

October 2015 post

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Twenty-Three Years – Chris and Chrissy Rouse

By Joel Silverstein

Something was not right today. I've been off center and unfocused. I'm getting things done, but something was gnawing at me and then as has happened for more than two decades I remember. And now take the pause. The kids are off from school this week for fall break; I have all of two days off as well from ASU. We have been slammed all season diving on the B-29 Bomber in Lake Mead, Kathy is busy managing all of our lives and then we come to the anniversary of the passing of Chris and Chrissy Rouse. Today marks twenty-three years.

Since 1993, I have written a memorial for two young men who died a grisly death while doing what they loved. I've posted messages like this on web boards, and blogs for almost as long as these men have been gone. It is a guidepost. It is the a reminder of where we have been, how far we have come, and how much more work we still need to do in the areas of technical diving. Some have voiced their opinion that these reminders and memorials I share have grown old. Some are clueless to why we remember, and yet others appreciate the reminder.

The past few years have seen the demise of divers and other good friends. Losing all those people in one's life takes its toll. It becomes a continuous reminder of the important things in life.

Over the past few weeks, there have been reminders for the California divers to be careful this lobster season. Last year there were five fatalities while bug hunting. I do not understand why hunting for a grocery item becomes deadly. However,, then again it could be similar to "china fever" that East Coast divers get from time to time when diving the big wrecks like the Andrea Doria. The memorial post about Chris and Chrissy Rouse serves as a foundation of the work in dive safety that will always need to be done.

On that fate-filled Columbus Day weekend in 1992 many divers had gathered in Philadelphia for the NAUI International Conference on Underwater Education (ICUE). A type of conference where divers shared their knowledge not just their selfies. For diving, 1992 was not a good year. More than ten fatalities occurred across the country. Unlike those California lobster diver deaths, these were all from technical diving. Around the USA, there were deaths at, Alachua Sink, FL, on the Andrea Doria, off Nantucket. And, the shipwrecks Arundo, NJ, and the Chester Polling, in Massachusetts. Plus there were fatalities at Devil's Ear, FL, and La Jolla Canyon in California. In addition to the U.S. fatalities, there were deaths in Europe. There were also some regionally close injuries in June, on the U-Who, a DCI blowup. In August that summer on the Andrea Doria another

DCI blowup. Out in Lake Jocassee, NC an o2 toxicity issue. However, what was about to ensue was two fatalities that would stand out and place our diving community in a standstill.

My [then] magazine Sub Aqua and my colleague Michael Menduno's magazine [then] aquaCORPS assembled a special panel to discuss the issues of technical diving. The panel included many of the divers and trainers who were at the vanguard of the technical diving movement. The panel included; Menduno, Chowdhury, Garvin, Hendrick, Bielenda, Deans, Betts, Bohrer, Butler, Hamilton, Mount, Emmerman, Gilliam, Lander, Cush, and me as an organizer. There were more than 250 seasoned and novice divers in attendance. The room was at standing capacity. Some divers had decades of experience, others with mere months. We discussed issues that were important to life and survival underwater with this new thing called technical diving.

During the next day, small groups gathered to discuss particular concerns and expand on what we had discussed the day earlier. We were encouraged by the work we had done. We planned to continue examining and refining the work in the future as this was just the beginning. It was a cold and rainy weekend in Philadelphia. However, we were warm and comfortable embraced by the city of independence and hope. While we were finishing, our meetings others were out diving. The dive season on the East Coast was still active, especially for the hardcore wreck divers.

As we sipped our coffee during brunch two young men, a father and son team were 235 feet below the surface off the coast of New Jersey were struggling to live. They were diving on the recently found U-Who submarine (U-869.) While they gasped for breath, we were laughing. While a father tried to save his son, we were planning our next adventure. And, while the courageous crew and passengers onboard the Seeker tried to breathe life back into them we thought the work we had done this weekend was good.

Barb Lander, (one of our panelists) had left the conference Saturday evening to be on that dive trip. A registered nurse, she saw the death of one, and then soon death of the other, firsthand. Another panelist, Cathie Cush, who had lost her long time lover that summer, was best friends with Sue Rouse, who has just lost her husband and son. Glenn Butler and Dr. Bill Hamilton were at the hyperbaric chambers that were treating Chris Sr. Except we did not know any of this happened until we got home that evening. Cell phones were rare and text messaging would not even begin to be used until late that year. But as many of us walked into our homes, the phones were ringing, and e-mails on Compuserve were making the rounds. The news hit home.

