

THE DESERT SHIELD DIVER



Steve Collins
United States Navy Diver

Well known Fresno-based photographer, Steve Collins, served as a diver in the United States Navy. This calling started at a very early age.

When I was twelve years old, my life was an exciting adventure everyday. I would go snorkeling all day long at Coes Pond in Worcester, Massachusetts. I remember watching my favorite television show, Sea Hunt with Lloyd Bridges and I also liked watching Flipper. There was just something about those shows that had me hooked. I watched Lloyd Bridges, and said to myself, “wow, someday that will be me.”

I remember going downtown in Worcester Massachusetts and in the store window of McBen’s Sporting goods they had a scuba tank with a double hose regulator in the front window. My brother Paul knew the people at McBen’s and they told him I could be certified at age 15 with a parent’s signature. I was looking forward to that for three years.

On my fifteenth birthday, I came home with the paperwork to go get certified but my Dad said “No”. He said it was too dangerous and he would not sign the release (This was coming

from a bombardier in a B-17 during WW II). I remained angry for next two years and when I turned seventeen my brother Paul and I went to Inland Divers in Leicester, Massachusetts to be certified. My first open water dive was in another pond —Comet Pond. My first Ocean dive was in Rockport, Mass, and it was snowing like hell that day. It was so cool, and I just loved it.

While there, at Inland divers, I spoke with a United States Navy diver and he said, “if you like diving, don’t join the Navy because you won’t like diving. You’ll dive every day and it will be work.” Of course, I went to the recruiter the next day and joined the U.S. Navy and became a driver. I loved it. It was 1982.

Being stationed at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii for second-class diver training was the toughest thing I ever did. Following that I was transferred to the



“Going through Customs, they asked if we had any drugs or weapons — absolutely not. Then one of the agents opened bag full of machine guns; that was hairy for awhile.”

submarine Tender USS Fulton, AS-11 in New London, CT. It was the last US Navy ship with teak decks. When I got there, the ship was in the Boston shipyard, so they sent me across the river to the Groton sub base. I asked a chief diver where the Fulton divers were. He leaned on my car and said, “Are you my new diver?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Second question, do you drink beer?”

Reluctantly, I said “yes.”

He said great we’d get along fine

I was attached to the submarine base dive locker and we dove everyday. I got my wish. I made many good friends there. The Master at sub-base was MDV Ray Straining. I also worked for MDV Steve Letcher at the Submarine escape training tank. The escape training was cool, we would train potential submariners to escape from submarines but the best part was making free dives to the bottom at 118 feet.

The Master Diver on the Fulton was Clifford Jones. And after a year, I found out the ship was to deploy to Scotland. I was looking forward to it but Master Diver Jones had other plans. He needed first class divers, so he pulled me aside and made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. He said, “Buckwheat, rarely in a Master Divers life can he do something like this and repay someone that has been a good worker. I know you want to go to Scotland. But I have an opportunity to send you to first class dive school. First class is mixed gas hardhat diving.” I really wanted to go to Scotland, but coming from the pond, first class school was the opportunity of lifetime.

Opposite Top to bottom: 1: A student enters the water with his feet tied. This is called “drownproofing” With Drownproofing it is possible to survive almost indefinitely with minimal effort. You don’t even need to know how to swim.. 2: Instructor Mike Pannone dogs out marines during Physical Training. 3: More students with feet tied for drown proofing. 4: Instructor Dunkin inspects students gear.

Top Right: Steve Collins on station off the coast of Isreal with M-60 machine gun in 1990.

Right: Dressed out in the old mk-V diving rig (1982).

So, in 1985, I attended a first class school in Panama City. I loved everything about it. Boy was it rough, more schooling than physical. After school I went back to work for Clifford Jones as a diving supervisor. When I left CT, I talked to the diving detailer who asked me where I wanted to go. He said I could go anywhere in the world except San Diego, so back I went to Pearl Harbor, this time as an instructor. The first time I dove in Pearl, it was surreal to think about where I was and what had happened here. Seeing the ships on the bottom was a vivid reminder. I lived on Ford Island, which took the brunt of the attack.

