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REEF CRUISING IN BEAUTIFUL BONAIRE
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Julius '72

By David Schloerb

EDITOR'S NOTE: Although living underwater is a very sophisticated aspect of diving and is not something to be taken lightly, upon receiving David Schloerb's manuscript, we could not resist publishing it. The imagination and ingenuity of this 17 year old boy is equaled only by his ability to clearly record on paper, in a concise and easy-to-read style, the results of his project. We think you'll enjoy sharing his fine adventure with him. However, SKIN DIVER cautions other youngsters about attempting similar projects due to the potentially dangerous nature of living underwater for extended periods of time.

I turned to my mother on the porch and tried to think of something light to say. I didn't want her to worry so much. A few words passed between us. She said, "Be careful." I said, "I will." I left the porch and headed down to the lake in my swimsuit and tee shirt.

Brian Kittle, my best friend and diving buddy, was waiting for me by our tent. It was still light, the end of a warm August day. Like so many other days, getting into the water, going diving was just routine. I moved the same way, did the same things, but this dive was different. I had dreamed of living underwater since I was ten years old and now, seven years later, in a very limited sense, I was about to do just that. I waded out by the pier in front of my grandmother's cottage, fitted my mask, slipped on my fins, and submerged.

I swam out, slowly, along the hose, listening to the air which forced through it with the sound of the pump on shore. The lake bottom changed as I moved deeper, until at 12 feet, the last weeds gave way to an endless stretch of mud and silt. Twenty-five feet down and a

couple hundred feet from shore my destination came into view.

Larger, more expensive versions are called underwater habitats; places for men to eat and sleep under the sea. The Navy's Sealab and Cousteau's Conshelf projects are examples. It is only in a very loose sense that I compare my project with these; saturation diving is not for sport divers. Also, if one considers that the most expensive piece of equipment in my project was the \$60 hooka compressor, the difference is apparent.

The proper name of my habitat — I prefer the word house — was Julius. Julius was four and a half feet high and two feet in diameter. It was made from oil drums, pieces of pipe, plastic, scrap wood, and a number of obscure things I had collected over the past few years. The air inside Julius gave it a buoyancy on the order of a thousand pounds. This was compensated for by a few tons of rock in a bin, left from a previous project, which had long since disappeared into the mucky lake bottom, leaving only the cables, to which the house was attached, visible. Bolted on the side of Julius was a small flooded room which served as an equipment storage area. We named this room "It," unable to think of a more appropriate name.

As I approached the house I could see a number of small bluegills hovering about Julius and It. The hose I was following now slanted up to the house which was suspended five feet above the bottom. A constant flow of air came from underneath Julius as the air inside was replaced. Everything looked good.

I removed my tank and stored it in the appropriate place in It. Still breathing from the tank I placed my flippers in their cubby hole and then closed the valve on the tank. I moved somewhat like an as-

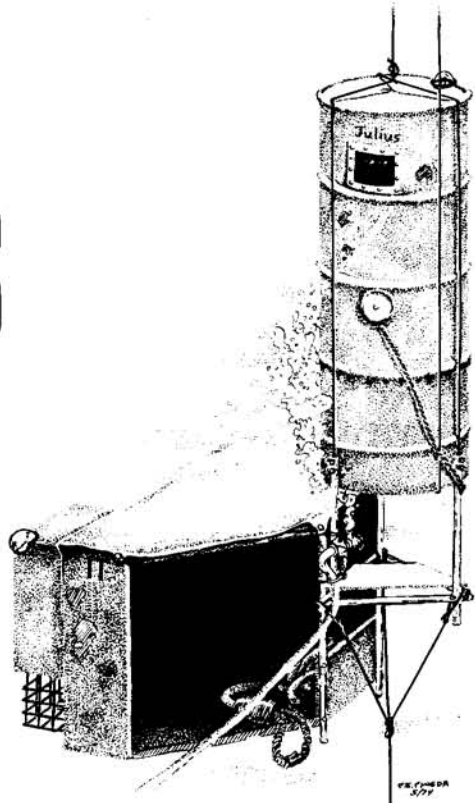


Illustration by Fernando Pineda

tronaut making a space walk. Being careful not to entangle myself in any loose cables or hoses, I pulled my way around the house and slipped underneath Julius. Then I pulled myself onto the step below its entrance and sat up with my head in the wiggling mass of air above. My ears came alive with the sound of air bubbling from the hose, such a contrast to the peaceful quiet normally found underwater. I placed my weight belt in its special box and hung my mask under the seat inside Julius. After attaching the leads to a lantern battery which hung under the seat, and which supplied electrical power, I stood up and pulled myself onto the seat. If everything worked right this would be my home for the next 24 hours. It was now a little after 7 pm.

Lifting the earpiece, part of an old house phone which served as our intercom, I pressed the 'call' button. I was immediately rewarded with a loud buzz which indicated that its twin was ringing in the tent on shore. After a moment the earpiece squawked, "Hello." I shouted, "'B', I'm here. Everything looks good." Brian responded with, "I think you have the wrong number," and hung up. I called back and we talked for a while but it became too hard to keep up the shouting. I signed off and turned my attention to my surroundings.

I checked the lights. Everything was working fine. I looked out the window and noted it was getting dark. A boat zoomed by over head; probably someone getting in his last ski ride of the day. A small bluegill drifted by my window and hovered there for a few minutes. He maintained his position and attitude with an ease I envied as a scuba diver. Then, as if he had been observing me and found nothing of interest, he drifted away.

