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Who Is That Masked Man?

Bret Gilliam discovers who "Ben Davison" really is

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In January 1977, as I was struggling to build up my first dive operation called V. I. Divers Ltd. in St. Croix, a customer came down and spent a week diving with us. He and his wife had a great time, and as they were leaving, they gave me a cheesy "newsletter" sort of publication called *Undercurrent*. I'd never seen it before but they explained that it was a *Consumer Reports* for diving which had recently started up, was distinguished by unbiased reporting on equipment, resorts, dive operations and the like, and was developing a reputation for objective, reliable articles done by its editors who arrived anonymously and just blended in with the rest of the diving customers, then wrote about the experience, good and bad.

Of course, I immediately asked if they were part of this *Undercurrent* thing and if I was about to get reviewed. They vehemently denied it, saying no one knew who the editors were. They gave it to me so I could see how my competitors in the Virgin Islands and other areas of the Caribbean were faring in their reviews -- and to be forewarned that some unidentified reporter could drop in on me sometime. They also assured me that my company's laid-back attitude about diving freedom, varied sites and great customer service would probably do well.

Wonderful, I thought. Unbiased objective reporting in the diving industry, in which you couldn't even get a mention in *Skin Diver* magazine without an ad contract? It just didn't seem likely. I was already advertising in *Skin Diver* and it always seemed to run some sort of little column about V. I. Divers Ltd. in every issue, along with a big yearly section on the Virgin Islands. They thought we were great, but then again, they thought everybody was "world class" if you bought an ad. Let your ad contract lapse, and you fell off the earth into the ocean's deepest depths as far as they were concerned.

So I read through *Undercurrent* and decided to write the editors immediately to dare them to come down and evaluate us, but nothing ever happened and I forgot about it. Then eight months later, I got the August 1977 issue and the lead story on the front page was a review of my operation, called "The Burgeoning Business of Beach Diving," written by a Ben Davison. My first instinct was to check our customer roster to see when this guy was down with us but, of course, there was no "Ben Davison." We had been clandestinely infiltrated, just as our guests had predicted. I nervously retired to my office to read what they had to say. Here are a few gems from that article:

"St. Croix, however, earned our attention because we respond now and then to a well-orchestrated hustle. In January, a letter arrived from the President of V. I. Divers, Bret Gilliam, saying he would 'like to host one of your writers to see how we fare in your evaluation. We aren't perfect, but we like to think we do a pretty good job of taking care of our guests.' Not long after that, the Virgin Islands Tourist Board wrote 'Y'all come see us some time, hear?' St. Croix has been an obscure speck on tourists maps... only now is it back... dive trips are offered by a handful of guides in business, more for sun than income, Bret Gilliam included. But he had his eye to the future and after a guide gig or two, he opened his own business, expanded and continued to expand.

"Now he has the only full-service dive shop on the island, and owns the *Virgin Diver* (an 85-foot liveaboard) that operates one-week charter trips out of British Virgin ports. Along with being an enthusiastic diver, Gilliam's real skill seems to be tough-minded management. Gilliam will bust his buns to get the tourist trade, and I don't doubt he'll be successful. He expects an avalanche of visitors from *Skin Diver's* forthcoming coverage, and when I was in his shop, boxes of new gear were arriving, and he was continually on the phone hustling new staff to handle the onrush. That's sound planning, and that's why Gilliam's getting St. Croix on the diver's map."

Well, I thought, not a bad start. This guy seems to appreciate the effort I'm putting in and thinks I'm going somewhere.

Swell! The article continued: "I selected St. Croix because Gilliam offered a one-week certification course, which I sought for a newly recruited buddy, but only after we had answered his earlier invitation, saying that he would learn of our visit when he read about it in *Undercurrent*. He replied, 'You're right. Booking as a regular diving customer is really the best way and most objective way to conduct a review. Good luck with *Undercurrent*.' So Bret, we booked as a regular customer. I was the guy you promised to have a dive for the first day, but didn't..."



