and over 300 ft., including dives in September, 1963 to 241 ft., May, 1969, Richard Taylor reached 306 ft., and Christmas, 1968, Richard Taylor and his crew dived down to 285 ft. at Piccinny Ponds S.A. The Club as a whole, makes regular dives to 130 ft. and also frequently visits the wreck of the "Birchgrove Park", lying 170 feet down off Avalon, Sydney.

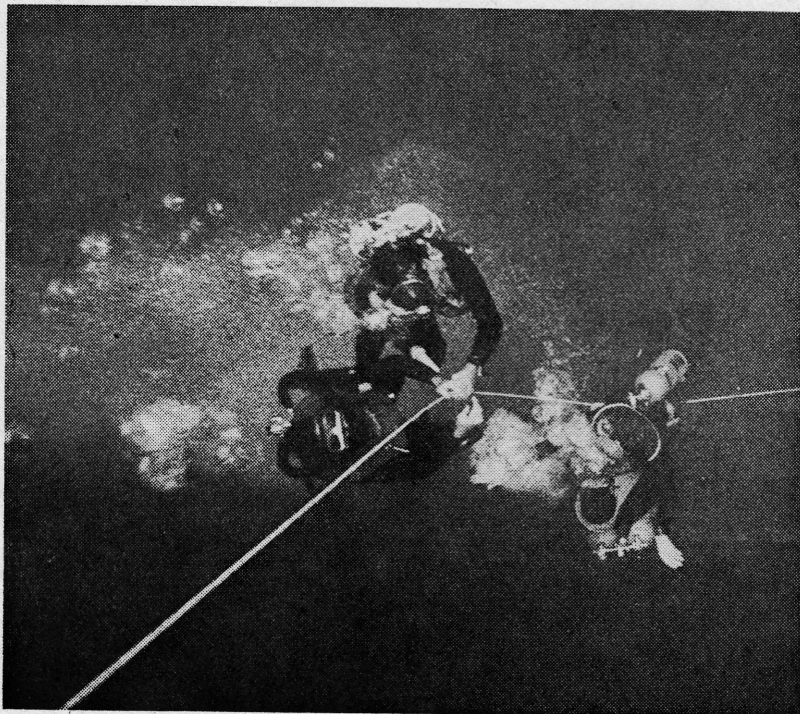
There are many dangers associated with diving deep and breathing normal air under pressures up to 10 atmospheres. Past 150 ft., to the unaware, nitrogen narcosis or "rapture of the deep", is particularly dangerous and if the diver does not recognise the tell-tale signs of loss of co-ordinated movement, dizziness and drunken feeling, showing that he is becoming affected and return to the surface, the consequences could be drastic.

Another danger, encountered a little deeper is Oxygen Poisoning. It seems quite paradoxical that oxygen, the lack of which can kill within minutes, can also be poisonous at the other extreme. Why this is so, or just how it affects the brain are still virtually undecided, but the point is that oxygen becomes toxic when its partial pressure reaches 2 atmospheres, this occurring at a depth of 297 ft. (10 atmospheres). In this case, divers should watch for small muscular twitching, usually around the eyes or lips.

Others dangers one could encounter were mainly associated with descent or ascent, such as the bends, air embolism, sinus squeeze, etc.

Our day started off at 6.30 a.m., 22nd March, 1970 on board a 56 ft. fishing trawler skippered by Ross Miller.

Our venue was a spot known to deep sea fishermen as "The Peak" approximately 20 miles from Sydney and 12 miles out from Maroubra Beach. It is made up of an underwater mountain with a small plateau-like top. this being some 250 ft. below the surface.



• Onward and upward depth 80 ft. (Barry Lines pix.)

Falling away at each side there is a shelf at approximately 360 ft. with some small pinnacles and then this falls off into very deep water.

Our intentions were that, firstly, 3 groups of divers (each group consisting of about 6, including a dive leader who was to evaluate his group's diving programme) were to descend to the 250 ft. bottom. If any member did not feel he should continue all the way, he would either return to the surface or stop and wait on the shot line with a buddy, while the rest continued down and then returned, the whole group would then ascend and spend about 10 minutes at 10 ft. This decompression stop was purely a precautionary measure due to the fact that a "bounce dive" to this depth does not require any decompression stops.

After anchoring, a weighted shot line was lowered along with two 150 ft. hookah hoses with "Sea Bee" demand valves to be left on during all dives.

