

Rich Walker

GUE's Technical Dive Training Director

Interview by
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Photos by Gareth Lock



Rich Walker is a full-time instructor with Global Underwater Explorers in the United Kingdom, but has worked for nearly 15 years at the University of Sheffield as a researcher studying how blood flows around the body. His knowledge of physiology and physics gives him a unique edge as a diving instructor. X-RAY MAG's Rosemary E. Lunn caught up with Walker to find out more about his experience and expertise.

Where did you learn to dive?

In 1990, I was a medical physicist designing electronic diagnostic equipment based at St Barts Hospital in the City of London. One day, I walked past a colleague's office and recognised a BCD and a set of regs hanging up. I've always had the desire to dive right from when I was a small child. The key influence had been my parents because Mum and Dad met through scuba diving.

From a very early age, I can clearly remember gear lying around the house and playing with it in the bath. But in the 1970's, children were not encouraged to go diving by BSAC, so it just didn't happen.

Now was my chance to embrace all things rubber, and I asked my colleague how I could start. "Come down to the club on Tuesday night," he said, and it went from there. I joined the Polytechnic of North London Sub Aqua Club.

I'd always been a swimmer, so to be able to be underwater and breath at the same time was just mind blowing. And when I dived in the sea and saw fish and wrecks, I was hooked. I trained up to BSAC Advanced Diver level and became an Open Water Instructor spending my weekends happily exploring the myriad of South Coast wrecks, from Swanage to Plymouth.

Then my boss dropped a bombshell.

He'd been given funding to move him and his team up north, and I had a choice whether to continue with my PhD or not. I was two years into modelling the Femoral Artery, and with two years work to go, Sheffield seemed the right move.

As I was still technically a student, I joined the Sheffield University Sub Aqua Club and served time as their Diving Officer and their Advanced Training Officer. It was whilst I was at Sheffield that I got introduced to Scottish diving.

My first trip was to Lochaline and the Sound of Mull. It's fair to say that it blew me away. I couldn't believe that there was all this diving completely neglected by South Coast divers. The life was more prolific, the wrecks were in better shape, easier to get to and the Sound of Mull was far more sheltered than the South Coast. For five years, I pretty much dived Oban and Lochaline solidly with an odd trip to Ullapool and Scapa Flow thrown in for good measure.

And then I dived out of Aberdeen. One of the women in the dive club came from Aberdeen, so we stayed at her house for a weekend, and we hit the East Coast. You know how



some dives are forever etched on your soul? Well, what I remember was being astounded by the incredible viz coupled with big, big wrecks and seriously large animals. It was my first experience of Wolf Fish, and they were everywhere. And then, you got the usual marine life, but it was supersized. When I eventually dived Norway, it reminded me vividly of diving Aberdeen.

What type of diver are you?

Personally, I am a cold water wreck diver, that's my history, and that is where I learnt to dive. Professionally, I am the Training Director of Global Underwater Explorers UK, a GUE Tech 2 Instructor, a GUE Tech 1, GUE Rec 1, GUE Rec 3, GUE Fundamentals and a GUE DVP1 Instructor Evaluator, and I sit on the GUE Council as Director of Technical Training, so I guess you could say I dive a bit.

Whilst it's hard to grasp now when you consider how prolific the internet is, and the sheer amount of technical diving information that is so readily

GUE's Technical Dive Training Director, Rich Walker

profile

available at the press of a key, in 1995, it was a different story. I'd got to the point in my diving where I was doing 50-metre air diving knowing that there was so much more out there but not how to access it, when the internet magically appeared on my desk at work.

It was the gateway that would change my diving forever, and I quickly started dabbling in technical diving. I kept on coming across information about WKPP and GUE. I soon learnt that Global Underwater Explorers was established in 1998. Originally, it was a bunch of divers that had

come together to explore a vast and extensive cave system in Florida, USA, called the Woodville Karst Plain (Karst is another word for cave).

The idea was that the Woodville Karst Plain Project, or WKPP, would explore and map some 450 square miles of underwater cave systems that run from Tallahassee to the Gulf of Mexico. And today, you can access the data so far collated on this project by logging onto www.projectbaseline.org/wakulla.kml

Back to the late 90's—one night, I got a phone call from an ex-girlfriend. There was a space on a Technical Nitrox expedition in Poole, and did I want to make up the numbers? I landed at Phoenix Divers and did a course with Kevin Gurr and Phill Short.

