A photograph of a man standing on a beach. He is shirtless, wearing red shorts, and holding a long wooden surfboard vertically on the left side of the frame. The background shows a blue sky, a blue ocean with white waves, and a sandy beach. The overall scene is bright and clear.

# What's it Worth?

*By Bev Morgan*

**Rain comes on the gusting wind and slams against the windows. The seas are building and the ocean is wild tonight. It is not a good night to be at sea and, fortunately, I am not. I am sitting in a warm, comfortable house at the sea side, on firm land and sheltered from the storm. It is from this safe haven that I recall a stormy night many years ago when I was at sea and risked it all on a diving job that became very scary because I underestimated the power of the seas. I think I'll just boot up the computer, pour myself a good slug of whiskey, and have at it...**

I had just returned from Hawaii, where I had been living and surfing on the North Shore of Oahu. Riding 20-foot-plus waves for a few months had put me in great physical shape. I skippered a 60-foot racing sailboat back to California and we had gone through a battering storm with hurricane strength winds and huge waves without any serious mishap. I was very confident with my abilities in the ocean. In fact, I was overconfident.

That can kill you.

There comes a point when the winds and seas are beyond anything you have seen before. Then, the operation of ships, boats, and diving enter a state where nothing is normal and each decision can mean life or death.

I sometimes wonder at surviving that time in my youth when it seemed to me that nearly anything was possible. With the right planning I thought I could always get the diving job at hand done without undo danger to the crew or myself. Most of the time that was the case. But then it would not make a good story to describe the normal diving job which was pretty much the same then as now: mostly routine, sometimes interesting.

