

Two for one...

(and other true diving tales from SED)

Text by Mike Downs
Reserve Lieutenant
Photos by Derek Clark
SED

The last month has been a busy one for the Underwater Search and Recovery Unit.

First, there were a couple of searches for a weapon in one of North County's coastal lagoons. The searches were quite uneventful (and unsuccessful--but you can never say we come up dry) with the exception of the discovery that very small barnacle-like critters grow on thick lagoon surf grass. They have the endearing feature of abrading the divers' water-softened cheeks and lips (the rest of the diver is protected by the wetsuit and mask) while the divers pick their way inch by inch through the stuff.

I personally didn't have the pleasure of this experience, but I am told that to get the full effect you need to get out of the water afterward and have the seawater dry on the cuts. From the searcher's descriptions it sounds to me a bit like shaving with a year-old razor blade and then using the salt off your margarita glass as an aftershave. A tactile experience not to be missed, no doubt.

The second event of the month was the recovery of a drowning victim in Lake Morena. That detail went smoothly as the submerged person was found within moments of the first scuba diver hitting the water. Business as usual, or I should say as usual when there is a report from a witness or physical evidence which allows us to zero in on a reasonable "last known location."

Given the fact that underwater searches in limited visibility water are difficult under the best of circumstances, it is critical to the success of the operation that a high-probability search starting point and target area are established.

If at all humanly possible, any witness to a water accident or criminal activity should be brought back to the spot where the witness was located when he

or she saw the event occur. The witness is then asked to help direct a diver on the surface to the victim's location, or a vessel on the surface to

center of this particular small ocean was only 15 feet deep. Never mind, the team was fired up anyway by the chance to immediately use the winch



The first of two 10851's is winched from the water by SED's new pickup and 5,000 pound winch.

the sunken vessel's location.

People are notoriously inaccurate at judging distances over water, and placing an object similar in size and shape to the search object on the surface, and positioning it from the witness's perspective, is of invaluable help in increasing the chances of success and lowering the risk to the divers.

The third event of note for the month was the day the dive team got a two for one deal at Neptune's used car lot.

Upon request to look for a stolen 1986 280- Z, the team responded to a sand and gravel pit in the San Diego River valley in Lakeside. Immediately we were rewarded with a breathtaking view of a stunning jewel set in a watery panorama.

Sitting as pretty as any South Pacific coral atoll, the roof a Pinto jutted majestically through the placid surface from the bone-crushing depths.

OK, well maybe not as pretty as any coral atoll, and perhaps the water at the

on the newest SED vehicle, a shiny 4x4 pickup.

You can tell that the truck is very new to SED because it still even smells good inside, rather than having a faint (or not so faint) odor of wet dog, moldering dive gear, or lingering but persistent traces of various chemical agents. The winch worked like a champ and the Pinto was soon corralled; however upon running the numbers it was soon learned that it was not reported stolen and turned out only to be a case of illegal underwater parking (fathom five section of the CVC: vehicle in a fish loading zone).

After that initial excitement, the day turned from one of anticipation to one of slogging it out: dive tenders and safety divers baking their brains in 100+ degree heat and unrelenting sunshine (there was a South Pacific connection after all) while the search divers smacked into various assortments of junk in the

zero-visibility water (which bore a striking resemblance to very thin mud).

The tedium was relieved in the early afternoon with the discovery of a vehicle underwater near the east shore. Could it be Davey Jones' '86 Z-car? (Or the Padres pennant machine from '84?) It turned out to be a stolen 1986 Bronco, which proved for the second time in the day that you can lead a car named after a horse to water, but you can't make 'em float.

Shortly after the Bronco was refloated by the divers and lassoed, a search team off of the west shore came upon another submerged vehicle. Rather than being another sea horse, this one proved to be the elusive Z that started the whole thing. (Someone should

The past month was also an important one for the Underwater Search and Recovery Unit not only for things found, but for what we are losing. Sgt. McClintock is now Lt. McClintock, and Deputy Clark is now Sgt. Clark, so both are off to new assignments.

While both were affectionately known within the unit as non-diving beach vermin, Scott was instrumental in the successful formation and training of the reserve Underwater SAR, and continued to be a force in the diving lives of the regulars and reserves with his innovative training session suggestions which were exotica at its finest. Derek was our lines and rigging man and the guy to whom we entrusted our lives, and more importantly our



Deputy Tom Drake (in water) directs the removal of a 10851 280Z, the second of two 10851s recovered by the Sheriff's Dive Team.

probably tell the crook that "Z" is diver slang for a Zodiac inflatable boat, as there seems to be some confusion on the issue.)

The day ended with the Z, somewhat worse for the wear, being dragged out of the water. Tired but happy campers, the divers went home with two more little car silhouettes for the side of the dive boat.

precious dive gear, when we were jumping off of high things. They both will be missed.

Al Courtney and Chuck Hahn are off to put in some time in at other locations. Both are old salts on the team and they have more years of diving experience between them than most of us have years. They will also be sorely missed. Good luck on your new assignments guys.