



UNDERSEA ADVENTURER

Part 2 of 2

Relics from the Depths

Waukesha County's own deep-sea diver uncovers bits of American history ... and explosives

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As if welding underwater wasn't dangerous enough (with the isolation, freezing temperatures, and potential for violent wildlife), Waukesha County native John Ditkof decided to pursue yet another commercial diving specialization. This time involving bombs. Unexploded bombs, to be exact. "When I got into commercial diving, I was looking for a specialty. I knew I wanted to get on the diver medic side ... but I was also looking for another job aspect," he said. "I ended up working with a guy who had mentioned UXO diving, and I had no idea what UXO was."

Generally referred to by industry professionals as "unexploded ordnance" or "UXO," Ditkof then attended training at the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service for Explosive & Ordnance Training (EOT). From January to February 2018, Ditkof learned how to detect, locate, identify and dispose of these bombs.

The summer after his training, Ditkof applied to VRHabillis, a company of military-trained professionals who specialize in UXO, environmental remediation, diving services and precision blasting.

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Courtesy of Loren Clark

On June 7, 2019, John Ditkof poses with the .30-caliber machine gun he salvaged from the sea floor while recovering a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

On May 1, 2019, John Ditkof dons his gear on the dive station off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, as he prepares to continue recovering a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver.

Courtesy of Loren Clark



On Dec. 7, 2021, John Ditkof installs an anode — a component welded to underwater structures to prevent corrosion — in Akutan, Alaska.

Courtesy of John Ditkof



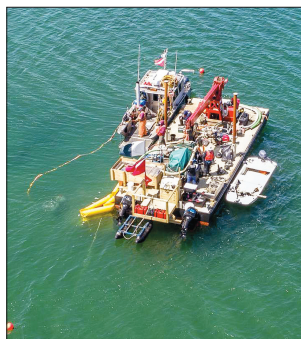
Courtesy of Loren Clark

On June 8, 2019, Ditkof poses with landing gear he recovered from the wreckage of a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.



Courtesy of Steve Rupp

On Feb. 10, 2023, Ditkof captures video of giant sponges near McMurdo Station in Antarctica. He was on the icy continent to provide dive support as part of the United States Antarctic Program Operation Deep Freeze.



Courtesy of John Ditkof

A drone captured this photo of the dive station used for the recovery of a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Ditkof was in the water when the photo was captured, and upon close inspection, one can see his helmet and cord.



Courtesy of Loren Clark

On June 10, 2019, Ditkof poses with an engine cylinder he recovered from the wreckage of a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Ditkof and his team recovered nine of the 18 engine cylinders (some of which still had pistons in them).

Undersea

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There aren't many companies that engage in UXO work, and many of them don't employ commercial divers. Instead, they tend to opt for former Navy explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) specialists. But with both commercial diving and military background, Ditkof knew he would be a good fit for a UXO project.

About a year later, he got the call. It was two days before Ditkof was set to leave for a project in False Pass, Alaska that VRHabilis sent him a message. He was needed out in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

A number of projects had been happening off the coast of the New England island over the course of a decade, but a couple years prior to Ditkof's mission, the company had found parts of an aircraft in the water, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wanted it salvaged. VRHabilis' job was to find what was left of the plane and bring it to the surface.

Ditkof says that the information regarding the lost aircraft in the region is limited, but it is estimated that throughout the course of a four-year span during World War II, roughly 20 planes were lost while the military was doing practice runs with the planes.

He was out east from late April to late June 2019, and when he arrived on the jobsite, he dove in right away. From the get-go, Ditkof and his team started pulling up artifacts.

Lots of the material was in rough shape due to both the impact of the crash and the fact that the remnants of the plane had been soaking in ocean water since the 1940s. Nonetheless, Ditkof and his team pulled up a piece of the plane that was clearly stamped with the name "Curtiss."

This confirmed that Ditkof was in fact recovering a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver.

The recovery project happened in shallow water — Ditkof estimates it was about 13 feet deep — but it took plenty of effort to extract these submerged artifacts. The material was stuck at the bottom of the sea floor, so the team dredged the items out with a vacuum-like machine and other equipment.

