

UNDERSEA ADVENTURER



Courtesy of Steve Rupp

On June 12, 2022, John Ditkof welds a 250-pound anode to the steel pilings on the newly constructed pier at Palmer Station in Antarctica to help prevent corrosion. He dove for 4 hours and 35 minutes, the second-longest dive in the history of the United States Antarctic Program (USAP).

Part 1 of 2

To the Ends of the Earth Waukesha County's own globetrotting deep-sea diver reflects on experiences

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How much does a cold brewski cost in Adak, Alaska? For a 24-pack of Heineken, it'll run you \$82. How about a week's worth of internet? That's a cool \$221.

What about commercial dive school? You'll have to pony up about \$30,000. Encountering a leopard seal on the job once you've received your diving certification? Possibly your life.

But the feeling of relief as you finally resurface after spending hours underwater repairing a dock thousands of miles from civilization? Priceless.

Wisconsin native and WCTC welding instructor John Ditkof has been there, done that. All of that.

His journey began at none other than Waukesha County Technical College. After graduating from Brookfield Central High School in 2004, serving as a torpedoman in the Navy, being deployed to Iraq a couple years later, briefly studying planetary sciences and geology at UW-Waukesha, and gallivanting around the country, Ditkof finally decided on being a tradesman.



Courtesy of John Ditkof

John Ditkof has encountered a variety of wildlife while on the job, including this king crab in Sand Point, Alaska in 2020. He was repairing a dive vessel when a local deckhand used Ditkof's phone to snap a photo of him with the colossal crustacean.

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.

TODAY: 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.

TUESDAY: 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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Courtesy of Alex Brett

On Jan. 3, 2023, Steve Rupp helps John Ditkof gear up for a dive at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. As part of Operation Deep Freeze, one of Ditkof's responsibilities was to release touch tank critters.



Courtesy of Steve Rupp

Assisted by Alex Brett (left) and Leora Wilson (adjusting mask), on Dec. 30, 2022, Ditkof prepares for a dive in Lake Fryxell located in Antarctica's Dry Valleys. He collected water samples for a science dive team in support of the Long Term Ecological Research Network. There are currently 38 people from USAP who have dove in the Dry Valleys. Of that number, 20 have dived in Lake Fryxell. Ditkof considers this to be his first true polar dive.



Courtesy of John Ditkof

On Dec. 30, 2022, Ditkof collects a water sample for the Long Term Ecological Research Network Science Dive Team in Lake Fryxell in Antarctica's Dry Valleys. He heads through the ice hole, which is approximately 10 feet thick.

Undersea

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In 2015, he graduated from WCTC's one-year welding program. Post-graduation, he took a traditional welding job with a company in Menomonee Falls. But soon enough, he was itching for another adventure. "I didn't want to just sit in a shop," he said. "I just thought I'm too antsy for this."

So, he packed his bags and headed to CDA Technical Institute in Jacksonville, Florida. While at WCTC, Ditkof had heard about careers in underwater welding. Now, with trade school education under his belt, all he needed was to learn how to dive.

He joined the commercial diving school and was taught all he needed to know about working underwater in industrial settings.

After dive school concluded, Ditkof took a trip north for Remote Emergency Medical Technician (REMT) training in Leavenworth, Washington. Then, he went to the Divers Institute of Technology in Seattle for diver medic training.

Equipped with all sorts of knowledge, Ditkof took his first commercial diving job in 2016 — debris removal at a power plant in Shamokin Dam, Pennsylvania. The water was murky, the visibility was low, and the job itself was far from glamorous. "With projects in the Lower 48, it's not glorious. ... The work is kind of gross, more often than not," he said.

With assignments like this, it's no wonder why roughly 70 percent of commercial divers drop out of the profession within the first couple years. Nevertheless, Ditkof continued to pursue this career path, jumping at every opportunity that presented itself.

Both work and personal travels have taken Ditkof to all 50 states, all seven continents, and all five world oceans. But much of his diving work has taken place in Antarctica, Alaska, and the Arctic. In fact, Ditkof is one of — if not the only — commercial diver with working dives at both poles. In terms of the southern end of that spectrum, he's spent a significant amount of time at the Palmer and McMurdo sta-

BIOGRAPHY

Name: John Ditkof

Age: 37

Occupation: Commercial diver, welding instructor at WCTC

Education: WCTC for Welding and Metal Fabrication (2015), CDA Technical Institute for Commercial Dive School (2015), Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service for Explosive & Ordnance Training (2018), Remote EMT Training (2018), Diver Medic Training at the Divers Institute of Technology (2018).

Military Experience: Served in the Navy from 2004-2008. Was stationed on board the USS Howard DDG-83, which was homeported out of San Diego, California. Did one deployment off the coast of Iraq from September 2006 to March 2007 as part of the Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) Team. While deployed, he personally boarded 62 vessels to protect the oil platforms. He got out of the military as a TM2 (Torpedoman's Mate, 2nd Class).