The next year, I drove south again, this time destination Plymouth to do a course with Richie Stevenson. Rich had just relocated Deep Blue from Congleton, and it was his first IANTD Trimix Course down there.

I think it's fair to say that there were a few teething problems with his new boat, *Loyal Watcher*. That aside, I quickly learnt that Helium was good and what big deep wrecks were about. A couple of seasons of reasonable deep diving with DIR UK followed, primarily out of Weymouth, where we tended to dive off Grahame Knott's boat, *Wey Chieftain 2*, which was replaced by *Wey Chieftain 3*.

I'd been resisting it for ages, but in 2003, the lure of cave div-

ing finally got to me, and I succumbed to its embrace. My thought process was that if I was going to go cave diving, then Florida seemed the obvious choice, and I might as well train with a prolific and serious cave diver who was much respected by his peers.

The 'serious name' was the Florida Scubapro and DUI Rep, David Rhea. I showed up in Dave's course and was taught how to dive. I was utterly shocked. I honestly thought I would go into a cave, swim about a bit and come back out, and that would be me, trained.

It made me take a long cold hard stare at myself and think about the teaching I was doing

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at the time. You see, I'd been teaching IANTD or TDI (can't remember which agency) advanced nitrox courses on the weekends.

I came back to the UK and stopped doing it immediately, because I didn't believe I was good enough. But I also knew I did want to teach GUE. I really liked the quality of the curriculum, the teaching style, the professional attitude of the instructors, and the higher bar that GUE were prepared to set. For me, it meant one thing—get in the water and practice, practice, practice.

A year later, I headed State-side once more and did my Cave 2 with Dave Rhea and started cave diving in Florida and France. A few months later, in September 2004, I was doing my GUE Instructor Training Course in Portofino, Italy. By day, I was



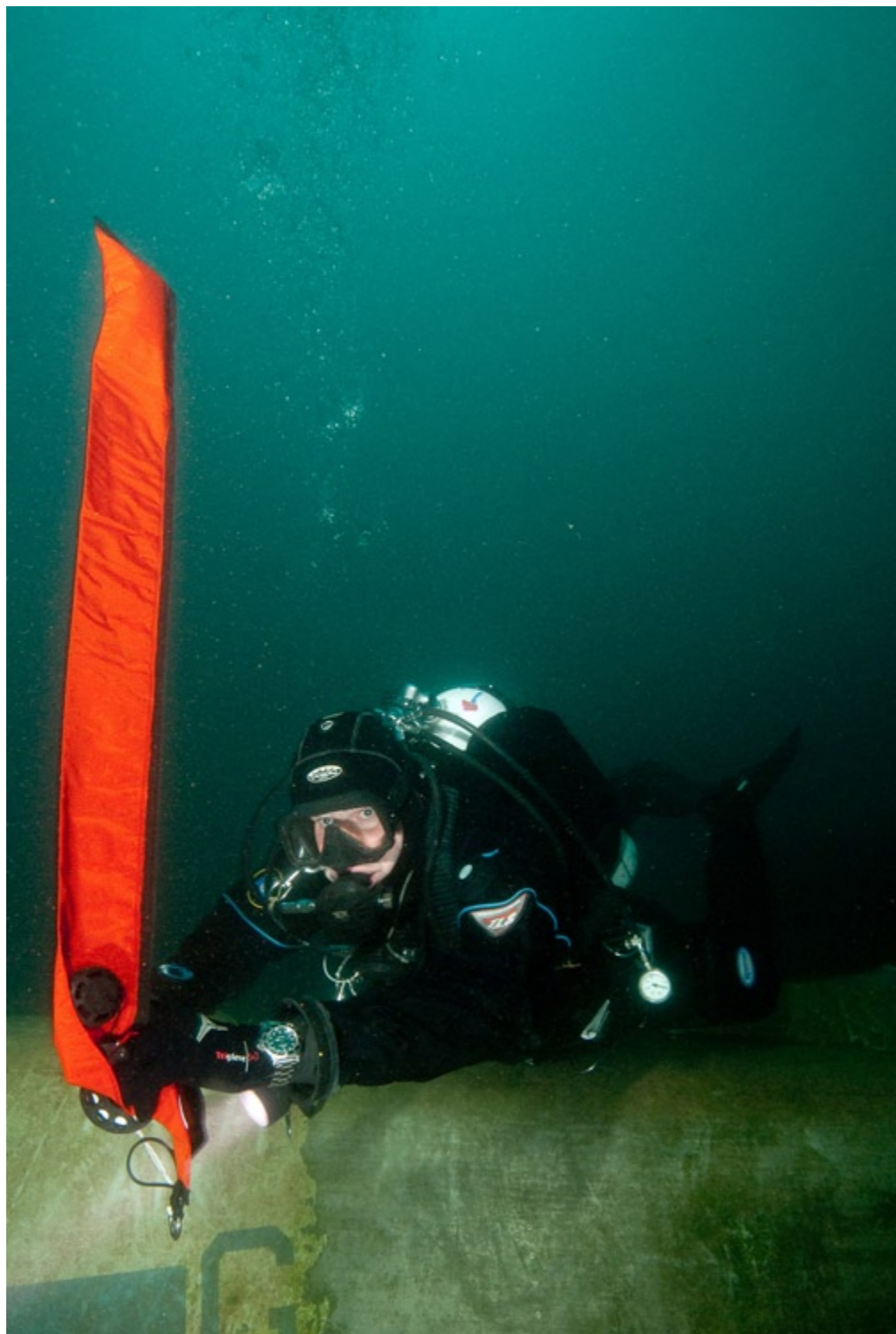
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now a post doctoral research assistant, i.e. a trained scientist specialising in physiology and modelling blood. (Ironically that knowledge coupled with the ability to research stuff has proved invaluable to my job now). Whilst on the weekends, I taught Fundamentals.

