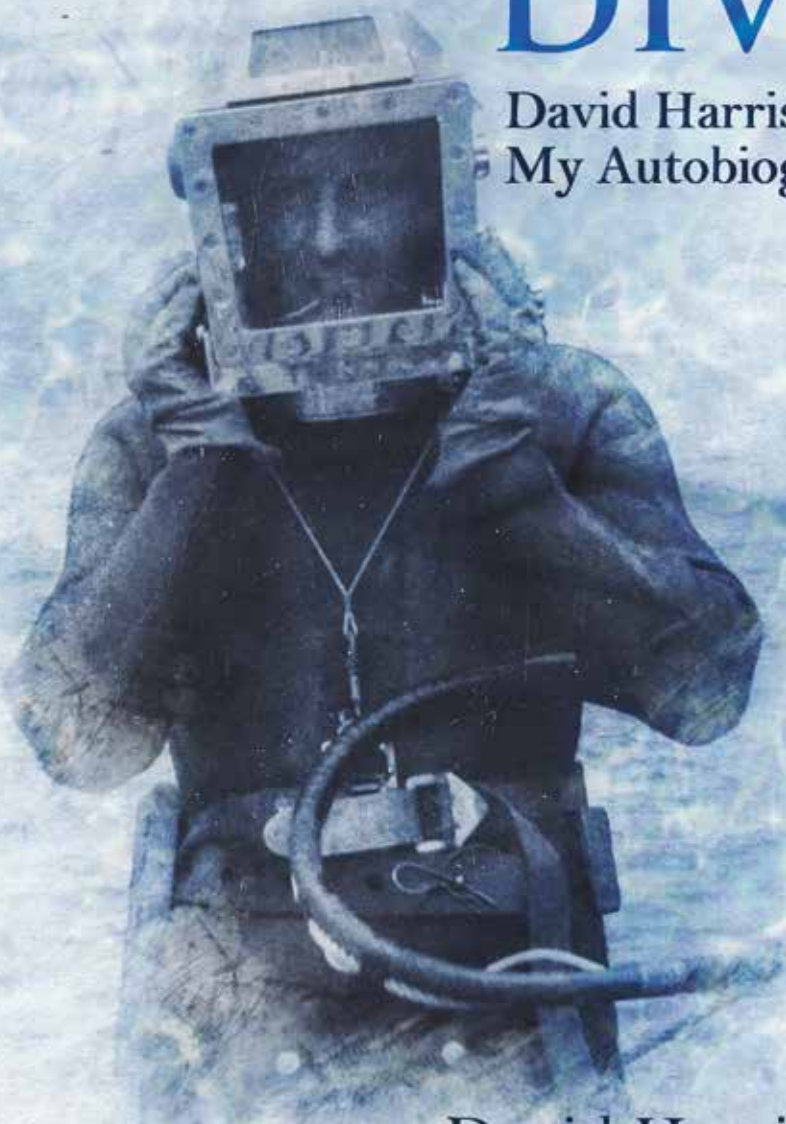


THE  
**LOONLINESS**  
OF A **DEEP SEA**  
**DIVER**

David Harrison Beckett,  
My Autobiography



David Harrison Beckett  
and Paul Zanon

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# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	9
Introduction . . . . .	11
Prelude. . . . .	13
1. David Harrison Beckett . . . . .	23
2. Becoming A Bubble Head . . . . .	25
3. No Air . . . . .	36
4. Blowout . . . . .	39
5. Learning All The Time. . . . .	41
6. Not A Nice Place . . . . .	46
7. Escravos . . . . .	54
8. George The Welder. . . . .	58
9. Certainly Not Football. . . . .	64
10. Milk Bottles . . . . .	72
11. Rolls-Royce Diver. . . . .	77
12. Chamber Life . . . . .	87
13. Nowhere To Run . . . . .	94
14. Becoming A Grown-Up . . . . .	101
15. O Is For Oblivion . . . . .	105
16. Fire In The Bell . . . . .	113
17. Whoops . . . . .	119
18. The Death Of A Platform . . . . .	121
19. Making History. . . . .	131
20. Missed Opportunities . . . . .	134
21. Rumbled . . . . .	137
22. More Helicopters . . . . .	141
23. Fun In The Jungle . . . . .	149
24. Another Plough Bites The Dust. . . . .	152
25. Typhoon . . . . .	157
26. Hell . . . . .	163
27. Madame Guillotine. . . . .	167
28. Knock Me Out . . . . .	181
29. Spooks . . . . .	185
30. Life On Mars . . . . .	195
31. Union Rules . . . . .	204
32. My New Best Friend . . . . .	211
33. More Meetings . . . . .	217
34. Divers Will Be Divers . . . . .	223
35. Desk Jockey . . . . .	229
36. Safety . . . . .	232
37. Family . . . . .	237
38. Treasure . . . . .	242
39. Granddad . . . . .	250

