

# PUBLIC SAFETY DIVERS

*Serious, well-trained professionals*

BY COLEEN BONDY



CITY OF HIALEAH FIRE DEPT./FELIX DOCCOBBO PHOTOS

*Public safety divers require highly specialized equipment and training.*

On Feb. 12, 1992, a news helicopter attempted an emergency landing on the thin ice of Horsetooth Reservoir in Fort Collins, Colo.

But the recently formed ice wasn't thick enough to hold the weight of the helicopter, and it broke through the surface. As the helicopter sank, its three passengers managed to escape, and struggled to remain afloat at the surface in 38-degree water.

The sound of the aircraft hitting the water and cries for help caught the

attention of a nearby bicyclist, who couldn't see what had happened through the fog but immediately found a phone and dialed 911. The call came in at about noon, and the local sheriff's and fire departments took off to the scene.

By the time rescuers arrived at the lake, the fog had lifted and they could see that one of the three passengers had already disappeared under the surface. Rescuers, including the Larimer County Dive Rescue Team, quickly planned their approach. A rescue boat from the local

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Parks Department set out from the south edge of the lake, while the dive rescue team's boat headed out from the north. Divers in cold-water rescue suits swam in

**A Good Diver Is Always Training!**

from the east shore.

The Larimer County Parks boat reached the crash site first, but another passenger had already slipped underwater. The pilot lay face down in the frigid water, kept afloat only by his buoyant down jacket. He was brought on board and immediately given cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

After regrouping, rescuers decided it was too dangerous to send divers down after the other two passengers. At a depth of 120 feet, a rescue search in the lake would require decompression stops in frigid water. A difficult decision was made to salvage the aircraft first for clues about the crash, and then to search for the bodies. Three days after the crash, a rescue diver located the bodies and they were recovered.

The pilot, Peter Peelgrane, survived the crash and is able to walk today.

When most of us go diving, we do it for relaxation, just for the fun of it, to get away from the cares of everyday life. We plan our dives, and often start preparing for them days in advance. We look forward to them with eager anticipation, imagining what our dive spot will look like, what kind of marine life we'll see and perhaps what type of game we would like to find or pictures we hope to take. Even a spontaneous outing must be planned, and generally only takes place because we want to go diving.

But for public safety divers, the dive usually starts within minutes of a cry for help. The call could come in the middle of the night, and the dive spot could be a chemically contaminated channel with zero visibility. The reason for the dive is usually to rescue someone who has drowned, and the only catch is often a lifeless body. But still, thousands of divers become trained every year to become public safety divers, working with sheriffs, police and fire department dive teams to help rescue drowning victims, recover bodies and retrieve evidence.

The men and women who make up the majority of this country's rescue

divers were not divers first. They trained as police officers or firefighters, and sheriff's deputies, and opted to become part of their departments' dive rescue teams. According to Scott Romme of DiveRescue International, a Colorado-based training company, about 40 percent of the public safety divers across the nation are volunteers, but most of those have training as reserve firefighters or law enforcement officials.

Just 15 years ago, however, a majority of dive rescue teams would have been made up of sport or commercial dive professionals who offered their skills to



*Professional rescue divers are often required to dive in areas that require extensive post-dive decontamination procedures.*

local law enforcement and public safety agencies. But in the past 15 years, Romme said, public awareness about the need for permanent dive teams with specialized training has taken public safety diving out of the realm of sport diving and into the arena where it be-

longs, with law enforcement and rescue professionals. It is still possible for a "civilian" to be part of a dive rescue team in some areas of the country, but it is becoming more rare as pressure is increased to standardize public safety dive training and procedures.

People who have been trained as sport divers and have no background in law enforcement or public safety experience often are completely unprepared to deal with circumstances which arise during a typical rescue, Romme said. The professional rescue diver almost always works alone, talking with people

at the surface through electronic communications equipment. Much of the time visibility is severely restricted or completely obscured in the lakes, channels, and rivers where most accidents occur. Divers will often have to break people out of cars, airplanes or other types of underwater "prisons" in order to rescue them by using heavy, cumbersome equipment, often risking entrapment themselves. And most sport divers are not prepared mentally to see the dead bodies of adults and particularly children. "(Body recovery) will always be a large percentage of what we do,"

Romme said.

"The odds are working against you."

However, in cold water where dive rescue operations are hampered by the need for more restrictive exposure suits, chances for a victim's survival are actually much better. A phenomenon thought by some to be linked to the

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"diving mammal reflex" found in humans has made it possible for some people to be completely resuscitated even after they have been underwater and unconscious for up to sixty minutes. In one case, a 3-year-old girl who had been underwater in 38°F/2 C water for an hour made a full neurologic recovery.

According to some studies, children have a better chance than adults of surviving this type of "near-drowning" incident because the diving mammal reflex is stronger in children. In these cases, the bodies of the victims shut down, pulling blood away from the extremities in an attempt to supply the vital organs such as the lungs, brain, and heart with oxygen. The heartbeat becomes so slow that the victim is usually declared clinically dead. However, resuscitation techniques can sometimes result in a full recovery if the victim is not badly injured or did not struggle excessively during the drowning.

### THE JOB

The public safety diver's role is to locate accident victims and successfully bring them to the surface for treatment as quickly as possible. In order to do this, standardized procedures using grids and lines are used to create an effective search pattern.

First, a dive rescue team will learn as much as possible about what happened at the accident site, including the last place a victim was seen on the surface. "We find out what they were wearing, where they went down, and where any witnesses were standing," Romme said. All this is done in a flash, so a rescue plan can be prepared as quickly as possible. All the while, divers have to gear up fast, making sure they do it right for the sake of their own safety.

Training is of the essence for public safety divers, because not only are the victims' lives on the line, but their own lives, too.

"It goes far beyond just the ability to scuba dive," Romme says. At DiveRescue, intensive two- to five-day basic water rescue and survival training

For more information about becoming a public safety diver, contact your local police, sheriff's or fire department to find out if there is a dive rescue team in your area. Or call Lifeguard Systems at (914) 331-3383, or DiveRescue International at (305) 437-7949.

courses are offered, including instructor training. Optional classes include learning to dive safely in polluted water, rescuing and recovering victims and evidence, sonar technology for locating people and objects, using a surface-supplied air dry suit, aquatic rope rescue, underwater accident scene photography, gear maintenance, and boat-based operations.

In cities such as Hialeah in southern Florida where water is abundant, a professional dive rescue team is a must. "We have 269 personnel at the fire department. Of those, 200 are certified at least as Open Water divers," said Brad Siegel, one of six public safety dive instructors for the Hialeah Fire Department. Because there are so many channels and waterways in Florida, there are a lot of water-related accidents. Siegel said extensive contamination of many of Florida's waterways makes the job much more difficult, because although the water is usually warm, divers must be protected from pollutants by wearing a waterproof suit.

To become a diver with Siegel's department, firefighters must be able to swim 220 meters freestyle, swim 50 meters underwater, tread water at the surface for 15 minutes, and retrieve heavy weights. First, potential public safety divers are given an 80-hour Open Water class which focuses on lifesaving techniques. After the 80-hour class, firefighters can volunteer to be part of the rescue dive team. Additional training, including a 40-hour dry suit class, is optional.

In Hialeah, "civilian" volunteers are not accepted for the dive team. How-