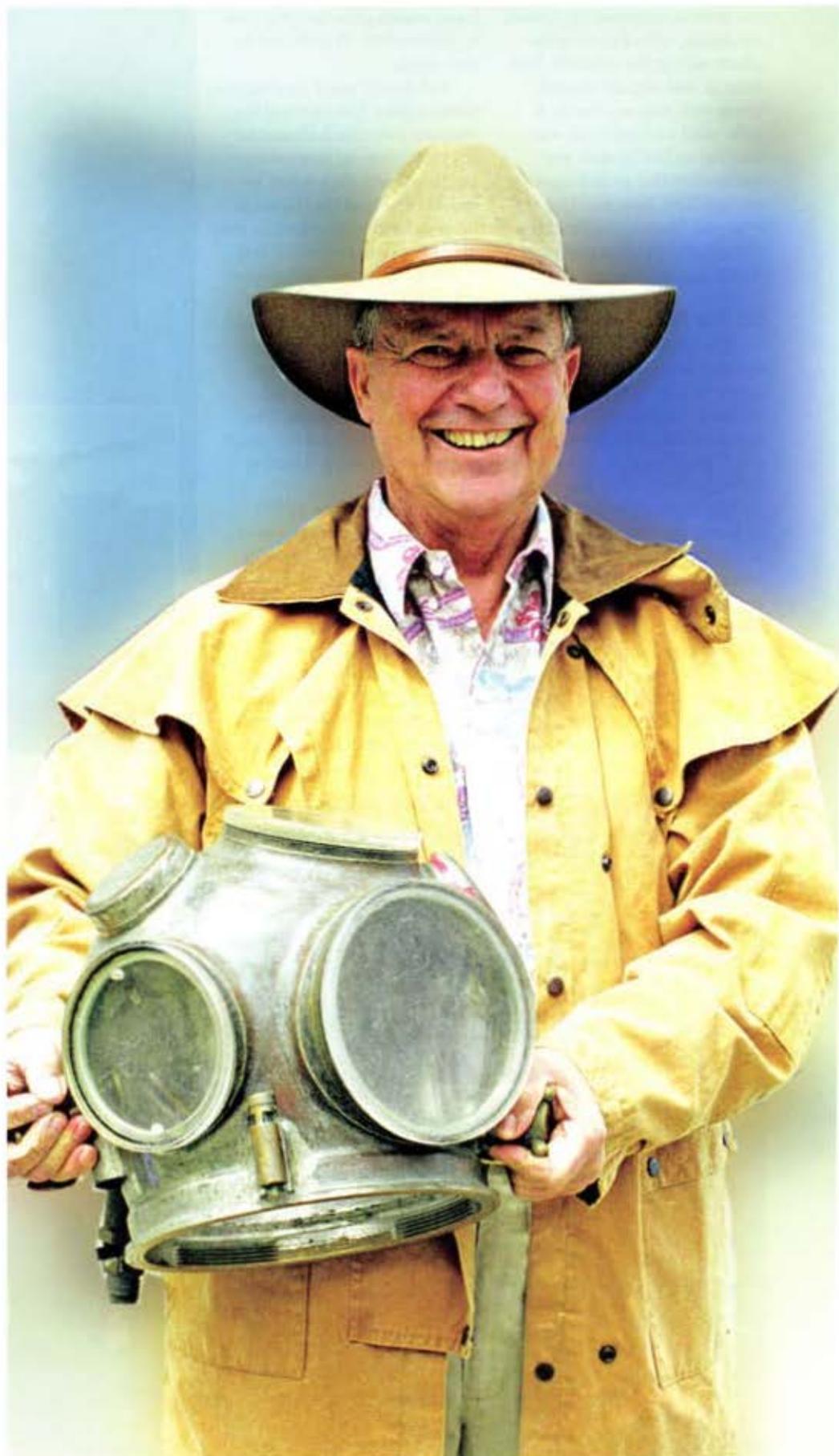
#### THE CALL OUT

It started with a call out to a floating rig off Santa Barbara, California back in the 1960s. I was working with Associated Divers, which was mainly Pete Brumis and Ted Benton at the time. Associated had the diving support contract for a floater which was doing exploratory drilling in 240 feet (73m) of water near San Miguel Island. The rig was a converted ship with a moon pool in the center under the drill tower. It was leased to ARCO, a petroleum company now gone, absorbed into the labyrinth of merging oil firms that now work offshore.

Back then "heavy gear" (standard dress) equipment was used on most underwater petroleum work on the West Coast. A complete spread of Associated diving equipment was in place on the vessel. The call out only required the dive crew to assemble at the heliport for the flight out.

In California, the divers could be recognized at the helicopter by their polished cowboy boots, slacks and golf shirts. Their tenders would follow close behind carrying the diver's well-used Yokohama heavy gear dresses rolled up and tied with 9-thread. Associated tenders wore the company coveralls. At Associated, most of the tenders had broken out as divers but worked at tending to be in line for rotational selection as divers.

It was late afternoon by the time I pulled up and parked my old truck in the lot next to the runway. A helicopter was sitting on



(Above) Bev Morgan holding a Kirby Morgan Standard Hat. "I sometimes wonder at surviving that time in my youth when it seemed to me that nearly anything was possible."

(Opposite) Bev with his board on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawaii.

the tarmac warming up. I could see Sandy, one of the regular pilots, was at the controls. Pete Brumis was already aboard, along with Ramsey Parks. A little wind and light rain was starting as Ted Benton and his brother Bob pulled up and parked. Ted, Bob, and I joined Pete and Ramsey on the chopper. We strapped in and gave Sandy the thumbs up.

#### TO THE RIG

The engine revved up and the blades started turning. Sandy lifted us off and headed offshore. The rainfall was increasing, but visibility was still good. The shoreline faded away as we headed out to sea.

The flight took about half an hour. The sun was still out as we approached the rig, but we could see the approaching line of clouds that was bringing rain. On approach, I noticed that Sandy slowed to a hover, observing the flight deck carefully, watching the heave of the ship. The wind was still light, but the waves were very

large, causing the landing deck to heave some 10 to 15 feet up and down.