# Introduction

**W**HEN I was approached by David Beckett to ghost his life story, I thought to myself, ‘What do I know about deep sea diving?’ I was genuinely not sure if this was the project for me. Within the first minute of chatting with him, he very calmly asked, ‘What experience do you have of diving?’ I replied, ‘I’ve gone under with scuba a few times – although not legally.’ He calmly responded, ‘Not recommended that. How far did you go?’ I replied, ‘About 18 feet.’ Interested in his achievements, I bounced back, ‘Give me an idea of how deep you went and what sort of stuff would interest a reader from your life.’ He said, ‘Over 500 feet – and I’ve dealt with everything from the salvation of helicopter and ship wreckages, through to being forced to watch public executions. But there’s a great deal more to me than just that.’ My next comment was, ‘You have my undivided attention! Let’s meet and write your book.’

On meeting with David, he produced his CV which was 13 pages long. I thought to myself, ‘Obviously nobody’s told him the protocol of trying to fit a CV on to two pages.’ Then I started to read and it became evidently clear why it was 13 pages – in fact, I was impressed with how he had been able to condense it so much. The number of tales to accompany the jobs he completed are only the starter. The script in between the lines of that CV is what you will have the pleasure of reading.

David Beckett is a man of incredible integrity and first and foremost a dedicated family man. He speaks his mind and this book certainly pulls no punches.

Paul Zanon, June 2015

# 1

## David Harrison Beckett

**I** WAS born on 1 June 1947 in Tuddenham, Suffolk. The Beckett family lived like nomads during those early years, so I can't really claim I was bred there.

My father was a squadron leader in the RAF, piloting Hurricanes and Spitfires, squirting down 109s (Messerschmitts) during World War II in Malta. My mother was also in the RAF, but in all honesty I'm not really sure what her role was. Anyway – I'm guessing they met in the RAF, as I never really asked.

Soon after the war my dad left the RAF, but jobs were scarce, so he decided to go straight back to them, initially flying, but eventually working crash investigation for bomber command.

As a result of him being in the forces for 25 years, my siblings and I grew up all over the place. As a kid I thought it was normal to constantly be on the move – I didn't know any different. However, I do look back at those times with a smile as I have some fond memories of the adventures we embarked on.

At the ripe old age of five, we headed off to the bush in Australia. The Suez Canal had just about been cleaned and cleared after the war, so we left the UK and headed through on the RMS *Strathnaver*. As you crossed the equator, old father time would crawl up on to the boat and give you a certificate

## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

confirming that you had officially made the crossing. Well that's what they told me. Several weeks later we arrived in Oz.

I don't remember a great deal about my time Down Under, but three memories certainly stand out. Firstly, the time when the school was on fire and we all had to run into the sea to be safe, and secondly was walking to school through the bush and standing on a massive snake. The snake slithered off in one direction and I hardly touched the ground as I sprinted off to school.

My third memory was swimming. At the time, my dad used to play water polo for the RAF and was a very proficient swimmer, so he started teaching me. Within a few weeks I did my 25-yard swimming test in the sea and passed. Little did I know as a six-year-old that this was an early induction into a substance that I would be deeply involved in for three decades.

My next memory was coming back to the UK on the SS *Orcades*. Neither ship exists anymore. The *Strathnaver* was scrapped in 1962 in Hong Kong and the *Orcades* ten years later in Taiwan.

Aged seven, we moved back to the UK to Hemsby, but for the next few years we moved about a fair bit within the Norfolk and Suffolk boundaries, and by the age of eight, I had already attended seven different schools. I'm not sure if that contributed to my lack of enthusiasm for school, or if I was just never destined to be an academic.

