

SEVENTH DECADE

DIVING

I was not looking forward to the end of my Sixth Decade as I thought there was not much to celebrate! I decided, to cheer myself up, that the only thing to do was to mark the event by doing something totally different, so started to think about what I had missed so far on my journey through life. The answer suddenly dawned on me that I had experienced an amazing amount of life above the surface of the sea but nothing beneath it except a few tantalising glimpses through a snorkel mask or on the television. I decided I would learn to dive so I could celebrate the entrance into my Seventh Decade under water!

There were only a few months remaining before May 4th to reach this goal and it would also mean swimming in the sea in the middle of an English winter, which would not be much fun! However, I looked up Scuba Diving in the *Yellow Pages* and found that there was a school in Yeovil run by Mark Reeves. I rang him and made an appointment to meet at a local swimming pool so he could introduce me to the gear and teach me how to breathe under water! Mark very patiently took me through the course and on August 7th 1994 handed me my 'Open Water Diver' certificate along with a photograph of myself taken while sitting on the side of a sunken battleship in Weymouth harbour, looking very apprehensive!



Breathing under water!

I prefer to forget about the cold sea off Chesil Beach on the coast of Dorset as well as the incredible weight of the cylinder on my back as I struggled over the pebbles to reach the water. I still remember the utter fear I had when, during a night dive on a wreck at the entrance of Weymouth harbour, I lost my 'Buddy'. I surfaced to find the current was so strong that my first thought was that I would end up in France! Fortunately Mark also surfaced at that moment and we swam back to the diveboat.

Mark's club decided to hire a van and drive up to the Orkney Isles north of Scotland as they wished to do some deep dives on the German fleet that sunk itself in Scapa Flow after the Great War. Mark asked me if I would like to join them and I agreed as I had always wanted to see the Standing Stones on Orkney. However, I told him that we would rather fly up than share the Club's over night minivan trip! This turned out to be a very good decision as Margie and I were able to hire a car and explore the island as well as dive with the boys. I found diving on wrecks to be very depressing, but I was bowled over by the Standing Stones and the 5,000-year-old buried village of Skara Brae!

Mark became obsessed by Scapa Flow and a few months later announced that he was going to move there and start a diving school. Unfortunately he immediately ran into financial trouble because a dishonest company sold him a faulty air compressor! In return for helping him out of trouble he organised a diving holiday for me the following summer.

By the time the summer had arrived son Tim had also gained his diving certificate so Margie and I took him and his family north for a holiday. Mark had arranged lodgings for us near his school and while Tim and I dived the rest of the family relaxed by taking picnics on wonderful beaches, where unfortunately the island's strong winds had a tendency to fill the sandwiches with sand! Although it was midsummer there was no way the children could swim in the sea because it was absolutely freezing!

Tim loved the diving but I found it cold and exhausting, although swimming through a kelp forest was one of the weirdest and most surreal things I have ever done. One day Mark suggested that we should snorkel with the seals. This appealed to me much more because to do this we actually didn't need cylinders as the bubbles frightened the creatures. We set off across the harbour and arrived at a small uninhabited island at the southern entrance to Scapa Flow. As we approached the basking seals woke up and waddled down the beach like living jellies and disappeared from view into the sea.

We moored and gently lowered ourselves over the side of the inflatable and drifted in the glass-flat sea waiting for them to return. So began one of the most fantastic experiences of my life. The seals always approached from behind, so the first you knew of their presence was a gentle tugging on your flipper as they nibbled at them! On rolling over you would find yourself staring straight into the eyes of one of the kindest faces you could ever imagine. They would eyeball you for a minute or two and then roll over on their tummies and cartwheel away. By the time they had decided to do this you would again feel a gentle nibble on your flipper and the whole process of turning around to look would begin again. It was sheer magic and if it had not been for the fact that being in the freezing sea can only last so long, I think we would have stayed there all day. We climbed back on board and skimmed back across the sea towards a hot bath and a general defrosting.

Over dinner that night we told the family all about what we had seen and what a wonderful experience it had been. I then suggested that Margie and

Jenny should take advantage of the offer that Mark had made of dry-suits so they could share this amazing experience with us the following day. By the end of the meal we had talked the girls into the adventure. The following morning we all fronted up at Mark's boathouse where the girls, including Sam de Laszlo who had joined us, were fitted into their dry-suits that would keep out the freezing sea and keep them as warm as toast.

We all piled into the speedboat and set off for Seal Island. When we got there Mark volunteered to stay with the grandchildren while the five of us slipped into the sea. 'Slipped' isn't quite the right word as Margie took quite a bit of coaching having changed her mind after putting her hand in the water. Mark assured her that with gloves and a dry-suit 'she wouldn't feel a thing', which I thought wasn't quite the right turn of phrase to use knowing just how cold it had been the day before.

