

Tasmania Police Dive Squad

A tale of search and recovery of planes, cars and boats

In July 1987 a three week dive training course was held at the Tasmania Police Academy, Rokeby. This was to be the last of the 'old school' training courses held before the introduction of the National Competency Standards, it was a more rudimentary but hardcore training era.

by Sgt Brian Edmonds, Police Diver

It was a course which commenced with seven male students, one female, and three instructors. Over the course of three weeks this ratio would diminish to only two students and three instructors.



Brian Edmonds

Training in a typical Tasmanian July, consisted of morning swims in Ralphs Bay in front of the Academy, horrendously cold and over shadowed by a non compromising, shore based Keith Harper.

Theory was undertaken in the classroom for the first week. This was then followed by a daily bus trip into Waterman's Dock in Hobart. From there training began with either a 500 metre swim to Castray Esplanade and back or a hell run into Battery Point via Kelly's and St George's Terrace Steps, down to

Quail Street and return. To ensure this regime met with the physical challenge needed to reduce students to nausea and pain, we were led by the infamous iron-man, Stuart Scott.

Initial swims or runs were for general fitness. The real training took place in the murky waters of the Derwent River, in and around Waterman's Dock at the berths of the then police vessel, *Vigilant*.

Training here was probably the most arduous. Seven degree water temperatures needed to be endured for up to four hours a day. Short breaks above for lunch, provided little relief in mid July under a snow capped Mt Wellington.

Speaking of mountains, the in-water components of training would be led by Rod Warrington, probably the strongest and most fearless diver I have ever encountered, even to this day.

In-water tasks initially were carried out wearing only a pair of combination overalls, again a test of endurance and a tolerance of cold induced pain.

Drills were carried out by myself and dive buddy, Alex Jerrim. They included: dumping gear, buddy breathing, out of air drills and search techniques.

Toward the end of the final week the standard police dive testing was undertaken. This skill was infamous but is now replaced by different competency standards. A simple task really; all you had to do was cut through a section of standard gauge railway iron with a blunt hacksaw!

This task would take each of us, on a self constructed underwater bench, about 4-8 hours to complete. In freezing temperatures we would first have to search for and locate our saws, install a blade that our dutiful instructors would first blunt on the con-

crete wharf, in order to slow progress below, and throw as far away from the frame as possible. As if the challenge needed any improvement, but alas, my buddy and I would yet suffer masks being removed, air supplies cut and the inevitable underwater jab in the ribs or knock in the back when we were not looking.

Not much fun unless you were a cold water fish or marine sadist, but there was one way to seek some small revenge upon these three knowledgeable, instructors, who had each endured all the same training on previous courses.

Along with this famous test to saw away underwater upon a seemingly endless piece of railway iron, was the challenge to develop initiative and resourcefulness underwater. Yes, if you could devise a method of hastening the underwater exercise (cheating) without these three wise and devious instructors catching you out, it was considered an acceptable demonstration of underwater ingenuity.

Knowing the reputation of this exercise some research had already been carried out by my partner and I about other successful schemes to reduce our exposure to this, the most mundane task imaginable. These had included divers smuggling fresh blades down in their overalls and dropping a spare hacksaw in beneath the muddy bottom. One year, 50 fresh blades were smuggled in and littered the watery work area before the instructors arrived on-site. The penalty for getting caught cheating was to start afresh, the stakes were high!

Never before have I revealed this secret known only to my buddy and I. After working 4 or 5 hours and making slow progress over the first day, we were destined to return for another couple of hours to finish our task, it seemed like we were not even half way through.

I had known a number of workman who shared the facility at Waterman's Dock. I procured a key to the compound and promptly returned with my faithful buddy late one night. I completed a single short duck-dive to get a rope around our makeshift work-bench and we hauled the whole bloody lot to the more stable and considerably warmer wharf above. With a fresh blade each and warm clothes we cut 7/8ths of the way through each of our sections of iron and gingerly lowered the lot back below.

It was a gleeful return to the icy brine the following day with the making of an audacious bet with the instructors that we could bowl this over on time!

