



JOHN THOMPSON

By Tim Cothren

Years Diving: 26

Hometown: Rincon, Puerto Rico

Favorite Dive Destination:

Mona Island, Puerto Rico

Why I'm a DAN Member:

"DAN has been a great supporter of SUDS over the years, and it is good to know they have your back in an emergency."



John Thompson with SUDS diver Dan Hendrix in Kona

Opposite, from top: SUDS diver Marco Robledo and photographer Tim Cothren dive in Guantanamo Bay; SUDS divers in Kona

“You can't walk through the doors of Walter Reed Army Medical Center [now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center], see our injured young men and women coming back from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and not get involved,” recalled U.S. Army National Guard paratrooper John Thompson about his first visit to that hospital in 2005. “It was a real gut check.”

Thompson had been working for 14 years as a Colorado Outward Bound School instructor and 10 as a scuba instructor. His skills led him to a Red Cross volunteer position in the aquatic therapy department at Walter Reed, where he developed an idea. “There is a pool here, and I'm a dive instructor,” he thought, “so let's try to use scuba diving in the aquatic therapy rehabilitation process.” He created Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba (SUDS) in February 2007.

SUDS is not a simple jump-in-the-water program. Each veteran completes his or her academic and pool work at the hospital under the care and direction of several core SUDS volunteer instructors who have training in the Scubility Diver Program from Scuba Diving International (SDI). Next, SUDS arranges dive trips so the divers can complete their open-water training at destinations such as Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guantanamo Bay and others. They finish the program as certified divers capable of diving just about anywhere.

“SUDS pays for all the veterans' expenses, from airfare to meals and lodging,” Thompson explained. “There is no cost to the participant.” SUDS, a subordinate chapter of Disabled Sports USA, is a grassroots nonprofit organization based at Walter Reed in Bethesda, Md. It has only one paid employee and relies solely on donations from the general public. Local restaurants, residents and dive operators offer assistance during trips.

For some veterans these trips are their first forays away from their hometowns that don't involve deployment, combat or a hospital. Marine Sgt. Greg Edwards, a double amputee, reflected as he looked into the clear blue water of the Virgin Islands: “I've never been anywhere but Mississippi and Iraq; this is awesome!”

SUDS also has a growing number of returning vets who have fallen in love with the sport and are working on advancing their certifications. “Lots of veteran organizations just give stuff away; what I love about SUDS is that it is about bettering yourself,” said Redmond Ramos, a U.S. Navy hospital corpsman. “John is adamant about us getting another certification and advancing our skills — it is about becoming a better diver.”

Therapy is still at the center of the organization. “The majority of the veterans we work with are amputees,” Thompson said, “but we see all sorts of injuries, from severe burns to traumatic brain injuries, PTSD and paralysis. Water is a great equalizer.” Volunteers often hear veterans say things like “The pain vanishes when I'm weightless,” and “I find peace of mind underwater that I can't find on land.”