



hyperbaric medical operations. He is considered to be one of the pioneers in diving, and led the industry's evolution and growth from 1971 into the new millennium. Bret is one America's most experienced deep divers and holds the world depth record for compressed air diving at 149 metres, set in 1993. Since beginning diving in 1959, Bret has logged over 19,000 dives around the world. His background includes scientific expeditions, military and commercial projects, operating hyperbaric diving treatment medical facilities, liveaboard dive vessels and luxury yachts, retail dive stores and Caribbean resort operation and ownership.

Bret has founded and sold six corporations *V.I. Divers Ltd*, *Ocean Quest International*, *AMF Yachting Group*, *G2 Publishing Inc*, *DiveSafe Insurance*, and *International Training Inc* since 1971. As vice president and CEO, he was instrumental in taking UWATEC public in a sale for USD44 million to JWA in 1997 and sold his publishing company (*Scuba Times* and *Deep Tech*) to Petersen/E-Map

in 1999. His entrepreneurial successes in the diving industry have made him a multi-millionaire. The aggregate value of his companies when sold was in excess of USD80 million. He is currently president of the consulting corporation, Ocean Tech.

Bret has also written over 1,500 articles and worked on 69 books on diving, maritime operations, diving emergency medical procedures, dive training manuals, photography, and others. He has won several awards in various fields.

Bret currently lives on an island in Maine, travelling extensively on diving and maritime business, and filming expeditions. He has a custom-built motor yacht for wildlife photography projects and other expedition filming usage, located in New England.

Bret formed the Diving Legacy Foundation in 2005, which makes generous financial grants and support for ocean conservation, scholarships for diving education, honorariums to diving pioneers, and funds humanitarian aid projects in remote regions of the developing world.

THE SEA SPECIALIST: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRET GILLIAM

Interview by: Asian Diver

Most people learn to crawl before they walk, but there is a man who learned to swim before taking his first steps. Diver, entrepreneur, writer, athlete, maritime specialist – Bret Gilliam is the complete package. Just add water.

Captain Bret Gilliam is a master of many trades. With a career spanning almost five decades in all the different

areas of professional diving, water sports, maritime and shipping, underwater filming, and emergency

ABOVE

Gilliam working with a dolphin on a movie production in 1979

RIGHT

Valerie Taylor and Gilliam aboard a dive vessel in the Raja Ampat Islands, Indonesia, 2018

FAR RIGHT

Gilliam with his 2012 NOGI award alongside his induction into the AUAS Diving Hall of Fame



Recently, *Asian Diver* was fortunate enough to catch up with Bret, who graciously shared his insight and knowledge. The interview covered his personal and business history, the state of the seas, and his current and upcoming projects.

ASIAN DIVER: You've said that your father worked closely with the seas, and that his guidance was instrumental in shaping your love for the water. Did you always see yourself as a water baby or is it something that was cultivated based on circumstances?

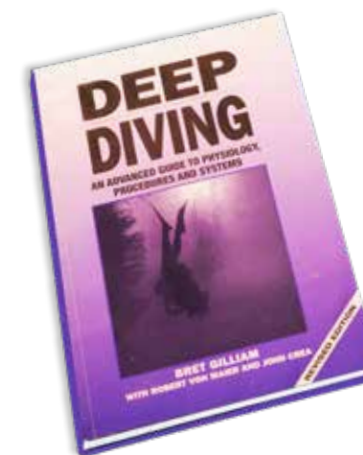
BRET: I don't think I really had a perspective since I was so young when I started snorkelling, diving, and running boats. My father was a senior naval officer and I was born at the U.S. Naval Academy. I learned to swim before I could walk and I was off snorkelling

on my own in Florida when I was six. In 1959 my father bought a 25-metre motor yacht named *Argo* and moved the family aboard and we were assigned to Key West. He hated having to move into a new house every two years or so when he got transferred to a new naval station so the yacht made perfect sense, but in that era it was very unusual to meet a family that lived on a yacht. But in my little universe this was my reality and I loved our life.

That same year we watched the first episodes of Lloyd Bridges's new TV series "Sea Hunt" that brought scuba diving into people's homes for the first time. I was totally fascinated and my dad let me take diving lessons and get certified at the ripe old age of eight. How many parents would do that?

By the age of 10, I had started a fish collecting business and was selling my tropical fish caught in traps so they were

not injured. My customers included several schools as well as the Key West Aquarium and the Miami Seaquarium.



