



Hazards Of The Job

The training and preparation undertaken by police divers plays a big part in the value and precision of the service they provide. Police diver Andy Clark tells us more about his demanding work ...

words & pictures **ANDY CLARK**

BENEATH THE waves, undersea Scotland offers some of the most incredible, alluring and world renowned diving the British Isles has to offer. Here, marine life is plentiful with impressive records of endemic species and equally notable reports of visiting whales, dolphins, porpoise and shark. With many of the underwater sites regarded as valuable 'high energy' sites - where large, food-rich water movements are frequent - the incredible seascape is abundant with an impressive variety of colourful species from virtually every imaginable class and classification.

The attractions are all too obvious to any diver - UK diving at its best! Unique marine life, unique dive sites! But there is concern that the perils are often masked by such appeal. Some divers are perhaps not acting within the accepted (and expected) levels of personal responsibility. Whether by failing to complete self declaration medical certificates truthfully, by abandoning diving within the guidelines of recognised practice and procedure or by denying physical capability and diving outside personal experience, some divers may very well be doing too little to eradicate complacency, often with fatal consequences.

There is one profession of divers however who, through adopting and adhering to rules and guidelines, recognise those perils and who stringently plan and prepare every dive to eliminate such complacency. These are the divers that are frequently tasked to search for and recover those who, through whatever set of circumstances, have made one irreversible error in their diving. These are the divers who find no comfort from recovering like-minded people (victims) who share a passion for this incredible underwater realm and whose only mistake may have been one that could have been avoided.

Scotland is divided into five police areas with Strathclyde, Grampian and Central Scotland offering an underwater search and recovery facility. Strathclyde works north from the border with England up the west coast and incorporates the Inner and Outer Hebrides within its' jurisdiction.

Grampian, stretches north up the east coast and takes first call priority for incidents among the Shetlands and Orkneys while Central Scotland, occupying the council areas of Clackmannanshire, Falkirk and Stirling (and occasionally dropping south to cover Lothian and Borders), operates along the east coast and amongst a myriad of inland waterways allowing police divers opportunity to practice and hone every aspect of police diving.

Although geographical boundaries and considerations may differ (true of all police diving teams), the existence of such a police resource is common throughout the British Isles - police diving teams are merely an extension of investigative facility and are available to assist in any criminal (or suspected criminal) inquiry where routinely, uniformed officers or CID have neither the capability or experience to work in or under water.

Strathclyde is one of only two Police Diving Schools in the entire British Isles and caters for both basic divers and diving supervisors with the capability and opportunity to offer diving in every conceivable set of natural conditions likely to be experienced by police divers in their investigations. The geography and climate combines to allow diving to 50 metres, diving at altitude, nil visibility and freshwater diving in any, and often, all weather conditions.

Closely regulated by the Diving at Work Regulations 1997 and the Confined Space Regulations 1997, each diving team is further assisted by the Code of Practice for Police Diving and the Police Diving Rules and Manual of Guidance. Directed by the HSE 1974 Act, compliance with such regulations and guidance has resulted in police diving history being virtually incident free. Aside from occasional incidents of mild baro-trauma (more recently one TVP diver suffered a neurological bend as a - later identified - result of a confirmed PFO) and equipment failure, police diving is considered by the HSE to be some of the safest and most highly supervised projects amongst the inshore diving fraternities.

But achieving the proficiency to

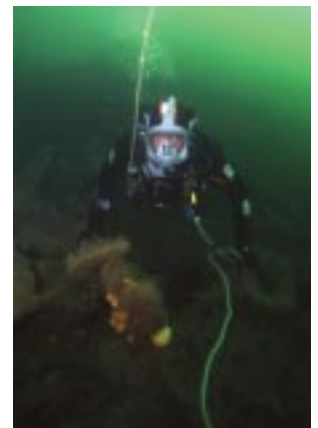
volunteer such a facility is very much a deliberate and meticulous collation of planning, preparation and compliance. Carefully structured directive from the very beginning and the mandatory attendance of 'refresher' training ensures uniform tuition throughout and retention of the knowledge and skills required of a police diver. Such support builds great confidence within police diving teams and in their abilities. Instilled initially during an intense and structured 8 week HSE Basic Air Diver and Police Surface Supply course at Strathclyde (or Northumbria Police Diving and Marine School), hopeful police divers are offered training in every aspect of diving physics and physiology, gas laws, decompression, diving at altitude, flying after diving, search patterns, examining submerged vessels and vehicles, the recovery of property and bodies and the preservation of evidence.