By now the first group was geared up and about to "hit the water", each diver wearing full wetsuit, SCUBA and a self inflatable safety vest. At least one in the group wore a depth gauge or automatic decompression meter.

This dive lasted some 10 minutes, 3 minutes down and 7 minutes up. On surfacing, those who had arrived at the bottom described it as flat with a "cobblestone" appearance and also confirmed the depth at 250 ft.

My group was now ready and within minutes we were heading down the shot line. We paused at 150 ft. where 2 stopped, the remainder heading down. This dive went exactly as planned with myself and three others reaching the bottom.

The water at this depth is surprisingly clear, although little light is apparent. Between 175 and 220 ft. a thermocline was crossed, the temperature dropping some 5-10°.

Immediately we surfaced and boarded the boat, group 3 was already in the water and heading down with 4 or 5 getting to the bottom.

Once everyone was aboard we headed off to deeper water (360 ft.) where 4 very experienced divers were to dive over 300 ft. These were Denis Robinson, Rick Latimer, Dick Taylor and John Sumner, who, up to this moment, had been quietly resting to help minimise the effects, if any, of nitrogen narcosis, as it is a fact that a tired, tensed up person will be more susceptible than one relaxed but alert.



• Dick, John, Rick and Denis stop at 20 ft. for their first decompression stop
— Photo by Barry Lines.

After anchoring, the 4 were helped into their gear and aided over the side, to the tune of dozens of shutters clicking off.

Once on their way down everything went smoothly up to 250 ft., where John had elected to stop. Rick Latimer then stopped 70 ft. below John leaving Dick and Denis continuing down.

By 330 ft. Denis had suspected nitrogen narcosis and was ready to ascend when everything began to happen at once. Denis felt himself drifting quickly into sleep. Dick, noticing that Denis was in trouble turned him around and headed him to the top, at the same time quickly snapping off a photograph from his "rolleimarin" of Denis's depth gauge.

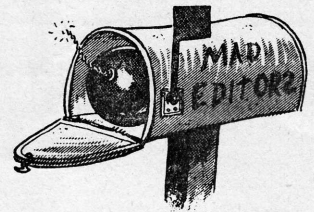
Denis had started up, but tried to turn around and descend again, but Dick, himself now feeling slightly affected had helped him up to a position where Rick Latimer could see them and immediately came to help. Nitrogen narcosis disappears quickly once a stricken diver ascends, and by 200 ft. Denis was quite "back to normal". Safety divers at depths of 150 and 100 ft. helped the 4 up to 20 ft. where they would decompress before going to 10 ft. for a further decompression stop.

Once on board amidst much discussion, the depth was estimated at 335-345 ft. and the possible cause of the attack on Denis could have been that he was a little tired and tensed up over the filming of the dive.

All in all, 3 divers passed 300 ft., the deepest being 340 ft., with 12 others reaching 250 ft. and some 12 others reaching depths of up to 200 ft.

This outing was, admittedly, a dangerous one, particularly if conditions were bad. But conditions were good, equipment was first class, safety precautions taken and the divers, themselves, were among some of the top ranking amateur divers in Australia. Still, we had our incidents which only goes to show that no matter who you are, things can happen and that any inexperienced person attempting this dive would be extremely foolhardy.

LETTERS DEPT.



23rd May, 1970
28 Carinya Ave.
Brighton-le-Sands
N.S.W., 2216

The Editor,
Dear Sir,

In answer to Mr. Les Graham of Terrigal, I was one of over a hundred divers present at Terrigal on 1st March, when the incident referred to in a letter printed recently in A.S.M., took place. The letter was brought to my attention when first received by the editor and enquiries were made to try and track down the culprits. At that time my enquiries drew a blank. Since the letter appeared in A.S.M., the driver of the boat, a junior member of this club, has come forward.

On the day in question there was a very rough sea, and most of those present were more interested in the state of the sea at the back of the headland, than what was going on inside the bay. The competition was postponed till the following Sunday. One thing I did see, and, in fact, I overheard this remark, "Look, some idiot has a divers flag on the mooring buoy for his boat." This appeared true as this buoy was amongst moored craft and other mooring buoys. I now find that this is the float you referred to, and it is left in that position, with the flag in place, all the time, whether or not there is a diver in the water. On this occasion there was not.