

CONTINUED FROM PART ONE:

http://andreasharp.com/ScubaDive_Shipyard_ASharp_Part1of2

What life was like in 1984 at a World War II ship yard as it was going through the labor pains of an impending renaissance – from the point of view of somebody who got to tag along with some scuba divers and work there a couple times. Since then, much of the city's blight has been replaced with new businesses, upscale apartment buildings and condominiums, and safe places to berth yachts.

DOWN AT THE SHIP YARD

Part Two of Two

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1984

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MONDAY

By about 9:00 in the morning, we had the van in order and were suited up, on our way to the ship yard once again, engrossed in a conversation—when Dan remembered the flashlights. They were still at his house sitting on a counter in his garage. He said it wasn't worth going back for them and, having never dived at the ship yard before, I had no reason to disagree. But his strong unsolicited reassurance made me wonder what was in store.

"There's nothing down there. Don't worry." I was trying not to when he told me the last time he took a new diver with him, he got about half way down, turned back around, and never tried again.

The water was about 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Even with a wet suit, it takes some determined concentration to force yourself into water that cold. The slip next to the drained one we'd be working on was open and full of bay water. We descended its concrete stairs and started kicking around to the front of the other. Several men in hard hats and heavy jackets were lined up on the upper walkway watching us, sort of the way people look down at beggars on a street—sympathetically but not understanding.

And, like a beggar, I was suffering. The water was as filthy as it was cold. My legs were already starting to ache. I was longing to let the weight I was lugging pull me below. But I remembered to try to enjoy myself.

"Nice view of San Francisco," I thought. It was true. No moisture, dust or haze obscured an angle of the San Francisco skyline I'd never seen before. The 52

stories of the Bank of America building formed a perfectly proportioned black backdrop for the Transamerica Spire.

Dan had to wait for me, the sightseeing, sputtering slowpoke. When I caught up with him, kicking and trying to keep water out of my mouth by breathing through my snorkel, I heard him say, "Now just hang on and don't get scared. We're gonna go down and mark the tire with this." He was holding the twine and empty bleach bottle. "I'll go slow."

But he was ready to go as I fumbled with my snorkel, my regulator, and my mask. I fumbled with the gear that I hoped would keep me alive 30 feet under water.

Dan kept his promise. Slowly, I turned myself upside down, submitting at last to the weight of my tank and weight belt with a sigh. It was like sliding into a vat of liquid aquamarine quartz crystal that burst into clouds of flat silver pearls every time I exhaled.

But five feet deeper, darkness saturated light and color. I checked my grip on Dan's wrist, cleared my ears, and fell another five feet. Dan faded into a dark shadow and then disappeared completely. I could not see. I blinked, stretched my eyes wide open, and waited for them to adjust to the darkness. But several minutes later, I was still blind. There was no light at all.

The only sound was the hiss of inhaling and the rumble of exhaling air—meaningless noise that provided no information about what was happening around me. My sense of taste, not that it mattered now, was overpowered by filthy saltwater. I focused my sense of touch, the only one left, on Dan's tugs and not on the bite of the chilly water. My sense of direction might have been limited to up and down if there'd been much pull from gravity. Sightless, we figured out up, down, sideways by groping our way along a concrete or metal ridge of the caisson, two or three feet above the bottom of the bay.

We stopped. Dan was moving, but I couldn't see what he was doing. Then he pulled my hand forward, placing my palm on the curve of the tire. I explored it with my hands, then moved to lie across it, stretching both arms out. My fingers barely touched the opposite edges.

A moment later, I realized I didn't know where Dan was. He could have been a foot away. He may have ascended. I had no way of knowing. I listened to myself breathe. I gripped the lip of the tire. I kicked slightly to keep from drifting. I wondered how I might go about looking for my partner.

Then he bumped me, managed to find my hand, and held it above my head. He was trying to tell me to ascend, but I didn't understand. He tugged on my hand again, preparing to go up. I still didn't respond. Then I heard a human

voice--faint, but somehow audible--that could only have been saying, "Up!" Embarrassed, I started wiggling upward.