Well, I reckon it took each of us about five minutes and we were heading up with the ultimate Tas Police dive trophy. Our very own section of railway iron, cut by our own hand surreptitiously under the eyes of our bewildered three instructors and, until this day, they were none the wiser!

Enough of tales of icy training. I went on to be, and am still, an active member of the Tasmania Police Dive Squad. Sadly, my buddy during the course did not get a final medical clearance and never began work as an operation diver.

I went on to complete a variety of different dive jobs; search and recovery of planes, cars and boats all around the state. I have dived with many good

divers, both old and new members of the squad over the past 15 years.

Of note were three dives of interesting contrasts. The first occurred one mid December, I was ordering lunch at a Christmas function and made a rash statement to long standing stalwart of Search and Rescue, Paul Steane, that we had not had a dive job for a while.

Well within the hour his pager went off. This one did not sound too good from the outset, most dive jobs don't. A plane had ditched into Meadowbank Dam with four people on board. As usual there was limited information but a dive team was scrambled as Paul hastily flew into the area by helicopter.

My instructions were to meet the team at the Search and Rescue store and get as much recovery gear as we had, then drive to Meadowbank which was an hour or so away. It was daylight saving so we still had around four hours of daylight on arrival at the dive site at around 5pm.

The helicopter had located an oil slick in the lake which helped pin point the search area. We buoyed it off and I was first in.

The depth was about 20 metres which is reasonably deep at altitude. There was no current to speak of, but visibility was zero and I mean only about 20cm with a good torch. This sort of diving is spooky, but that is what all the training without a mask in freezing conditions is designed for. At least here I had a good wetsuit, this was pretty warm really.

We searched for about 20 minutes when I bumped headfirst into the wreck of the Cessna 182. I tied a line to the tail section by feel, this was too deep to lose again in the murk.

Running along the fuselage with a torch was eerily quiet, the cabin was a real mess of twisted metal and smashed perspex. Recounting the story later, I likened the Cessna to being like an egg after you had crushed it in a tight fist, broken and smashed into small pieces beyond recognition.

Still in 20 metres, with limited time to work at depth we set about the job we had trained for. We recovered two bodies, cutting seat-belts and cables, pulling and pushing around the jagged wreck.

A third front seat passenger was hopelessly trapped. With dive time and daylight running out we set about fixing an air bag to the wreck. Not much weight in those 'eggshell' machines underwater, it lifted with amazing ease. Our small inflatable zodiac dinghy was able to move the lot into shallow water.

Paul reckoned we had done our bit and he would get in to tackle the next recovery. We were all ashore by last light with the third body. The only problem was we were one body down. The pilot had been thrown clear and was not within the main wreckage.

This meant another deep dive and this was a job for tomorrow. Multiple fatalities are never the easiest of recoveries. I didn't sleep that well and was anxious to return and finish the job.

With an early start the next day and fresh tanks of air we again set about an underwater search in the initial area. Our original buoy still marking the spot.



It took a bit longer but we found the pilot still strapped to his seat, at least he was wearing his belt.

By this stage the Bureau of Air Safety Inspectors were on site to examine the wreckage. Apparently the pilot was out with three passengers following some water skiers along the lake, he managed to collect a powerline spanning two hills and busted off an 800 metre section of three strand wire. This was a weight too heavy for the undercarriage and would have pulled the Cessna down by the tail. In order to compensate the aircraft controls were in a full nose-dive position at full throttle. When the wire finally slipped away, with low altitude in a full-on dive, the Cessna hit the lake at an estimated 160km/hr. Apparently, that will cause that 'eggshell' effect.

We continued to assist the investigation by commencing a search for the overhead powerline that was missing in the lake. Ordinarily this could have proved difficult as the search area was pretty large. Not the case, as a keen young boatsman, I tendered the helm of our trusty zodiac. As we combed the river bank I managed to stall the motor as I collected an obstruction with the propeller.

"Well bugger me" I exclaimed, as I lifted the motor, I wrapped the overhead powerline around the propeller about three times. The air investigators were impressed when we announced yet another successful search and recovery, but they were still pondering how an air crash turned one section of the wire into that strange 'pig's tail' configuration.

