

Royal Navy Diving Course by Ginge Fullen

The Navy's diving school is in Portsmouth, based at the time at HMS Vernon. The diving itself is done at Horsea Island, known by all the people that pass through it as 'the diver's nightmare'. The one week aptitude test I was on was in February 1985, one of the coldest times of the year. At the start there were seven people on the aptitude.

The seven lads on my aptitude were mostly straight through entries, with just a couple of lads already in the Navy with other jobs, but wanting to transfer to diving. The straight through entries were all under 21, with me being the youngest at 17 years. Straight through entries were stopped in 1986 because a lot were failing, and they thought that under 18s were too young to be trained as divers. Horsea Island is a 1,000 metre long, 100 metres wide and 7 metres deep man-made lake built earlier this century for torpedo trials. It's really the ideal safe training area, and you get to know nearly every square foot of it during your diving training.

After joining HMS Vernon it all gets very hectic, with drawing and diving kit etc. During the mid 80s there were career diving courses starting nearly every two months, more people left than stayed though. From HMS Vernon to Horsea Island is a distance of about seven miles and requires a coach to get you there and back. This soon becomes a trip from hell in itself, as you quickly get changed out of your working uniform into your sports kit, and have time to think about what horrors are in store for you that day.

The first sight of Horsea Island is seen at a running pace as all the people on aptitude tests and other courses are dropped off about one mile away. There's a fair amount of competition to be the first up to the classrooms, or at least to be in the first few. This then gives you more time to get changed into your diving suit and be ready for the circuits that are to come at the beginning of each day.

On the first day of aptitude they had to show us all the diving equipment and even show us how to get into a diving suit. With me being the smallest I had to have the smallest issue suit that the Navy has, a size one. That year the new zip entry dry suits had come to the Navy, but they had none in my size. I had to wear the old neck entry suit clamped tightly shut by a wooden clamp. It needed another person to help you into it and it took minutes rather than seconds to get into, a real bitch.

One of the first things we learned was what to do when one of our instructors said the word 'awkward'. This word, as we found out, is closely followed by pain. It means get changed into your diving suit quicker than is humanly possible, and then get ready for diving or more often either a log run or a mud run.

Within the first hour of being at Horsea on the aptitude we had got changed a dozen times into our diving suits. Then our course instructor, a PO(D) Kenny Ball, who had just been busted to LS(D) for whatever reason, we never found out, called us all together for our introduction talk.

His talk went something like this, “my job is to get you off this aptitude. I will use any means possible to do this. The aptitude should last till Friday, I want to be going home for the weekend by Thursday night. If you want an off-course chit just come and see me or either of my two helpers and you can do without all the pain and aggro to come. Does anybody want an off-course chit now?” Nobody said anything. The next thing he said was, “awkward.”

In the 70s and 80s there were many people trying to go through to the diving branch, firstly because you get extra money each day, specialised or danger money, whichever way you look at it. The diving branch is also seen to be outside of the ordinary Navy, a bit more independent and laid back. You are expected to work on your own or in small teams and the jobs, like mine clearance, are a lot more interesting. They could afford to be choosy, and things were done in those days that are just not allowed today.

The next five days were hell, except hell should not be that cold. The first task of each day was to do three circuits, which is still done today. The seven of us would all start off together and jump off the top diving board in Horsea, a height of about 30-foot, and the third platform of a high metal tower.

(The top platform was dismantled in later years as it was deemed to be too high by health and safety officials.) We would then have to fin across on our backs to the other side, run around to the boards and do it again. Three times in total, each morning. Whilst we were finning across on the first circuit we were all holding our hands out of the water trying to stop them from freezing in the water. We were never allowed gloves on aptitude or until we had passed the course. The instructor yelled at us to put our hands in the water and get a move on, we weren't fast enough. You had to try and pace yourself, if you sweated too much on the circuits, you would be even colder in the hours of diving to come.

I was first to finish the circuits. The two helpers or second 'dickies' as they were called, were there to help the instructor and to act as safety diver and crew, but also generally there to help make our lives a misery. I got back a couple of minutes before the others, one of the second dickies gave me press-ups and star jumps to do. He was being good to me, very good. He could see how cold I was and was trying to warm me up. He asked me if I wanted an off-course chit, he said he'd even sign it for me as my hands were frozen. He took a shine to me, as he could see I was trying my hardest at everything we did. He carried an off-course chit with him over the next five days with my name on it. He constantly asked me if I wanted it. I even found it pinned to my bed one night when I got back. When I arrived each morning he commented, “You still fucking here, won't be long till you're off course.” I don't remember his name and he will never know how much he helped me in a crazy way! It's like we were playing a game with each other and I was not going to lose.