I failed pretty much everything, so that ruled out technical college. I used to get zero out of 30 for spelling and failed the 11 Plus. I was already heavily dyslexic at this point, but in the 1950s, if you were dyslexic, you were simply branded as not being very able on the reading and writing front. I did however come top in the pigs module in my City and Guilds qualification a few years later at agricultural college. What an honour.

The thing is, I didn't really have a major ambition to become a farmer – it was kind of a natural progression from the environment I was in. At the time I was living on a farm and thought, 'I might as well be a farmer. What else is out there for me?'

# Becoming A Bubble Head

I'VE often been asked how I became a deep sea diver and threw away the opportunity to become a pig farmer, especially after I'd passed my tractor driving test when I was only 16.

My route to diving was not a conventional one. As opposed to many who entered a diving career following a grounding in the military, I wasn't even a former pig farmer at this stage. I was in essence a kid looking to land his first job to pay the bills as a result of getting kicked out of the house.

My parents had gone away for a couple of days so I thought, like you do when you're 20, 'Let's have a party!' Seemed like a good idea at the time. What could possibly go wrong?

Thing is, word had got about – *really* got about. Everyone I had invited brought a friend or eight and without trying to lose my cool reputation as a guy who had organised a great house party, I let everyone in.

In those days, where I came from, when you went to a party you took along a barrel of beer. At the time it was Watneys Red Barrel which contained about five or six pints of bitter and, would you believe it, came in a red tin barrel.

I won't go into the ins and outs of what happened at the party. Suffice to say, every bed was used, the house was unintentionally



## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

redecorated and the need for a very challenging clear-up was evident.

I was only thinking of my dad when I filled the big double door fridge up with the half-empty tins of beer. He liked his beer and used to make his own, which in all honesty tasted like shit, so I thought I was doing him a favour leaving him a load of Red Barrel.

I did the best I could with the clean-up operation, but when you're only 20 years old you can't do it as well as your mum. I didn't even know how to work the washing machine, let alone make the beds properly. I didn't cover my tracks very well.

They arrived home that evening and in under three minutes I was busted. Dad opened the fridge, only to be hit with a sea of Red Barrel, which started off a non-stop shouting marathon directed my way, insisting first and foremost I put his home brew back. No wonder they grounded him when he was in the air force – he must have been unstable even in those days. Although, looking back I can understand the genesis of his anger.

Mum and dad agreed it was high time I found new digs. That kind of signified the end of my childhood and later that night I was looking for somewhere to stay. I guess I had to leave one day. It was goodbye to home cooking, clean laundry, having my bed made, free electricity and use of the phone. I didn't miss dad's beer though.

With a bag over my shoulder, I eventually found a boarding house that had a room. It was late by this time and I was ready for bed. The landlady showed me my room and told me what time breakfast was. She made me pay a deposit up front. I remember thinking she wasn't like my mum – I used to give her an IOU.

I said thanks, shut the door, got undressed, jumped into bed and nearly skidded straight out the other side with sparks flying from where my bum was getting electric shocks. It turned out the sheets were made of nylon. If you've ever slept on nylon sheets, you'll know what I mean.

The following morning at breakfast, the table next to me had some rough-looking dudes sitting on it who were giving me the



## BECOMING A BUBBLE HEAD

once over. One of them asked me if I was going out with them. What sort of place was this, I wondered? I think I blushed.

The conversation was a bit confusing but it turned out that they weren't proposing to me – they wanted to know if I was the diver they were waiting for. It seems they all worked for a company called Delta Diving and stayed at this boarding house the night before they went offshore.

We got chatting and it seemed like a well-paid job. One of the divers hadn't turned up so they were one short. He said, 'If you've got nothing else to do, why not come with us?' There was no job spec, but they said they'd train me on the job. I could swim, but I knew absolutely nothing about diving.

I'd just finished my agricultural course which had entailed three years of hard work. At that point in my life I'd pretty much decided I was going to become a farm manager with a tweed jacket, driving round in a Land Rover chewing a piece of straw, that sort of thing. I thought about it for a moment, before saying to the lads, 'Why not?' And with that, I packed my bags.

Before heading off on my maiden voyage, I needed to pass a medical. In those days you only needed a blue book with a doctor's note saying you were fit to dive.

In order to get that note though, the doc gave me a strict medical in which he checked almost every part of me starting with my old jam tart. You had to lay down and get all these suction pads put on with cold jelly, then they checked my heart rate to make sure everything was okay.

