

Terry Dwyer lives and breathes diving. Even though it takes heaps of time, money, and plenty of tedious work in archives, the sense of mystery surrounding a shipwreck tempts this professional Canadian into the depths again and again.

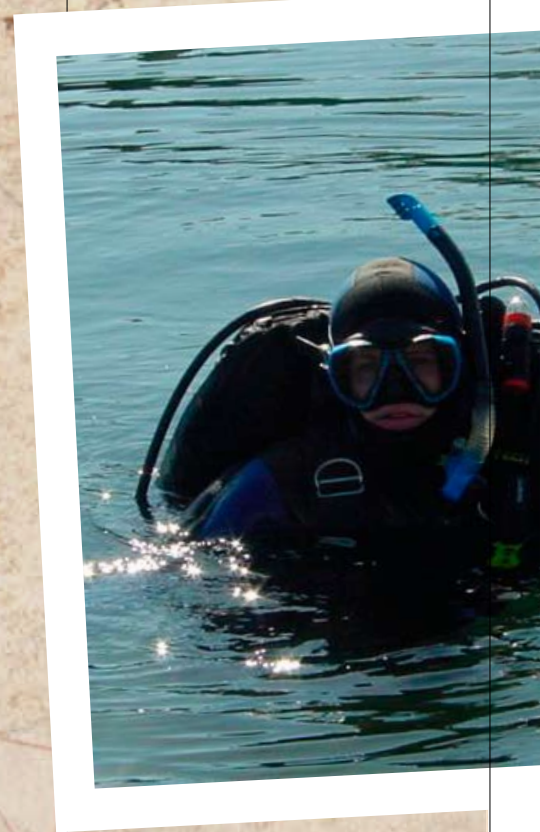
EXPLORING
the deeps

TEXT: MINNA TAKKUNEN

DWYER'S passion for adventure in deep water burns down the telephone line. Both an underwater explorer and entrepreneur, his story conveys that rare quality of focus that marks out the true enthusiast - someone who knows what they want and then devotes their whole life to it no matter what. His first book *Wreck Hunter - The Quest for Lost Shipwrecks* is now in its second edition. It is absorbing reading. Telling of the moment when he encountered a shipwreck for the first time while scuba diving, he describes the sense of mystery surrounding it. "It doesn't matter whether the wreck is resting on the bottom relatively intact, or whether it resembles an underwater junkyard - twisted metal with no recognizable shape or definition. Regardless of the state it's in, every shipwreck is a fascinating piece of history." His second book *Wreck Hunter - Tracking Treasure*, is due out in 2010.

You might think that having a passion for shipwreck hunting means just learning to dive and then spending a lot of time in the water, but Dwyer reveals that you also need to be ready to spend time working through archives. A plentiful supply of resilience helps. Finding shipwrecks takes lots of time, money, science and technology. And the legislation that regulates commercial archaeology and salvage from shipwrecks is by no means simple.

Besides working in the recreational and scientific diving industry for the past 30 years, Dwyer has also worked as a safety diver in several movie productions, specializing in underwater video production and photography. "Directors may know what they want to shoot, but they don't know how to dive," he says. In addition to working on the blockbuster →



Terry Dwyer returning from a dive on St. Paul Island [right].



Terry Dwyer prepares for a dive off St. Paul Island [above].

Titanic for a year, Dwyer has also worked with Hollywood greats such as **Harrison Ford** and **Sean Penn**.

By their nature, the disastrous events that lead to a vessel sinking make it difficult to find the wreck's exact location. If and when a well-publicised moment arrives, it can be that nothing is actually found. "Failure is always in full public view. And the irony is often that when you do find something, there's no one around," he chuckles.

Dwyer spent his childhood years in the eastern Canadian fishing and coalmining community of New Waterford, Nova Scotia. Watching Jacques Cousteau's documentaries in the late 1970s, he caught the diving bug.

He established his first business when he was just fifteen. As he cleaned propellers for fishermen, he cherished the idea of hunting for wrecks. To get a job, he practically stalked people working for a diving and shipwreck salvage company. After being turned away many times, he finally offered to work for free. Paid diving jobs and a successful career as an entrepreneur followed.

Nova Scotia's harsh and often unpredictable weather means it has one of the world's highest densities of shipwrecks. In addition to freezing rain, fog and fickle winds, hundreds of islands, shoals, reefs and partially-submerged rocks make navigating awkward and difficult. There are also peculiar phenomena such as the heavy, black sand in Aspy Bay, believed to be the reason why ship's magnetic compasses don't work as they should in that location.

Of the 10,000 or so shipwrecks known to have taken place in waters off Nova Scotia, only 5% have been located, visited or documented by divers. Even though the salt water and mud help preserve sunken ships, the forces wielded by Mother Nature can result in a wrecked vessel completely disintegrating over time.

As members of local communities wanted to make sure they had exclusive access to the money and jewels carried in wrecked ships, false lights were often used to distract and confuse passing ships, making it almost impossible for them to establish a vessel's whereabouts. According to Dwyer, this was a common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries. False lights were sometimes attached to cattle as a way of deceiving a ship into thinking it was on proper course.

Wrecks that lie in deep water present greater challenges, and require more training and equipment. The importance of safety cannot be overestimated. Divers who work at great depths have to undergo strict decompression routines as →

Suzie Dwyer at the helm of the "Black Pearl", a 24 foot zodiac [left].



Sambro Island, outside Halifax Harbour [above] and St. Paul Island [below].



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passion

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they return to the surface, stopping at specific depths for precise amounts of time to allow the excess nitrogen which has accumulated in their bloodstream during a dive to be eliminated without complications.

In Dwyer's opinion, we don't make mistakes in life, we only receive lessons, but one of these lessons almost cost him his life. Working on a deep-water shipwreck survey project in the early nineties, the survey boat's anchor and mooring

line broke free, and both Dwyer and his diving buddy were soon running out of air and time. Not being able to trace the anchor, they clipped themselves together, completed an in-water decompression while drifting down the harbour and eventually managed to return to the surface alive, despite a strong surface current.

Diving off St. Paul in Nova Scotia and discovering virgin shipwrecks was one the highlights in Dwyer's career. St. Paul Island is also called “Graveyard of the Gulf”. Nearly every place on the map of the island is named after a shipwreck. “The preservative qualities of the ice-cold water make the island a virtual time capsule of marine technology,” he says.

And it's the ice-cold water and strong currents that makes diving off St. Paul Island a huge team effort, one that requires discipline, skill and commitment. “You are totally dependent on the team. For me and my companions, lifelong memories and friendships were forged by the obstacles we overcame as a team.”

Many magical shipwrecks remain to be discovered – and they're on Dwyer's wish list. Even though they dive all year round in the freezing waters off Nova Scotia, winter is largely spent planning summer activities. A television series based on Dwyer's book is in the making and there are plans to shoot a documentary.

And yes, as you've probably guessed, he met his wife **Suzie**, also a professional diver, while diving. Their one-year-old daughter, **Holly** has already been exposed to the cold water, in Nova Scotia and the warm waters of the Caribbean. The next generation of shipwreck divers? “Oh yes, she's a water rat,” says her proud father.

But father is still learning. “After 30 years, every dive is different and I am still experiencing new things. That rush of excitement and the childlike sense of wonder that I experienced back in 1979 has never left me.” ●



Cape Race,
Newfoundland
[above].