Our first experience of diving was attended-diving this is when the diver is attended from the surface by a thick line. It's one of the safest ways of teaching, as the instructor has more control over the divers and can even haul them up if necessary if they get into trouble.

When I was diving I remember it being so cold that I had layers and layers of clothing on to try and stay warm. This made me positively buoyant so I had to grab hold of rocks from the bottom to keep me down. Of course not having gloves meant your hands were totally numb, but that wasn't a bad thing as they were soon forgotten about. The diving sets should have had the capacity to last well over one hour, but we all used to breathe them down in 30 or 40 minutes so that we could get out of the water. They only made us change the diving sets quicker and get straight back in though.

It was not that easy when you were on the surface tending to your diver, as the instructor and second dickies would come around and ask you questions on diving and the diving signals that you should have learned prior to coming on aptitude. Getting them wrong earned you some form of exercise. Making a bad mistake, like not having two hands on the divers life line, earned you mini circuits which meant jumping off the top board into the water getting back out and doing it again until they told you to stop.

We had our first taste of mud runs on day one. At low tide the mud flats stretch out around Horsea for about 600 metres. Being about six inches deep it's not the easiest of surfaces to run on. In fact the best technique is to try and skate across it rather than run, but the second dickies don't tell you that until you're halfway through the course, if you get that far.

My situation was made even worse as the legs in my dry suit were far too long for me and with the suction of the mud pulling them down, I was left with the feet of my dry bag flapping around. From then on I had to tape around my ankles to keep the feet of my dry bag in place.

Every Navy diver who passed through Horsea Island will remember the infamous mud run. Every diver who passed through in the 80s will remember the small wooden post on the mud flats that you had to run out to. It was a distance of around 600 metres away, but it never seemed to get any nearer, it took an age to get to and even longer to get back. Those who got back first were made to do press ups in the mud touching their nose down all the way, those who were last might be made to go again. After the mud we all had to do a circuit just to wash the mud off they told us. The last task of the day was to run around Horsea Island with a telegraph pole, a distance of one and a half miles.

One lad took himself off course as soon as we got back. He said he could not do this for the rest of his life. It was the end of the first day and we had lost three people already. My way of passing the aptitude was to take it one day at a time, but on that first day, it seems like several days 'attack' you at once. We were down to four, a nice even number the second dickies told us, as now one of them would not need to tend one of the divers. The instructor was happy, by this rate he said we would all be off by Wednesday and he would get home even earlier.

The next two days were pretty much the same and by Thursday afternoon there was only two of us left, me and Kyle Luke who had been in my class at Raleigh. One lad had come off earlier that day, saying his hands were too cold, nothing like stating the obvious, but he only had one more dive to pass the aptitude. This was to be a night dive on the Thursday night. On the Thursday afternoon the second dickie, with my off-course chit pleaded with me one last time to sign the chit and then all the pain would be over. I declined and won the game. I told him I didn't make important decisions when I was tired and on my last legs.

The instructor left us in the hands of the second dickies for some last fun and games before the night dive, to see if they could get us off course. As there were only two of us left now they had more time to dedicate to us. One of the games was to go up to the top board, put our diving hoods on back to front, so we could see nothing and then get us to jump off. The next game had us standing about 20 feet back from the water's edge on the jetty, again with our hoods on back to front. We were then told to run towards the water and jump when they told us to jump, into what we thought would be the water. Wrong, we both landed in a snotty heap about two feet away from the water. We took our hoods off to see the two second dickies rolled up on the floor in fits of laughter. I'm glad we'd been of some entertainment; I could never quite see the joke.

We finished with a run around the island, bunny hopping between every other lamppost. A practise which has long since stopped as it's known to damage the knees. Kyle and I did the night dive on the Thursday, passing without any problems. All that was left to do on Friday was complete some paperwork and return our diving equipment. We'd passed the aptitude, now all that was left to do was to pass the four months diving course. No easy task.

On 4 April 1985 the seaman divers' course 59 started with 13 people. I was the youngest by far on the course and one of the youngest altogether. The course was four months long and took you up to Health and Safety Part 3 standard inshore diving, and very nearly Part 1 standard covering off shore diving. The course is hard, it's meant to be, both physically and mentally. With several different diving sets that you have to learn to use, and all the equipment and drills that come into diving, there's a lot of information to take in. This is all combined with many different physical exercises which are part and parcel of the course. There's a lot on which you can fail. I'm not going to say it's the toughest course in the services or even in the Navy, but it's different and not everybody likes the idea of spending hours underwater, often at night in nil visibility.

