



Presentation to Combined Hunter Underwater Group (CHUG) Annual General meeting

14 July 2013 by Neville Croese .

Neville would like to thanks Warren Kirkby for his help in preparing the presentation.

Neville Croese was a spear fisherman for 12 months before finding NURG as a 16 year old in 1962. He held positions of publicity officer, secretary, treasurer and field officer before leaving in 1968 due to work commitments.

Newcastle Underwater Research Group - Pioneers and Achievements

Establishment & Membership

Underwater Research Group (URG) established in Sydney in 1953; Newcastle Underwater Research Group (NURG) in 1956 when Fred Studden & Warren Kirkby plus others broke away from the Newcastle Neptune's Spearfishing Club. There was no rivalry, many were members of both clubs and NURG used Neptune Hall for meetings and the magazine for publicity.

In 1953 USFA was Australian Governing Body (Underwater Skindivers' & Fishermen's Assoc) - was known before and after under several different names

Financial membership in 1963 was 32, in 1967 there were 111 (from register). Skindiver Mag Nov 1965 shows 57 - biggest in State if not Australia! *Skindiver* Mag shows April 1966 NURG had 30 trainees to be tested, in May 1966 50 trainees to be tested and 28 members at an club official outing.

We were the only outlet in Newcastle training divers . There was no competition from dive shops or academies as there is now in every coastal town and it was a fast growing exciting sport.

Training & Testing

PADI nor SSI did not exist back then. The only references we had were CEMAS (European Organization) and British Sub Aqua Club (BSAC) so we devised our own diving methods using a mixture of these. (PADI Professional Assoc of Diving Instructors ,SSI Scuba Schools International)

Our Theory Book was written by Owen Drew by gathering what information was available - Owen owns Tranquillity Island, Resort & Dive Base on Moso Island, Vanuatu. It has a Turtle Sanctuary, Eco Tourism activities, and more than 16 dive sites. Maybe you have heard of it or visited?

Log Books: all trainees had to pass a preliminary test before attempting snorkel and then a snorkel test before progressing to SCUBA. It was rigorous - theory and practical testing for all stages over an extended period before qualifying. Your training today is very similar - we must have got something right!

We went as a group to get medical certificate to dive from GP; he'd never seen so many grotty ears and then to our own GPs annually.



Image: NURG members dive in 1964

Our training attracted crowds when held in public places such as Swansea Channel. We had official club dives about every 2 weeks - training every other week. We didn't have gauges/computers available that you have now.

Our only safety gear was a quick release buckle on the aqualung and a weight belt. The cylinder was strapped straight onto our back - no buoyancy vest etc

The Police wharf, where Crowne Plaza is now, was often where we did snorkel training. There was often lots of rubbish from boats floating on the water and the occasional dead rat. On this day we were hookah diving for experience.

On 14 April 1965, members went to Mick Simmons Sports Store in Sydney to experience pressure in a recompression chamber. We were taken to 165ft to test reactions; it was a tight fit in the chamber.

Acquiring and Making Our Gear

Warren Kirky made his aqualung using surplus RAAF 27cf oxygen cylinders purchased from army disposal store. They would remove the steel wire, make a yolk (crosspiece) regulator 1st stage adapting oxygen bottle regulator, and purchase a 2nd stage from manufacturer. Warren has given me details of how this was done anyone is interested.

At this time we were earning 5 -7 pounds per week. You could pay 40 pounds for secondhand twin 40 Heinke with a new Heinke

advertised for 72 pounds. Wet suits were new to market and very expensive, they changed diving dramatically. Dry suits were still advertised in 1960.

Gear was available but very expensive; so we made own where possible. We would shape wet sand to make lead weights using melted scrap lead and file off sand and rough edges. The SCUBA harness/weightbelt was from webbing from army disposal store as were 27cf bottles.