From the blackness emerged a hint of dark blue. A silhouette of Dan's hooded and masked head separated itself from the black water. A few more feet, enough light penetrated the water to turn it green and illuminate the mud and particles floating about. The bubbles appeared, small at first and growing as they gurgled away. Ten feet from the surface, we were back in the blue-green aquarium. With less water above us than below, we were suddenly pushed faster toward the film of light that danced above us—a fragile sealing between two universes. A second later, we'd shattered it and returned to light, to air, to color, to sound—to our familiar earth.

Six of the ship yard workers stood above us. "We got it," Dan informed them and, pulling the bleach bottle above the tire, told them where to drop the hook.

It looked even bigger than it had on Saturday when I watched it from the caisson. It moved so smoothly, so precisely, that it made no splash when it broke the surface of the water. The twisted, rusty rope and three thick chains followed. The fourth chain, the one that had snapped off the shackle, was tangled in a heavy knot. The end of it hung about ten feet above the ends of the others. It too disappeared.

Dan and I kicked over to the chain. "Ready?" Dan asked. I was. We worked our way down the chain, placing one hand under the other like children on a baseball bat vying for ups, but upside down.

The chains looked even bigger under water. We moved by them link by link, then passed the enormous knot where the light faded. We were willfully falling into that foreign black world once again. By touch, we found the tire and the hook. We resurfaced twice to adjust it. At last, it was secured to the tire.

Treading water, we moved away to witness the delivery of this ghastly treasure. The chains crept out of the murky water one link at a time. Then the knot appeared, the shackles, the rope, the top of the hook and, at last, the tire, coated white with shell, dripping with water and mud as it swung limply away to be deposited on the platform.

The first job was done.

When we returned five hours later, with the flashlights this time, the dry dock was full of water, and the ship had come in. It was a sonar, used for oceanography, I was told. It took up about half the length of the dock.

The crane was busy, as usual, but not with the hook this time. It dangled what looked like the bottom half of a bright yellow telephone booth to transport uniformed people from the ship to the platform. There was no gangplank.

Rudy joined Dan and me beside the van as we donned our equipment. "The instrumentation panel hangs about 30 inches from the bottom of the ship," he told us, using a thick stub of chalk to draw an illustration on the concrete with the precision of an architect. "We think it's in the right place, but we want to make sure the instrumentation panel doesn't hit the keel blocks when we drain the dock."

Neither Dan nor Rudy had seen the bottom of the ship before, not even a drawing. We'd be working from Dan and Rudy's imagination and Dan's memory of the chalk blueprint Rudy drew on Saturday. I eyed the ship, the dry dock, and the water with trepidation I couldn't completely conceal. Dan fidgeted like a racehorse ready to blast out of the gate.

Loaded with our stiff wetsuits and heavy equipment, we plodded heavily down the cement stairs, each with a plastic four-inch flashlight hanging on string from a wrist. When the stairs disappeared into the gray-green water, we began kicking and slowly made our way to the middle of the port side of the ship. Rudy tossed down one end of a tow line. We locked wrists and turned to pike dive our way under the vessel.

I was disoriented at five feet below. This wasn't like diving straight down the firm wall of the caisson. This time we were moving, awkwardly, in a downward curve along the side of the ship. It was dark much sooner too; inside the dock, even less light penetrated that immense black void that cut us off from my life's version of planet earth: color, light, sound, air, north, south, planes, lines, shape, sense, order.

The flashlights were worthless, barely illuminating a misty cylinder of water about a foot long and no more than eight inches wide where the blackness consumed it. I pressed mine against the side of the ship and saw an area, about four inches wide, covered with rust and slime. And I caught glimpses of Dan or the towline jiggling through the faint beam. For a split second, it would hang weightlessly, curled and twisted one way. The next second, it seemed to defy time and jump somewhere else. It was distracting; I turned the light off.

