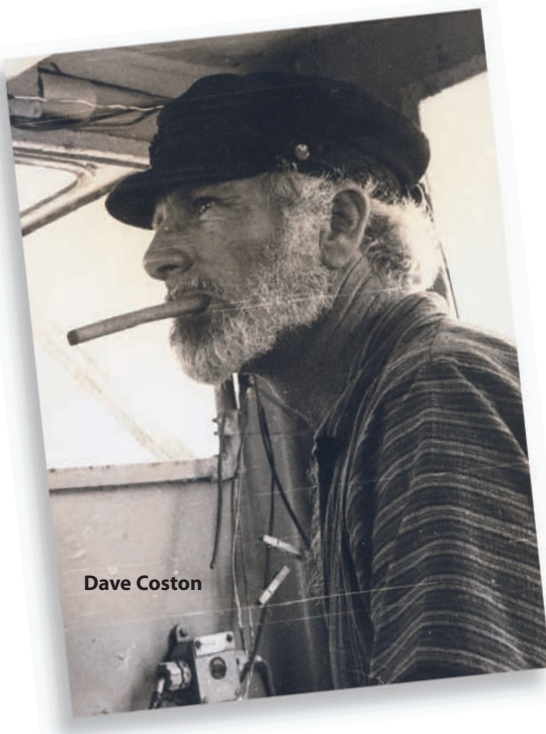


T

here are certain people that you instinctively know are in control of situations.

Some may be natural born pilots who could land a washing machine on a trash can lid. The ship captain who

could bring in a cargo when the rest of the fleet hid in port from the storm. Maybe the engine mechanic who gets the island's generator going again with a handful of mismatched Volvo parts, three hair pins, and part of Kate Moss's



Wonder Bra for a fan belt. Or the guy who survived for sixteen days in a life raft with nothing but a soggy Twinkie, two rusted fish hooks, half a Grateful Dead concert ticket, and four ounces of three day old Bong water from a 1960's vintage hash pipe.

Yeah, these are the characters that you jump up behind and follow out of the burning movie theater without even considering another exit. Or you simply take their advice without argument as they casually say, "don't eat the purple berries," when you're a couple hundred miles up the Amazon basin. Because beyond all doubt, they've got the "right stuff" and the only stuff you've got is still stuck to the bottom of your hiking boots.

I knew a guy like that named Dave Coston. He was about thirty five when I first met him in 1971 and, of course, it amazed me that he could still walk upright unassisted at such an advanced age...

much less stand the rigors of professional diving. My perspective, honed from accumulating twenty-one birthdays of my own, left me convinced of my own absolute immortality and Dave spent the next five years or so showing me how idiots like myself could survive extraordinary circumstances in spite of our immaturity.

St. Croix in the early 1970s was a gold mine for a guy like Dave who could do just about anything and do it well. He'd dabbled in construction, electrical engineering, landscape architecture, heavy-equipment operation, and finally settled on diving as means of combining his hobby with a career that was suitably swashbuckling but would still allow him membership in the local yacht club.

Dave wasn't an imposing figure physically. He probably topped out at 150 pounds or so including his faded Greek fisherman's cap. His hair and neatly trimmed beard had gone prematurely white so he sort of had a look that conjured up an image of your grandfather who just finished an Iron Man contest.

He was a man of few words and did not suffer fools gladly. Those of us who knew him well had learned to listen precisely to what he said and then do exactly as bidden. Otherwise we had discovered that the barge septic tank emptied a ton of effluent on top of you or a blast of compressed air removed all body hair and several outer layers of skin when you turned the valve the wrong way. Then he'd smile wryly and inquire what you hadn't understood about his original instructions. You learned quickly around Dave Coston. Actually that seemed like the key to survival and whatever retirement plan we might hope for.

But he would never ask anyone to do something that he wouldn't do himself. He led by example and his eager disciples fell in line behind him just glad for the opportunity to learn from the master.

All of us knew how to dive; hell, that's what we did for a living. But Dave taught us the skills to be valuable underwater craftsmen and to think through a problem and apply the easiest way to a solution instead just getting a bigger hammer and pounding harder.

And, in spite of the fact that what we did was inherently dangerous, he always emphasized how to best apply safety procedures and made us map out elaborate contingency plans for whatever project we took on. His vision would save us all from losing various body parts to underwater pneumatic tools, being sucked into high-pressure water intakes, chopped up in

dredges, or blown up in our TNT charges. It would also teach us to save his life.

In July of 1971, Dave had a contract in St. Croix involving over a hundred divers working on lowering the ship channel approach to Hess Oil's plant from a controlling depth of 45 feet to 60 feet. This involved one hell of a lot of explosives, several large tugs and a half dozen giant dredge barges to remove the aftermath of our little demolition exercises.

By the end of the first week visibility along the island's south shore was about twelve inches and pretty much everything underwater was done by touch and feel. It was no place for the claustrophobic. In

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fact, it helped a lot to stay sort of perpetually wired and not think too much about the hazards.