I was an instructor in Hawaii, and we would train the Navy Coast Guard basic hard scuba diving. But the scuba training was taught to Navy Submariners, Army Special Forces, Marine Recon, Air force Combat control and Para-Rescue. The way it worked was we would have 30 spots open in the class, and they



“A good Navy is not a provocation to war. It is the surest guaranty of peace.” (President Theodore Roosevelt)

*“The second time I was named
‘The Unknown Terror’.*



would split the classes between these forces. The marines couldn't get enough people qualified. We came up with MTT, Mobile Training Team. So, instead of the marines sending 5 students to a class, we would send a team of three instructors to train 35 students. It brought them up to speed quickly. During pool week we would have an additional instructor come over.

We would train at Camp Swab and Camp Hansen Marine Corp. We used the pool at Kadina Air Force Base, and we used the re-compression chamber, in Subic Bay, Philippines, to test their ability to withstand pressure and oxygen toxicity. During training, we had to stop because there was a military coup against the government. The sh*& hit the fan, bad.

Our training was stopped immediately. All the guys I was with had to go secure the airport. It's funny watching the armed forced TV and CNN, and what I knew was happening was all so different. After it all settled down, we flew commercial and landed in Osaka. Going through Customs, they asked if we had any drugs or weapons — absolutely not. Then one of the agents opened bag full of machine guns; that was hairy for a while. Then his supervisor came over and zipped the bags up and said, “I didn't see nothing.” He didn't want the hassle.

I was in a mobile training team in Okinawa. I was the Command Photographer in Hawaii and Okinawa. The Marines students always gave instructors nicknames, and I was called “The Shark with a Camera.” The second time I was named “The Unknown Terror.”

We went to Okinawa, in 1989, and the students had heard horror stories about Instructor Collins who could hold his breath for eighteen minutes. Well, one night we drank a whole lot of San Miguel beers at twenty-five cents each, followed by a Coke with ice made from bad water. I was sick for days and couldn't get in the pool so

Top: Helocast jumping out of helicopter with 3rd Recon Batallion.

Middle: Diving operations off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, in December of 1989.


Below: Me with my old submarine rescue capsule. I was the pilot of the Sunbird ASR-15 rescue capsule from April 1990 to September 1991. I saw the capsule again when I went to visit my son Justin who was serving in the Navy and stationed in Hawaii.

“We went to Okinawa, and the students had heard horror stories about Instructor Collins who could hold his breath for eighteen minutes.”

I had to run topside that week. The students called me the “The Unknown Terror” because they never experienced me in the pool...I could hold my breath at four minutes back then.

From there I went back to Hawaii. I was teaching at Pearl Harbor, hardhat diving. And I met a student, Michael Tone. He was big and his first go round he failed and nobody wanted to tell him. Being the lead instructor that week and I had to tell him. They all thought I would get my butt kicked. But he came back and passed the next time around, the top of the class. In the meant time, he and I had become friends. To make a long story short, he introduced me to his sister in 1990, and we are still happily married.

In 1990, I took orders on the SS Sunbird, ASR-15, a submarine rescue ship. As a side note, the food sucked, it was just horrible. We deployed to the Mediterranean and there, along with being a diver, I was the ship’s photographer and the head of the assault team. We were assigned to monitor the Suez Canal during Desert Shield but were brought home prior to Desert Storm.

I got out of the Navy in 1991 to pursue my dream of photography. I miss the Navy sometimes but I don’t miss the food or the months away from home. I still cherish the bonds with my shipmates, many of whom I still communicate with, and friends I now have like Master Diver Fernando Lugo, who was on the sea lab project with a dive to 1,025 FSW. I’ll never forget my years as “The Shark with a Camera.” 

STEVE COLLINS | Photographer



Former
NAVY

Deep Sea Diver & Photographer

Photography for advertising & public relations
Custom Photographic wall murals any size!

AIRPORTS • BUSINESS • BASES & HOMES



Specializing in 3D and Lenticular

Worldwide service then and now

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY CAPABILITIES

1419 M. Street Fresno, California 93721 • steve@3dmural.com • www.3dmural.com

 **STEVE COLLINS**
PHOTOGRAPHER

559.355.3818