But Sandy was a very experienced pilot. He centered the chopper over the deck and let the ship come up to meet our landing floats. On contact he quickly changed the blades to keep us hard on the deck as the up-heave changed into a drop. Sandy gave us the "go" and we scrambled out. Pete was last out. He slammed the door and we ran for the stairs as Sandy wasted no time in lifting off and clearing the rig for his return trip to the beach. The rain was starting and the wind gusts were blowing it across the deck.

We met with the ARCO men and the vessel skipper on the bridge and were brought up to date on the drilling. It turned out to be a dry hole and they wanted to get off. The authorities (there was a State Lands inspector aboard) required ARCO to clear any obstructions to a certain level below mud line. It was decided



Sandy, one of the regular pilots, was at the controls for what turned out to be quite a helicopter ride to the rig. And that was just the beginning...

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to blow the base plate structure some 15 feet below the mud line and retrieve it. In those days explosives were used in removals.

The vessel's skipper told us the weather was worsening and sometime in the next 24 hours the full strength of a strong storm was going to hit us. If possible he wanted to pull off without leaving anything on the bottom to avoid an expensive return to just clean up a dry hole. Then, as now, rig time was very expensive and any time saved was important.

"Okay, let's hit it!," Pete said.

### SETTING UP THE GEAR

We half-ran to the area near the moon pool where we had the diving gear stored. Pete would make the first dive, with Ted



Bev set up the Associated Divers diving station before the ARCO dive.



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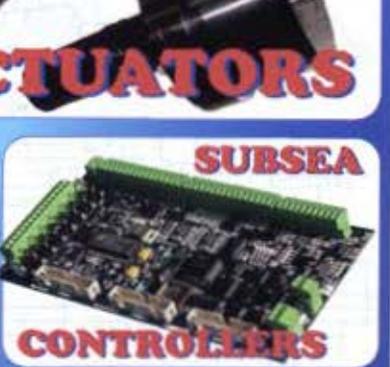
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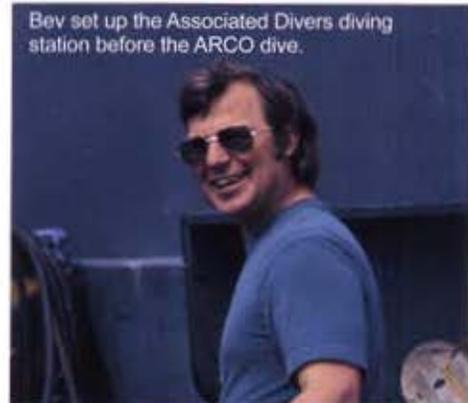


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as standby. Bob Benton and Ramsey Parks would be tending and I was on the gas box.

We all pitched in to unpack the two big metal dumpsters with the heavy gear helmets, umbilicals, hook-up hoses and all the things needed to run a dive.

I next ran the high-pressure whips to the six packs of mixed gas from the gas box. The gas box was the control center for regulating gas supply and pressure to the divers' gas hats. The compressor was fired up and the inner lock of the two lock chamber was pressured up.

Then I placed two fresh Sodasorb canisters in the helmets which scrubbed the CO<sub>2</sub> out of the recirculated Helium Oxygen mix. I checked the helmet ports, made sure they were clean, and rubbed a film of Joy soap on them for anti-fog. The umbilicals were flaked out on deck in figure eights next to the moon pool and connected to the gas box.

I finished up the odd bits of setting up the diving station, pressured-up everything, and checked for leaks. Pete and Ted started dressing in, assisted by their tenders. Ramsey was helping Pete and Bob was tending his brother Ted.

### DRESSING IN

The dressing in was practically a ritual. The divers changed out of their clothes in the locker room. For gas diving the divers

Associated Divers' Ted Benton and Arco's Rix Kimberly.



wore three sets of wools to stay warm. They put on rubber slippers to keep the woolen socks clean from the deck and proceeded to sit on the dressing stools next to the dive station.

