

THE ORIGIN OF THE DIVE FLAG

Ted Nixon, where are you?

COLEEN BONDY

Who invented the red-and-white dive flag?

That question has been the bane of my existence for the past two months. When the article was assigned to me by the editors at *Dive Training*, I thought, "Oh, how interesting. I wonder who did invent the dive flag. It will be fun to find out." Little did I know it would take me nearly two months of digging and dozens of phone calls to get the whole story.

Sometimes the story behind the story becomes at least as interesting as the story itself. Take *All the President's Men*. The details of the uncovering of the Watergate scandal still (in my journalist's mind) rank as one of the best books ever written.

This story is not quite as intense, gut-gripping, and earth-shattering as Woodward and Bernstein's. No "Deep Throat," blank tapes, or wiretaps. But the making of the dive flag story still proved more interesting than the dive flag story itself.

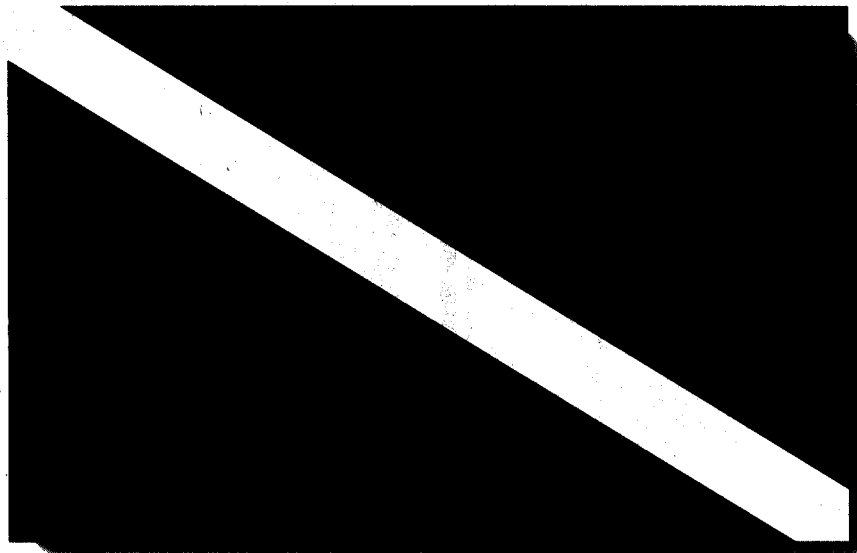
Just so that you, the gentle reader, don't have to wait until the end of this article for gratification, I'll tell you who invented the red-and-white dive flag up front. Ted Nixon of Flint, Mich., designed the flag for use in the Great Lakes. But it was Gene Parker of New Hampshire who called on all divers to use the flag and who is now known as the "father of the dive flag." If you want to know how I found that out, read on...

I started locally, as I always do if I can. My local dive center in Morro Bay, Calif., is a wonderful resource, but the owner, Chuck Rawlinson, could only

tell me that the red-and-white flag was adopted by sport divers and the blue and white alpha flag is the internationally recognized dive flag for boats. He even checked in a few old diving manuals, but found no information about the flag's origins there.

ured, was sufficient protection."

If the private sector didn't know, I figured the government might. So I contacted the Coast Guard and Harbor Patrol offices in Morro Bay. I learned about diving laws and rules regarding the flag, but not who made it.



Next I tried a dive center in nearby Pismo Beach, whose owner, Wink Russell, has been diving about as long as I've been alive. But neither he nor any of his instructors knew anything about its origins. One instructor, Rick Burnside, said at one time the flag's white stripe actually made an arrow pointing down, but that was only a brief fad.

Glen Bickford, a Morro Bay resident who started diving commercially in 1938, also had no idea where the sport diving flag came from. "We always worked from a boat. The boat, we fig-

Next I called Gary Nichols, a Divers Alert Network information officer and a dive history buff. Gary could only tell me that the birth of the dive flag is "shrouded in mystery." But he wished me luck. And maybe that helped, because I was due for a score.

Stumped and nearing my deadline, I called the editors at *Dive Training*. I had to confess my miserable failure and ask for not only an extension of the deadline, but any assistance they could give me. They gave me the reprieve — and my first successful lead.