"Because it'd been down there for like 80 years, most of the stuff that we had found was actually probably about three feet in the mud," Ditkof said. "We ended up actually using the suction and removed all the sedi-



Courtesy of Loren Clark

On May 3, 2019, Ditkof poses with an MK-23 practice bomb he recovered from the wreckage of a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. He located a number of unexploded practice bombs (which Ditkof describes as "elongated shotgun shells") during the project and passed them along to another UXO company to be detonated on shore.

ments and whatever material we were trying to get rid of."

A PVC grid was set up to divide the site into different sections. The divers would focus on individual sections and then tell the professionals above the surface where the artifacts came from. "Our marine archaeologists would catalog it and try to paint an overall picture," he said.

A sifting table on the dive station was also used to help uncover small artifacts that would have gotten lost with all the large equipment.

So, what exactly did Ditkof find? Lots of things, including two propellers (one still attached to the hub), a gyroscope, a 30-caliber machine gun, a few personal effects, a penny, material from the plane's seats, electrical wire, tubing, landing gear, nine

of the 18 engine cylinders (some of which still had pistons in them), multiple undetonated MK-23 practice bombs and human remains — which momentarily put the project on hold.

"I ended up finding human remains almost immediately," Ditkof said. "So, we ended up having to come to a stop. We had to contact the Boston Medical Examiner."

Together, the medical examiner and Ditkof's team came up with a procedure for dealing with the human remains they found at the site. It is likely that the remains belong to the pilot of the dive bomber, but the medical examiner could not determine that immediately.

UNDERSEA ADVENTURER

A two-part series

Who is John Ditkof? From serving as a torpedoman in the Navy to graduating from WCTC's welding program to becoming a commercial diver, he's done it all. And he's seen it all too. This globetrotting John-of-all-trades has visited every continent, took a dip in every ocean, and stepped foot in all 50 states. But some of his most exciting adventures have happened at the ends of the earth.

SATURDAY: Read about Ditkof's background, education, and the details of his commercial diving gigs in Antarctica, Alaska, and the Arctic. He's taken every job from dark to dangerous to disgusting.

TODAY: Since welding underwater in the coldest, most remote corners of the globe wasn't adventure enough for Ditkof, he decided to take on another specialization. This time involving a little bit of American history ... and a few explosives.

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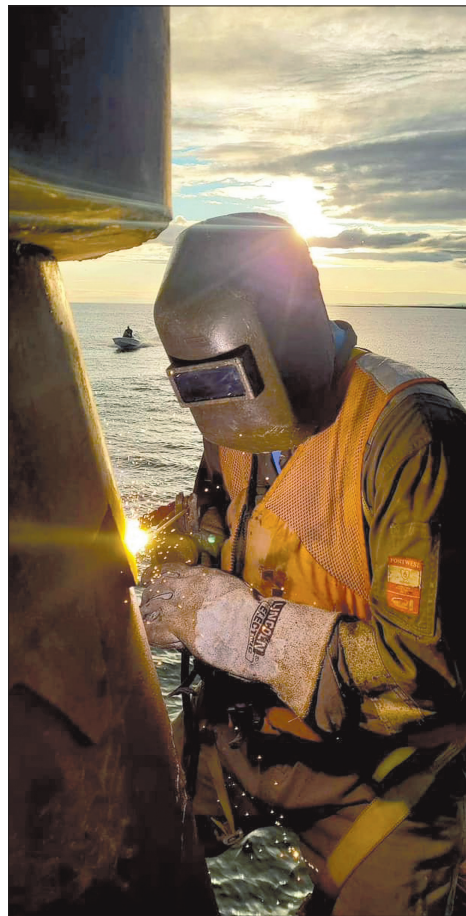
On July 2, 2023, John Ditkof repairs a mooring dolphin in the Port of Red Dog Mine, Alaska. Mooring dolphins are used to help secure a ship to a pier.

