Brave Deeds

Modern-day diving 'tall tales' pale to insignificance in comparison to the feats of early commercial divers. The story of the salvage of the wreck of the 'Royal George' in Portsmouth Harbour 141 years ago provides a remarkable example of just what these pioneer divers had to face.

Illustration from 'The Conquest of the Sea' by Henry Siebe, London, 1873. A diver is shown in the 'improved dress' invented by Siebe and Gorman.

DIVING BRINGS OUT THE BEST AND the worst in story-telling. While the standard tale from anglers is about how the big fish got away, the standard tale from divers is about how they got away from the big fish. If you hang around dive boats long enough, you're liable to hear many variations on this theme.

I came across a fantastic tale the other day that makes such stories, both ancient and modern, true and untrue, seem like snorkelling excursions in the local aquarium. It is a factual account of a commercial diving operation that took place over 100 years ago, written in 1873 by Henry Siebe. Siebe's name is familiar to all commercial divers and most sport divers who have at least heard of the Siebe-Gorman helmet. His book, *The Conquest of the Sea: A Book about Divers and Diving*, comes with numerous wood engravings, illustrating the wildest and wackiest collection of diving bells, breathing inventions and mile-long snorkels. Divers are pictured doing things like walking along the bottom, holding a fish in one hand and a sword in the other. But, the real adventure of this book begins in a chapter which Siebe appropriately entitles 'Useful Works,' and it is about a group of courageous divers whose hair-raising exploits were often unscheduled, a sort of accidental derring-do.

Siebe, in his unique prose, sets the stage:

'During the summer of 1842, a corporal and twenty-three rank and file of the Royal Sappers and Miners, and nine men of the East India Company's Sappers, were employed at Spithead, under Major-General Pasley, in the removal of the wreck of the *Royal George.*'

By HILLARY HAUSER

This introduction makes clear what was going on. Sappers, I learned, were a group of engineers and underwater technicians who were the first to use underwater gunpowder blasting to remove submerged wrecks. Sappers also dived with hard-hat gear, executed 'all minor fittings not requiring the skill of shipwrights,' and assisted seamen and riggers in 'naval arrangements.' These particular sappers were out to remove a ship, *Royal George,* sunk in 98 feet of water in Portsmouth Harbor. Apparently it had been a hazard to navigation, and the removal of this and other wrecks in the same area was to be accomplished by these hardy underwater demolition teams. There were two particularly brave divers who emerge from Siebe's great list of names: Corporal David Harris and Lance-Corporal P. Jones.

'Corporal Harris, almost entirely by his own diligence, removed, in little more than two months, the wreck of *Perdita,* mooring lighter, which was sunk in 1783, in the course of Mr. Tracy's unsuccessful efforts to weigh *Royal George.*' (We never find out who Mr. Tracy is, but they should have told him that *Royal George* was heavy.) 'It was about 60 feet in length, and embedded in mud 50 fathoms south of that vessel. The exposed timbers stood only 2 feet 6 inches above the level of the bottom so that the exertions of Harris in removing the wreck were Herculean. Completely overpowered by fatigue, he claimed a respite for a day or two to recruit his energies, and then resumed work with his accustomed assiduity and cheerfulness.'

Apparently is was extremely extraordinary to remain cheerful at all times during work such as this. Often there was fierce competition between the divers, in that each one wanted to claim recognition for salvaging certain pieces of wreckage whether he actually did so or not. Siebe describes tug-of-wars between divers on either end of old ship timbers, and pig iron ballast in particular was a top priority item. Every now and then one diver would steal the credit of salvaging a batch of pig-iron ballast, credit which rightfully belonged to some other sapper.

the side, burying Jones under her sails and rigging. Perilous as was his situation, his fearlessness and presence of mind never for a moment forsook him. Working from under the canvas, and carefully extricating himself from the crowd of ropes that ensnarled him, he at last found himself free. A thunder-storm now set in, and, obedient to a call from above, he repaired to the deck; but, as soon as the squall had subsided, he again disappeared, and cleverly jamming the slings, the boat was hove up; but she had become a complete wreck, and was taken on shore.'

This illustrates the unheard of fortitude of this diver. Vessels sank, tides turned, the sky stormed, ropes and sails pinned him to the bottom, and masts fell on his head, but Jones carried on almost as if nothing had happened. In fact, Jones apparently found that the difficulties of this job were not difficult enough, so it was decided that he should be given something challenging to do.

'Nothing was too venturesome for him to undertake, and the trial of enterprising expeditions only whetted his wish to be the chief of their execution. It was desired to ascertain how long a diver could exist in his dress without communication with the external air. Jones, offering himself for the experiment, remained 10 minutes on the deck of the lighter, cased up as if hermetically sealed, without experiencing any inconvenience. A more dangerous trial followed. A clever man had expressed his conviction that, if the air-pipe were to burst on deck, and the diver were not immediately drawn up, he would be suffocated. Notwithstanding this scientific speculation, Jones descended, and the pump, by signal, ceased. Five minutes he continued unsupplied from above, but a feeling of pressure having then commenced on his chest, he signaled for air. The knowledge thus acquired proved that a diver had ample time to be drawn up before the air in his dress should become too vitiated to sustain life.'

The 'clever man' who dreamed up this last experiment was no doubt Girvan, who was probably still mad at Jones for kicking in his faceplate. Or could it really be that Jones believed it was in the interest of diving science to learn how long it would take for him to suffocate? In any case, Jones triumphantly executed this feat and went on to an even tougher situation.

'On going down to examine the progress made in the removal of the *Perdita,* Jones encountered a human body, which had been drowned about six weeks. It felt round and hard, was nude to the waist, but clothed in trousers to the ankles. Jones was a long time before he could discover what it was that annoyed him. On tracing with his fingers the course of the spinal column, it felt as if the vertebrae were as distinct as the bars of an iron grating. The thought suddenly prossessed him that he was handling the remains of a fellow creature. Horror-stricken at the idea, he rushed up the ladder, and it was some hours before he could sufficiently master his feelings to descend. When he did so, he went to the spot where the body visited him, and removed the timber he had previously secured. He was, however, no more troubled with the submarine apparition nor with the return of his melancholy emotions. Two days after, Corporal Harris had an interview with a strange substance at the foot of his ladder, but, not over nice in his sensations, he struck his pricker into it. When pulled to the surface, it turned out to be the mutilated remains that had molested the sensitive Jones.'

By this time they all should have been arrested by the vice squad.

'These two non-commissioned officers were now equal to the best divers in Europe, and their daring exploits at the bottom of the sea, under a great depth of water, with strong tide, and traversing a space covered with thick mud, embarrassed by iron and shingle ballast, large timbers, guns, and a thousand other obstacles, were constantly recorded in the newspapers of the day, and filled the public with wonder.'

Here it is finally stated once and for all that Harris and Jones were the best divers in Europe. But, in spite of all their daring deeds, and in spite of their recorded bravery, they have sadly faded to anonymity. No modern day diver I know has ever dived into mud 'embarrassed' by iron and other offal. No colleague of mine would ever submit to being called a 'sapper' or to allowing the air in his dress to become 'arbitrarily vitiated' for the sake of an experiment. What diver has recently had an 'interview' with a strange substance? No wonder the public was filled with wonder—it should still be! □

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