Their tenders positioned the diving suits (called dresses) so the diver could remove one rubber slipper and place foot and leg into the dress, then the other. Next, the diver stood up. The tender pulled the dress up from behind while the diver pulled it up from the front. Then the tender held a can of water for the diver to wet his hands. Then the tender squirted a small amount of liquid soap on the diver's wet hands. The diver rubbed his hands and wrists with the soap and water while the tender pulled up one shoulder of the dress. The diver reached into the sleeve on that side of the suit and his hand, slippery with the soap and water, slipped through the sealing cuff, then the other side. The tender supplied a small towel for the diver to dry his hands.

The breastplate went on the diver next, and care was taken not to bump the diver's head or nose with it. Then the tender pulled the rear of the dress up onto the studs of the breastplate. The diver put the front of the dress over the studs where he could reach.

The bib of the dress was adjusted inside the breastplate. Usually the diver sat down at this point. Then the brails were placed on the studs of the breastplate with shims under the four points where the brails come together. The wing nuts were spun on and tightened with a special wrench. A dropped wing nut would cost the tender a round of drinks when next on the beach.

Chaffing pants went on next, with ropes that went over

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the breastplate. These were made very tight and served as a jock-down for the breastplate. Then, loose fitting rubber short-topped over-boots, special rigged with quarter-inch lace-up ties, were knotted onto his feet. Five-pound ankle weights were belted in place next. The standby diver was finished dressing in at this point and had his stool placed next to the phones. During the dive he usually ran the communicator.

**EXPLOSIVES PACKAGE**

The blaster man showed up and signaled the ships' crew to shut down all unnecessary electrical activity and secure all wireless transmitting systems. He then finished wiring the package of explosives and stood by to hand it off to the diver. The detonator wire would be strung out from the package to the surface. After it was placed and the diver came out of the water onto the deck, the wire would be connected to a detonator box.

Pete had the weights put on, and then the helmet was locked in place. I gave him a phones check. He took the explosive package, made sure the wire to it had slack, and jumped into the moon pool next to one of the down wires and dropped to about 30 feet (9m). After one more phones check he dropped to 130 feet (40m).



Associated Divers' Pete Brumis

Usually this was the depth where we switched to gas. But Pete wanted to do this dive on air since it was simple and air had a shorter decompression time. We had hooked up the gas system in the event he

encountered a problem and wanted to go on gas. On deep air dives we used recirculators to reduce the CO2 in the hat during the dive. Reduced CO2 somehow reduced the nitrogen narcosis and extended the depth we could dive on air in heavy gear. We had learned this and in those days it was one of the closely held secrets of deep air diving.

Pete then dropped to the bottom and placed the package into the open center-most casing at 15 feet below the mud line and tied it off. He then came to his first decompression stop. The decompression time was short and he was soon on deck.

The blaster man did his job. A short "whap!" on the hull told us the charge went off. The base plate had four air tugger down wires to it. A check of the wires told the crew that the blast had separated the base plate from the conductors and it was on the way to the surface.

**A LITTLE PROBLEM**

I noticed the motion of the water in the moon pool was increasing and becoming more violent. The waves were increasing in size with the confused seas. Wind was now blowing off the wave tops. The rain was very heavy and was blowing across the decks with the sea spray. I was glad the dive was done. We started packing up the dive gear.

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Associated Divers' Bob Benton helps put the hat on Pete Brumis.

The ARCO men appeared and started talking with Ted and Pete. I could tell from their serious faces that something was not going right.

They motioned me over and filled me in. Because of the heavy swells on this location they had drilled in an anchor pile to help keep the ship on the hole. That anchor pile was some distance out in front of the ship. It needed to be removed to 12 feet below the mud line to make the State Lands people happy. All they needed was a diver to place a charge in the open top of the anchor pile, tie it off at the right depth, and come back



The ARCO men explain the little...uh, problem to Pete Brumis.

aboard. It was about the same job as Pete had just done.