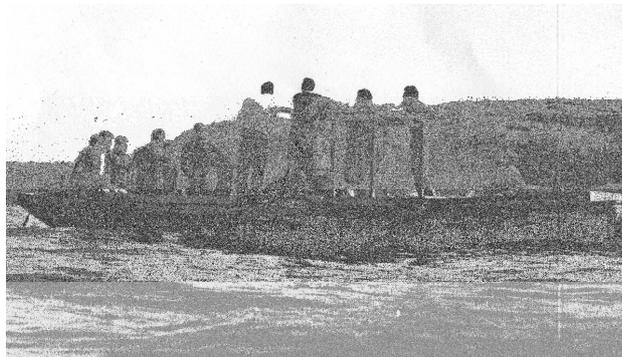
Our cameras were ordinary cameras housed initially in sealed brass, then perspex housings until Calypso shot camera - note line from aqualung to brass housing to equalize pressure.



Top: Unwinding aluminium wire from aircraft oxygen tanks to make aqualungs 1957, Above: Underwater camera housing 1958 Left: Broughton dive rebreathers 1954-55.

The Club Boat

We built the Club Pogo it was approx 16ft x 8ft with a 9 HP outboard motor. Not quite enough power for its size and our cargo. Swansea outings had to offload gear and divers on the breakwall to make progress against outgoing tide - similar to your impressive dive boats NOT! More unusual transport was Sabre jet drop fuel tanks powered by 1.5HP seagull outboard.



Research & Conservation

In 1966 we created an artificial reef off Coal Point. We didn't get permission from Maritime Services Board to build the reef. The group gathered many car and truck tyres and tied them together in groups of four. The reef was laid on 28th May 1966 with 4ft visibility. We tried to find it six months later on 20th November with no luck. No GPS at that time, only visual markers (line up the pine tree with the jetty and the path with the chimney on the third house). It has probably never been found since, as it's not on any maps. We beat *Neptunes* in laying reef. The same day in November we were asked to look out for a lost outboard motor - success with that but no reef.

In July 1966 we forwarded sponge specimens to Sydney Museum for identification with no luck. The authorities sent samples to noted New Zealand scientist. Little was known at this time about anything underwater - they relied on clubs like us for specimens.

Wrecks

The *Southland* was built in 1864, the 130ft Iron Paddle Steamer Tug collided with *SS Waratah* and was probably scuttled because of damage, there's not much left now. The wreck of the *Southland* is approx 7 miles offshore 118ft deep (echosounder). Finding it was similar to the artificial reef (no GPS) - line up track with palm tree and Newcastle Hospital chimney with something else - then drag anchor until hooked up. Four incredible dives logged from November 1964 to January 1967. We were taken out by George Edwards and Bob Grunsell.

The *Psyche* was built at end of 19th century it was transferred to RAN in 1913 and commissioned to patrol coast of Burma in response to threat of German uprising. It patrolled Australia's northern waters from 1917 and was sunk in Salamander Bay 1940. The top of wreck is close to surface but it is in dirty water and hard to find although it would now be shown on maritime charts/GPS.

Deep Dives

I logged two deep dives to 196ft (echosounder) in February 1965 and July 1966 with slight narcosis. On the first the two Owens' buddy breathed, 2nd did maths test. No weight belt, we would pull down the anchor rope until pressure then sink. Coming back up we'd drag ourselves up rope until buoyant then hang on. Being able to vary gases today you would be able to dive deeper and longer.

Night Dives

We went to Desoto Gulf, Shark Hole, Swansea Channel and Terrigal. We usually used torches which gave light 3 inches wide for about 5 feet. We set up a line of lights at Desoto 50m into the ocean powered by car batteries floating on a tube: it worked great in the day but failed when the dive was on and we'd hoped to observe night life.

Top: NURG Swansea Channel 1957.