The first bit was fine, then I climbed off the bed and jumped up and down on a step about a foot high 30 times per minute for five minutes. I was allowed to change the step leg halfway through. After five minutes of this my heart was thumping away like mad. They didn't need a machine to hear mine but I think they liked the machine to draw a graph. This test showed how fit I was – or not.

I'm surprised no one ever had a heart attack.

The doctor said, 'We also like to x-ray your long bones to see how much decompression could cause your bones to crumble in

## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

later life.' Decompression? What was that? A few baptisms of fire would turn me into a micro-expert on the subject down the line.

Once you'd done your medical you could assume you were fairly fit. You needed to do one, because when it came to diving, it was the equivalent of your diving licence.

The final part was always bemusing. I never did understand why they held your testicles and asked you to cough – and yes this did actually happen.

After the medical was finished, he stamped the blue book and up to the heliport we went.

On arrival, I phoned mum and dad to tell them I'd had a career change. My dad had been a pilot in the war so I think he liked the idea of me becoming a deep sea diver, as it had a strong element of discipline to it. He hated farmers, for which he had his reasons – namely because one had been sleeping with my mother while my dad was away flying for the RAF.

The guy who came to pick the divers up was the equivalent of a modern day operations manager. He used to be the road manager for the band Manfred Mann. No idea what that's got to do with diving, but there you go.

He didn't object when the guys told him I was going with them and that they'd train me on the job. He told me how much I would get paid. The other lads got the day rate raised a bit for me and it ended up being £14 a day. I didn't get that per week working on the farm, not even with eight hours of overtime. I was a happy bunny.

I'd never been in a helicopter before and I was the youngest of the crew. Act brave, I thought.

You'd grab a seat and put your kit bag next to you. If you were the one near the door you would put a sort of leather thing on your head with something that went around your throat. It turned out to be a throat microphone so you could talk to the pilot – he needed to know when the door was shut and everyone was ready for take-off.

Start-up was fun. It was shake, rattle, and roll as this thing attempted to lift off the ground. It did all sorts of dipping and

## BECOMING A BUBBLE HEAD

shaking before the pilot eventually got the thing level. Then he seemed to go straight up, dipped the nose and away we went over the cliffs and out to sea.

It was only a 25-minute flight out to the rig. As we approached the helideck, I thought to myself, 'Are you kidding me?? Surely we're not landing on that little thing?' I would have preferred a much bigger target, but nobody else seemed concerned, so I kept my trap shut. After all, I was now a deep sea diver...albeit one who'd never been underwater before.

Landing in the helicopter was the best bit. With a lot of shaking, the pilot seemed to come to a stop above the helideck, hovered to one side, stayed there for a few minutes, then very slowly, slipped sideways over the deck and down with a thud. We'd landed.

The pilot left the rotor turning so when the man came to open the door, he was bent right over to avoid getting his head cut off. I remember thinking, 'I'm going to do that,' as I wanted to see if I could make it to my first pay day. It was all a bit scary this career change, but things were just about to get a whole lot scarier.

I got out of the helicopter remembering to keep my head down, but nearly got blown away as I wasn't expecting the wind coming across the helideck. That would have been a great start – the other divers jumping in to save me. The guys seemed to be doing okay, so I stayed low and followed them down into the helicopter arrival room.

This was the place they took your name and allocated you to a cabin. It turned out to be a big cabin with about ten bunks in it, which were stacked five high, with a ladder at the end. I was allocated a locker for my kit, and thankfully a bunk which didn't have nylon sheets. Already a step up from the boarding house.

It was starting to look like these rigs were built for work, not comfort. Communal showers I could handle, as I used to sit in a big bath drinking beer after a rugby match. However, the toilet situation was a bit trickier, as they didn't have doors. I went in and made sure no one else was in there and tried to do it as quickly as possible – it never seemed to work out though.

## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

One day this big American walked in, unclasped his dungarees, pulled down these enormous pair of boxer shorts, and plopped himself down next to me. I think he wanted a bit of company. Well, next thing there was an almighty fart and it was all over. A quick wipe and it was back up with the boxers and dungarees. He looked at me and winked. As he left he said, 'That's the way to do it,' before continuing with, 'Don't worry, boy. You've got beginner's nerves.'

