

Newcastle Underwater Research Group

Tom Perkins – Member 1969 to 1971.

I read with interest the article by Neville Croese who had left the NURG's in the year before I joined, like Neville my membership was also cut short by the demands of my career. I will attempt to add to Neville's piece with my recollections for the period 1969-1971; mind you 45 years on, my memory is a bit dodgy, particularly for names; I apologize in advance for any faux pas.

In those days anyone interested in Scuba Diving, who didn't already know a member, eventually gravitated to the dive shop under the palm tree in Tudor St Hamilton where Ted Baker(?) hooked them up with the club. The club had a strong active membership of about twenty to thirty divers with a dive scheduled for each second weekend and the weekend in between dedicated to training.

Facilities – The club had two 'pogos' with 9HP outboards on a double deck trailer, an air trailer made up of a bank of 4 industrial size air cylinders, and several scuba sets. We met monthly in a small hall on Popran Rd Adamstown where the Camera Club was based at the time. Theory classes were conducted by Spenser Wharton at his home. The air trailer and our personal tanks were charged up by the dive shop from their compressor out the back, they also arranged the testing of bottles as needed.

Personal Kit – Basic kit- body only wet suit with long sleeves and hood, mask, snorkel, flippers, weight belt, and obligatory knife strapped to a leg. Optional extras of wet suit pants and boots for the keen or the 'wusses'; Onion bag and rubberized garden gloves for 'sampling' or collecting, and the odd flotation vest was beginning to appear.

(Some members carried personalized additional equipment; Spenser Wharton who had lost part of one leg in an industrial accident had a home- made wooden leg he could toss back on shore as he went into the water. Dr. Frank Summers always carried an umbrella, he had an acronym – 'Underwater, Multi, Benefit, Rescue, Elevating, L....., L....., Aid. I forget what the two 'L's stood for.' Its uses:- Walking stick, hooking as anchor or as an aid to climbing out on rocks , poking & pulling things, Opened overhead to capture bubbles and give an express ride to the surface. Frank also had a theory (untested, mind you!) that opened quickly in the face of an approaching shark it would have the same affect it has on dogs!?)

Scuba – A single 72cf tank with lever operated reserve, two stage single hose reg., complete with some 2in and 1in webbing, a couple of stainless steel Utilux clamps, a simple quick release hook type buckle and a few copper rivets to make up your own harness.

Training – Up to 1969 the NURG's provided the only formal training and qualifications available in the area at a cost of membership only, with dive shops beginning to offer commercial training from 1970 on. It is worthy of note that when the Underwater Federation of Australia decided to establish national standards for training and qualifications they adopted the already existing NURG log book as the standard. Training and testing was carried out by the members and any individual was competent, under the supervision of the Field Officer, to train others up to their own level, but not beyond.

There were enough experienced divers around at the time to allow 'C' & 'B' classes to be defined and applied, however in an environment of rapid evolution and development it was deemed wise to leave the definition of an 'A' class to a future generation. For 'B' class, the zero visibility diving was done on the harbor floor at the Police wharf and the requisite 130ft dive was achieved on the 'mud barge' which was a simple uncomplicated wreck on a sandy bottom about 10k's off Newcastle.



Training Weekends - Though training had been conducted in various locations and pools previously all training in my years of membership was conducted at Catherine Hill Bay at the 'Shark Hole' and a nearby natural rock pool. At least two members were rostered as trainers for the Sunday training, however, as it was designated as a dive outing members wishing to log dive time for their qualifications also attended and as it is a great spot and the pool is safe for kids many families attended training day. With the club being the only available training at the time there was a big demand with the result training day was often a bigger occasion than the formal dive outings.

Notable Events 1969 – 1971.

Lake Reefs – The NURG's participated in the laying of 2 tire reefs in Lake Macquarie; tires were tied together into 2 meter cylinders then stacked in a 2 layer horseshoe formation on the bottom at the Pelican drop-off (I heard a rumor years later that it had been buried by the shifting sand?) and a second reef at the northern end of the lake; not sure of the location for this one.

Crown of Thorns – A group of our members that could spare the time off work volunteered and went to the barrier reef to help fight the first large outbreak.

Coffs Harbor Convention – At Easter in 1970 & 1971 the NURG's organized and hosted 4 day diving conventions open to all who could present plausible qualifications or demonstrate proficiency. An entry fee covered a trawler dive each day for 3 days at one of the offshore islands, a fish BBQ on the Sunday, a treasure hunt and a night dive under the jetty. Up to 100 entries with two trawlers on the run all day saw the first divers hit the water as the sun came up and the last ones returning just before sunset. The local dive shop worked round the clock refilling the tanks.

Fish Rock Cave – We planned a trip to South West Rocks in Feb 1970 to go through the Fish Rock Cave. For a number of weeks before the dive we went to Speers Point baths on a week night to work on our condition and proficiency. Underwater hockey and testing how many divers could remain submerged circulating between 3 SCUBA sets on the pool floor was exhausting. On the day very strong current and choppy conditions resulted in one boat with a low transom turning back – those of us who completed the dive, through and back, were treated to an experience never to be forgotten. With single mouthpiece regulators on single tanks the options for 'buddy' breathing were limited and dangerous. The first diver in placed a spare SCUBA set on the floor of the cave half way through. For light I carried an old Dolphin torch which worked well and withstood the pressure at the estimated 70ft.

North Haven – Calm seas, good visibility, 35 ft sandy bottom; a potentially mundane, almost boring dive turned into a major drama day. When we entered the water we all went to the bottom and one diver landed bare knees first on the sandy bottom right on top of a 'numb' ray – the electric shock knocked him out; luckily his buddy grabbed him and holding his mouthpiece in place brought him to the surface. While lifting the semiconscious diver into a boat we had another diver burst to the surface

crying out in pain from the effects of cat fish venom - he had tried to catch a cat fish by hand and it stabbed him in the fleshy area between his index and middle finger. Just happened we had a Doctor on board and he took charge. The stunned diver recovered OK, however things didn't go quite as well for the cat fish tamer – the Doctor gave him a local anesthetic and cleaned and probed the wound for anything that may have been lodged there. This spread the venom well into the surrounding tissue and when the local wore off he was delirious with pain and had to be rushed to Taree Hospital overnight.

Seal Rocks – For us Seal Rocks was a magical place to which we returned at every opportunity. By 1969 the road had been built and established, but not well received by some locals – heard stories of trees being felled across the road on some long weekends. The camping area was an open grassy patch of ground with one spear-point with hand pump for water. Prior to the spear-point, water had to be collected by boat from a spring on a headland north of Seal Rocks. When we went out to the rock we invariably anchored the boats in a line along the shoreward side and called to the seals clapping flippers to entice them into the water. During my first dive there was a 'thump' like a distant explosion which, we found out later, was the first tail thrust from a large sleeping Grey Nurse shark startled by a diver.

On the second visit we struck magical conditions, the sea was like a millpond almost unlimited visibility and from a point midway down the anchor rope I could see and identify every diver in the water. Swimming 20 ft from the bottom in crystal clear water the sensation was more like flying than swimming.

On my third visit we were able to entice the seals to join us and I was able to get some nice shots on my old 8mm movie camera.