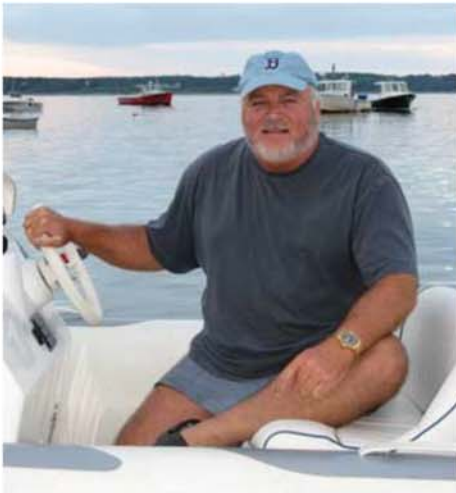
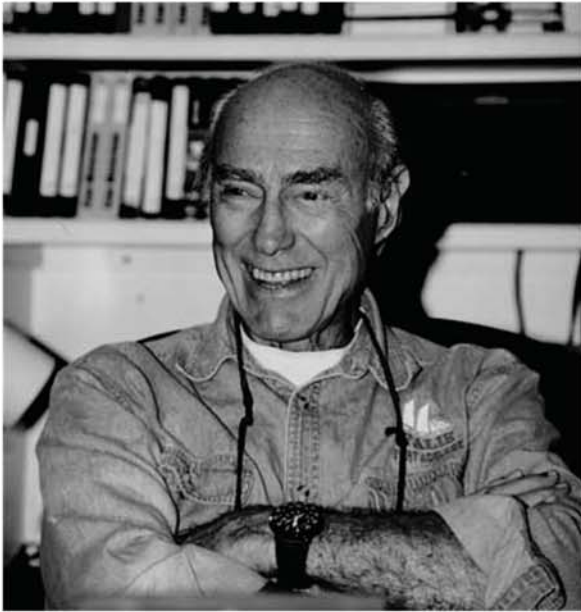


What's In A Name?

By [Bret Gilliam](#), October 14, 2010



There's something very revealing at times about peoples' names. Remember that a huge segment of our population derived their surnames from their ancestors' original trades or employment. Just think about how many people you know whose last names are Cook, Smith, Carver, Baker, Carpenter, Speaker, Chandler, Flowers, Fryer, Gardner, Packer, Singer, Fisher, Taylor, Driver, and even Hooker. I even cautiously knew a dentist with the unfortunate moniker "Dr. Payne" on his business card. Not exactly the guy you want doing your wisdom teeth. Of course, it can work the other way... consider the smug satisfaction that dry suit manufacturer (DUI) founder Dick Long has enjoyed over the years.



Stan Waterman in his office

But every now and then, fate hands out a surname that is simply perfect... that captures the essence of the person who bears it. I know a guy like that. His name is Waterman.

It's a safe bet that most folks will have name recognition for the likes of Jacques Cousteau or Lloyd Bridges who brought television's diving hero Mike Nelson to life in *Sea Hunt*. But for divers, the one person most likely to hit 100% on recognition, popular approval, and appreciation scales simultaneously is, of course, none other than diving's eloquent ambassador, Stan Waterman. It's also worth noting that he began diving well before either Cousteau or Bridges first dipped their faces beneath the ocean. Stan's contribution to the popularity and initial recognition of scuba diving is virtually unequaled.

From a humble beginning as a blueberry farmer in coastal Maine, he was inspired to start one of the first pure diving operations in the Bahamas. Chafing at confinement to one locale, he indulged his passion for diving by teaching himself the art of motion picture photography and producing some of diving's earliest films. His first documentary in 1954, *Water World*, set the hook in the young adventurer and he widely toured the U.S. personally narrating the show to astounded viewers.