One day a barge capsized and spilled a load of four foot diameter pipe all over the sandy bottom. It was days before we were able to sling these monsters and get them raised again. Shortly after that we resumed our systematic blasting. Our standard drill at the end of each day was a diver sweep of the blast area to see if we needed to mark any large debris for separate hoist before the dredges moved in. Since we couldn't see anything due the visibility, the teams would work on buddy lines and measure objects by arm span. If you couldn't reach around something, you sent up a float buoy and another team would come down and sling the boulder or whatever and haul it away.

Late one afternoon around 4:30 pm, Dave was swimming the end of a sweep line when he slammed into a large object. Examining it by feel, he quickly determined that it was one of the big dredge pipes that had fallen overboard earlier and not been found. Since these things were nearly a hundred feet long he deployed a float from one end and began to swim to the other end. When he arrived at the pipe opening he fanned the sand from underneath to pass a loop around for his other float buoy.

But while he had his hand under the pipe, another energetic crew had rigged a sling on the other end and had the dredge begin lifting. In a split second, his left hand was pinned to the bottom as the other end was raised. It was just enough force to pin his fingers between the flat rock of the sea bottom and the pipe so he couldn't remove them... but not enough to crush them. The dredge crew held the north end of the pipe about three feet off the bottom and waited for the other end to be rigged before finishing the lift.

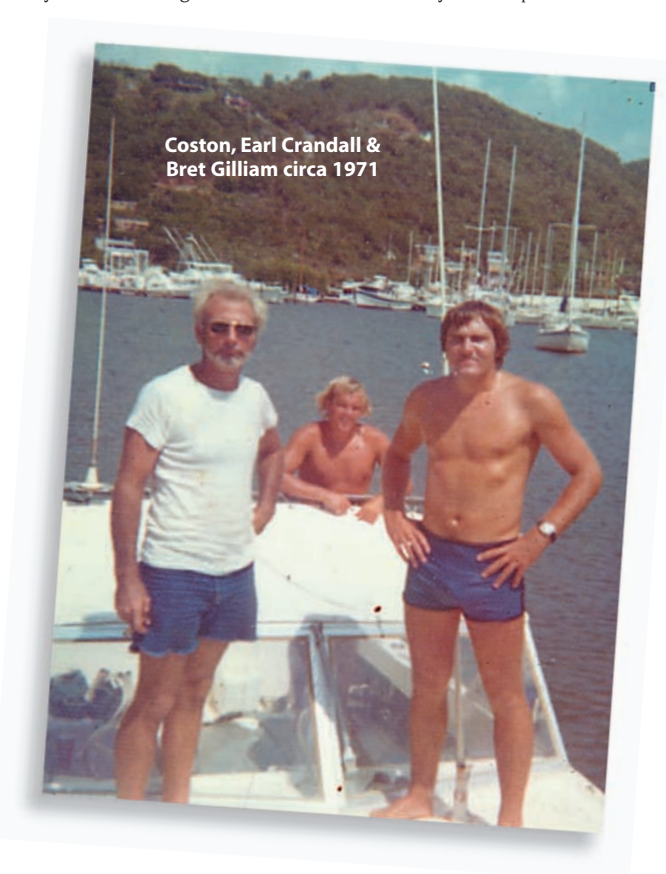
Meanwhile they had unintentionally anchored Dave beneath the south end of some very heavy plumbing.

All efforts to extract his fingers were futile and he was left alone in zero visibility to ponder his options. He knew that all divers were due up by 5:00 PM or his dive supervisors would send out search teams. He was just able to read his pressure gauge, about 1700 psi, and that didn't seem likely to last him long enough until help would get there. And then he'd still have to deal with getting his end of the pipe raised and getting his hand out.

Most of us dove those days in canvas overalls and simple backpacks. Dave had added an early

edition floatation vest after getting left offshore one day and bobbing around in the six-foot swell treading water. He quickly sized up the situation and calculated that his tank wouldn't last long enough in 50 feet of water before he drowned.

Necessity being the mother of invention, he decided to employ his vest as a rebreather. He orally inflated the vest and then began breathing from it until the CO2 built up to an uncomfortable level. Then he'd switch back to his regulator, catch his breath with good clean air from the tank, vent the vest, and start the cycle all over again. Over an hour went by. The topside





teams were scrambled looking for him to no avail and he was down to less than 300 psi in his cylinder.

That's when he decided to amputate his fingers with his knife. He had thought it all through and knew he needed to start the cuts in advance so he could get a good clean break through the bones at the last moment. It took him another few minutes to work his small utility knife over his fingers and begin the first incisions. He wanted to use his heavy dive knife to break the bones and paused to reach back to position it for the final plunge. A quick look at his gauge confirmed he was down to about 100 psi. Time was up. He lay quietly to catch his breath and hoped he wouldn't pass out from the pain that was about to come.