Only there was a little problem. The storm was raging on and the skipper of the anchor boat (another boat that tended the ships anchors) did not think it safe in those sea conditions to move the anchors so the ship could be over the anchor pile for the dive.

In fact, the anchor piling was the only thing holding the ship where it now was.

Needless to say, by now it was about midnight – the black of night. That seems to be the time when most things go sideways for divers on drill ships.

We did not have enough hose for a heavy gear diver to reach the anchor pile, even if the diver could find it. At this point

all eyes were on me: "Think you could set the charge with scuba gear?"

Ramsey Parks and I were the only scuba divers on board. We had the scuba equipment aboard for quick wheel jobs and such. We even had experience at the 250-foot-plus depths.

But look at the conditions!

A scuba diver could jump off the bow of the ship with the charge and follow the chain down to the anchor, set the charge, and get to the surface (slowing the last 30 feet up for a short, half-assed decompression), and be picked up by the supply boat, which was standing by.

The skipper of the supply boat would be holding station down swell and down wind, looking for the diver's light. Once he saw

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Ramsey Parks ran the gas box that day for Associated Divers. Pete Brumis is in gear, and Ted Barton was standby diver.

the light he would slip sideways to be in the path of the diver. Cargo net would be over the sides for the diver to climb aboard.

Sounded simple.

Of course if there was anything wrong – such as a rope in the wheel, diver's light not working, diver not sighted, worsening seas, or something unknown, something not thought of – then the diver was on his own some miles from land. Survival was next to impossible if everything did not go right.

### WHAT'S IT WORTH?

"Too dangerous." I said.

"Look, we can just drop the chain, but then we have to come back and remove the pile and chain later," The ARCO man said. "That's going to cost us several hundreds of thousands of dollars, plus State Lands will give us a fine for pulling off and leaving something on the bottom, even for a short time."

He put it right to me. "Can it be done?"

I said, "Yes, but only at very high risk."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

"Will you do it?"

"No."

"I've got to get it done. What's it worth?"

I thought about it. Yeah, I can do it.

What's it worth for me to do it?

At this point dollars are just dollars and no amount of them is worth my life. On

the other hand, in my foolish overconfidence, I thought I could do it. "Well, how about a new Chevy pickup truck?" I blurted out, thinking everyone would get a laugh.

### SUIT UP!

The ARCO men were not laughing. They looked at each other and back to me, "Suit up!" The boss man said.

Oh shit, I thought to myself, I was now committed to doing the deed. At that point, my concern changed to planning.

I ran through the "What ifs" while putting on my wetsuit, while Ramsey checked the air pressure in the big set of doubles. What if the explosive package went off? Oh well, I wouldn't feel it. What if both my lights went out, the boat

would never find me.

What if, what if, what if?

As it turned out, the biggest threats were not on my "What If" list. I could not foresee them.

When I finished with the wetsuit I put on the weight belt and gathered up my fins, flashlights, and a few other things that might come in handy. Ramsey attached the two-hose regulator to the tanks and we started for the bow of the ship. This was before buoyancy compensators so the tanks had a harness, J valve (reserve air) and nothing more on them. He pulled on a rain slicker over his pants and jacket.

He carried the tanks as we threaded our way forward on interior passageways, followed by a few of the curious crew and, of course, the blaster man with his package and his assistant with a large coil of wire. They were wearing yellow slickers to help ward off the rain.

The closer we came to the bow the more we felt the heave and plunge of the ship. One of the crew undogged the hatch to the outside deck and held it open for us. I stepped out into the storm, followed by the rest.

The deck forward was raising with a thunderous roar as each wave crashed into the bow and lifted it, followed by a plunge into the following trough. Rain and spray

was blowing horizontally, stinging my face.

I held onto the lifelines and moved to the bow. I tested my lights and pulled on my fins. I continued to hold the lifeline one hand at a time. Ramsey held the double tanks up. First I placed one hand and arm, then the other hand and arm through the tank harness and then felt the full weight of the doubles. Ramsey fastened the waist strap. I pulled on the mask.