Courtesy of Oscar Hopps



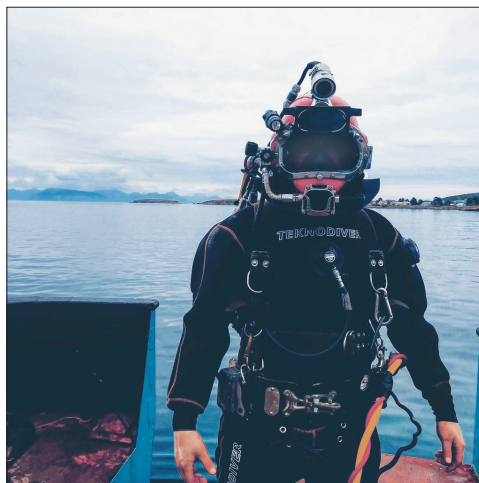
On Jan. 20, 2023, Ditkof explores an underwater ice cave near the McMurdo Station in Antarctica. He was in Antarctica serving as dive support and helping with dive equipment shakedown during the USAP Operation Deep Freeze.

Courtesy of John Ditkof



On July 9, 2023, Ditkof repairs a mooring dolphin in the Port of Red Dog Mine, Alaska. According to Ditkof, this photo was taken at 11:30 p.m. This is as low as the sun would set since it was summertime in the Arctic.

Courtesy of Oscar Hopps



On Oct. 2, 2019, Ditkof wears his diving gear and prepares to inspect outfall pipes in Sand Point, Alaska.

Courtesy of Oscar Hopps

Diver

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For about eight weeks, Ditkof and his team worked tirelessly. They even worked on Memorial Day, which ended up being a special moment for the professionals on the job.

Most of the crew came from a military background, Ditkof included. They bonded over the shared experiences and recognized how unique it was that they were bringing home a fellow serviceman — even if it was nearly eight decades after the fact. “We were quite literally bringing home remains of the crew over Memorial Day, and we’re all vets. I had mentioned that to everybody, and we all paused for a moment and realized that it was really cool,” he said.

In terms of the bombs on site, Ditkof’s team recovered four. He describes them as “elongated shotgun shells.” But the risk of the ordinance actually detonating was relatively low. “So in this case, we got kind of lucky because they’re pretty old,” Ditkof said. “There’s not a ton of hazard to them because they’re

SEE VIDEOS ONLINE

Visit gmtoday.com/undersea to see videos of Ditkof’s adventures.

just sitting in salt water for like 80 years.”

So, when Ditkof found the bombs, he just put them in a bucket and brought them to the surface. “That was the best way to do it,” he said. The bombs were then passed along to another UXO company and blown up on the shore.

Being able to utilize his UXO training was a significant moment for Ditkof. “Finding the bomb was a big one for me,” he said. “How many guys can say they’ve done that? Especially underwater.”

But Ditkof has spent the last couple months gearing up for another big moment — his first day of school. As a welding instructor, that is. In July, Ditkof was hired as a weld-

ing instructor at Waukesha County Technical College — the place where it all began. He’s looking forward to sharing his expertise with his students and letting them know that welding doesn’t just happen inside the four walls of a shop. “I actually always wanted to teach,” Ditkof said. “I’ll definitely have some stories for [my students]. And I’ll be able to say ‘I’ve gone through this program at WCCTC and look what I’ve done.’”

But more than anything, he’s glad to be able to spend more time with the ones who mean the most to him. “Having been all around the world, I know diving isn’t going anywhere,” Ditkof said. “My kids are.”

These underwater jobs have taken him across the globe and away from his family for months at a time. Now, as a welding instructor on dry land, he’ll be able to watch his young children grow up.

Nevertheless, he’s still keen on taking another adventure. Ditkof says he might snag a diving gig once or twice a year, but when it comes to traveling for fun, the climate might look a bit different. “It would be nice to go somewhere warm for a change.”



On May 3, 2019, Ditkof poses for a photo with the gyroscope he recovered from the wreckage of a World War II-era Curtiss SB2C Helldiver off the coast of Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts.

Courtesy of Loren Clark