I did not know the two men who died. I had heard their names and may have met them once, but that need not matter. By default, they were friends. I did not have to know them personally to understand how they caressed life. Since that weekend in 1992 I have lost way too many friends to diving. Some were acquaintances, some very dear friends. Some that make me wonder why we continue to do these dives and others that just make me wonder. The pivotal ones for me, were Steve Berman, Tony Maffatone, Rod Farb, and Steve Donothan. In 2009, I lost my friends Capt. Zero and Paul Blanchette and Joyce

Haywood (medical reasons). In 2010, there were the deaths of Yasuko Okada and Wes Skiles. In 2011, there was Mike LaPrade, and my dear mentor Dr. Bill Hamilton. Shortly after Dr. Bill came and Peter Hess in January 2012, that year we also lost Debra Green and my dear friend Dr. Ed Campbell. This past spring we lost Capt. Hank Garvin, the gathering at his service was a who's who of the wreck diving world, all there out of respect. Many of these deaths were from diving, some from medical reasons. There have been other diving fatalities as well around the world that I had not mentioned, but their losses are significant as well.

I have also seen many divers get hurt from decompression sickness, oxygen toxicity, and gas embolism. Most survived with little to no permanent damage, some still struggle with each day's basic needs. Each one leaves an indelible mark that requires, that mandates that I continue to succeed on my trail of being the best I can be at this craft.

As I go on dive boats now and watch divers, who do not know who I am or where I have been, I interact less and less with them. While listening to them discuss dive plans and profiles with a cavalier attitude, I shake my head in wonder. I might ask how long they have been diving only to find they have only accumulated a pile of equipment and many certification cards, but never really have dived. And it's not only tech divers it is recreational divers as well. I had a conversation this morning in the gym with a visitor who talked all about his rebreather but came to town for two months without dive gear. How does someone go where there is diving available and not bring their gear? It offers a moment of pause.

The view from my office has changed over the years. I have become seasoned and cautious. Some of the new divers seek me out for advice and tutelage. Some of the older professionals pass ideas and discuss challenges with me for a different viewpoint. Today's diver scares me. Just like early tech divers like myself (then) scared those who came before us. Note that of the panelists I listed above, all are still alive except Dr. Hamilton and Capt. Hank Garvin. Some of us are still very active in technical diving; some have retired from diving altogether. I have been in technical diving since 1990; it is still very exciting, and I still do it. Though for me, technical diving is just diving with different tools. About a year or so ago, my friend Dick Long said "you don't need to do those big dives anymore; you have greater responsibilities." He may be right.

Twenty-three years have passed since Chris and Chrissy Rouse died. Since then, there have been two books written, a documentary filmed, and a feature film buried in development, and yet more friends and acquaintances keep passing away. We know beyond any doubt that technical diving is dangerous that the oceans and caves are alien environments, and we are just guests.

While equipment rarely fails, we know that men and women fail at the point when they can no longer perform. Many of you who are reading this know that some divers will be left behind. It is not because we want them to be, but because the sea will take them. If you do not know this brutal fact, then, this is the time for your wake-up call.

This past year, as in previous years, there have been accidents and fatalities. The fatalities in both open and closed circuit diving continue to be out of hand. There will be more- but there should be none. We have the tools, techniques, and knowledge to prevent diving fatalities. We try to analyze and synthesize the data from accidents in the search for more information in the hopes we learn something. Some in the community demand information in the unearned right to have it when an incident occurs. They just may have to wait. In the meantime take a moment and realize that the last time you came back from a dive you were lucky.

At 56, I take a different approach to diving. While more than capable of still doing the bad-ass hardcore work, I take great pleasure in introducing people to the big wrecks in a healthy environment. This past season was spent at 110 feet on the B-29 Bomber. It distracted me from some of the bigger sites around the country. However, this one has historical significance and is limited in access. Some wonder why our rules are so strict for a “shallow” dive. Though the seasoned pros who come out seem to thank me for keeping it safe.

On that weekend in 1992 I met my magnificent wife, Kathy. Since then our lives have taken us to many fabulous places and have given us our wonderful children, Jane, and Jona. Moreover, as we survive the loss of many friends and family, it brings us closer to each other and those of our friends we still cherish. And yet we instinctively know that life is fragile and all our time is limited.

I believe that luck begins with preparedness. Some say its skill, but at the end of the day if you are still breathing, and your name was not on the list, you did just fine. And, while you may continue to argue about which method of diving is better, and which way is right, use some common sense and help yourself and the people who love you. If you know what you are about to do is stupid just don't do it. If you know, your dive prep just was not what it should be, scrub the dive. If you do jump in and become one more name to add to the list, someday after the pain has subsided among those that knew you, someone may remember that fateful day.

In Memoriam for Chris Rouse Sr. and Chris Rouse Jr. October 12, 1992

Godspeed