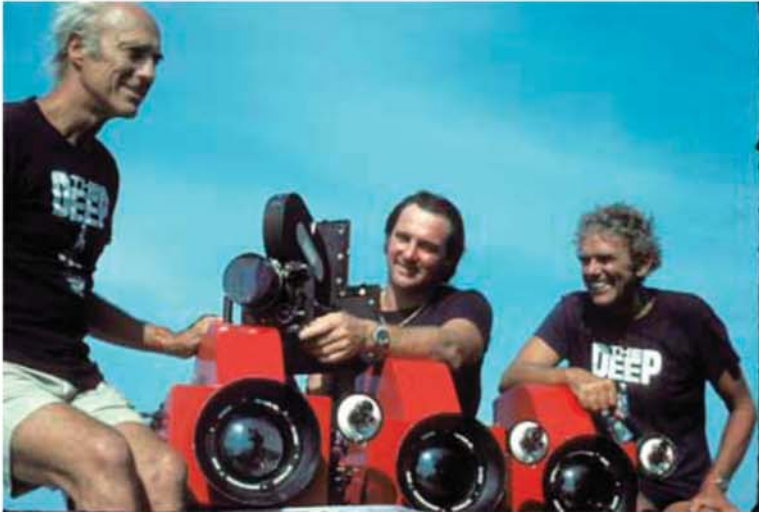
In 1959 Waterman participated in the first underwater archaeological expedition to Asia Minor to film a Bronze Age shipwreck. The resulting film, *3,000 Years Under the Sea*, was a hit. His third effort in 1963, *Man Looks to the Sea*, won numerous awards including top honors at the United Kingdom International Film Festival. Following that success, he packed his entire family off with him to Polynesia for a year working on a film that became a *National Geographic* special.

For anyone lucky enough to catch one of Stan Waterman's personal appearances, you undoubtedly came away with a lasting impression of his wonderful speaking presence and gift for oration. I remember my own feelings after seeing him from a distant spot in the audience for the first time nearly four decades ago. It was like listening to Lincoln or Churchill... but with a better vocabulary. And Stan talked about diving, my passion, in a way that no one else could.

Someone once suggested that he was the “Jacques Cousteau of American diving” and was promptly corrected by an observer to note, “Cousteau was actually more like the Stan Waterman of France.” It’s a fair statement.

In 1994 the Discovery Channel honored him with a featured two-hour special aptly named *The Man Who Loves Sharks*. The September 12, 2005 issue of *Sports Illustrated* had a profile of Stan remembering his first appearance in the magazine on its cover in January 1958. It’s hard to find a serious diver who has not been touched in some way by this gentle and eloquent man’s creative works.

But Stan is truly in his element when you discover him through his writings. That’s not hard to believe when you consider that he actually studied under Robert Frost at Dartmouth. Throughout his lengthy career, he has carefully chronicled his underwater rites of passage in a widely published series of articles, features, anecdotal musings, and interviews. Don’t miss his excellent book of essays titled *Sea Salt* (New World Publishing). This fascinating book recounts his career in a series of autobiographical chapters and others that simply relate stories of great diving adventures spanning close to eight decades now.



Stan Waterman, Al Giddings & Chuck Nicklin on site for *The Deep*

But one film was singularly most responsible for launching him into the consciousness of divers and the generally terrified viewing public: the astonishing documentary epic *Blue Water, White Death*. Released in theaters in early 1971 after nearly two years in filming, the movie induced a primal gut reaction for most audiences that combined horror and fear with fascination. No one before had ever left the safety of cages to swim in open water with pelagic sharks. Waterman (with Peter Gimbel and Ron & Valerie Taylor) blew everyone away by leaving the cages to swim with hundreds of feeding sharks... at night. The film’s dramatic conclusion, featuring the first great white shark footage ever presented, left an indelible impression on millions and firmly established Waterman’s reputation. Following the popularity of the movie *Jaws* release in 1975, ABC television latched on to Waterman to film an *American Sportsman* segment with author Peter Benchley. A year later Hollywood came calling to ask him to co-direct the underwater unit for *The Deep*.