Eventually Margie was coaxed over the side and into the sea. As I pulled her away she turned to me and said, "How do you think I am going to get back on board again?" Before I had time to answer, a baby seal swam up and looked her straight in the face! It was perfect timing as all other thoughts went straight out of her mind.

The seals were very obliging and came to play with the funny shapes floating about in the sea. Time passed and Tim and I started to turn blue in our wetsuits. It was all right for those in drysuits who, being as warm as toast, were having far too good a time to think of ending an experience of a lifetime. Eventually I dragged Margie back to the inflatable and with the aid of a good pull from Mark above and a push from behind from me, she flopped into the boat just like a seal! So ended our trip to Orkney and if anyone reading this is ever in that part of the world and wishes to go seal swimming, I highly recommend they contact Mark Reeves on the Internet.

Having learnt to dive I of course wanted to do so in tropical waters. The whole purpose of learning was to be part of the glorious underwater world you see on television. I had just sold a large sculpture and as it was a bitter winter in England, I decided that we should take a holiday in the Caribbean and chose Cayman Brac. The photograph in the brochures showed an idyllic beach with palm trees and promised peace and quiet. As Margie would be left alone all day while I dived I thought it looked the perfect place for her to relax.

We arrived in the dark and were shown into a bedroom that was beside the freezer plant that ran all night, making it impossible to sleep! A trip to the Reception in the morning to see the manager quickly changed all that and we moved to a room from which we could walk straight out onto the beach. As Margie climbed into a hammock amongst the palm trees with her book, she told me to go and not to disturb her again until sundown with a Rum Punch!

The hotel had the best American-run diving school in the Caribbean and I was soon aboard a speedboat heading out to the reefs. As I was alone and you always have to swim with a 'Buddy', the Dive Master paired me off with a German who couldn't speak a word of English, the perfect partner! We swam together for the whole week we were on the island.

Diving in the warm clear blue waters of the Caribbean is a completely different experience to the mind-numbing coldness of Scapa Flow and I just couldn't believe the colours I was seeing. The fish and the reefs around which they circled were a wonder of nature and I was completely entranced by the sheer beauty of the underwater world. Having learnt in such terrible conditions

somehow made the whole experience that much more enjoyable! I shall never forget the moment that I saw my first pair of 'French Angelfish'. They were superlative and quite enchanting as they swim as loving companions.



French Angelfish

It had been a remarkable holiday and a breathtaking way to end my Sixth Decade and commence my Seventh. On the flight home I wondered to myself what adventures the next ten years would bring. One of the things I decided was that I would like to return to Cayman Brac and bring son 'Tim' to dive with me as my 'Buddy'.

I suppose that it is better to jump ahead here and record that this dream came true the following year, when 'Tim' and Jenny and their children came with us to Cayman Brac. We had a blissful time diving together and 'Tim' eventually talked Jenny into learning in the pool so she was able to dive with him on the reef. Margie had the time of her life looking after her grandchildren, which is by far her most favourite occupation in the whole world.

The most amazing event during my dive-time with 'Tim' happened when we met 'Charlie' who had become an island celebrity. He is in fact a three-foot long grouper and lies waiting at exactly the same spot every day so as not to miss his visitors. The reason is that he likes to have his chin scratched and when you gently do this he stands up on his tail to expose his chin! It was the most bizarre interaction with a creature that I have ever had or heard about.

Like all holidays it was over too soon, but it was a golden moment of sharing. In fact it was so successful we decided to take Peter and Kate with Sam and Kimberley the following year. Peter also learnt to dive in the pool so he could join Kate (who had learnt in England as a girl) and together they enjoyed the warm clear blue Caribbean Seas, while Margie again took charge of the grandchildren.

After my third dive on the Cayman Brac reefs I decided that nothing would ever be as good again so I would retire from the sport. However, there was one other dive that I have to record that took place in the Mediterranean. Damon and Sam had chartered a yacht for a week and had invited us to join them so we could dive off the island of Port Cros. Well, you can't pass up an opportunity like that, especially if you have never been on a luxury yacht on the Mediterranean before!

The plans worked out well and after I had finished working at the foundry in Italy we set out for the south of France. We arrived at a little port near Nice and found the *Madinina* moored stern to the quay with Damon and Sam sitting comfortably on the sundeck! So began the most luxurious holiday we have ever had.



Madinina

We dived off Port Cros, but saw very few fish. The dive team told us that 30 years ago the waters around the islands had teemed with fish and octopuses. It was tragic to see that the invention of scuba gear and spear guns had left the sea barren of nearly all edible life.

Apart from the disappointing dive we did all have the most wonderful time imaginable and I don't think any of us have ever laughed so much in our lives. As the adventure can never be repeated, in the same way that Cayman Brac can never be bettered, it was time to move on and do something new.



Jean Clottes and cavewoman 'extraordinaire' Margie at Niaux