

One from the archives:

A Surge in Drownings in Vermont Brings Up the Important Work State Police Divers Do

Story and photos by Ricka McNaughton

[The author accompanied the dive team on a monthly training session to learn more about their work and help commemorate a special achievement.]

"Today State Police divers recovered the body of..." So leads off many a news story about a tragic drowning. It's been a very bad year for drownings in this state. No one can recall, in fact, a worse one.



When we hear of an accidental drowning, few of us think too much about what risks divers may face to recover a body. Rather, our thoughts naturally drift toward the victim. Who loved this person? How will they find a way to deal with the tragedy? When VSP divers are called out, it's almost always a recovery operation. But it is they who take the first difficult step to bring home the deceased. And in doing so, the divers help significantly with the emotional rescue of the living.

Not many outside the force realize that dive duty is an extra job that VSP officers take on and make time to train carefully for. This is in addition to the stresses of their other regular police work. They are a tight, dedicated group with other demands on their time and on their nerves as full time state law enforcement officers. Much of their recovery work is admittedly grim. But it can vary. Sometimes they search for stolen property, crime evidence, or bring up samples of ooze for environmental analysis. It could be who knows what, from who knows where.



ABOVE: The newly NAUI-Certified team (Fall of 1986): L-R: Team instructor Bill Johnson, Trooper Warren Whitney (Middlebury), Lt. Dean George (Middlebury), Sgt. Craig Iverson (Waterbury), Trooper David Wilson (Rutland), Lt. Roger Gilbert (Derby), Sgt. Rod Stone (Rockingham), Trooper Gary Gaboury, (Shaftsbury).

A good part of the technical skill set they learn pertains to safety. Divers almost never go down alone. Most often in pairs. One does the looking and the other keeps contact with the surface and his partner. Though they may be only a few yards apart, sometimes the visibility is so poor -- as is often the case in Vermont murky lakes and rivers -- that the divers must link themselves by a line to keep tabs. Lines are also used under solid ice, but differently. A diver could become disoriented, unable to spot the entry hole through which he came down. A line system enables the crew above to locate him within a known radius of the hole. Every recovery operation throws up different challenges.

Sgt. Rod Stone (Rockingham), recalled a time when a beverage truck had run off the rim of an abandoned quarry hole, carrying driver and passenger 60 feet down with it. "We had practically no visibility in the water," said Stone, describing aspects of the ordeal: the cold and miserable work and the hopelessly mangled vehicle. "We finally got the truck raised and the passenger wasn't it it." Weary as they were, they had to go down all over again.

"Once we were looking for a murder weapon," Stone recounted. "The bottom of the lake was pure muck. We had a needle-in-a-haystack chance of finding it. What we did was stand on the bank and heave a rock about the same weight as the murder weapon." They dove in where the rock disappeared. They found the weapon 15 feet away.

The divers recently took a day to demonstrate their honed state-of-the-art maneuvers to their instructor Bill Johnson. Certified by the National Association of Underwater Instructors, Johnson has mentored the team for the past year to get them drilled in advanced NAUI diving standards. Johnson has been loaned for the purpose by the Vermont State Office of Emergency Management, where he is also a full time radiological systems technician. The team meets once every month of the year for drill.

On a cool fall day under a brooding sky, two state police boats motor the team out onto the Lake Champlain, then through an undulating slate-green soup that slaps up onto a particularly treacherous looking, rock-faced, moss-slimed island. It's going to pour any minute. A snickery voice announces the unbecoming joke-name the divers have given this cove. "Don't print that," someone pipes up. The mood is light because an unusual event is about to take place.

As the boats reach the shallows, suited divers enter the water and don their remaining gear. Tanks. Weights. Gauges. Hoses. A very big knife sheathed at the inside of the calf. Hands fly, buckles snap. Familiarity breeds fast work. A few divers negotiate the rocks and remain there. Others reboard one of the boats. It then motors out to a nearby dive site and the divers somersault backwards into the lake and disappear.



Lt. Paul Gauthier carefully guides our boat away from where the team dove and stops. It is eerily quiet except for some crackly bursts of static from the boat's radio. There are no other people or crafts in sight. We wait as the sky further darkens. Obviously something lengthy is going on below the water's surface. Someone on board pokes around in bins for stashed snacks.