I called Joe Strykowski, a fellow contributor to *Dive Training* and a long-time diver. With Joe I hit the gold mine. He not only knew the flag designer's name — Ted Nixon; he also faxed me *Skin Diver* magazine articles and letters from 1957, in which the debate raged over which flag divers should embrace. Gene Parker wrote an article in the magazine calling for flag designs, but, as he told me recently, he didn't get a single reply. So he picked one which had been sent in earlier by Ted Nixon. Nixon told him his local club, the Great Lakes Divers, had adopted it as standard and let local boaters know what it meant.

Meanwhile, I had sent out a cry for help on CompuServe's Scuba Forum. (CompuServe is an information and communication network available to any PC user with a modem. See *Dive Training*, November 1991.) I got several interesting responses, including the following:

"I thought it was based on an album cover for a Van Halen record (Diver Down). Just kidding." That was from Menno Knipper, who replied from Sydney, Australia.

"Here in Florida it seems that the jet-skiers use them for slalom course markers. We carry bang-sticks, but it ain't for the sharks...." That gem was from Dale Stoller.

Ken Kornblum of Michigan wrote to say he didn't know the answer, but when I found out, would I please send the information to the Scuba Forum. No problem, Ken!

The next reply was particularly helpful, however. Robert Doheny wrote that Gene Parker was being honored in Boston in April for being the "father of the dive flag." Doheny even included Parker's phone number, which was a real boon. Sometimes finding people is the most difficult part, even if you know who they are.

I did have a dilemma on my hands, however. If Parker was taking credit for being the "father of the red-and-white dive flag," would he admit that Ted Nixon had a hand in it? But I needn't

have worried. As 68-year-old Parker explained, if he was the "father" of the flag, then Nixon was the mother. And his memory was in keeping with the articles I had researched.

"I didn't create the flag. It was Ted Nixon of the Great Lakes Divers. I just chose Ted Nixon's flag," Parker said. I asked Parker why he felt the need to pick a standard dive flag. "There were a lot of divers getting propeller haircuts,"

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was his reply. Parker even admitted to putting the arrow marks on the white stripe, but because he got such a mixed response he nixed the arrow.

Within a couple of months of authoring his 1957 article, "there were divers' flags all over the place," he said. "The manufacturers just took off with it." On an interesting aside, Parker said he got wind of a lawsuit involving a dive shop owner in Belmont, N. H., a few years back who decided to take credit for the dive flag, and any cash flow that happened to accompany it. He tried to patent the design, but the courts apparently decided the dive flag belonged to the public, not one money-minded entrepreneur.

Parker said he does not know what has become of Nixon, a resident and diver from Flint, Mich. Parker tried to contact Nixon several times after getting his letter in 1957, but never got a reply.

My story wouldn't be complete without finding out where Nixon is, or if he is still alive. So (being a newspaper re-

porter by trade) I called the Flint Journal and asked about Nixon. There were no articles or obituary listed under his name at the paper, but the newspaper librarian suggested I try the local library. So I did. The woman at the reference desk checked all their files and found no mention of Nixon, except that he had been in the telephone directory during the '50s. But she did call The Dive Shop in Flint for me and get the name of the man who owned the shop during the '50s. Librarians are truly public servants. I thanked her profusely for all her help.

Dock Dockery was the name she gave me. He lived in Vortex Springs, Fla., she said. So I called him, and now I have to add another name to the list of the dive flag's fathers.

"Ted Nixon and I made up that damn flag. But Lord, that was a long time ago," Dockery said from his resort in Vortex Springs. The two of them got the idea from the Navy's "Baker" flag, which signified danger. They put a white stripe down the middle, but later changed it to the diagonal stripe because they heard the up-and-down striped flag "was some European country's flag."

"My wife used to sew them by the hundreds," for his Flint dive center, Dockery said. "The whole thing backfired on us, really. We wanted boats to stay away from the dive flag," Dockery said. They tried to pass a law to that effect, but the law that passed made it illegal for divers to dive without the flag. That offense was punishable by a \$25 fine. Boats could still go where they wanted.

Dockery couldn't clear up the mystery of Nixon's whereabouts, though. "I haven't heard from him for 25 years or more," he said. Last he heard, Nixon worked as a representative for U.S. Divers, a dive equipment manufacturer. Supposedly, he was heading for California.

Who knows, maybe he's right here in Morro Bay.