I remember thinking he must have eaten a lot of sprouts. We soon became friendly and often sat together. I think I was even quicker than him one day.

It was a good learning curve as, later on, when I became a saturation diver they'd watch your every move on the TV. Or perhaps that's every 'movement'.

Back to my first day on the job.

The mess room was good as was the standard of food. I could pretty much eat all day if I wanted, which as a 20-year-old with unlimited appetite was perfect. Steak and chips four times – why not? However, as opposed to home life, these rigs were dry. Strictly no alcohol. I was apparently now a responsible working adult.

The time had come to work. The lads had a chat with the tool pusher, who was in charge of things and told us what to do. He wanted us to go down each leg of the rig in turn and check for scouring.

The guys explained to me, because of the strong tides in the North Sea, when the rigs spudded inwards, it would push each leg down as far as they would go, which in turn would then flood the bottom chamber. However, the sand around the bottom could get washed away and the rig could become unstable. If this looked like it was going to happen they'd bring boatloads of sandbags out and lower them down for us divers to place around the legs. Seemed fairly straightforward. In fact, just like humping bags of spuds about. I knew my training would come in handy one day!

The next step was to show me how we would get down there. One of the guys called Albert showed me the equipment and how

## BECOMING A BUBBLE HEAD

it worked. Albert was from London and used to be a getaway driver – until he stalled. He did a bit of time and somehow became a diver. I must say, he was a lovely chap and a very big help.

First thing he showed me was the rubber wetsuit, which was made from very thick rubber. He said the thicker the better as it would help keep me warm. Sounded good to me.

Next up was the Desco diving mask, which had a hose that went to the surface air compressor on the top deck. The mask was a constant pressure mask, which meant the air was forced into it. All I had to do was open my mouth and breathe. Inside the mask was a little round microphone stuck on the glass with putty. This hi-tech piece of equipment was the communications (aka ‘comms’) to the surface.

Albert said, ‘When you’re underwater, the air rushing around inside the mask will make so much noise, you won’t hear anything from the comms. You’ll just feel a little vibration on your nose.’ My first thought was, ‘Aren’t I the lucky one with a larger than average nose.’ The way to make it work was to turn off the air to the mask and try and be as quiet as possible. I really had to concentrate to hear anything but it did work. Although, the first time I was a bit reluctant to turn the air off.

Next, I was given a weight belt to make me sink, as rubber suits were buoyant – which did come in handy now and again, as you will read later. Lastly, I had a pair of fins which were called ‘AP’, which stood for Admiral Pattern. I stuffed my feet in these and pulled a strap up round the back of my heel.

With all the kit on, I couldn’t wait to get going.

I didn’t have to wait long as the next day was initiation day. Once we arrived at the changing room, I struggled to get into the wetsuit. Thankfully the lads saw me wrestling around with it and told me to use talcum powder next time as it would help me slide straight in. And it did!

Another trick was to wear a pair of ladies’ tights. Some of the guys used to wear stockings. Whatever turns you on I guess.

Once the suit was on, I waddled off to the lower deck, then down to the boat landing which was about 30 feet above the

## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

sea. The masks and everything else were down there, coiled up and ready to go. Less than 48 hours after eating breakfast at the boarding house I was moments away from diving.

It was me and Albert on this day. I looked down and asked Albert how we were going to get into the water. I shouldn't have as it was simple really.

'Jump,' he said.

When I looked down again it seemed further. I looked at him and he just nodded. I already had my diver's knife on, so it was on with the AP fins and weight belt. I was beginning to feel the part. Up with the hood and on with the mask. Albert said he'd go first and wait for me just below the splash zone. I later found out this was about 30 feet down. It's where you lose the effect of the surface swell.

Albert was gone. Hands holding his mask, fins crossed and pointed down just like they told me to do it. The guy on the surface threw enough umbilical over the side so I'd go straight down once I hit the water. He gave me the nod and I jumped.

When I hit the water I must have forgotten everything they'd taught me. The mask came up and nearly broke my nose – in fact, the only reason I think it stayed on was because of the size of it.

I was flapping my feet to try and get some kind of orientation, bubbles were everywhere, and there was what seemed like a roaring noise going through my mask. My flippers weren't working and, to put it mildly, nor was my brain.

I felt a tug on my arm and there was good old Albert, pulling me down to the nearest bracing.

