

ANNA JEFFRIES

After several unsuccessful attempts to enter the Royal Australian Navy, Maurice trained as an electrical and mechanical engineer with General Motors. In 1936 he married a fellow water-baby Marjorie, who as a teenager was among the first Australian women to attain a surf lifesaving bronze medallion. Together they started a family and lived by the sea in Melbourne's bayside suburbs.

When Maurice was finally enlisted with the RAN Volunteer Reserve in 1942, he hit the water swimming. Almost immediately his first assignment was to render bombs safe and salvage materials from shipwrecks after Japanese air raids in Darwin. 'A couple of Jap mines broke adrift and came ashore near Melville Island and as we didn't know anything about them or how they were made, I was given the job of pulling one to bits to see what made it work.' Seemingly an instant asset in the area of underwater mine warfare and disposal he lectured in the United States before commencing service with the Royal Navy in 1944.



MAURICE BATTERHAM

EARLY LAST CENTURY UNDER THE LAPPING SURFACE OF VICTORIA'S CORIO BAY, A 10 YEAR-OLD BOY WAS DIVING WITH HIS SELF-MADE APPARATUS CONSISTING OF A KEROSENE TIN AND GARDEN HOSE. ON THE SHORE, HIS YOUNGER BROTHER PUMPED AIR DOWN THE HOSE WITH A PAIR OF BELLOWS. THIS EQUIPMENT WAS LATER SUPERSEDED WITH A MECHANICAL PUMP OPERATED BY BICYCLE PEDALS, ALLOWING THE YOUNG DIVER TO EXPLORE DOWN TO 24 FEET. THIS BOY WITH AN AFFINITY FOR THE SEA WAS MAURICE BATTERHAM, WHO WENT ON TO SPEND HIS LIFE DEDICATED TO UNDERWATER HUMAN ENDEAVOURS.

The liberation of Europe required serviceable ports and supply lines. The RN decided to take the unprecedented approach of using divers to render mines safe across harbour beds and docks. Technological developments such as acoustic and magnetic mines were a new challenge. Batterham became part of the research unit that developed underwater breathing equipment to meet the requirements. The largest task was to psychologically and physically screen thousands of men. Batterham led one of the four 'Port Parties' that worked around the clock until dawn on D-Day. The conditions and work of these original 'Frogmen' are legendary. Middle of the night dives in six feet of mud in order to defuse a V2 Rocket with bare freezing hands was a fairly standard task. It is on record that the 'Port Parties' suffered no fatalities prior to D-Day. Maurice took all the challenges in his long stride, and during this time became



fondly known as 'Batts'. Many of the techniques developed during World War 2 are still standard practice in modern clearance diving.

When the war ended Batterham was required to attend to post-Japanese occupied Rabaul. This time the conditions were tropical and the bombs to be deloused were stacked deep in mountain caves. With Lieutenant Commander CG Croft he spent nine months rendering safe and disposing of tonnes of ammunition. Dwindling food rations were supplemented by catching fish, sometimes by discharging a fuse. Sadly, wartime attacks and the consequential disposal work irreparably damaged Rabaul's aquatic environment.

After his celebrated return to Australia, Batts went back to Europe for further



testing and development of diving technology with the Royal Navy. In a letter to his family in 1951 he wrote of the regular test diver, a mountain goat named 'Lord Nelson', who apparently quite enjoyed the underwater activities, logging dozens of dives. Batterham was awarded an OBE in 1952 for 'sustained courage and devotion to duty'. The press enjoyed covering stories of Batts' extreme underwater adventures. Modest yet always the people person, he gave many Rotary Club talks and interviews on his outrageous wartime exploits, routinely playing down the danger.

By 1950 the young inventor Ted Eldred (see *Sportdiving* Dec/Jan 04) had sought out the RAN's assistance with a Scuba design. He was put in touch with Batterham, who was involved in pioneering the Clearance Diving Branch and associated school. Batts' and Eldred became somewhat kindred spirits; they shared a passion for the ocean and both possessed technically precise minds. Together they strove to make the best possible diving apparatus, developing and manufacturing the first single-hose regulator, the 'Porpoise'. As much time as possible was spent machining prototypes in Batterham's garage, with the aim of

introducing diving to the Australian public. The RAN became their first significant client and consequently Defence Standards Laboratories supported further technical research, particularly in addressing the respiratory requirements of a distressed diver. Batterham and Eldred registered the Breathing Appliance Company. Bob Wallace-Mitchell, who had a sporting goods store in North Melbourne, joined to distribute the Porpoise in Australia. To create interest in recreational diving and ensure safe use of Porpoise equipment the company started the School of Underwater Swimming and Diving at the



Melbourne City Baths in early 1954.

Dive medicals were performed by Dr Bill Taylor, who also taught physiology of diving to the eager students. With Batterham as an instructor, the dive training was based on the standardised curriculum studied by RAN Clearance Divers and included both practical and written exams. Batterham always enjoyed teaching, and also trained Police and Rescue Divers during the 1950s.

Ted Eldred recalls (*Sportdiving* Dec/Jan 04) that 'all sorts of people turned up to train at the baths', local celebrities and then in 1955, author Arthur C Clark. His subsequent book *The Coast of Coral* informed the world of the great Porpoise scuba unit, a dramatic improvement on Cousteau's Aqua-Lung. Despite this acclaim, the company could not afford to patent their design worldwide. In 1960 Le Spirotechnique (a subsidiary of the Aqua-Lung patent owners), bought out the struggling Breathing Appliance Company and by 1961 new instructors were running The Victorian Aqualung School at the baths.

After the Breathing Appliance Co.'s sale Batterham worked in the business' new foreign owned form of Australian

Divers Spiro. Further Porpoise models were released but unfortunately the design partnership with Eldred no longer existed. However they did collaborate on a difficult operation at the Snowy Mountains hydro-electricity scheme in 1961. Unexpected heavy rainfall caused debris to block a diversion tunnel at the base of Eucumbene Dam. Rather than drain the dam (and wait 15 years for it to refill), Navy divers were sent down 260 feet underwater. Eldred was Consulting Engineer and Commander Batterham



Branch, vines, accumulation, debris ready for clearing.

diving imaginable was instrumental in creating the thriving recreational diving culture Australia enjoys today. In his lifetime, the possibility of diving was opened up to the world.

Anna Jeffries and Nick Batterham are currently in pre-production with producer Carmel McAloon on their documentary film *Man Overboard*. Any information on Maurice Batterham and/or relevant history is gratefully welcomed. annajeffries@bigpond.com.

The Historical Diving Society SE Asia-Pacific thanks Nick and Anna and Marjorie Batterham for recording Nick's grandfather's exciting life. This adds to our storehouse of knowledge about the Australian dive industry and the many people, who through their endeavours have made diving and the dive industry into what we enjoy today.

The objective of this series of articles is to place on record for the future these profiles, and over time allow these individual pieces to become an interconnected record telling the rich story of our recreation. HDS SEAP Thanks also Belinda and Barry (Sportdiving Magazine publishers) for their support of this project.



supervised the operation. The divers used Porpoise equipment. Batterham held a managerial position at Australian Divers Spiro until his faltering hearing and eyesight made it impractical. He retired permanently to Phillip Island in 1969, still filling days and nights engineering gadgets in the shed, as well as diving and fishing around Westernport Bay.

Maurice Samuel Batterham officially logged 6822 hours underwater. A man who endured some of the most unpleasant

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