

Taking Flight

Wounded Warriors Who Fought for Freedom Find It Anew Underwater
By Renée Duncan

Last summer marked a significant event in the life of DAN® Member Scott Taylor: He discovered military veterans, who sustained wartime injuries, are as powerful in the water now as they once were on the battlefield. His method of discovery? Taylor helped these wounded veterans become scuba divers.

It was a moving experience for me," said Taylor, himself a veteran, in a telephone interview from his office at A-1 Scuba and Travel Center in Englewood, Colo. He co-owns the operation with his wife, Lynn. His enthusiasm was evident; that zeal was echoed by the six veterans and their family members Taylor helped train.

"Not only were these folks ready to dive, they were determined to do well," he said. And they did, diving for an entire week as guests of Captain Don's Habitat in Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles.

"I was only a small cog in the operation," Taylor added. "There was amazing cooperation among a lot of people and organizations to make this week the success it was."

This event was the second for this particular group of organizers (see How It Began below), the first being held in October 2006 at Habitat. A subsequent trip is scheduled for September 2008.

The Divers

The dive expedition centered on six wounded veterans from all over the United States. The veterans came with family members so that each family would have its own set of dive buddies after training. The divers were:

Veteran Latseen Benson and wife, Jessica;
League City, Texas

Veteran Matthew Ceccato;
Sacramento, Calif.

Veteran Tony Larsen and girlfriend, Nicole Kline;
both of Oak Park, Ill.

Veteran Orlando Gill; wife, Maria; and son, Darius;
Suitland, Md.

Veteran Derrick Wallace and wife, Shaunyce;
Washington, D.C.

Veteran Michael Buyas and son, Justin;
Orondo, Wash.

"Everyone arrived jazzed for the big days ahead," Taylor said. "I knew it was going to be a great week."

The Dive Week

With the assistance of Stewart Snyder, a Handicapped Scuba Association International (HSA) Instructor Trainer who accompanied the group to Bonaire, the staff at Habitat welcomed the warriors.

"The islanders and Captain Don's rolled out the red carpet for us," Taylor said. "For example, Jack Chalk, Habitat general manager, is a member of the Bonaire Bikers Motorcycle Club; they served as our escorts that week. How cool is that?"

Arriving at the airport on their motorcycles, club members welcomed the veterans and escorted their bus to the dive resort. Later that week, the riders escorted the divers and staff to a dinner and reception hosted by Bonaire Gov. Herbert Domacasse, who presented each veteran a "Bonaire Ambassador" medal.

The dinner included many business owners from Bonaire who contributed time, meals and shopping opportunities for the veterans and their families. The warriors themselves presented to each of them an autographed and framed picture of the group, with their thanks.

The divers topped off their week with a farewell Texas-style barbeque hosted and prepared by Chalk and his wife, Karen. The U.S. Consul General to the Netherlands Antilles, Timothy Dunn, and Assistant Consul General William Furbish traveled to Bonaire from Curaçao to attend the dinner.

The Dives

After training, the divers made daily dives. Snyder said for the veterans' first dives the water was calm and "gin-clear," and the air temperature was 86°F (30°C), while the water temperature was 82°F (28°C). "The fish under the pier were swimming around without a

care in the world," Snyder said. "What a place for them to do their first open-water dives." Snyder led the divers to the wreck La Machaca, which is upside-down at a depth of 35 feet (11 meters). As they swam alongside the wreck, they saw a green moray eel swim from under the wreck.

"Some divers stopped dead in their tracks, while others swam beside it," Snyder said. To the right of the wreck, the divers watched a green sea turtle swimming slowly into view. To the left, two large tarpon sped by. "This was really a lot to see on a person's first open-water dive," Snyder said.

"It was a cool time," agreed Jessica Benson, wife of veteran Latseen Benson. "Plus it was good to be in such a small group of divers."

The second dive of the day found the divers practicing skills: flooding their masks and clearing them, recovering and clearing their regulators and practicing neutral buoyancy. Then they were off to the reef.

The next day they practiced additional dive skills; on the third day they made their last dive to complete their HSA certification. They also received their PADI Open-Water and Advanced Open-Water certifications. This final dive must demonstrate self-rescue skills, how to bring an unconscious diver to the surface and rescue breathing at the surface while towing an injured diver to shore. Each diver passed the tests to become certified HSA divers.

The following day saw the divers on a boat trip to the nearby small island of Klein Bonaire, where they would make their first 60-foot (18-meter) dive. The waters there were full of life, Snyder said. "Fish were swimming everywhere," he said. "We saw a turtle, a frogfish, a ray, another turtle. It was amazing. No one wanted to get back on the boat."

Latseen Benson said he enjoyed the dive. "I had made one dive in Mexico prior to being wounded, and I've been wanting to go again," he said.

The week's dives totaled 11, and some of the Wounded Warriors and their wives began their Advanced Open-Water certification.

"Imagine missing a limb, even two, and learning to dive," Taylor said. "These guys worked hard on their skills and still enjoyed every day in the water, no matter how difficult their tasks."

Also on the trip were two young men, sons of the Wounded Warriors, Darius Gill and Justin Buyas. "To see them diving with their dads made everyone in the group feel real warm inside," Snyder said.