Around 8 pm I called Brian. He said he was about to bring down some dinner. A few minutes later Brian floated past my window and popped his head through the open bottom of Julius. He handed me a jar with milk in it and a plastic bag which contained a couple pieces of chicken. At first the jar wouldn't open because of the pressure. Fortunately its seal was not perfect and after a couple of minutes enough air had leaked in so that it could be opened. Brian and I talked awhile. It was nice not having to shout. Then he went outside to give me a little show. He floated by upside down, or sideways, and peeked around the edge of the window making faces. He wasn't wearing a tank, so every now and then I heard a splash as he ducked his head in for a breath of air. Finally he waved good-bye and drifted upward, giving Julius a little push as he went.

As I finished my dinner it became too dark to see, so I turned on the interior light. Then I tried the outside spotlight. The first thing I noticed was a number of bubbles rising past the window. A clamp holding the hose had slipped so that most of the air, from the surface, was pumped

outside rather than inside the house. I remedied this by pushing the hose back into place with my foot. Then I flipped off the interior light to get a view outside.

Looking out the window reminded me of Cousteau's second Conshelf project during which his group had done a similar thing. The only difference was that his group was sitting in their living room, looking into the Red Sea, while I was sitting in an oil drum looking into a muddy lake. I had to wipe the window with a rag every few minutes because of the moisture. Everything inside was wet.

About 8:45 pm I called Brian to tell him I was going outside and that he should come down and join me. I slipped off my seat onto the step and turned off the interior light. The water seemed very cold as I fitted my mask. I put on my weight belt, then maneuvered myself to reach the Hooka attached just outside. I use the term "Hooka" to suggest surface supplied diving apparatus. The device itself was of the simple free flow type which consisted of a number of pipe fittings in a plastic case strapped to my chest, and two flexible rubber hoses coming out of the case and connecting to a mouthpiece. I worked my arms through its straps and turned a valve which diverted the air from Julius to the Hooka. When it started bubbling I inserted the mouthpiece and tried a few breaths. Satisfied that it worked, I eased outside and pulled myself around into it to don my flippers.

Suddenly a light shined in my eyes — Brian had arrived. He turned it on himself so I could see him, and it was nice having someone around again. Having to spend most of my time down there alone was not something I enjoyed. We swam around looking at the house and at each other. After about 40 minutes I started getting pretty cold and signaled I was going back inside. Brian waited for me to get in, helping with my equipment, then waved through the window and floated away.

Inside I decided to write a letter to my high school counselor. I opened the small storage compartment in my control panel. The door of the compartment served as my table. Taking out some almost dry paper and a pen, I began to write the sort of letter I had always dreamed of, starting with, "You'll never guess where I am!" Halfway through the letter, I turned off the interior light to watch some minnows dancing in the outside spotlight. By 10 pm I had finished the letter and decided to rest by leaning forward against the opposite wall of the drum. This didn't involve leaning at any great angle. The drum was so small that Brian, who is four inches taller than I am, could just barely squeeze inside.

Slowly I became aware that something was wrong. The hose clamp had slipped again. I could not work it back with my foot so I grabbed a pair of pliers from the storage compartment and climbed down

to fix it. Then I donned my mask and Hooka to try to work on it outside.

When I had done the best I could, I floated up for a look in the window. I had started to shake from the cold and now I began to vomit into the mouthpiece of the Hooka. (Several months later, I discovered that the pump was operating at approximately the resonant frequency of my stomach.) I told myself, "Take it easy Dave, keep control." I was able to pull myself back onto the step but, as I removed my equipment, my numbed hands couldn't hold everything and I dropped the pliers. Reaching for the pliers, I dropped my mask.

After climbing back inside I called Brian. He had to turn off the pump to hear me. I told him to bring down another mask. I'm still not too sure what happened next. On shore the pump is just a noise in the tent, and perhaps Brian started getting ready to come down and just forgot to turn the pump back on. Whatever happened, I suddenly realized I wasn't getting any air! I shouted and buzzed until my little brother John picked up the phone. I yelled, "John! Turn on the pump!" John went to get Brian and I think I heard my mother's voice, "What is it John? Brian's busy." I was preparing to leave when the hose started to gurgle again.

By 10:30 pm Brian had come and gone. He had found the mask I lost, and I had made my point about the importance of that noise in the tent. He told me that my parents wanted me to come up. I agreed it was a good idea: I was getting cold and too many things were going wrong, but I decided to wait until eleven o'clock. The interior light had gone out, so I sat watching the minnows outside my window. Brian sent some music down from a tape recorded on shore via the intercom. I could just hear it over the constant gurgle of the hose. A little after 11 pm I told Brian to come get me.

Five minutes later, Brian's face appeared in the window. On his head was a green army cap with a large capital 'B' sewn on the front. He handed in my cap, the one with the capital 'D,' and we looked at each other through the window. It's hard to explain the meaning of the 79¢ hats with the homemade emblems. They made us laugh at a project, with all its long hours of planning and building, which was too much of a failure to be considered a success. It was just a simple joke — one of those things which makes us human and gives hope for the future. I turned off the remaining lights and climbed down onto the step.

We ascended in darkness and surfaced into another world. The area was illuminated by a floodlight on shore and a yellow light hanging in the tent. I could hear my parents, who stood on the pier, talking in the still night air. I waved to them to show I was all right. Then Brian and I swam slowly to shore, on our backs, looking at the stars. 🐟