It is true that not all police diving teams are subject to the same problems and conditions. Of the 14 or so remaining teams (police diving records date back to 1955 with police diving teams numbering as many as 28 in its heyday), geographical conditions within their jurisdiction may vary wildly and may not, save for diving theory and practice, reflect hugely on those experienced in Scotland.

Indeed, some forces may well be landlocked, like Thames Valley Police and may, to a certain degree, tailor their own practice and procedure to suit conditions. But it is however true that all police diving teams need to be trained to the same level to ensure consistency and ultimately proficiency. Should a request for assistance be made by an adjoining police area, the capability of all police divers can be virtually guaranteed.

When attending the

continued on P.23





mandatory 'refresher' courses, it can safely be assumed that each diver had received the same level of training. Such 'refresher' courses not only address the need for further input but also offer opportunity for police divers from other forces to get together to share experiences, ideas and views on practice and procedure – some forces are using equipment configurations that although differing from that used by the majority of police dive teams, are by their experiences justified and furthermore, approved (by HSE) as 'suitable' configurations for the purpose - useful knowledge for other police divers to understand the workings of such equipment and the ideals behind its use. It is precisely these opportunities that prove invaluable in the support of maintaining, not only police diving skills, but diving skills and knowledge generally.

Police divers share a common trait in their attitudes to diving and whether by personal design or some other unseen force, the sheer desire and willingness to dive is stronger than I've experienced in any other diving fraternity. Only understood when you consider some of the conditions they work in and some of the tasks required of them.

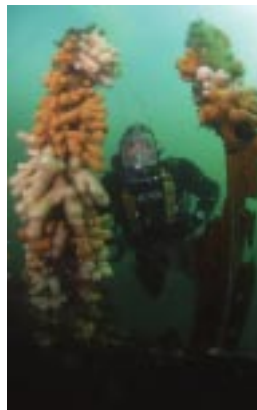
Many police divers also share an interest in sport diving. Some may have been sport divers before joining an underwater search team. Some have certainly taken it up since and there are some who still pursue their interest and consider themselves divers first and foremost whether 'at work' as police divers or at play as sport divers. Indeed, sport diving offers a welcome respite from some of the arduous duty required while 'at work'! And, as you would expect, sport diving is always a topic of conversation. Often (and affectionately) referred to as 'Scooby-Doos', sport divers and the sport diving fraternity is generally regarded as an area for discussion (usually when several police divers get together on refresher courses) and as such receives a good deal of hearty debate. The subjects of medicals, training and 'badge collecting' are usually the topics to receive most deliberation.

Such discussion not only allows one to ponder the strengths and weaknesses of police diving, but also allows valid comment and observation on areas where sport diving may benefit – or perhaps one's own sport diving practice may improve. It is also true in reverse and serves to illustrate that whatever diving

body you show allegiance to, you can always learn something new. By such debate a very personal system may be born that makes one's own diving more responsible and much safer.

On that same note and by further point of interest, similar such discussion has resulted in at least one publication that has examined practice and procedure, has collated such information and offered the advice as the 'Doing It Right' diving system. Equally, and without exception, diving journals do their utmost to promote a safer diving practice whether by offering healthy advice and guidance on diving theory and application, or by contributing tidbits geared towards efficient and effective kit treatment and maintenance. Case history is also examined with opportunity afforded for divers to submit reports of their own mishaps and anecdote that other readers may learn from.

In highlighting such examination, this article (and those that follow tackling the subjects of medicals, training and 'badge collecting') is not intended as a critical piece more a basis for discussion in the hope that personal sport diving may be conducted more safely. Having learnt a great deal since becoming a police diver, there seems to be no valid excuse from



straying from the valued practice of safe diving, and certainly no excuse for failing to acknowledge one's own responsibilities and capabilities.

Personally, discussion and conclusion is so valuable because sport diving is such an important part of social life. To that end, and in my mind, any subject discussed that may add that extra element of safety to the practice of sport diving, is a subject well discussed. You may even find that the analysis of common held belief and the dissection of the balanced accounts that follow may in fact change unfounded certainty and go some way to ensuring safer sport diving for us all!