Once he got me under control I could see he was killing himself laughing. My fins were up around my knees, but thankfully he pulled them down for me – by which time I was finally getting orientated and my breathing was okay. I could even see things around me. The rig underwater looked the same as it did above the water, just like the lads said it would.

Time was of the essence in the southern sector of the North Sea. You only had four slack tides a day, so you had to get on with things. Albert pointed down and started going down the leg into

## BECOMING A BUBBLE HEAD

what looked like the gloom. My ears really started hurting and I remembered what the lads had told me: swallow or yawn until you felt them pop. Swallow worked for me and down we went. I loved eating mussels and there were millions of them on the rig leg, although you couldn't eat these as they'd grown on metal. The further I went down, the quieter and more crackly it became. The bottom was around 80 feet, which for a first dive was pretty deep. It appeared fairly suddenly and I was surprised how much I could see. There were crabs walking about together with cod and all kinds of other fish swimming around.

Marine life apart, the sea bed was a mess. There must have been 50 scaffold poles laying around, lumps of steel, and all sorts of debris. It looked like a scene from the movie *Zulu*, with Michael Caine and those tall African warriors slinging spears.

Albert was doing what we were meant to be doing while I was still in shock. I do remember thinking I should be helping him.

He was pointing at my mask and making a motion to turn off my valve, but there was no way I was going to touch that let alone turn off my air supply. There's no way I could tell if the end of my nose was tingling with someone trying to talk to me. It was still throbbing from when I had hit the water. I did manage to follow Albert about, but didn't achieve anything work wise.

I started to feel the water move – the tide was picking up. I got the sign to head back up. Halfway up I thought, 'How do we get out?' I then remembered them saying there was a ladder going up to the boat landing, but hadn't bothered to look.

It was coming back, what they'd told me, 'You get hold of the bottom rung of the ladder, take your fins off, put them over your wrists, and climb the ladder.' In reality, what happened was, you got hold of the bottom of the ladder, then the next minute the swell lifted you halfway up the ladder then down again. It turned out to be tricky and I was lucky not to hurt myself.

After a few times doing this, I learnt how to use the swell to my advantage. If you timed it right you'd get hold of the ladder at the top of the swell and hold on for all you were worth until the swell had gone down, then climb like crazy before the next wave



## THE LOONLINESS OF A DEEP SEA DIVER

hit you. Doing this, you'd eliminate half of the 30-foot climb.

When I got back, that first time, my legs were like jelly and I was completely knackered. After a while it did get easier and became a lot more fun.

I didn't realise it at the time, but I was about to embark on a lifelong career and join a long line of individuals looking to explore, search for food, salvage and repair underwater. The latter being what I would be doing for many years to come.

I was now a commercial diver, albeit a very green one, which stemmed from a history dating back as far as the 1800s, when the industrial revolution was in full flow. Everybody wanted to build a tunnel, a bridge or a pier back then, so as a result many people ended up immersed in water at some point.

Even the equipment hadn't changed a great deal in the last couple of hundred years. Diving bells and suits were similar, it's just that technology combined with scientific research had brought them forward leaps and bounds. Understanding pressurised air and the safe levels of ascent after being in a pressurised environment, buoyancy, and the influence and correct mixtures of air, helium and gas did not happen overnight. A steep learning curve awaited me. Many divers perished to help the likes of myself have this knowledge and in the years ahead of me, the same would happen again, with those disasters assisting future generations. The only downside is that I would be involved in witnessing some of those disasters.

At this moment in time, I was air diving. I was officially a bubble head. Although I thought I was deep at 80 feet, the seriously deep stuff awaited me a few years ahead. For now, I was either working with an umbilical or with a 'self contained underwater breathing apparatus'. You may know this as SCUBA. Originally the invention of Jacques Cousteau and Emile Gagnan, and referred to by the English for many years as the 'Aqua-lung', SCUBA revolutionised diving.

When I left the surface of the water, it was almost as if I metamorphosed into another creature. It's almost like I ceased to be a human being and turned into a new species called 'A Diver'.

## **BECOMING A BUBBLE HEAD**

I was not a fish or aquatic mammal, but as with both of these, I now operated in a certain way underwater. Totally differently to the way I did on land.

As I reflected on my first stint as a diver, my change of career was completed with my first pay day.

I had never been so rich – on a number of levels.