ABOVE
Gilliam's best-selling book on *Deep Diving* has sold over 100,000 copies in seven languages to date

FAR LEFT
Bret doing experimental deep diving as part of a Navy team filming submarines for stealth protocols in 1971 in the Virgin Islands. Gilliam descended to 160 metres on heliox

LEFT
Bret conducting the first international training programme for Draeger rebreathers in 1994 at a TDI conference in Nassau, Bahamas

Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers (IANTD) with Mount and Rutkowski, but I exited in 1994 to found Technical Diving International (TDI) and it became the largest certification agency of its kind in the world. TDI just celebrated its 25th Anniversary with a big party at DEMA attended by over a thousand guests. Quite a night!

But I could see that the business model would work since I always embraced new technology and innovations to equipment design and operational protocols. Technical diving also was a key platform to introduce electronic diving computers for increased efficiency and safety. Computers had been resisted by a lot of the "old school" along with things like nitrox. This was primarily due to a lack of understanding about how all this worked.

I authored several books that covered these topics as well as other complicated diving subjects, techniques and procedures that fully detailed things in everyday language that divers could understand without a medical or scientific background.

My 1994 book *Deep Diving: An Advanced Guide To Physiology, Procedures and Systems* was really the first of its kind and became a best seller. It ultimately sold over 100,000 copies in two editions in seven languages. And, of course, all this new stuff became mainstream practice in spite of the uninformed critics.

FAR LEFT
Bret learned to swim before he could walk. Here, he practises his skills in 1953 at about age two in the Navy swimming pool

LEFT
Father, Cdr. Gill Gilliam, and sons Chris and Bret aboard *Argo* in Key West, 1960

I had to hire a young naval officer to drive me around on the deliveries since I was too young to operate a car. Ironically, my dad let me head out to sea in our Boston Whaler by myself to do the fish collections without any worries at all. He trained me well in boating skills. His mentorship really charted the path on my career. With my diving experience and maritime background, I think it was inevitable and predictable that I went down that path. I sure wasn't going to end up as an insurance salesman!

ASIAN DIVER: How did you get into technical diving, and what about it made you pursue this niche for all these years?

BRET: "Technical diving" was a term that started being used in the very late 80s and applied to

deeper diving, cave and wreck exploration, alternate breathing gases, specialised equipment like rebreathers, proprietary decompression models, etc. But for guys like me coming from a background as a military, commercial and scientific/saturation diver, I had already been completely immersed in such activities since 1971. Others like myself with similar backgrounds ended up stepping forward and trying to guide and mentor people from the sport diving groups so they had the right information and didn't kill themselves!

Most of the other earlier leaders in technical diving included Dick Rutkowski, Tom Mount, Billy Deans, Sheck Exley, Jim Bowden, Rob Palmer, Lamar Hires and a handful of other innovators. I was one of the founders of the International



ASIAN DIVER: You have been an entrepreneur since the age of 10! Could you share more about your first profitable business venture, and what made you delve into it?

BRET: My fish collecting business was my start but it was small scale and I was a kid. Later as an adult when I finished my work with an experimental Navy diving team in 1971, I wanted to see if I could come up with a different sort of business model for sport diving and founded V. I. Divers Ltd. in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I incorporated retail, training, filming, vessel operations and an expanded offering of diving adventures that other competitors didn't really do. The company grew rapidly and by 1976 we had grossed over a million dollars in sales for the first time. That was unheard of for a sport diving company back then. Growth continued and V. I. Divers Ltd. became the most successful diving business in the Caribbean. That original company that I started at the age of 22 cash flowed all my expansions into other segments, including a large 13 vessel luxury yacht charter fleet, a diving cruise ship company called Ocean Quest International, a publishing corporation for books and magazines, training agencies, manufacturing (UWATEC), and a high-end exotic diving travel operation that offered experienced divers the best diving in the world to places like Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Micronesia, Fiji, Tonga, the

Silver Bank, the Arctic and Antarctic and even deep submersible dives to over 914-metre depths.

When I sold the last of them in 2005 the aggregate sales totalled right at USD80 million. So things worked out pretty well from that modest beginning. My instincts were good and I offered superior products combined with an excellent staff that embraced my attitude for gracious customer service. To me, it was just common sense. I've had three generations of customers that stuck with me for decades. If you give the customer a satisfying experience and treat them right, they'll stay with you.