With gloved hands, we groped along the contour of the ship, sucking in air like blind babies. I couldn't see Dan. I couldn't see any keel blocks. I couldn't see an instrumentation panel. I couldn't even see the enormous ship I was touching.

It was too late to matter now, and I knew that, but I recall thinking, "What am I doing here? Where's the towline? What am I gonna get tangled on? Which is the length of the boat? Which is the width? Which way would I go to ascend? Are

we moving up now? Yes. How can we be moving up when we're underneath a ship? How far can we go? And what's up there? Why didn't we plan this? We're moving down again now, I think."

Waving my arms in front of me and kicking through the blackness, I followed Dan in an upward curve. Our tanks unexpectedly collided with the ship somehow and I turned my flashlight on as if it would help me figure out where we were. It didn't. We stopped for a moment and it dawned on me that we could have been anywhere under the enormous vessel and I couldn't begin to guess which way we'd come.

But Dan guided us, how I don't know, up along the curve of the ship again. I could see a vague outline of my gloves. We were at the surface suddenly—a few feet from where we'd descended.

"What happened?" I started grilling Dan for answers as soon as I could get the regulator out of my mouth. "How did you know where we were? How'd you get us back here?"

Dan, unflappable as usual, pondered what he'd just discovered. "There's a hole under there. Remember when we started going up?" I nodded. "That's where it was."

"What'd we run into?"

"I don't know. Some lip hangs down and we were in between that and the rest of the ship I think."

Thirty feet above us, the men in hard hats stood with bends in their necks staring at us. Dan called, "Rudy, you sure that thing is right here?" Rudy was sure. Dan handed me a wad of the towline, said, "Hang onto this and let it out slow," and disappeared.

The rest of us waited. And waited. At last, Dan emerged. "You sure that thing's down here?" Rudy was sure. Dan checked again. We waited. "What's it shaped like?" A dome, according to Rudy, that hangs 30 inches below the bottom of the ship. Dan disappeared. We waited. "Is it by the bow?" he returned to ask. Rudy didn't think so. We kicked down to the bow anyway. Dan checked the keel blocks. Still no instrumentation panel.

An hour passed and the sky started dripping like deep, ice-blue watercolor. The cement wall of the dry dock was covered with mussels from the waterline all the way up to the platform where the men, standing side by side like cowboys on the horizon, stared down. Opposite them was the immense wall of the ship with its portholes, lifelines, and jagged topside. I waited in the moat in between, treading water. In that black wet suit, I could have been some slimy sea-creature

whose bulging eyes and head bobbed above the water like a buoy. I looked at the sky and pretended I was a nymph in a Maxfield Parish painting.

Somebody tossed a rope down from the ship and yelled, gruffly but kindly, "You can hang onto this if you want." I appreciated it, but the very idea of not treading water to keep my blood moving made me colder than I already was.

"Thanks anyway," I called back and added, "But anybody got a T.V. Guide?"

It was getting late. And colder. The sky wasn't a high dome of blue anymore. It came right down and hugged the water--black and reflecting the warm, yellow lights of the ship yard. The men in hard hats were violet silhouettes. The stars were intense torches of ice. No clouds. No smog.

We'd been waiting more than two hours when Dan finally came up for the last time, relieved and exasperated. "It was right there the whole time. I didn't know that was it." As we kicked back to the stairs to pull off our fins and climb up to the platform, Dan assured Rudy that everything was fine.

As if to greet us, San Francisco was glowing like a fairy tale on the other side of the bay, a fading band of indigo cuddling it like a blanket. I pulled off my tank and took a long, grateful look at the view, rejuvenated. Or was it reborn?

As I jumped on my numb feet, I didn't care whether anybody heard me exhale the words, "Not a bad way to make a little money."

But Dan smiled through shivering teeth and said, "I can think of worse ways."

Five minutes later, thawing out very slowly, I was happy to be rolling out of that warship Brobdinagia toward some warm shelter. Home.

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