Ah shit. I knew we had screwed up because this guy must have arrived on an afternoon flight and missed our morning boat departures. We made a practice of doing only one boat trip a day in order to give folks three dives and lunch in an unhurried setting that let us access the remote drop-offs and reefs other operators couldn't get to in their little outboard boats. We ran a 50-foot boat then, huge for that era, and traveled up to 25 miles to get the best diving. It was an all-day outing, but I guess we didn't make it clear that you had to be there by 9 a.m. My bad, and I fiercely scribbled a note to myself to add this information to



The "Real" Ben Davison

our booking brochure.

The reviewer also never realized that we ran the boat trips because he immediately opted for our inexpensive beach diving tours than ran all day and at night. "St. Croix diving is well suited for the diver who brings his own tank and buddy, feels confident in new water, and wants to explore the reefs on his own, because there is more than enough beach diving to keep one occupied for a vacation. Gilliam encourages people to head off on their own, and will provide a map of beach dives for anyone who has demonstrated on a guided dive that he can handle himself. For...confident beach divers, St. Croix indeed rates well. Gilliam has two competent guides... and Bill Walker, a gentle and excellent instructor. For the macro photographer, Fredericksted Pier will provide critters almost impossible to find elsewhere."

The writer went on to favorably rate our operation for the most part, and to disparage our competitors, much to my delight. Along the way, he pointed out some things we could improve on, and I immediately implemented the changes -- the very next day. He also made some notes on hotels and restaurants that would prove both amusing and the key to his secret identity 20 years later. "We stayed at the Buccaneer. Summer rates of \$51 a night are awfully high, but it's attractive and relaxing. In town, the Club Comanche at \$24 a night... a good choice. For fine dinner, we loved the Comanche. We didn't enjoy the appetizer of quail eggs garnished with salmon eggs... but the cat beneath the table did."

In retrospect, the five-star luxury Buccaneer Resort now has rates that start at \$410 and go up over \$1,100 a night. The Club Comanche (our hotel base for guests that offered harbor view rooms, pool and a big pier for our dive boats) has only gone up to the \$85 - \$200 per-night range. What a difference three decades makes... I eliminated the quail eggs appetizer from the restaurant menu, but our resident cats, who we adored, stayed on forever.

Overall, that review really put us on the map, and I was astonished when a rave article in the same publication followed, about how much the writer liked the certification course we provided his girlfriend. He rated us the best place for training in the Caribbean. Later *Undercurrent* followed up with reviews of our liveaboard operation on the Virgin Diver, then one of only two in the Caribbean, along with Paul Humann's *Cayman Diver*.

Undercurrent was always fair and I appreciated the exposure, as it brought in a lot of sophisticated divers who read and trusted its reporting. We were frequently reviewed over the next eight years before I sold the business, and we always got high marks. A mutual trust developed. Although I never knew who "Ben Davison" was, he communicated with me through assistant editors from time to time, asking for honest information on diving conditions, expansion of tourism, conservation issues, crime, airline service, etc. I always gave them the straight truth, even when it meant losing money sometimes, but I knew that if I fudged on accuracy, I'd lose my credibility overnight.

I think I finalized my commitment to honesty in late 1979, when an editor called in the aftermath of a hurricane to find out what diving conditions really were locally, as they thought they were getting "hyped" by other operators and the tourism board. I replied that, although we would recover just fine in about a month, the rough weather, high winds and silty runoff into the ocean had reduced visibility at the dive sites to two feet or less, and extended as much as a half mile offshore. I recommended that no one schedule a trip for at least six weeks to allow things to get back to normal. Yeah, that cost me some revenue but I made it back 10 times over from customers who came later and said they respected me for telling the truth and putting customers first.

About that time, my editor contact at *Undercurrent* asked me to contribute articles, using my own byline, on subjects like safety, medical emergencies, training, deep diving, narcosis, remote destinations and the growth of the diving industry. I sold my Virgin Islands interests in 1985 and moved on to bigger things, but I was also contributing more often as a writer to *Undercurrent*. However, I still had no earthly idea who the mysterious publisher and senior editor, "Ben Davison," was. I'd inquire every now and then, but was always politely rebuffed with the explanation that only a handful of staff even knew his real name, and none had ever met him. So I figured I'd forever remain in the dark. But he paid well enough for my articles, never failed to embrace controversies, like the initial arguments over diving computers, nitro and technical diving, and I decided that having an honest forum on these subjects for divers to make an informed choice was worth not being privy to the Lone Ranger's secret identity.