### GO!

Ramsey looked me over, then gave me the double slap on the shoulder that meant, "Go." I eased over the lifelines and held on, ready to jump. I was handed the package and made sure the wire was looped outboard with enough slack for my plunge.

Then I watched the rhythm of the waves. I jumped into the upper face of a wave, plunging some 10 feet deep under the water from the jump, then quickly rolled and swam deeper and angled toward the anchor chain. At about 30 or 40 feet deep I could see the chain some 20 feet away. It was raising and falling on each wave with the bow of the ship.



Ramsey Parks looked Bev over and gave him the double tap on the shoulder that meant, "Go!"

I started down pulling the package wire. Surprisingly there was little current and hardly any resistance pulling the wire. The motion caused by the surface storm was hardly noticeable. That is with the exception of the anchor chain that was rising and falling vertically some 20 or so feet at a time.

### THE ANCHOR CHAIN

Each link in the chain was about four feet long. It was not something I wanted

Bev Morgan did the deed in scuba gear. "I caught my breath. Then I started shaking with the after-effects of the rush."



to get very close to. At about 60 or 70 feet in depth, the chain started to angle into the loop forward to the anchor pile. It had not dawned on me that this section of the anchor chain would not be riding straight up and down like the first 50 feet from the surface.

I had been down ships' anchor chains before, but usually in calm or moderate seas. The movement in the loop section of chain on those occasions was some three or four feet at the most.

As I swam deeper into the loop, the chain was violently moving up and down many, many feet, disappearing up and disappearing down. The chain was now looped forward, almost horizontal, aimed slightly down, but moving vertically at a very high

speed with each wave that hit the bow of the ship.

If it hit me there was no doubt it would crush me.

It disappeared overhead, then came down very close to me. I almost lost my mask in the swirling water that the chain set in motion. I swam away from the loop and down, going as fast as I could. I reached the bottom and caught my breath.

#### **THE BOTTOM**

The bottom was white sand. While the storm raged at the surface, it was tranquil on the bottom with no motion of the water. My lips were numb and my thinking was not very clear. Narcosis.

I concentrated on finding the anchor

chain and pile. I glanced at my depth gauge on my wrist. It read 245 feet (74m). The bottom time clock was running. How could I judge which direction to swim?

Then I thought: by looking behind me at the wire I was pulling from the ship I could judge the direction I should go to find the chain. I checked it and then swam forward and to the left. Sure enough I came across the chain where I thought it should be and followed it to the pile. I dropped the package into the open end of the pile and tied the wire off at the correct depth for the inside blast off.

#### **COMING UP**

Having no wish to be near the anchor chain or ship when I surfaced, I started

straight up from the anchor pile. That should place me forward of the ship.

I slowed at 30 feet and eased up to the surface, estimating the decompression I needed with the very short bottom time. The surface was wild, with the big swells and wind. I kept my mouthpiece in and breathed from my tanks amid the turmoil breaking waves and spray.

There was nothing to see but black night. I rotated and then realized I was in a trough between waves where I could not see anything. I knew I had to be upwind from the ship. Just after the crest of the next wave broke over me I looked downwind. I could see the drill ship and, to its port, my pickup boat.

### THE PICKUP BOAT

I started swimming toward the bow of the pickup boat. I knew that I had to be very close to get aboard. The bow was coming out of the water and pounding down as each wave passed. It looked impossible to get close enough and avoid being crushed under the plunging boat.

I had told the skipper I would board on the port side (the side away from the ship) to keep from being crushed between the vessels if something went wrong. The wind and spray continued to howl by me.

The seas pushed me along and I was soon coming close to the boat. The skipper was holding the bow into the seas, but the boat was rolling heavily. He later told me that he spotted my hand light and was trying to hold station for the pick up.

Tires lined the sides of the boat to act as bumpers. As the boat rolled, the tires would raise high out of the water, then come crashing down. The cargo net they had rigged for me was hanging over the tires, but I had not thought about the danger of swimming for the net and being caught under the tires on a roll.