Bottom: NURG Night Dive c. 1957



Dive Sites

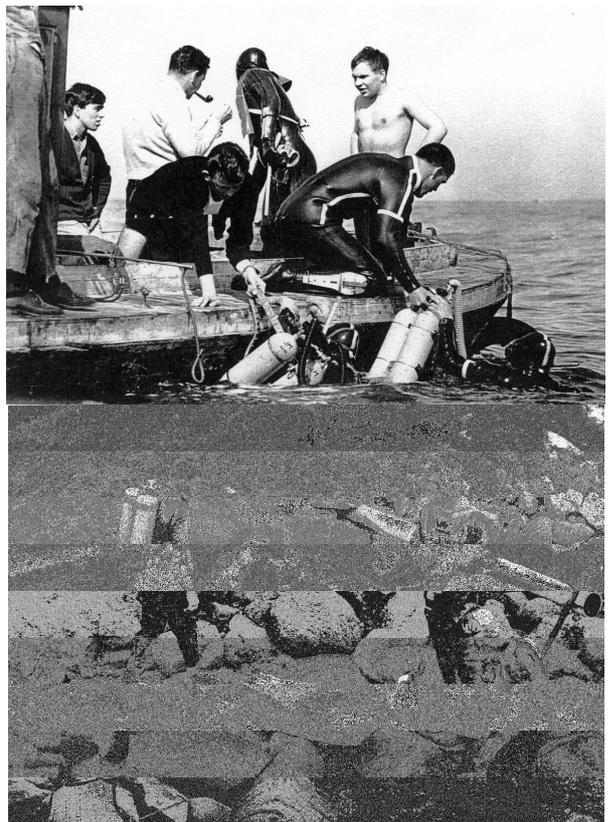
Halifax Park was a favoured shore dive for observation - coral, sponges, tropical fish, everything. I hear there are problems with sand lately.

Swansea Channel - we would ride the current from Lake Macquarie down the channel to breakwall . We didn't pick up any rubbish there was not much in those days, we just observed marine life.

Hat Head - huge schools of grey nurse sharks

Seal Rocks - getting over sand hill to follow powerlines in was hard work- all sand, no dirt or sealed roads then. The shop was there then. There were brilliant dives with seals.

Our members speared as well; whilst being an URG we also speared and took lobsters but never on official club outings. We also took samples for personal display eg gorgonia, starfish etc. Conservation wasn't what it is today, there was plenty of everything. We were all learning and scientists relied on specimens for study. Warren's gorgonia specimen won an award - although the picture doesn't do it justice.



Community Projects

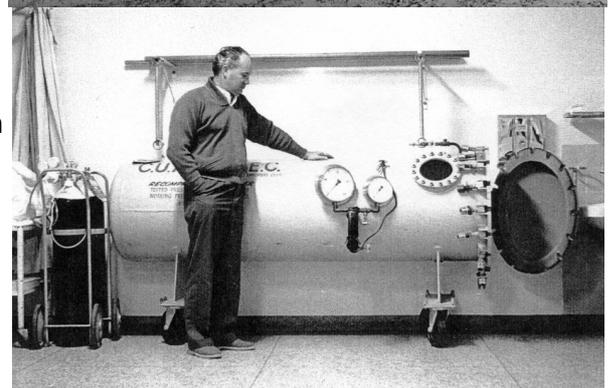
In 1962 NURG tried to raise 500 pounds for portable recompression chamber but it never happened, there was no public interest and it was a lot of money for a relatively unknown sport.

Publicity & Recruitment

NURG had a monthly column in Skindiver Magazine as well as the Newcastle Neptunes's *Spearline* magazine.

For Newcastle Show , the group borrowed a dive tank from Underwater Photographic Society. Members would eat a banana or drink coke underwater. It drew lots of attention from public, with five people deep around tank constantly. The water was filthy after a few days as there was no filtration.

For our annual Christmas party, at Nesca Park or Wangi Point, King Neptune appeared from water with gifts for kids and they were treated to ice creams, lollies and cordial. They were great fun, real family days with foot races etc.



From top:

NURG dives at Swansea Channel c. 1957 x 2,
NURG Cray recovery team 1963, Lindsay Martin &
recompression chamber in Perth 1964.