The Fundamentals Course or

"Fundies" is run over four days and refines and increases an individual's core skillset. It's a course for any diver, and it doesn't matter what level of training or experience the diver has, they will get something positive and good from it.

I've taught newly qualified BSAC Ocean Divers through to





Work had begun to notice that I wasn't at my desk as much as they wanted, so we came to a mutual agreement to part company.

It was the push that I needed, and I now had the perfect opportunity to work professionally as an instructor. It didn't occur to me once that I'd miss the regular pay packet at the end of every month.

What's your favourite piece of kit?

I am now going to contradict myself because in the main, one of the tools I need to do my job is my equipment, so I don't get emotionally attached to any of it. But then again, I have a double-ended piston clip that I use to snap fasten my light head to my harness. This clip has got an exceptionally smooth action, and I know I am being completely irrational, and I could use any other double-ended piston clip, but I've got very attached to this particular one.

Favourite dive site?

That's easy—it's the Sound of Mull because it's got everything! It's a beautiful location. The logistics for diving are spot on, and you can dive it in almost any weather because it's so protected. There are shallow wrecks and deeper wrecks, and everything is covered in superb life. The viz is generally good, and the people are friendly. It's a great place for a long weekend or to spend a week diving. I normally stay at Lochaline, and I always enjoy a pint in the Mishnish on Tobs, followed by fish and chips from the van outside.

Best country visited?

Underwater without a doubt it's Norway because we get to see the ships we sank, as opposed to normally diving the ones the Germans attacked. The crystal clear visibility is mouth-watering, and the wrecks themselves are so intact. The Norwegians have a great ethos when it comes to divers and wrecks, "Chisel bits off, and we'll confiscate the boat and its contents." Consequently everything is untouched, and it's like diving something straight out of the *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

You get to experience a phenomenal snapshot of history there right in front of your eyes, and it makes you think. The thing with diving is that it really puts you in touch, not only with the environment, but with times gone past, too. I have often wondered when I wreck dive, who were the people who lived on here? Did they get off the ship okay, or did they go down with it? My parents were born in WWII, so wrecks connect me directly back to my grandparent's generation and brings their lives and sacrifice into sharp and real focus.

The other thing about diving Norway is the prolific marine life. Because the water

is about 6–10°C, you tend to get more of the slow-moving stuff, such as nudibranchs and anemones. It's pretty similar to diving Scotland, but everything is so much bigger there, and there's always a chance to see King Crabs or even Orcas.

What motivates you to go diving?

Being able to dive somewhere that no one has dived before and see things that few people have had the chance to see. And it's that "making the connection with the past" thing again—wondering who walked on that deck, or secured a line around this bollard. Diving takes me one step closer to a past era.