Day one consisted of meeting our instructors, being issued with diving equipment and having a course photo taken. This is done so the diving planning office can keep track of who is on the course and more importantly, who is off the course. Those who come off the course get a big red cross through their face on the photo. One lad did not get that far, he came off the course for a medical reason. We were down to 12 people already.

The first month was all air diving on the now long out of service two-cylinder Aquarius air set. The endurance of this set was not too long, but depended on the individual, the depth and how hard he worked. It could last anything up to 90 minutes. We were supposed to come up after two equalisations. This meant that with the diving set having no contents gauge only one bottle would be open at a time, and when this drained down you had to reach behind you and open the other cylinder and so equalising the two cylinders. On the second time of doing this you would come immediately to the surface knowing you still had enough air in one cylinder for emergencies.

The first two weeks were at Horsea, night diving on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We had exams every week that we had to pass and of course the diving was supplemented with lots of different exercise. I will not go on about these too much except to tell you that we got to know the logs and mud around Horsea very well. As well as the physical aspect there was also a lot of theory, involving the physics of diving, such as learning Archimedes Principle and Boyles Law by heart.

One new and equally infamous physical exertion was 'the soup'. 'The soup' lives in the memories of divers who qualified before about 1990. 'The soup' was situated at the entrance to Horsea Island and was actually the sea inlet to Horsea Lake itself. Whereas the mud on the mud flats during the mud runs was only six to nine inches deep, 'the soup' was up to three feet deep and even deeper in places. By week four we were getting quite quick on the mud runs. Most people had mastered the skating technique and we could be around the wooden post and back, nearly a mile, in around 20 minutes.

'The soup' was only about 30 metres long and we thought it should not take too long to complete, we thought wrongly. Half an hour later some of us were still struggling through it. I had big problems being only five foot six inches tall and having fairly short legs, I was nearly up to my waist before I even started. The process of taking a step was difficult to say the least. I had to lie back in the mud, put both hands down behind my knee and pull one leg up out of the mud and push it forward as far as I could, and then put my weight on that leg and keep repeating the process.

The other lad who had problems was big Scouse Vernon with whom I'd been at Raleigh. We'd played rugby and lifted weights together. At nearly 15 stone he was big and heavy and he sank a little more than everybody else. At one stage even the instructor was getting worried he would disappear altogether. 'The soup' was an experience, maybe one to be missed, but in a crazy way I was glad that I was in the era that did it.

During the course the second dickies ran what was called a 'fuck up fund'. If anyone made a mistake on one of the diving drills or got a question wrong they got fined some money. On week one it was only 10 pence or so, but as we were making so many mistakes it soon mounted up. It slowly progressed up to £1 later in the course as we should have been making fewer mistakes. It was also £1 earlier on if it was a major safety mistake. The money went towards a 'piss up' at the end of the course. It was collected daily early on just in case someone went off course and the second dickies missed out on some valuable beer drinking money.

The next two weeks were up in the harbour learning the different ship's bottom searches. These searches are used when you are looking for any limpet mines placed by enemy forces. We did our searches on different boats in the harbour at the time, but mostly on HMS Tiger a 'dead' ship moored out in the middle of the harbour waiting to be disposed of. HMS Tiger had a flight deck nearly 60 feet tall, ideal for what the instructor had in mind for us.

It was not too hard to figure out, we were to jump off. They gave us a few tips: jump out as far as you can so you don't hit the side and hurt yourself, look at the horizon to keep straight, so you don't land on your face or back and hurt yourself, and keep hold of your suit inflation bottle (a small bottle on your waist that you can inflate when going deep to prevent suit squeeze and also to keep you buoyant when on the surface), so that it doesn't get too loose and flip up and smack you in the face and so hurt yourself. Everything was to prevent you from hurting yourself, I still wasn't sure that if you did everything right you would not hurt yourself anyway.

The jump was optional the instructor said, we didn't have to do it, but if we didn't jump then we were off course. We all jumped and one person ended up in hospital. He had not looked at the horizon and so landed slightly on his back. He got fined £1 for fucking up. By the end of week four we were down to nine people, and we had not yet done the infamous live-in week, the hardest week where most people come off course.