Then in January 1997, a strange thing happened. I was attending a private cocktail party at the DEMA conference in Orlando for senior writers who contributed to my magazines, *Scuba Times* and *Deep Tech*. I had to host another private affair later that same night -- I was in the process of taking one of my companies public for a nearly \$46 million sale, and had rented the entire private dining room at Morton's Steakhouse for a grand celebration. I had 60 major industry players arriving, along with my top staff all showing up, so I was anxiously sneaking peeks at my watch as time dragged on, worried about being late. Dinner and the liquor bill at Morton's was going to set me back over \$50,000, and I was already getting cellphone calls about my whereabouts from my executive assistant, Cathryn Castle (now editor of *Dive Training* magazine for the last 13 years).

"As I strode down the hall, he called after me, 'Let's chow down on some quail eggs sometime!' I stopped dead in my tracks."

Finally, I got up, excused myself from the magazine writers' group and left them to be entertained by my publishing partner, Fred Garth. As I was walking out of the hotel suite, a pleasant-looking, middleaged guy said it was good to finally meet me and asked if we could grab a quick drink before I left. I didn't know him and I apologized, saying that I was already late for another event that I was hosting. He shook my hand and said he understood... maybe some other time. I waved and hurried out the door. As I strode down the hall, he called after me, "Let's chow down on some quail eggs sometime!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. I've got a near-photographic memory and had never forgotten that tossedoff critique of my resort restaurant in the original *Undercurrent* review 20 years before. I turned around and asked what this stranger meant by that. He simply replied that he thought I had a fondness

once for that esoteric dish.

I looked at him closely and said, "Is that you? Are you really the guy that wrote that?" He grinned and said, "Nice to meet you. I know you're late but I just wanted to say hi finally after two decades."

I looked at my watch, pulled my cell out and dialed Cathryn, who was supervising the Morton's party to say I was going to be a little late. Something important had come up and I'd be along later.

I turned back to the stranger and said, "I'm Bret Gilliam. Who are you?"

And the figurative "mask" came off as he introduced himself with his real name. I was actually filled with emotion to meet the guy who had helped launch my business career through an article in a little newsletter that had made a decision years ago to be a real journal with ethics and give readers the straight, honest truth in an industry that avoided honesty like politicians giving campaign speeches.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'd really like to have a drink with you."

We walked back into the suite, sat down away from the others, and I spent an hour catching up with my newest best friend. I finally made it to dinner 90 minutes late but Cathryn had everything in hand, as I knew she would.

"Well, do you want to tell me what was so important to make you disappear for a dinner that's costing you more than some people's houses?" she asked.

"Sorry, I couldn't break away. I bumped into an old friend I didn't know."

In the years since, "Ben Davison" and I have managed to get together just a half dozen times for dinner in various cities, but it has always been a great occasion with a now dear friend. We talk on the phone a lot. And I still write for *Undercurrent*, although I've retired from all other diving industry connections except litigation consulting. Let me only comment that it has been my pleasure and privilege to be included in *Undercurrent's* family over the years. In exchange, I've received a certain sense of nostalgia, fond memories, friendship and benchmarks of the diving industry chronicled in those pages.

"Ben Davison" has done good work for nearly 35 years, the diving industry is a better place and the readers better informed, due to *Undercurrent*. He has earned his place in history, even though only a handful of people actually know his name or would recognize him. That's a rare entity. If there were a proper Hall of Fame in diving (other than the dubious awards ceremony held by various sycophants devoted to a mutual, self-aggrandizing exchange of statues, medallions, medals and plaques issued to those who lobby the loudest), then he would be in it as a member of the first inductees. And I would proudly stand to applaud him. But I'd never reveal or disclose his true identity. You can "waterboard" me but I ain't giving him up.

Bret Gilliam is a 40-year veteran of the professional diving industry with over 18,000 logged dives. He retired in 2005 as one of diving's most successful and wealthiest entrepreneurs, and now lives on an island in Maine.