BELOW Gilliam and staff at V. I. Divers Ltd. in St. Croix, 1976. The company grew to be the largest diving operation in the eastern Caribbean



ASIAN DIVER: Your company Ocean Quest was the largest diving operation in the world. How did that start?

BRET: I was originally brought in as a consultant to advise the group of investors on what they'd need for a vessel, its dive boats, itinerary, crewing, and all the other details for a startup in such a specialised trade. I had to explain that their original ideas about just about everything were inherently flawed. They wanted to use too small a vessel, dive launches that were too small, ports that really didn't offer a great diving experience, etc. To my surprise, they listened to me and I ended up as an equity partner and made all the operational decisions including being Master of the vessel



and CEO of the company. We acquired the original flagship of Norwegian Cruise Lines, called *Sunward I*, and renamed it *Ocean Spirit*. It was operating then in the Persian Gulf and was in poor cosmetic condition but excellent mechanically and its infrastructure was fine.

I sent it to Singapore for a complete renovation including adding guest suites to the accommodations, total interior design redo, ten 8.5-metre diesel dive boats, a full size hyperbaric treatment recompression chamber, and refined the cruise route to depart from New Orleans and visit Cozumel, Mexico, the offshore atolls of Belize, and Roatán and Guanaja in the Bay Islands of Honduras. Excellent diving back then when we started operations in 1988.

“We acquired the original flagship of Norwegian Cruise Lines, called *Sunward I*, and renamed it *Ocean Spirit*.”

The ship was over 152 metres in length, 18,000 tonnes, and 10 stories high. When divers came aboard as passengers they couldn't believe the size. They were used to getting shoe-horned into small bunk beds of liveaboards of the era and jammed into small salons as the only social areas. Our ship had five restaurants,

ABOVE Ocean Quest International's 152-metre, 18,000-tonne cruise ship off Belize in 1989. This was the largest diving operation in the world, conducting over 80,000 dives annually

three nightclubs with great live entertainment, a movie theatre with first run Hollywood films, a spa, a casino, a gym, and even a 4.5-metre deep swimming pool.

In addition to our regular cruises we also did special charters and projects. In 1989 we were chartered to host the contestants for the Miss Universe contest in Cancún since they wanted to all stay together in one facility and didn't like the available hotel offerings. So they chartered a cruise ship! We loved it

and the beauty queens were quite fun.

We also did a lot of movie and documentary work including comedian Adam Sandler's first movie called *Going Overboard*. It also included actors Billy Bob Thornton and Val Kilmer in some of their first movie roles. We definitely had a lot of fun on so many of the voyages!

I had a great dive staff and we offered boats to match the divers' experience and interests. We supplied the early versions of dive computers

and trained people on them with the first certifications on such instruments. We also allowed deeper diving, cave exploration, shark diving, the latest in underwater photography equipment and training, and a total luxury experience with large staterooms that simply were unheard of in regular diving vessels.

We carried an average of 400 passengers and had 228 crew including the dive staff. The guests loved the experience and we had many divers come several times a year since it offered such a unique itinerary and you just had to fly into New Orleans.

We sold the company to Sea Escape Cruise Lines in September of 1990. Ocean Quest remains the largest diving operation of all time. We average 80,000 dives annually... that was beyond the industry's imagination at the time. But my concept was well thought out and executed. It was a very special experience and I really enjoyed it.