"Both of them gave us a run for the money," he added. "They were overwhelmed by the beauty of the ocean, rushing to see everything they could, traveling at rocket speed from reef head to reef head. When I was diving with them I would hold on to their tank valves

and sail along on their power, I really saved on air."

Snyder, a veteran diver and HSA instructor, said he never stops learning - and being surprised. "As we ended a dive, I saw one of our veterans sit on the sandy bottom and remove his mask," he said. "He placed it on the sand, then pulled his regulator out of his mouth and threw it over his shoulder.

"I watched as he did a sweep to reach his regulator and missed it. Alarmed, I quickly swam to his aid, put his regulator back in his mouth. I saw he was breathing, so I picked up his mask and handed it to him. He replaced it, cleared it and then made a funny, quizzical face at me.

"When we got to the surface, I said, 'What the heck where you doing down there?'"

"Just practicing my skills, like you told us to do," he responded with a grin. "I was OK. You were the one who flinched first."

Dave Reidenbach, thrilled with the week, related his favorite moment. "At the end of one dive, Michael Buyas, a double-leg amputee who normally swims with webbed gloves, was hovering in mid-water, making a safety stop," he said.

"As he waited, his son, Justin, swam up to him, then swam around him using only his hands, imitating Michael's style of in-water mobility.

"Justin then stopped and gave his dad a huge hug. There wasn't a dry mask in the area."

The divers ended the week with a final motorcycle escort back to the airport.

Taylor said the time spent with his fellow veterans was incredible. "We became lifelong friends," he said.

Snyder agreed. "To give a person the freedom from a wheelchair or crutches, even if just for a while, is truly a gesture of friendship," he said.

More Underwater Fun

Attesting to that friendship, the Taylors invited the group of veterans to visit them in Englewood and dive in the Downtown Aquarium in nearby Denver.

Tony Larsen, Nicole Kline and Latseen and Jessica Benson participated. "They made a great dive courtesy of the aquarium," Taylor said. "Each of them raved about diving with the 21 sharks, five good-sized barracudas, three giant turtles and other creatures.

"It was especially interesting to see the look on the faces of the aquarium guests. Here are

people who lost limbs in the war in Iraq but who are proving to those watching that they can still participate in activities like scuba diving. What a powerful message."

How It Began

So, how did this event come about?

"Tom Ingram contacted me to see if I'd like to participate in the open-water training of Wounded Warriors," said DAN Member Scott Taylor. "Needless to say, I was all over it."

Taylor, who has a degree in physical therapy, began assisting with scuba classes in the 1970s while working at the Spinal Cord/Head Injury Center at Craig Hospital in Denver.

Ingram, executive director of the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association, which helps present diving's face to the public, is an avid supporter of work with disabled divers.

DEMA has a long history of working with disabled divers many years ago. With Ingram at the helm and with the unanimous backing of the DEMA Board of Directors, that dedication crystallized clearly around disabled veterans through DEMA's Scuba Tour and Be A Diver campaigns in which DEMA staff met up with many physically challenged veterans who want to learn to dive.

During last year's tour in New York City, DEMA employee Dave Reidenbach, known in the industry as "Big Wave Dave," and his wife, Carla - aka "Riptide" - also a DEMA employee, met with members of the Wounded Warrior Project and Disabled Sports USA. From the meeting, DEMA pledged to sponsor scuba training for wounded veterans through these two nonprofit organizations.

"Carla is one of the main keys in making this happen," Ingram said.

"Dave has worked very hard to make this happen," Taylor added. "He deserves tremendous credit for his work with the veterans."

Mike Hill, area representative for the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, provided critical support for the operation; each member of the warrior teams received either an open-water or advanced certification in scuba diving. PADI provided the course materials.

Enter Jack Chalk, himself a veteran, a DEMA member and general manager of Captain Don's Habitat in Bonaire, a DAN Business Member. Captain Don's Habitat worked with the New York office of the Tourism Corporation Bonaire. Each shared enthusiasm for the project; Habitat provided free stays to the six veterans, their family members and accompanying staff.

Long associated with the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA), Stewart Snyder has contributed many hours and resources to the program. Working from the HSA International Training Center in New Jersey, Snyder has worked with disabled divers for more than 25 years. He's never too far from discussing the safety side of diving.

"If you plan to dive or if you are an instructor about to teach a disabled person to dive, make sure you get the proper training to be able to handle their special needs," he said. "As an instructor you should have the working knowledge of the anatomy, physiology, causes and psychology of disabilities and their relationships to scuba diving."

Snyder's proclamation on the HSANJ website reads: "Each person has the power within to do what he or she wants, and scuba diving provides a way to use that power. Each person must overcome the limitations caused by his own body; whether able-bodied or nonable-bodied, they must successfully learn and practice the skills required to become divers.

"Scuba diving is unlike any sport available to people with disabilities, it offers a lifetime of challenge, education and normal socializing. It is a sport that can include their friends and family on an equal basis."

For more information

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www.woundedwarriorproject.org

Disabled Sports USA
451 Hungerford Drive, Suite 100
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HSA International Training Center of NJ
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