In week five we were introduced to a new diving set which only clearance divers in the Royal Navy use. It was called Diving Set Self Contained Clearance Diver, DSSCCD for short. We spent a lot of time in the classroom learning how the set worked and then more time learning about diving accidents and illnesses that could kill us or at least seriously hurt us. The list of different diving related accidents and illnesses grew to around 20, from rather minor ones like perforated eardrums and suit squeeze, to burst lungs and drowning. All were accompanied by rather graphic slides and photos of civilian divers in different stages of discomfort or death.

Week six came soon enough, the dreaded live-in week. A week when you live at Horsea Island and get very very little sleep, whilst diving all hours of the day and doing whatever exercise the instructors and second dickies can come up with. This is the week that they try and crack you and get people to come off course. They usually succeed in getting about 50% off from the original numbers. Everything we had done in the past on the aptitude course and the diving course was easy compared to this week. Maybe easy is not the right word, it's just that what they had done in the past they could now do day and night. In the whole week you maybe get about 10 hours sleep, so that means plenty of time for diving and other such fun.

We soon switched off to what was happening around us and one day merged into another. It was around two or three o'clock in the morning before we got to bed and we were already up and diving when the other courses arrived at 0800 hours. Between that period a lot had happened.

We got to bed around 0300 hours on the first night. None of us could sleep at first because we expected the worst to happen. Sure enough 20 minutes later a thunder flash was thrown into the middle of the room. A thunder flash is a small explosive charge normally thrown into the water if you need to call the divers up in an emergency as it can be heard and felt from quite a distance away. On the surface it's a very loud bang. It has a seven second fuse so we all covered our ears until it went off. Then in came one of the second dickies and gave us an 'awkward'. We were to be dressed in diving gear and ready to be in the water in 20 minutes time. We all had to run the 400 metres or so down to the classroom, where all the diving gear was, put our diving sets together, get our undersuits (often still wet) and drybags on, and be standing by the jetty ready to dive. We took 23 minutes.

'Get undressed', our instructor said. We took off our diving sets. 'Am I talking to a bunch of fucking retards, I said get undressed, fully fucking undressed'. We stripped off to nothing and got ready for the inevitable skin swim. We had to swim a distance of about 150 metres. When we finished we stood in a line on the jetty still naked and shivering at around 0330 hours.

Not good enough, the instructor had said, we were the worst course that he had ever seen at Horsea Island. It's funny that on nearly every hard and demanding course I've done in the Royal Navy the instructor has said that. There's definitely some psychology going on there or else I'm crap at every course I've done and am the worst sailor there's ever been. He said, 'Next time I want it quicker'. We went back to bed. An hour later another second dickie woke us with a thunder flash. We were stood on the jetty ready to dive within 20 minutes. 'That's it back to bed,' the second dickie said. We didn't even dive. The instructor stayed in bed. That's how it went on through the week each of them taking it in turns to get us up and take us out for some exercise.

We swam the length of the lake 1000 metre's dozens of times. More often than not we would have to get out and run back to the classrooms with all our diving kit. It was more a shuffle than a run, but if you were caught walking there was always a punishment or a fine for the 'fuck up fund', depending on the mood of the second dickies. We had to run back all the way as we were never too sure if one of the second dickies was hiding in the bushes watching us.

They gave us incentives though. For the first pair to reach the lock gates at the end of the lake they would take their diving gear off them so it would be easier to run back. Early on in the course we would try and swim at the side of the lake at around one to two metres where the water would be warmer, but then we risked getting a paddle on the back of our heads by the instructor. It was better to put on an extra thermal top, put up with cold hands and go slightly deeper. We lost another lad halfway through live-in week he got an ear infection and had to take a few days away from diving. Miss two days and you were off course. It was big scouse with whom I had joined up. He was back classed and passed the next course.

We were still being woken up at stupid hours in the morning. By the third night they had put the thunder flash in a dustbin in the middle of the room as we did not hear them otherwise. By the fourth night they let one off in the bin and still nobody moved. The second dickie had to come around and shake us to get ready to dive, as we were all so tired. Halfway through Thursday night, the last night of live-in week, another lad came off course. He'd had enough and asked for an off-course chit. We were now down to seven the number we would finish with.

We had our last real foray on to the mud on the Thursday. This time we were carrying logs 'just to make it special' our instructor said. The course before us had been doing log runs when a Health and Safety advisor had come round. He had said it was not safe to run with logs. So the two logs had been put in a skip ready for disposal. When the advisor had left the instructor said to the course, if he couldn't make them run with logs he would make them run with rocks, and when that was stopped he would make them run with bags of cement. So he said it was up to them, run with the logs or rocks. The logs they thought would be easier to carry, so they retrieved them from the skip. Log runs were stopped at the end of the 80s, but were started up again not long after, because it's seen as character building. So was running around whilst actually breathing on the diving mixture set. This practise gave you carbon dioxide poisoning and made you pass out. The instructors wanted to show us how to notice the symptoms.

