



JOHN THOMPSON

An unusual concert of popping and clicking occurs before each dive as prosthetic legs are removed and replaced with specialized devices featuring mechanical ankles that can be articulated and moved downward as a foot would during swimming. Some divers prefer to go without the finned prosthetic. Greg Edwards uses webbed gloves to pull himself through the water. "Just because you have legs and I don't doesn't mean you're better than me," Edwards said. "I can do anything you can underwater."

One of the more unusual dive destinations for the group is Naval Station Guantanamo Bay (GTMO) in Cuba. Thompson was stationed there in 2003 and built a relationship with Ocean Enterprises, the local dive shop on the base. The warriors meet at a small air charter company in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and board a flight to GTMO. It takes about three hours to fly there because the small prop planes have to veer all the way around the east end of the island to avoid Cuban air space. The dive shop and the Reef Raiders dive club raise funds to provide accommodations for the veterans. Checkout dives are done right there in the bay, but the big payoff is being able to dive from secluded beaches that are usually off limits even to the individuals stationed there. Since any outside boat traffic has been prohibited there since 1898, the reefs are pristine. You won't find any lost snorkels on the bottom here.

A crew from the HBO series *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* joined a SUDS group at Guantanamo and filmed soldiers enjoying the experience for a segment titled "Underwater Heroes," which aired in June 2009. Some veterans used scooters to get around the virgin reefs. Styrofoam fish were floated mid-water to create an underwater shooting range for spearfishing.

Virtually untouched by humans, the reefs were thick with life, including some very large lionfish that had invaded the waters.

As the wars have been winding down, the number of wounded service members coming off the battlefield has slowed. SUDS has refocused its efforts toward continuing dive education while still reaching out to the military's wounded, ill and injured. To date, the organization has trained more than 400 injured soldiers to dive.

Thompson is a man of few words, but he is proud and passionate about diving and helping our injured servicemen and women. "I often say I have the greatest job in the world," he said. "I'm blessed — I think I get even more out of this than the warriors. I have a lot of great help, and I get tremendous satisfaction from contributing to the recovery of our veterans"

"A city boy like me never would have attempted anything like this if it weren't for John and SUDS," said U.S. Army Sgt. Javier Torres, a New York native who was shot in Afghanistan. "Now I want to advance my certification and become an instructor so I can help other wounded veterans — just like John does." AD



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