As he reached in to drive the knife blade down with all his force, he felt the shaft poke something soft and a corresponding grunt of surprise and outrage. He'd jammed his knife right into the shoulder of sweep diver, Ralph Yula, reaching around the pipe end.

We'd finally figured that Dave had to be somewhere along that submerged pipe after finding his buoy at the other end. But it took nearly 20 minutes of careful search to find him. Ralph began buddy breathing with Dave and deployed his own float. Three of us dropped in on them within two minutes and lifted the pipe off Dave's hand.

He calmly pulled his fingers free, holstered his knives and swam slowly to the surface in the remaining twilight. As he related the story to us on the boat, we listened in fascinated horror. Finally someone asked, "do you really think you could have cut off your fingers and not passed out?"

"No problem," Dave replied. "Remember, I didn't have to do the thumb. That would have been a difficult angle. Yeah, if I had to do the thumb I'd have really been in trouble."

Ten minutes later with his wounds patched up with duct tape and caulking cotton, he stood on the dive platform and directed the team "to get that goddamn pipe out my ship channel!"

On the ride back in, Dave lit one his favorite "Rum-soaked Crooks" cigars and honed his knife blade on a whet stone. His accompanying lecture on the best method to effect a clean bone break was greeted by several group "hurls" over the lee rail. But the teacher had our undivided attention. 🍷

*Bret Gilliam is Publisher of Fathoms and President of TDI/SDI. He worked as a commercial diver in the Virgin Island in the early 1970s. He has all his fingers and toes.*

In addition to Dave Coston's expertise as a marine contractor, he was an extraordinary freediving spearfisherman who, at one point, held more North American world records than any other individual. He was adept at stalking fish in depths up to 100 feet on a single breath and frequently could surpass down times of two and half minutes or more. That might not sound like a particularly long time when you hear tales of divers going to depths of 500 feet or more until you remember that divers like Coston employed no weighted sleds or ballast that could be jettisoned.

Rather, he was a pure hunter who entered the ocean with the bare tools of the trade: mask, fins, snorkel and speargun. His single breath from the surface had to get him to depth and then allow some period of hunting and stalking before the inevitable struggle to swim a fish up that could easily be half his body weight. If you can't fully appreciate how strenuous such an activity can be, try pulling a large garbage can lid up from even 60 feet some time and see how much resistance must be overcome. Then consider that the garbage can lid is not trying to fight back. The blue-water hunters of this era were a unique breed of divers who were an inspiration to observe.

Eventually, Dave and other free divers realized that they were capable of hunting just about any bottom fish successfully and they abandoned the quest as lacking sufficient challenge and being unsportsmanlike. He moved on to hunting pelagic species and was the first diver to ever spear a dolphin (mahi-mahi), wahoo or kingfish. His records stood for years (some still are unequaled) and no one overtook his marks until he gave up spearfishing years later.

Around 1972 someone noted that the world record for shark was a measly 25 pounds or so attributed to a guy who speared a reef shark in self-defense off St. Thomas. He openly boasted of his record and finally Dave decided that he needed to be silenced, if only to dignify the record with a worthy fish.

Other hunters might have decided to pick off another reef shark at 50 or a hundred pounds and earn bragging rights quickly. Instead his first record was a silky shark nearly 10-feet-long and weighing in at over 350 pounds. He got the beast while

diving 10 miles offshore in the deep trench between St. Croix and St. Thomas, which is over 10,000 feet deep. And he only shot the shark after it charged him and took away a dolphin he had speared. Shortly thereafter he bagged a massive oceanic whitetip shark under similar circumstances. I think both records remain unchallenged.

Coston was a true environmentalist in the purest sense as well. He never shot anything he didn't eat and left territorial bottom fish for scuba divers to enjoy for photography. The sharks he took only after being threatened or attacked outright. Even then, he ate them. And he would never consider using scuba to hunt fish. He considered scuba spearfishermen to be beneath contempt.

Today, Dave is 65 and lives in Jupiter, Florida where he is still involved as a marine contractor. Since he looked old at 35, his appearance hasn't changed much and he's just as spry as when I first met him over three decades ago. He was the most important mentor I ever had and taught me more about the business of commercial diving and the science of freediving than any person I've ever known. For anyone who knew him in the early 1970s, his name invokes a litany of stories of his incredible feats of watermanship and diving skill.

His name also typically prompts most to comment, "That guy was really something. It's a shame he's not still around." He's become something of a recluse and most of the dive community naturally figured he'd passed on to the great dive site in the sky.

*Fathoms* is pleased to note that Dave is still alive and kicking. As the guy in *Monty Python's Holy Grail* movie protested to the grave diggers who tried to carry him away prematurely, "I'm not dead yet!" Indeed, Dave Coston may outlive us all.



Coston with world record Oceanic Whitetip shark, 1972