Family: Married with five children

tions in Antarctica, which are two of the 70 permanent bases from around 30 countries on the icy landmass.

As a freelance commercial diver, Ditkof's jobs have been everything from dark to dangerous to disgusting. He's been underwater in the dead of the Antarctic winter with nothing but a headlamp to illuminate his welding work. He's been visited by a variety of venomous marine life while working underwater. And he's been elbows deep in the waste of an Alaskan seafood company, collecting data for the EPA. "[Us



Courtesy of John Ditkof

Ditkof poses for a snowy selfie with a bald eagle in Akutan, Alaska in December 2021. On that day, Akutan received roughly a foot of snow in just a couple hours.

divers] are the ones that collect that data," Ditkof said. "We're the ones literally putting our hands in fish guts."

But as a freelancer with extensive knowledge of the trades, Ditkof will do everything from dock inspections, repairs, and builds to laying cables and pipes to installing equipment. When he's back on dry land, he'll be hired to dive inside water towers for certain projects.

But the most interesting jobs take place in distant locations, far beneath the surface for extended periods of time. As an underwater welder, Ditkof can be submerged for as long as the average white-collar worker sits behind his desk each day. At the Palmer Station in Antarctica, he dove for 4 hours and 35 minutes, the second longest dive in the history of the program he was

part of. At 5 hours and 20 minutes, the record goes to Ditkof's program supervisor Steve Rupp.

But in terms of a personal record, Ditkof's longest dive was 8.5 hours. There are a number of protocols divers like Ditkof follow to stay safe on the job, including wearing 100 pounds of gear. In order to keep warm in the roughly 30-degree Alaskan, Arctic, and Antarctic waters, divers will wear a wetsuit heated with hot water. "There comes a point where your hot water suit actually becomes just as much of a life support as your breathing gas, because otherwise you'd suffer from hypothermia pretty quickly."

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Diver

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Oxygen is pumped in through a hose to a 30-pound helmet that also includes communication features to maintain contact with those above water. Once the task is complete, divers follow steps to ensure proper decompression as their bodies readjust to the differences in pressure as they resurface. If these steps aren't followed, the divers can literally explode. Additionally, divers follow OSHA regulations and dive tables from the Navy to help gauge depth.

Even with all of these (and many, many more) precautions in place, there is still potential for things to go awry. Beyond that, there are a lot of unknown factors that accompany these jobs.

One of those unknowns is the wildlife. While freelancing, Ditkof has encountered orcas, otters, elephant seals, sea lions, sea spiders, king crabs, venomous fish, jellyfish, penguins, bald eagles, and more. Though he himself hasn't had any close calls, the divers stay vigilant while underwater. Especially when it comes to leopard

seals, who have a penchant for violence against other mammals.

Ditkof recalls a cautionary tale he was told about a scientist being attacked by a leopard seal in Antarctica. The creature dragged her to a depth of 200 feet, where she ultimately succumbed to the intense water pressure. "It imploded everything on the inside," he said. "Also, they found gnawing marks on the back of her neck. ... Leopard seals are more apt to bite you, and that can cause a lot of problems. They're the big thing we've got to worry about."

Leopard seals are so dangerous that when Ditkof arrived on a job-site and a juvenile leopard seal was spotted on the dock, the team had to wait for it to leave before hopping off the boat. "We tried to use a snowblower to get rid of it, but it actually started charging the snowblower," he explained.

Incidents like these are why Ditkof has undergone REMT and diver medic training. Diving in such remote locations is dangerous. "Being in Dutch Harbor, there's a sign when you get off the plane that says 'Do you have Flight For Life insurance? You are 887 miles from the closest hospital.'"

Dutch Harbor is in Unalaska, an

SEE VIDEOS ONLINE

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

island in the Alaskan Aleutian chain. But he's been even further than that. Ditkof has taken a job in Adak, Alaska — the furthest west incorporated town in the United States.

Adak is even further west than the Hawaiian Islands, and the prices are just as crazy. Seven days of broadband Wi-Fi costs \$213 with a little more than \$8 in tax. If you only need a day's worth, that'll be just over \$55. A beer to take the edge off will put a dent in your wallet as well, with an 18-pack of Miller Lite costing \$50 and a 24-pack of Heineken costing \$82.

But out in Adak, you don't just need to be careful with your money. You need to be careful with your health.

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Courtesy of John Ditkof

John Ditkof poses for a photo with the sign for McMurdo Station in Antarctica on Christmas Eve of 2022. He was in Antarctica with the USAP from December of 2022 to February of 2023.