### GETTING ABOARD

The big twin tanks were now a burden that slowed my swimming and would surely make it too hard to hold onto the net. Not only that, I was moving slowly through the water with the bulk.

I made a decision that probably saved my life.

I released the waist and shoulder straps then swam away from the tanks. Next I dropped the weight belt. Breathing now was difficult, but I managed by turning my head away from the wind between breaking waves for a quick gulp of air, then holding my breath and swimming into position to grab the net.

I dropped the light that then hung on a short lanyard to my wrist. Without the tanks and weight belt I could move through

the water much better. The wetsuit had been cold on the bottom where the pressure had compressed the insulating bubbles, but now it provided enough insulation to keep me warm. I felt no cold that would have robbed my strength and the adrenalin was pumping.

Still, I knew the first pass at the net might be the only one I would get. I swam close to the side of the bow, just outside the reach of the tires. Then I was alongside the wheel house where the net started.



As Bev dove in the horrible storm, the crew were wearing slickers to ward off the rain.

The face of a big wave started lifting me high up above the deck and the boat rolled my way. The wheel house, rolling my way, seemed just some 10 or so feet away. I was on the same level as the windows of the house. I could see the skipper with the instrument lights shining up on his face looking at me through the side windows of the wheel house. It was one of those moments that one's mind captures. I can still recall the look on his bottom-lit face as he looked at me just a few feet away.

Sheer terror.

The brief moment passed as I was sucked up the wave. I just said f\*\*\* it, pumped my fins, and took off as the wave broke on me. The boat had bottomed on its roll and was just starting up. It was like surfing in the shorebreak at Makaha Beach. I body surfed over the tires and onto the deck just aft of the house. The net was on the deck also. I grabbed onto it and held

on as the water rushed across the deck and over the other side.

Grabbing a quick breath I started to get up, but saw that the next wave was about to hit. I wrapped my arms into the net and held on. The wave hit me so hard I thought I would lose my hold, but somehow I kept my grip. I don't think I could have held through another wave. This was worse than a two wave hold down at Makaha.

The skipper had seen me wash aboard and turned the boat to have the waves hit the other side. I looked up and saw the change. I let go and ran for the house, my old short fins just flopping along with the run. A crewman helped me into the cabin.

### JUST ANOTHER JOB

I caught my breath. Then I started shaking with after-effects of the rush. Some of the crew looked at me like I was the creature from the Black Lagoon. If I were a deck crewman on a boat out in the middle of storm and some kid body surfed off a big wave onto the deck after setting a package of explosives on the bottom in 240 feet of water, I guess I would be staring too.

I stopped the shaking and, acting like it was just another job, told them to radio the ship to blow the pile. There was no need for me to spoil the moment for them by saying I was about as scared as I had ever been and would never do such a hair-brained dive again.

There was no chance for me to transfer back to the drill rig in the high seas and wind. One of the crew got me a set of coveralls and I changed out of my wetsuit.

I heard the "wack!" of the package going off. The radio came on and let us know the pile parted and was off the bottom. Both of the vessels took off downwind to the shelter of a harbor.

### A NEW CHEVY

A couple of days later I had my choice of trucks at the local Chevy dealer. I guess ARCO was happy with the job.

Years later I ran across the ARCO boss man and he told me that ARCO would have been happy to pay me 10 times the cost of the truck for saving them the rig time and money that I did.

Was it worth it? Sure.

Would I do it again? NO!

Well, the whiskey has run its course and I'm tired. Must be time for bed. But then, I do remember another hairy dive I made in the Cook Inlet, Alaska...

I'll save it for another time. **uw**

*Bev Morgan is a true diving pioneer, on both the operations and equipment sides. He co-founded Kirby Morgan and is an ADCI Commercial Diving Hall of Famer. Visit [www.kirbymorgan.com](http://www.kirbymorgan.com).*