We loaded the boat and packed the gear. It was time to return to Hobart.

Another memorable dive job was a call to King Island; this time a car off the end of the Jetty at Naracoopa on the island's East Coast.

I flew in a light plane in company with Paul Steane and long time squad member Ray Curran. Collected by the local police we arranged our gear and headed straight over to Naracoopa to assess the scene. The jetty was a wooden construction, completely straight and about 400m in length.

The night before, two of the local lads had apparently been out joy riding and had, at some stage, driven at speed down to the end of the jetty. The only problem was with damp wooden boards, no lighting, poor judgement of distance and an ancient braking system on an HT Holden, there was insufficient braking distance for the given speed. The old HT had sailed clean off the end of the jetty, even under heavy braking and had taken out the small timber end-capping.

Anyway one of the two swam ashore. Unfortunately, the other never made it, so we went in search of the HT and the missing person.

This dive was to be better than many. I jumped the six metres from the jetty to the water. It was at least clear, with visibility on the bottom out to about eight metres.

My dive buddy for the day was Ray. We were supervised from above by Paul who guided us

Tas Police Dive Course 1987:
Left to right, Rod Warrington,
Brian Edmonds, Alex Jerrim
and Keith Harper

through the search pattern, controlled by a line to the surface. This is a common searching technique called arc searching. Basically Ray and I swam in an arc with the line taut, the supervisor uses the line to send signals that would give us a direction to swim underwater, arcing left then right, out a little further on each arc.

We searched away for about an hour or so working to the outer limits of our standard line. This dive was pretty good with a few fish, crabs or shell or two to look at as we scoured into the deep blue for anything human.

Suddenly on the edge of our visible range our target came into view. We signalled our find to the surface and tied him off to the line.

We both swam him back to the jetty with some assistance from above on the line. The problem we now faced was extraction from the water.

The swim to shore along the jetty was a good 500 metres, our only other option was a hoist six metres vertically from the waterline to the jetty. With some crafty knots and a secure lashing we secured the body at water level. It was hoisted upward and landed on the jetty by Paul and placed in a body-bag. It was not the most conventional extraction from the water, but never the less effective.

The third of these underwater recoveries was less successful. It involved the tragedy of the St Helens-based, 50 foot steel crayfishing vessel the *Eastern Star*. She was lost at sea on the rugged Tasmanian West Coast at Arburg Bay, north of Granville Harbour. Three fishermen perished after the boat was capsized by a huge wave while still anchored during the night.

The search was large scale with plenty of media interest. A helicopter was flown in from Victoria on the night of the mishap, but searched without success. Sea and land searches had been conducted but with little reward apart from some flotsam and jetsam found smashed and washed ashore by a consistently large west coast swell.

I was tasked with taking a dive team around from Hobart. We gathered all our gear and drove five hours to Zeehan where we stayed overnight before our dive.

Up before first light and briefed by the search coordinator Darren Hopkins, we commenced the hour or so 4WD epic along 5 Mile Beach and over the headland that I knew was infamous for sticky black mud and bottomless creeks.

Sure as eggs we managed to get the 4WD bogged. In the middle of wading through the mud trying to find an anchor point for the winch, I heard a well known Inspector of Police being interviewed on ABC radio.

I thought he may have been a little optimistic when he said that the divers were on their way and should have the vessel searched by 10am. The time was now 9am and we were still bogged. We persisted and reached the headland where we assessed the conditions.

The swell was a good six metres with the occasional set up to eight metres. We could see where the boat was by a huge sand cloud it was pushing up as

it was rolling around on the ocean floor.

The boat was resting about 600 metres off shore at the edge of the breakers. Our inflatable dinghy was not the sort of vessel required to carry bulky diving gear in these conditions, so I requested a 'Devil Cat' to be driven up from Strahan.

Working on this coast was not for the faint-hearted and this operation would require a vessel and operator with the speed and agility to drop divers into the outer break without losing another vessel or more importantly any intrepid searchers.