Adventure

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For context, it's a six-hour flight from Adak to Anchorage. This means that if someone were to need medical assistance, it would take 12 hours to get to the nearest hospital. If a flight isn't available, sailing is the next best option. And that could take days.

So, does Ditkof ever fear for his own life when he's in these freezing corners of the world? "Not really," he said. Medic training and a little bit of realism keep Ditkof grounded while he's afloat. "Either something happens and it's no longer my problem, or we figure it out. I've had to treat guys while I've been out there. It's just the nature of the industry."

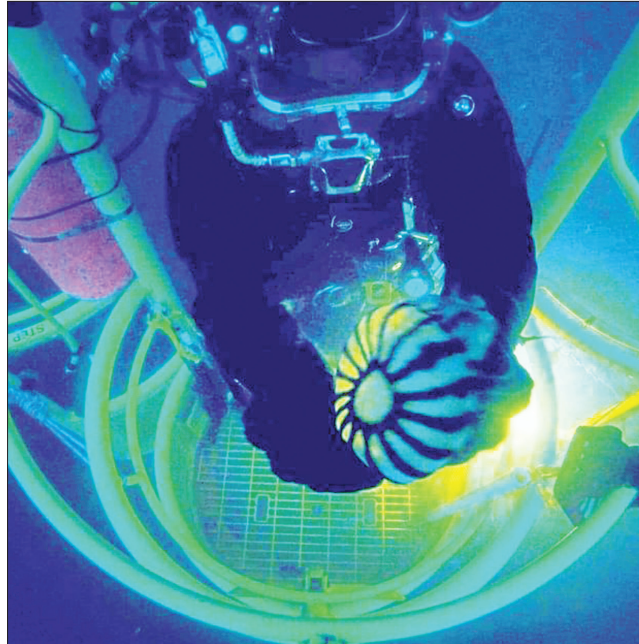
Though he works and lives with many other professionals while he's out on a job, Ditkof notes that the underwater tasks are largely solitary. And the deeper you go, the darker and lonelier it gets. On the mainland, dives are normally around 30 feet, but in places like Alaska, Ditkof will go as deep as 190. It's just him and the endless ocean.

"This isn't like scuba where everybody's down there," Ditkof explained. "You are by yourself to get a job done. There are personnel with equipment who are topside trying to make sure you can do your job and do it safely, but at the end of the day you're by yourself down there and you've gotta figure it out."

Though it isn't uncommon for Ditkof to work 12, 24, or 36-hour shifts while he's on a job, he still makes time for fun. At the McMurdo Station in Antarctica, all the professionals participated in an unofficial 1K race. Everyone dressed up for the occasion — with one person in an inflatable dinosaur suit — but Ditkof wanted to represent his homeland. So, he donned some Green Bay Packer merch and cracked open a frosty Spotted Cow he transported all the way to the end of the earth. "It was the only non-expired beer down there," Ditkof added.

Another time, he grabbed his gear and GoPro (which he uses to capture photos and video of his aquatic welding work) and explored some underwater ice caves. With hundreds of feet of visibility, he relished every moment under the surface and he's thankful he took the time to experience something so rare. "No one gets to do this," he said. "And I don't think I'll ever be able to do it again."

This summer Ditkof spent some time on a diving job in the Arctic, but one of his most memorable gigs happened in 2019. It involved a little bit of American history and a lot of bombs. Yes, bombs.



Courtesy of John Ditkof

On Oct. 25, 2019, a jellyfish visits Ditkof while he is conducting a seafloor survey in Valdez, Alaska. This encounter was about 40 feet below the surface of the water. During this job, Ditkof reached a depth of 189 feet — his deepest dive at the time.

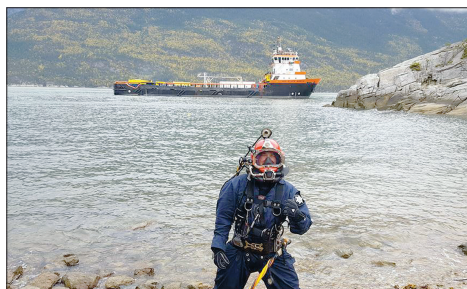
Part 2 on Tuesday:

See the second part of Ditkof's undersea adventure, running in Tuesday's edition of The Freeman.



Courtesy of John Ditkof

(Left to right) On June 17, 2022, Jake Metzger, Ditkof, and Steve Rupp pose for a photo at the Palmer Station in Antarctica. The three divers were waiting for the boat that would take them to survey the sunken Argentine ship the Bahia Paraiso to be put into the water.



Courtesy of Jason Venick

On Sept. 14, 2016, Ditkof dons his diving gear in Skagway, Alaska. For this job, he was helping install fiber optic cable.



Courtesy of Steve Rupp

John Ditkof welds an anode underwater at Palmer Station in Antarctica on June 12, 2022.