

The late LCdr(ret) Ben Ackerman wrote to Chuck Rolfe that he joined the RCN as an Ordinary Seaman(OS)Telegraphist at Toronto, Ontario in 1940 and Commissioned as an Officer in 1944 during WW II. He qualified as a Diving Officer in May 1951 and retired from the RCN in August 1965 as a LCdr. He stated that the Canadian Navy Divers are an unique group in all the world of Diving! The RCN was the first and only Navy in the world to train and employ full time Divers in a Branch of their own. For those recent Divers in the Branch who may be unfamiliar with our history, I would like to inform them as to how it all came about. In the beginning, the RCN had only one type of Diver, the old Standard Dress hardhat Diver. An underwater mechanic is perhaps the best way to describe him, “Bagsy” Baker men! Very competent at their tasks, but restricted in mobility and therefore the number of tasks they could undertake. These were the part time Divers; after a period of a year or two, most went back to their original Branch and Trade, but still authorized to wear a Divers Badge on their right hand sleeve.

As a result of Allied experience during WW II, it was appreciated that the RCN had no countermeasures for many of the new more sophisticated types of mines now in existence, which included the nasty limpet mine. Therefore we now required Swimmer Divers, and they must be trained for mine disposal. Since the Germans had introduced bomb/mines , it was necessary to include bombs in the mine disposal training curriculum. So started the Underwater Swimming Unit; just ask Colin Drew, an original from the Ordnance Branch, who took this training. After a brief period on our own, I was summoned to Ottawa by the late Lt. George Cook to discuss the creation of a new Branch, which was to incorporate the old Standard Dress Divers and the new Swimmer Divers. In order to sell the idea of creating a Branch of our own, we had a lot of work to do. We had to create four Trade Groups on paper, which meant it was necessary to show that the degree of knowledge and experience needed for each Trade Group could be equated to that of an already existing Branch. We chose the Engine Room Branch as a model. There was much discussion and changes, before it became law, and recruiting for Divers could begin.

NSHQ(Naval Service Headquarters) never did want to admit that such things as mines existed, but they were afraid to deny it. Finally, under pressure from our NATO allies, a decision was made that we should recruit four teams of 10 men each to be trained as Mine Countermeasure Divers. Within an hour of getting the official message approving this, I was in HMC DOCKYARD trying to convince the Admiral(Chief of Staff) to approve a message to the Fleet, asking for volunteers. We took it that the Admiral seemed quite reluctant in this matter, but after a short delay, with messages back and forth with NSHQ, the message went out. Since I was wearing three hats, I got some flack from our training establishment at HMCS NADEN, for not consulting them in this matter. Since our Branch came into being, we had been transferred from the Ordnance Branch, and the Seaman Branch in the case of the Standard Dress Divers, and now came under the TAS(Torpedo Anti-Submarine)Branch for training only. The waters now get very muddy, but having had some training in the Potomac River, I was used to that! My three hats: OIC Diving Training and for administration under HMCS NADEN; Officer Commanding Operational Clearance Diving Unit #2 and; lastly but not least, as Staff Officer, Diving, on the Staff of FOPC(Flag Officer Pacific Command) got me out from the authority of HMCS NADEN and the TAS School, and later the new Training Commander – who truly wanted full control! Trouble was, everyone I had to deal with outranked me, so you can see that I had to be quite diplomatic in all my dealings. After recruiting most of one Mine Countermeasures Diving Team, NSHQ got cold feet and cancelled authority for a second West Coast Team. I learned that the East Coast was slow off the mark, and did not even get a start on one Team before this change in NSHQ’s priorities occurred.

They finally did get started though. One very memorable day, I visited the Standard Diving Unit at HMCS NADEN to inform them that we, the Underwater Swimmers, were taking them over, and they either had to "Sink or Swim". If they wished to carry on diving, they had to put on flippers! At that time, Lt. W. Harry Myers was the OIC there, and I believe that Chief Petty Officer(CPO) Robert "Wiggy" Wigmore was also there. Anyway, all seemed unconvinced. We had had a brief tiff, when one day I was asked if our Swimmer Team could inspect the cathodic protection on a DE(Destroyer Escort) then in a major refit. It seems the hardhatters had been requested first, as was appropriate, but stated they could only do one side, then the ship would have to be turned around to do the other side. She was berthed at Yarrow's Shipyard with 50 thousand lines aboard, and the loss of time would have been unacceptable – of course the pump-suit Diver could not go under the keel, pulling his lifeline behind. The Swimmer Team did the job in a forenoon, winning the praise of all concerned – except from the old original Standard Dress people. I believe I was a very successful salesman, in that we got most of the Standard Dress guys to switch over From DV's to Swimmer's, and thus became Clearance Divers. Thank god for that, since they, plus the original Ordnance Chiefs, were the backbone of a very new and challenging endeavour!