At an actual incident nearly the whole team responds because all hands are needed. "We might have a hundred people [to manage] at a scene," explained Stone. Besides rescue personnel, this may include curious

onlookers, the press, or just about anyone. Crowd handlers are needed. Rig handlers. Spotters. Communications people.

Somber missions aside, the divers do enjoy learning and practicing diving itself. With high tech buoyancy compensators they can hover in the water at a selected depth with ease, or sink gracefully down. Their flippers give them better-than-human propulsion in a dreamy underwater world. "I love it." a grinning Johnson had pronounced earlier, referring to his non-work diving pursuits.

Finally, sleek black heads begin slowly poking through the lake's surface near the boat, looking like a curious pod of marine life. These are the divers now done with their day's underwater training exercises, and something more has occurred. It was test day, and they all passed. Each diver holds up a new, waterproof, NAUI certification card handed out by instructor Johnson 40-feet below the surface of Lake Champlain.



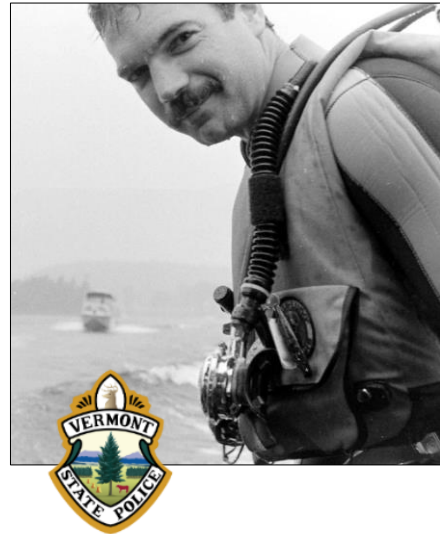
Pellets of cold rain are pinging down. But no matter, it's been a pleasant dive for the team. Many are not. As our boat heads back to the mainland at a bracing clip, sending up feathery arcs of cold spray behind us, Johnson discovers the only glitch in the day's well-ordered proceedings. Someone on this boat has gotten into his personal supply of chocolate chip cookies. After a dive, these traditional provisions are only slightly less dear to him than a warm, dry towel. Johnson digs into his remaining treats, exposing them to the now-driving rain. In a celebratory spirit he holds out a sad wad of cookie mush for me. I eat it in solidarity. It's the least I can do.

Some parts of this article have been edited from the original and contain details not previously included. [RETURN TO PUBLISHED ARTICLES](#)

See Sidebar Remembering Gary Gaboury, Added 2017, Next

Gary Gaboury A Sacrifice Remembered

The worst case scenario for State Police divers? Sometimes no amount of training can overcome a sudden, dangerous turn of circumstances in the course of a dive. The worst case happened at Vermont's infamous Huntington Gorge in 1992. Horrifically, at this place on May 12 of that year, Trooper Gary Gaboury lost his own life on a mission to retrieve the body of a drowning victim.



At Vermont's Huntington Gorge, despite the presence of strongly worded danger signs to deter swimmers, two dozen people (as of 2017) have lost their lives ignoring the warnings. The term "avoidable tragedies" comes to mind. State Police divers have had to repeatedly navigate the Gorge's deadly currents, rock formations and shifting underwater debris to return the drowning victims to their loved ones.

I did not know Gary personally. I met him briefly just once, doing a feature about the dive team. But I could well imagine when I learned of his death how brutally painfully it had to be for his loved ones. It also must have crushed the hearts of his fellow dive team members - a very close knit group.

By sheer coincidence, just days from an anniversary date of Gary's death, I happened to come across the story I had written decades ago, as well as images I had of Gary not published with the original piece. I thought the discovery was a cosmic call to bring forward the article here and additionally honor Gary's sacrifice.

On regular duty Gary had been a patrol commander at the Shaftbury, VT barracks. The diving work entailed a commitment of time and spirit to public service outside the realm of everyday law enforcement. Gary, everyone said, lived that commitment.

In a published eulogy for Gary, Sgt. Paul Barci commented. *"After 11-plus years with the Vermont State Police, he still had the ideals, integrity, and undying desire to want to serve the people of this state. His daily attitude, even after his years in service was the same attitude that every cop took with them to their respective police academies at the start of their own careers. However, so many of us in law enforcement, after years of seeing life's tragedies time and time again, see that attitude either eroded away, changed or destroyed. Gary did not and would not allow that."*

Here's to that ever-buoyant spirit.

Ricka McNaughton
2017