

Lifelo

Butch Hendrick demonstrates the use of a left-hand-configured octopus in the pool.

ong Lifeguard

By Ethan Gordon

As a young boy growing up in Connecticut, Walt “Butch” Hendrick Jr. was constantly in trouble – so much so that his mother mandated that his father, Walt Hendrick Sr. (NAUI 391), not let him out of his sight. Butch’s dad owned a dive shop, taught scuba, trained scuba instructors and, eventually, went on to work at NAUI and become its National Training Director. So from an early age, Butch was constantly around scuba diving activities. When Butch was 12, his father took him to the Boston Sea Rovers show, where he distinctly remembers watching famed underwater explorer and department store heir Peter Gimbel win the coveted Diver of the Year Award. When he returned from that trip, he told his mom, “I’m going to win that one day.” She dismissively replied: “You’re perpetually in trouble. You’re failing classes. You’re going to carry someone else’s tanks and swab the deck!”

Not long after that, the family picked up and moved to Puerto Rico, where the elder Hendrick ran a dive operation at the Conquistador Hotel in Fajardo. It was at this bright young age that Butch started helping with the family business. He’d help guide the tourists they brought snorkeling and scuba diving every day. When he wasn’t at school or helping with dive operations, he was a lifeguard and a surfer. He spent a lot of time hanging out around a favorite beach among surfers, the Condado strip, near Old San Juan on the northern coast.

While surfing at Condado, Butch noticed that a lot of the tourists didn’t know when it was safe to enter the surf. As a result, a lot of them needed rescuing from the high surf and dangerous undertows. It was here that he organized his first lifeguard team, the Condado Rescue Team, and invented and perfected his technique, which he named the “do-si-do,” for towing exhausted swimmers back out of the surf. The maneuver

involved hooking arms with the tired swimmer and towing him or her back to shore, all the while with the ability to give rescue breaths if needed.

By the time Butch was 18, he had already earned a reputation on the island as a go-to guy for leading groups of divers. Whenever a hotel needed help with an extra-large group, they called Butch. He was known as someone who really knew how to take care of people in the water. After spending several years in the U.S. Navy, he returned to Puerto Rico, where he picked up where he had left off, helping keep divers safe in and out of the water.

His interest in diver safety led him to attend talks all over the U.S. on the topic. What he learned was that a lot of the diver safety experts talked about “hypothetical” practices. He’d ask the experts question after question and wasn’t satisfied with the answers he received. He believed that they weren’t practical in the real world. So Butch took it upon himself to develop his own diver rescue techniques. He became a NAUI Instructor (NAUI 1724) in 1967. At NAUI’s very first International Conference on Underwater Education in 1969, he introduced his do-si-do technique to sport diving. It was an instant hit, and what started as a single morning demonstration in the pool became a series of one-hour demos lasting all day long. He was overwhelmed with the response from the industry, and that motivated him to develop and share more techniques.

Butch then developed techniques on how to use an octopus properly, get divers to the surface safely, and transition into the do-si-do to transport divers back to the shore or boat. Seeing a growing interest in diver safety throughout the industry, Butch began marketing his services and formed his first business, Underwater Horizons. With this business, he soon found himself traveling the world in his mid-20s, training dive operators

in his diver-rescue techniques. It was in these years that he developed his ideas for the very first recreational rescue diver course that he would create for NAUI. He also created the first emergency oxygen administration classes and wrote a book, *Oxygen and the Scuba Diver*, which the Divers Alert Network sold before developing its own materials. Business was booming. Butch was booked a solid six months in advance. In the words of Jim Brown (NAUI 6186), who had replaced the elder Hendrick as NAUI National Training Director, Butch was “living the dream.”

The Birth of Team Lifeguard Systems Inc.

Butch moved to New York around the time he turned 30. Despite his young age, he had already cemented a position as one of the country’s leading experts on recreational diver safety. Like many others who were early pioneers in public safety diving, Butch would frequently volunteer to recover drowned bodies. Forty-five years ago, this was largely how it was done: Recreational-diver volunteers would go out and find the body. “The downside of this,” Butch recalls, “is that most of these volunteer recreational divers didn’t have a clue how to execute a search, let alone stay safe in these limited-visibility, obstruction-filled environments.”

There was one particular incident Butch recalls that really rocketed his public safety diving career to the forefront. There was a missing little girl who was suspected to have drowned in northern New Jersey. The local fire rescue team had been searching for her for two days without success. So Butch drove up there, tied off a wreck reel to his truck parked at the water’s edge, and began his search. He located the unfortunate girl in zero visibility in less than an hour. The local fire chief was so impressed that he asked Butch if he could train the team. Butch designed a protocol for executing a search, but one that didn’t require tying off to a stationary object like a truck. Instead, teams would run a search with the diver tethered to a tender on shore. After training that chief’s team, he trained another and another, and his public safety diving career grew almost overnight. He became a regular speaker at firefighter conferences and scuba shows.