My request caused a delay of another two hours but was well justified in my mind. The Strahan Cat arrived with Allan Skeggs at the helm, a combination of boat and skipper whom I knew had the experience and capabilities for this operation.

The dive crew I had with me were made up of newer members to the squad, capable but never the less there was an unease with the team that this job was pushing the limits of safety too far. This concern was not without foundation but it was our job to do whatever was possible in the search for these three missing men.

I scouted the area where the *Eastern Star* lay. It was in 10 metres of water and inside the break of the larger swells. A stroke of luck was finding a rope from the debris of the vessel below floating to the surface. We used this to tie off a surface marker, so we at least had the search area buoyed off without getting wet.

With a reluctance to dive at all I formulated a plan from the shore. We would need to drop the divers at the marker buoy from the cat, the vessel then needed to move offshore outside the break to avoid being rolled and continue to monitor the buoy to extract us between the big sets of breakers. We would dive down the line and assess the situation below. We could expect serious turbulence, debris and visibility in the sand cloud would be extremely limited.

The request for the first two divers to kit up brought some comment regarding the safety of the plan, there

Police divers Brian Edmonds and Ray Curran



certainly was a degree of danger for which I made no apology; this was not a straight forward dive. I decided I would go in first with Tim McNamara, a younger but competent and a very fit diver.

We were dropped into the dive area by the cat, which left with according pace to its safety zone. We descended the line as staying on the surface only delayed the inevitable and increased the chance of being swept away by a breaking wave. Once on the bottom we found the line had somehow been connected to the boat's anchor chain which still lay outstretched into deeper water.

Visibility was reasonable at about five metres, the turbulence had begun to cover the chain in sand. We slowly worked our way along the chain using it to anchor ourselves.

I recall at one point a large set rolled through above, this caused a pressure wave underwater the like of which I had never experienced. I knew to lose a grip on the chain would be dangerous. If swept away and separated from each other we would probably be rolled ashore in the mighty swell, this was not the preferred option.

As we slowly approached the boat, using valuable energy and air, the visibility reduced in the underwater sand cloud. We found an increasing amount of debris, lines, craypots and pieces of the boat's wooden wheel house obviously destroyed by the power of the sea.

I recall a large 50mm diameter rope disappearing into the sand firmly attached to some part of the gear. It was about three metres long, floating above the sand and would weigh heaps to pick up on deck. It waved in the water like a piece of cotton in the breeze as the next mighty swell rushed past, causing us to revert to the 'two handed hang on for dear life grip' yet again.

As this subsided we inched closer and closer till I saw the eerie shadow of the bow of the *Eastern Star* in the intense sandy murk. I was able to read the

name on the vessel but with the debris the insecurity of moving into the vessel for a thorough search was a risk I was not prepared to take.

The vessel lay upright, rocking back and forth in the swell. The wheel-house smashed off and much of the gear still washing to and fro in the water column. This was the best we could do, we retreated along our anchor chain to the line leading up above. We surfaced with minimal air and scoured the horizon for the pick-up vessel.

I was pleased to see the approaching cat's bow wave as it steamed into collect us; it pulled up alongside. No easing gently into this dive platform, it was both in 'ASAP' and power on to get out before the next set.

I reported back to the Search and Rescue Coordinator the limited results of our searching. It was not the definitive answer or recovery that the grieving families wanted but I explained this was the best we could possibly do.

The land search ran for a few more days, the swell kicked so another dive was aborted. Local fishermen eventually dived on the vessel in fine weather without result. The three men from St Helens have never been found.

The Tasmania Police Dive Squad continues to operate and is made up of about 16 part-time members based in Hobart. Training has changed in line with national qualifications and standards, Tasmania Police run courses on a needs basis every few years. Students are now partly trained by our instructors and in part by a national training body.

This has allowed those newer divers to be accredited as commercial divers whilst still being trained to departmental standards. Some of the older training techniques have been modified or replaced, the 'old railway iron trophy' has been replaced by new competencies. It remains a myth to those of the modern diving era but etched in the memories of those who passed or failed in the old school.