When I first started wreck diving, I'd look at it and go, "Oh look, it's a piece of metal." Now, I've got an understanding of what bit of the boat I am looking at, so therefore, where I physically am on the wreck. And then, I tend to think about how the ship came to be where it is now and what was going through the sailors' minds as the water fatally started sloshing over their boots all those years ago.

Dream dive buddy?

Someone who can read my mind. A

PADI Staff Instructors, and they've all left saying, "Golly, that was useful", or words to that effect. The emphasis is on delicate, precise position control, so bang on buoyancy and exact finning is high on the list. And we have fun too, because divers come away being able to fin backwards. What a cool skill!

Other things such as gas sharing, valve drills, DSMB deployment are also cov-

ered, along with dive planning considerations, teamwork and problem resolution. So, it's tough and challenging but well worth it and hugely enjoyable.

By 2007, I was teaching pretty much every weekend when I became a Tec 1 Instructor. This presented me with a problem because to teach Tec 1 takes five days, and I just couldn't fit it in with my day job. Something had to give.



Dream dive destination?

This is such a tricky question to answer because there are so many. I guess firstly it's got to be *HMS Hermes*. The Navy has a tradition of re-using names so the *Hermes* I'd like to dive was the first purpose built aircraft carrier in the World, and launched on the 11 September 1919. Her design was "cruiser" influenced and her role was intended to be of a similar scouting nature. Her design wasn't that successful however because amongst other things, she had limited high-speed endurance and stability problems caused by the large starboard island. They solved this by carefully dis-

(Ceylon) now becoming more stable and benign, *Hermes* is high on the list and I'm currently looking into the logistics of diving her.

And it's not only Norwegian Blues that pine for the Fjords; I too want to spend more time in and around Narvik. I'd love to get the side scan sonar out and explore the numerous fjords because there is so much that hasn't been discovered yet in these amazing temperate waters. (I am sure I mentioned somewhere that I'm a cold water wreck diver at heart). And then there's Greece and I'd love to go back and visit friends there again. Diving logistics are finally getting easier there, thank heavens.

Best dive book ever read?

It's got to be "Water Light Time" by David Doubilet. This book instantly transports me because the rich images superbly

portray life beneath the waves. They capture the essence of diving for me - everything and every emotion that I experience underwater. It's there on the page in front of you, how the light dances and shimmers through the sea and although it sounds slightly mad, you can almost see the life moving in his pictures. Just looking at the front cover you can feel the waves lapping as ray cruises away from you.

What bugs you most about diving?

Decompression! There's no way round it and you HAVE to do it. Typical deco for me tends to last about an hour, so I pass the time by writing notes to my buddy, reflect on the dive or tidy up my gear. Sometimes I spend it by starting to think about the next dive and the logistics involved, ie what gas filling I need to do. If it's the English Channel, then it's a bit

of a long haul, but if I am lucky enough to be decoing in the Red Sea, then it's a whole new dive and something to be enjoyed and embraced.

How would you describe diving to non-divers?

A lot of people focus on the weightless aspect of diving but that's just a Fairground Ride to me. Once you've done it, it ceases to be that cool. For me it's seeing history in the wrecks and remembering the people who fought and died on those ships. Or watching fish in their natural habitat, not served up on a plate, in an aquarium or on the television. You get to see it close up and personal. Diving gives you an amazing opportunity to enter an environment that man has not yet evolved to explore in a natural way, so that makes it a very privileged visit. ■

dive buddy who intuitively knows what picture to take, which way to swim, or when to turn the dive. It's a very rare thing, but during your diving career, you will come across that odd one, or perhaps, two people that are so in tune with you underwater. Together, you become a more complete diver. I am incredibly fortunate because I sometimes dive with Brian Allen out of Plymouth who ticks all those boxes, and we are perfectly matched underwater.

tributing the fuel to balance the ship but it wasn't ideal, and as a result *Hermes* was deemed unsuitable for operations in European Waters. She sailed south and was employed in trade protection in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans. On the 9th April 1942 she was heading away from Trincomali to the Maldives when she was attacked by the Japanese carriers *Akagai*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*. She sunk in the Indian Ocean off Batticaloa, Ceylon in 50 metres. With conditions in Sri Lanka