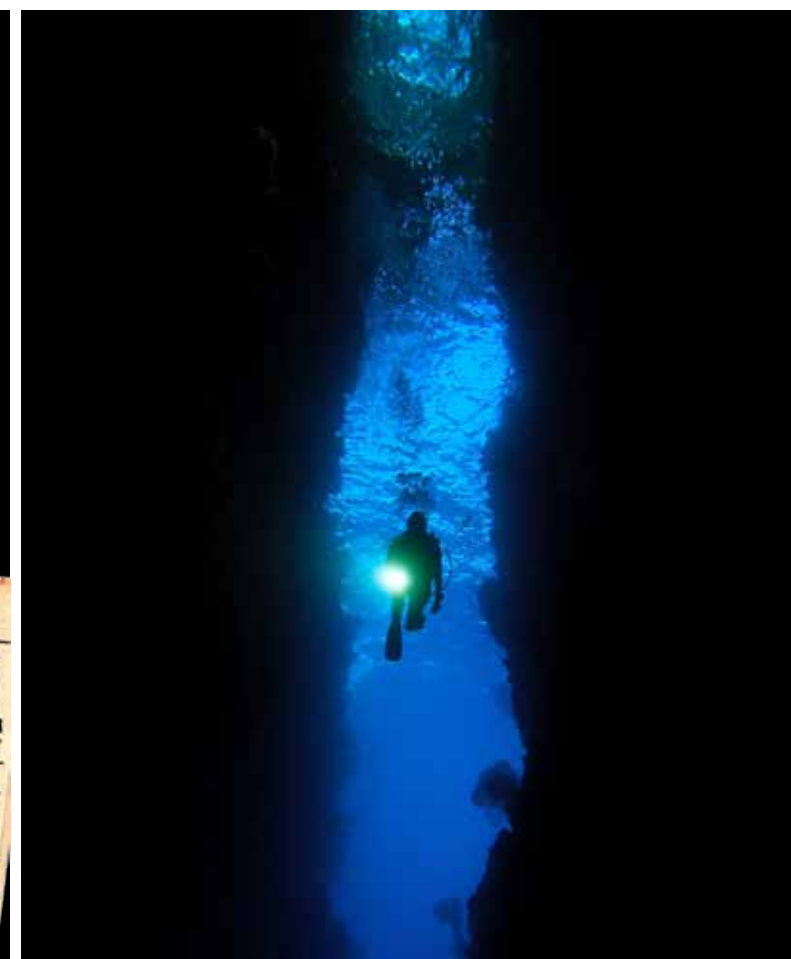
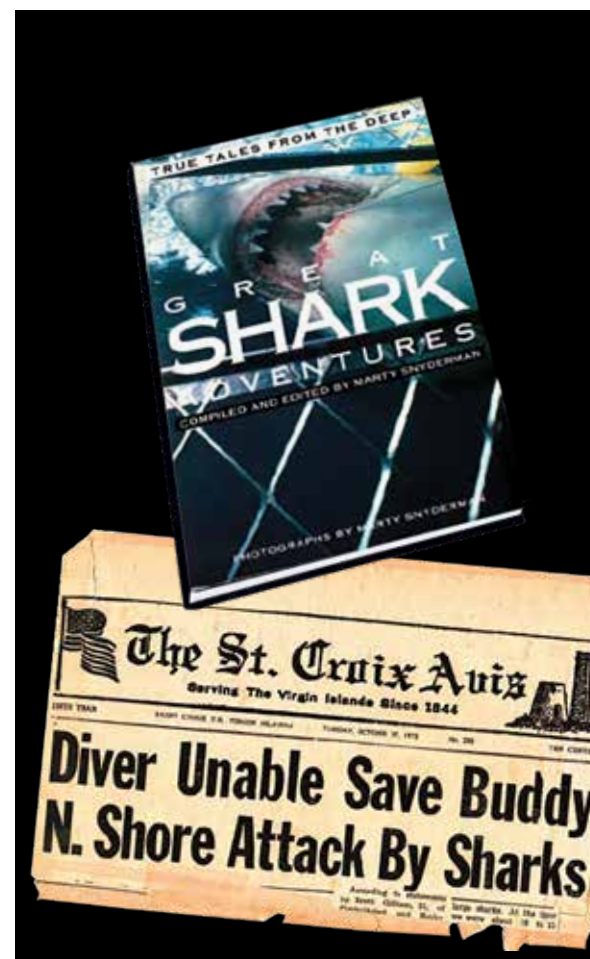
“We carried an average of 400 passengers and had 228 crew including the dive staff.”

TOP
Capt. Bret aboard cruise ship *Ocean Spirit*, off Belize 1989

OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT One of many books that feature the story of Bret's shark attack survival; headline in local newspaper, October 17, 1972

BOTTOM
Gilliam (far right) and staff at 1988 DEMA show introducing Ocean Quest International to the industry

OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT Cave entrance, Solomon Islands
IMAGE: Bret Gilliam



ASIAN DIVER: In your many years as a diver, we've heard that you've been in some life-threatening situations. Could you share your most memorable escape?

BRET: Probably my closest brush with death was in 1972 when two oceanic whitetip sharks attacked one of our dive team members on a scientific project and were dragging him over the drop-off wall at Cane Bay on St. Croix's north shore. I went to his rescue and tried to fight the sharks off but we ended up getting dragged down to a depth of nearly 114 metres or more. He ended up dying underwater and the sharks dragged him from my grasp and into the abyss. I had to do an out-of-air free ascent from

that extreme depth and then was airlifted out for treatment of the bends to Puerto Rico.