On the Friday morning the last thing to do was ditching drills. This involved going to the bottom of the lake, seven metres, taking you're set off and free ascending to the surface. There were a few important things to do here so you didn't drown but also so you don't burst a lung. Breathing out slowly as you ascend should prevent this. One of the second dickies was there with you for safety, punching you in the stomach if he thought you were not breathing out enough.

As I ditched my set one of the connections broke loose so allowing water into the set. This meant water mixed with the soda-lime, which all re-breathers have in them. It causes a soda lime cocktail, an acid chemical mix which can burn the skin and be very harmful if swallowed. I took one mouthful before I realised what had happened and then bolted for the surface. The second dickie punched all the air out of me on the way up. On the surface my mouth was mildly burned. I was made to swill my mouth out with vinegary water as treatment. I was lucky it was Friday I would have the weekend to get back to normal and would not lose any days off the course. Live-in week was over. We had all dived for over 1,000 minutes in that week alone.

With live-in week behind us we felt as if we were over the worst. We still had our final exam and a very hard four weeks at DEODS, the Defence Explosive Ordinance Disposal School in Kent, learning all about mines and explosives.

The following weeks were intensive learning about new drills and equipment rather than physical work. Whilst we were in Portland doing different underwater searches, we upset our course officer. His name was Jimmy Green, a WO diver and a big powerful man. He had the entire course jumping off a jetty about 35 feet high, swimming around the boat, climbing back up and doing it again and again. He made us carry on until we were all physically sick. Jumping in and out of sea water and swallowing quite a lot you retch up first and keep on retching. We did our best not to upset him again.

We did our three weeks deep dive work up in Falmouth. Deep dive work ups have to be done every few months so each individual keep's worked up to depth. It's very easy to get nitrogen narcosis at depth, although there is no danger in that itself, the diver's concentration may be impaired and so they might act inappropriately.

The mixture set DSSCCD has a maximum depth of 54 metres, quite a deep depth which requires decompression stops. Safety is paramount and drills are carried out carefully and precisely. I was all dressed up ready for my first 54-metre dive when the instructor asked in a rather puzzled way, 'How old are you?' '17' I said. 'And how many months?' he asked. '5 months' I replied.

The instructor and the course officer looked at each other and then went away to look at the diving book. When they came back they explained that I had to be 17 to be able to dive to 54 metres. I was limited to 42 metres. Rather disappointing.

We all passed our final diving exam and were then sent up to DEODS in Kent for our final month. A lot depended on this; people had failed at this stage before. The main aim was to teach us about different kinds of sea mines, but we were also taught by the Army and the RAF about their ammunition as there was a possibility we could come across air dropped bombs in the sea and on the shore.

We had to learn all the dimensions and ways of initiation of each mine and then we were tested on our ability to recognise them by feel only. This was done in two ways. One of the tests was to recognise a series of mines placed in a very murky lake. There were about 20 pieces of ordinance along with a couple of non-ordinance pieces. These non-ordinance pieces were things like the inside of a washing machine to try and catch us out. We only had a short time to dive down and feel around the object, measuring it and remembering anything else about it. We had to measure it by knowing how long our arm span was and from our elbow to the tips of our fingers etc. and then placing it alongside the object. Of course being at the bottom of a lake or the sea, the object might be buried quite a way, making it all the more difficult to recognise. On completion of the dive we came up and had to draw a diagram of it and say what we thought it was. We had six dives to do altogether on a selection of the 20 objects.

The other way, and the last test we had to do, was exercise 'softly softly'. This was done on the land and again we had to recognise a selection of mines. This time we were blindfolded and the mines were wired up to anti-handling devices. If we were too rough in the examination of them a large bang would go off and we would fail the course. Somehow we all managed to pass.

We went down to Portsmouth the following week to get rated as seaman divers. I remember seeing a group of SAS guys in the rest room waiting to start their course, as we were waiting to go in and see the Commanding Officer for our diving badges. We were all in total awe of them but they shook our hands and said well done for passing such a course. Their diving course was only a three-week training period on two different diving sets. That was enough for them they said. There was a lot to take in on our course but I don't think I found it too tough physically. There were a lot of technical things to learn and I was certainly not the best on the course. I did not really start to learn about diving until after the course when the pace of things slowed down.