At the same time he was presenting at these shows, he would attend other experts’ talks and was still frustrated by where they were getting their information. It seemed to him that they developed techniques based on “something they heard someone say works” rather than getting in the water and developing and testing techniques themselves. One example was at a firefighting conference where an expert stated as if it were fact, “If a firefighter falls in the water while dressed in full turnout gear, they’ll drown in under



Photo by Andrea Zaferes of Team Lifeguard Systems

90 seconds.” Butch and future fire chief Ray Downey (who would lead his men into ground zero on 9/11) took this as a challenge. They dressed in full turnout gear and jumped in the East River, where they floated around for 45 minutes unable to sink but more likely to suffer the ill effects of hypothermia. It turned out that since the turnout gear had waterproof seams, it trapped all of the air inside of it, serving as natural flotation.

This proved to Butch once and for all that the experts on water safety had little experience; he had to go out and prove or disprove these things himself. This eventually led him to create more than 20 courses for public safety divers that cover myriad topics, including search and recovery, rescues both above and below the ice, drysuit diving for public safety divers, diving full face masks, diving in rivers and swift water, and many more.

Murder She Wrote

Many years before, Butch had trained a 16-year-old girl who was enrolled in one of his recreational diver rescue classes. She went on to attend school at



PSD divers from the Beaver Falls Fire Department Underwater Rescue Recovery dive team in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, practice the Hendrick hand signals for black-water contingency.

the University of Michigan, where she was deeply involved in the scuba program, teaching alongside the likes of Dr. Lee Sommers and Karl Huggins. (See the previous issue of *Sources* for the article on the diving program at Wright State University.) Upon her graduation, Dr. Sommers recommended that she contact Butch to continue her diving career. And that is how Andrea Zaferes re-entered Butch's life in 1987. Who knew then that she'd go on to become the vice president of Team Lifeguard Systems Inc.?

She became an Instructor (NAUI 10533) and excelled at search-and-recovery training. Together, she and Butch became widely known as the experts in body recovery. They've spoken in front of just about every law enforcement conference you can imagine and still travel the world speaking on the topic. In Butch's traditional manner, they don't just talk about their craft; they do it. They've been involved in hundreds of recoveries, but what they discovered through the course of these recoveries was disturbing.

"There was one case about 38 years ago," Butch recalls, "where I located a little girl's body that

should not have been where I found her. It was a physical impossibility for her body to be where it was. I couldn't convince the police that this was suspicious, but it got me to thinking. I believe that a large number of the child drownings we encounter are homicides, not accidents." While that specific police department may not have wanted to hear it, many others did. Butch and Andrea were called upon to do a talk on the subject, and it spread throughout the law enforcement community like wildfire.

Andrea excelled in this topic and is now the only expert certified by law enforcement in drowning by homicide and aquatic death syndrome. She has worked hundreds of cases and, as a result, has sent a lot of people to jail and solved a lot of cold cases. She now travels the world lecturing on the subject and working homicide cases in which she searches for evidence and re-enacts how the death may have occurred.

Where Will the Industry Go From Here?

Now, more than 40 years after the company started, Butch and Andrea have grown Team Lifeguard Systems into one of the most successful public safety diving training organizations in the world, but Butch is still concerned about the future. "Some training agencies crank out public safety diving instructors," he says. "This is serious training and should not be evaluated on how quickly or cheaply you can obtain the certification. What we're seeing now are teams that have been 'trained' but really don't know how to do anything at the level they should."

NAUI shares this concern, which is why it has taken time to review, revise and continually refine its PSD training program by working with NAUI leaders like Butch and Andrea to leverage their knowledge and years of experience to make NAUI PSD courses the standard for quality. At the end of the day, Butch hasn't strayed far from his roots as the diving and surfing teenager who helped rescue and guide countless people in the waters around Puerto Rico. "I see myself as a guy that takes care of people," he says. "I teach people to love scuba diving and how to take care of each other and be safe. Don't do dumb stuff – that will happen all by itself."

Walt Hendrick Sr. received the Boston Sea Rovers Diver of the Year Award in 1985. Six years later, Butch was awarded the same honor, making the Hendricks the first and only father-and-son pair to have won one of diving's most prestigious awards. So much for his mother's warning – or perhaps as a result of it.