In retrospect, it was close to a miracle that I survived. It's still the deepest free ascent that any diver has managed to pull off and survive. The incident has been featured in many books as well as a BBC television documentary. It was an emotionally draining experience to lose a close friend under such tragic circumstances. I have no regrets about going back to try to rescue him... it was an instinctual reaction. But someone was looking down at me and gave me the strength to survive. His body was never found.

ASIAN DIVER: We know that the state of our waters has changed over the last 50 years, especially in regards to climate change and pollution. You have no doubt seen this transformation happen firsthand. Could you share how this has impacted diving for you, both in terms of your career and passion?

BRET: I've now been diving for over 60 years and remember the days when the reefs of Florida, the Bahamas, and the Caribbean were virgin and in superb condition. Sadly, that began to deteriorate in the early 90s and the conditions have continued to decline. I shifted most of my attention to the Indo-Pacific



TOP LEFT
Gili Banta Island,
Indonesia
IMAGE: Bret Gilliam

TOP RIGHT
On the deep drop-off,
Solomon Islands
IMAGE: Bret Gilliam

RIGHT
School of jacks off
Mary Island,
Solomon Islands
IMAGE: Bret Gilliam



“I urge all divers to get out and see things while they still can because it’s not going to last.”

ASIAN DIVER: As a pioneer of modern diving with over six decades of experience, what advice do you have for budding divers?

BRET: Get good training and practical experience to acquire independent diving skills. A regular Open Water diver course is just a start. Keep diving with a trusted instructor and get practical experience in a wide variety of conditions, depths, and equipment. Wherever you start your diving experience will be interesting to a newcomer but try to get out and see the best stuff left in the world before it’s gone.

and have enjoyed nearly 30 years of exploration in those regions. But I’ve also witnessed firsthand the downturn in biodiversity and the health of corals and fish species. I was stunned in 2018 when I was back in the Raja Ampat Islands in Indonesia after being away only two years. The biodiversity had experienced close to a 70 percent loss in both corals and marine life. Equally depressing was the unbelievable amount of plastic pollution present in the ocean. There were some dives where we swam through plastic from the ocean surface to the bottom depths. So sad... I don’t see a viable solution.

Whether you call it “climate change” or “global warming”, the reality is that water temperatures have risen sharply in the last three decades and it has had a terrible effect on corals and marine life. Pollution is a huge component as well. I’m not optimistic that the oceans can recover. I’m truly blessed to have been able to dive and film the underwater world at its apex. We will not see those days again. I’m still actively diving worldwide, but it’s an experience that does not come close to what it used to be. I urge all divers to get out and see things while they still can because it’s not going to last.



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My favourite region is Indonesia and the Solomon Islands on the high-end liveaboard vessels. The clock is ticking...

ASIAN DIVER: You are currently involved in consulting on vessel construction and operations, as well as litigation consulting on diving and maritime legal cases, and you dive as well as contribute articles and photographs to various publications. What projects are you currently working on?

BRET: I just completed the design and construction of a 115-metre luxury diving

expedition vessel for a client in Dubai. This vessel will continuously circumnavigate the world visiting the most interesting diving places including the polar regions. All you need is about USD500 million to finance such a project! I greatly enjoyed it and have a similar contract coming up with an Asian client.

RIGHT
Diving with a female humpback on early rebreather, off Silver Bank, 1994

BOTTOM LEFT
Humpback whale doing tail wave, Tonga 2017


BOTTOM RIGHT
Mother and calf humpbacks, Tonga, 2017






“I’ve been diving with whales since I was a teenager and find humpbacks to be fascinating.”

ASIAN DIVER: Bonus question! There are dog people and there are cat people. Which particular *marine* animal do you have a soft spot for?

BRET: I’ve been diving with whales since I was a teenager and find humpbacks to be fascinating. They’re gregarious and social and seem to enjoy contact with humans that understand their behaviour and how to blend in. It’s been a privilege to film them in the North Atlantic, the Silver Bank, Hawaii, Tonga, Alaska and a variety of rarely visited regions that most people aren’t aware of. It’s a very special experience and I’ve been so lucky to know them as friends. **AD**



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