At a Tripartite Conference I attended in 1954, I learned just how truly unique our Canadian Divers really were. While meeting with the Brits and our USN friends, we learned for sure that we had the best trained, most flexible Divers within NATO. All because we were too small a Navy to have EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)Teams, UDT's(Underwater Demolition Teams), Beach Clearance and Attack Swimmer Teams, and the Standard Divers as separate groups – Canadian Divers were all capable in each one of these roles and, since we had cross responsibilities, we could use Swimmer equipment to do ship repair work, when most appropriate. Later on, both the RN and the USN copied our ways of operating! We pioneered in changing Sonar Domes and screws while afloat, saving the drydocking costs and thus developing a most valuable capability to have in wartime. The opportunity to be innovative had never been better – when you are first, you don't have to deal with those people who hate change. I remember trying to rid us of the need for using Dockyard Matey's, those guys who had been known to light up a cigarette and forget the Diver's Stage they were supposed to be handling; you know, the story of the hardhat Diver who was squeezed into his helmet when someone let the Stage drop him to the seabed. I had designed a flotation Stage that I hoped the Swimmers could operate without lines to the surface for control. The prototype was a flop, it went to the bottom with the Dome! While on innovations, I must mention Leading Seaman Nearing and his hot water wetsuit. It worked well, and was a pioneering event. Hot water suits are quite popular today with commercial Divers. Then there was DERK, meaning Dome Emergency Repair Kit. This was a bandaid approach to making a dome useable, after being damaged at sea, without the ship having to return to Base. I had reason to believe this was needed because of my experience when we struck a submerged log during WW II as ASCO(Anti -Submarine Control Officer) in HMCS SHEDIAC. This meant we were no longer of any use as an Anti-Submarine weapon, but we had to make a long trip home without "ears". The prototype DERK was also a failure, I never did find out if there was a Mk II model developed, and if it was successful, since I was posted to a new position. Since all our DE's now had trained Swimmer Divers onboard, it seemed to make a lot of sense to give them a larger purpose if possible.

After we lost LCdr Frank Bayfield-Davis while using CDBA(Clearance Diver Breathing Apparatus) on the West Coast on 14 June 1962, I felt it was necessary to develop acoustically/magnetically safe SCUBA gear for mine countermeasures, leaving the O2 gear to the daredevil Attack Swimmers. Francois Vellerem, Managing Director of US Divers, transmitted my idea to Jacques Cousteau, who supplied me with 6 aluminum tanks and, as some will remember, I tried to create a silencer for the Aqua Lung

Regulator, I think with some success. I believe work on this project stopped when I retired in 1965. Incidentally, when I visited Mr. Vellerem in Santa Ana, California, I told him about our first dive with the Aqua Lung Regulator, he then said that I was the first person in North America to make an Aqua Lung dive! I don't know if this is true or not, remember that he was a salesman for the company, and I an important buyer, but I will claim the fame till someone proves me wrong! At the same time, we unpacked the first Aqua Lung suit, which was Cousteau's infamous Constant Volume suit, and I had the misfortune to be one of the first to try it out; it was porous after very few dives. On the first dive it proved to have another more dangerous flaw, the air escape valves seized up if your ascent was too fast – then it became very fast indeed!! In fact, I only held on to my hat with my teeth, which fortunately were all mine. These suits were made with WW II balloon silk, or whatever the barrage balloons were made of. Later, rubber suits with better valves were produced by Cousteau, which were the most satisfactory dry suits that I have ever worn. I will never know why our next dry swimsuit was obtained from Pirelli, they were well made but not rugged enough, particularly for mucking, as we did up in the High Arctic. The Brit's Dunlop suit was OK, and it certainly was rugged enough, however it was not a constant volume suit. On ascent, we had to open our cuffs and also let air out through the face opening. I believe our complaints about the Cousteau air release valves influenced Naval Headquarters decision as to which ones to purchase, but I just don't remember for sure. Going back to the balloon material suits that leaked after only a few dives, I went to NRE (National Research Establishment) in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia to request assistance in making the material waterproof. A Dr. Rogers, a very scientific looking gentleman with a beard, produced an NRE treated suit and asked for our cooperation to test it in the HMCS STADACONA swimming pool. Three of us turned up, and he stated that won't do, we need enough men to submerge the inflated suit completely in order for him to inspect for leaking bubbles. I pointed out to him that there were not enough Divers in the whole world to do that, but he seemed unconvinced with my argument until we tried, and failed! I am sure there is not a Naval Diver alive who does not have many stories to tell – all true of course! Honestly though, the truth is many times stranger than fiction when it comes to diving, in many cases. I was intrigued by the shark attack on Stan Stephenson while working on the SOSUS project off Shelburne, Nova Scotia, which I believe is the only one involving Canadian Naval Divers in Canadian waters. *NOTE: Ben passed away on 4 March 1997. Sentences that are underlined indicate important historical information concerning formation dates of the Diving Branch.*