YMCA ran an annual kids training day at Nesca Park with snorkelling and SCUBA experience in very shallow water it was another good PR opportunity

In 1962 & 1967 NURG had a Mattara float. There was always a lot of interest from the huge crowds who lined Hunter Street. In 1962, an 11ft White Pointer caught by Bob Grunsell in the nets protecting beaches was gutted, filled with sawdust and snap frozen in Darks Ice Works until the parade. Some of the public thought it was a fake - it was brilliant publicity.

In 1965 the group escorted swimmers on "Back to Woy Woy" marathon - 5 miles across bay, we struggled to keep up.



Other Services Undertaken

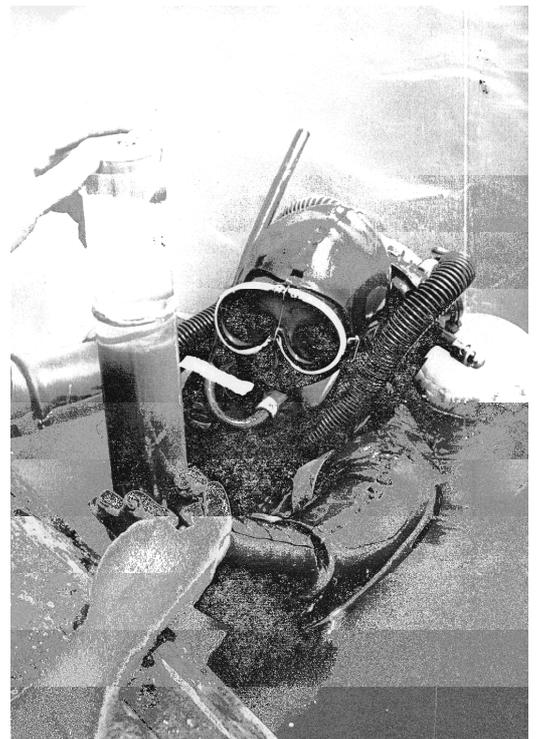
In 1964, a Volkswagon was driven onto Nobbys breakwall during huge seas and washed into the harbor. NURG were asked to retrieve it. They pattern searched towed by boats using boards tied to rope to cover more area. Forty four gallon drums were secured to car filled with air from cylinders but the boats couldn't tow car against outgoing tide. The Water police were called for assistance with the small boats ready to cut line if car sank. The exercise was successful with the car lifted onto wharf by crane.



In 1964, Hunter Valley Research Foundation's Prof Cyril Renwick asked us to collect bottom samples from harbour. Newcastle Harbor had been seeded with radioactive pellets to gauge silt movement for future dredging. We had to push the cylinder into bottom (30ft) place stoppers on each end. There was no visibility and the results showed the silt didn't move into north arm of the Hunter.

BHP asked NURG to dive under BHP wharf to assess amount of debris dropped from wharf while ships unloading. Owen spent little time in water, it was very dangerous, lots of coils of wire etc. We used a hookah with lifeline for safety but visibility was ZERO.

RW Miller (coal company) at Catherine Hill Bay asked NURG to search for an anchor lost off one of their ships. Members tried on 1 & 8 January 1967 with no luck. Ships came to the gantry to load coal - many had a marker buoy attached to anchor.



Interclub Activities

A Treasure Hunt was held at Shellharbour every year - all were welcome provided you were a member of a club. There was also an annual SCUBA championships - the Pacific Coast, NSW and Australian events were always well represented by our club. It was held at Shoal Bay, Toowoon Bay, Terrigal and once in Lambton Pool. The Australian championships were held in various States . I'm not sure if they are still held now.

Reunions

NURG started having an annual reunion in 2007, attendance is usually around 30 including past members, partners and friends. All are welcome and CHUG have been added to the mailing list.



CHUG and NURG members at 2013 NURG reunion

Thank you

Neville Croese

Combined Hunter Underwater Group would like to thank:

- all past NURG members for forging the way and sharing their underwater experiences and images
- Neville for attending the AGM and sharing his memories
- Will Owyong (CHUG member) for reworking the original images

Combined Hunter Underwater Group can be contacted through the website

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