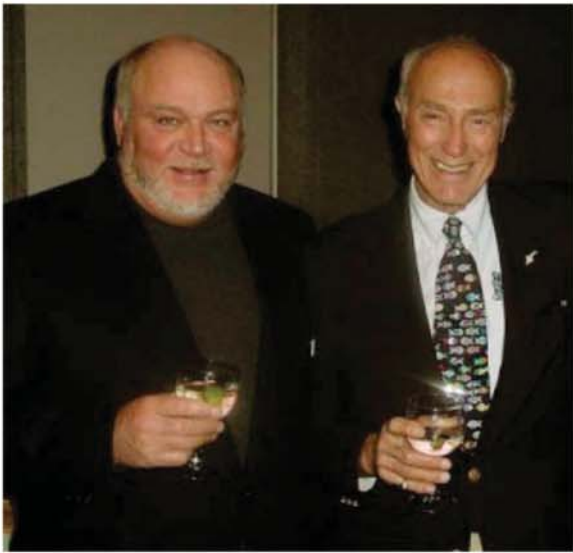
My own awareness of him began back in January of 1971. I was working as a diver for

the U. S. Navy on a project that required us to film fast attack submarines as they whizzed past us underwater at great depths and speeds up to 70 knots. That alone had been enough to intimidate all but a handful of the Navy's elite divers but it was the lengthy decompressions in the open ocean following the dives that had left more than a few battle-hardened veterans with soiled wet suits. It wasn't the decompression itself... it was the zealous population of oceanic whitetip sharks that looked on us as so much sushi that was sparking a mass exodus from our project. These pugnacious pelagic sharks were attracted and stimulated by the low frequency sound transmissions that accompanied the sub tests and basically served the same purpose as ringing a giant underwater dinner bell.

It was exciting, frightening, and more than a bit out of control. The sharks would swim right up to us and bite cameras, cage bars, jet fins or anything else that presented the hope of a snack. Several had even bitten the support ship's propellers, struts and rudders. The refuge of sturdy shark cages was our only solace at times. Those of us who persevered considered ourselves to be members of a fairly select team of divers who were certainly showing far more bravado than anyone else we'd met when it came to shark encounters.

However, our macho elitist personas were instantly dashed when we got a weekend off in February that year and took in a movie that had just been released called *Blue Water, White Death*. In the film's stunning first half, a stalwart fellow named Stan Waterman slipped out of his protective cage along with his team and forever entered the pantheon of diving history as they became the first divers to ever deliberately swim with hundreds of actively feeding oceanic whitetip sharks. It was enough to make a bunch of semi-fearless Navy divers wet our collective pants.

At the time, it was quite simply the most daring act that we could imagine and we all returned to our regimen of diving with subs and sharks with a new humility and respect for our elders. After all, Gimbel and Waterman were in their late forties in age (old men!) while we were blessed (and cursed) with the arrogance of youth being barely past the legal drinking age and had heretofore considered ourselves invincible specimens of physical fitness and diving acuity.



Bret Gilliam & Stan Waterman

Stan, of course, went on to glory in many ways with his filmmaking, published works and captivating public speaking appearances. Five years after seeing him in *Blue Water, White*

Death I had the chance to meet him at a cocktail party during the filming of *The Deep* in the British Virgin Islands. While others beat a path to shake hands with star Robert Shaw or to simply ogle the transcendent beauty of Jackie Bissett, I maneuvered myself into position to meet Stan for the first time. From my perspective it was like being introduced to a rock star or to football god Johnny Unitas. I shyly proffered a hesitant handshake and was treated to a smile and a firm grip from my hero. I don't think any single event in my diving history came close to that moment and I still remember it vividly along with the warmth of this stranger who took some time to chat with his youthful fan.

Stan and I have been friends now for years. We've shared many stages over the years as well in Chicago, New York, Houston, and Boston and I always look forward to hanging out with a true American legend. I stay over at his house in Maine and he visits mine. Lately I've been cruising over to his waterfront estate near Deer Island on beautiful Eggemoggin Reach. I anchor my motor yacht *Encore* in his snug harbor known as "The Punch Bowl" and we get together to share lobster, strong drink, and tell stories by the fireplace. There will never be a grander or more articulate spokesperson and ambassador for diving... or a better friend.

Stan will turn 88 in April of 2011 and still keeps to a diving and speaking schedule that would daunt persons the age of his grandchildren. I am moved to reflect on the wisdom of the wise man that said, "The Key to Immortality is Living a Life Worth Remembering."

What's in a name? I think his ancestors got it right when they handed down "Waterman" to this iconic figure in diving and steward of our oceans.

Thank you, Stan, from divers everywhere for inspiring and stimulating us to embrace the sport of diving. We are all better persons for knowing you.