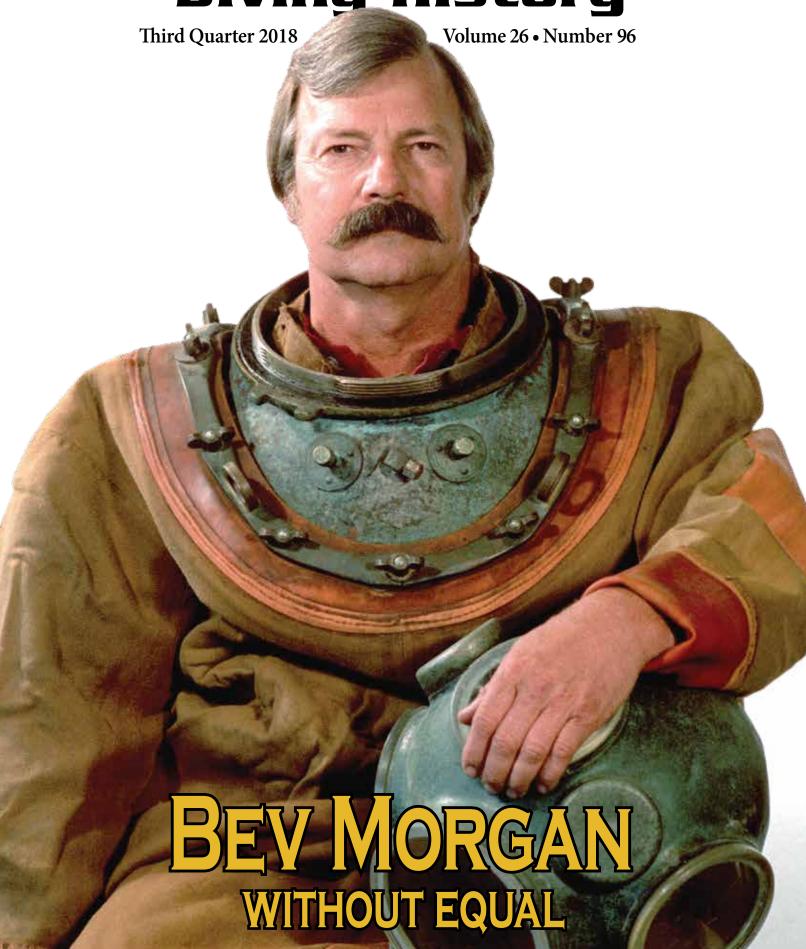


The Journal of Diving History





BEV MORGAN WITHOUT EQUAL

By Leslie Leaney

Circa 1956. Surfing roots. Morgan at Banzi Beach (Pipeline) Hawaii, North Shore, with the enormous standard "Gun" surf board of the day.



1955. Bev Morgan behind the sales counter at Dive 'N Surf. Photo by Bill Meistrell.

Ithough there are several international diving pioneers whose contributions have had a global effect, few, if any, have made as many diverse and significant contributions to the world of diving as Bev Morgan. His career contributions span the birth of recreational diving up to his modern - day commercial diving helmet company. He passed away on June 3, 2018 in Santa Barbara, California.

Morgan was born in Los Angeles, California, graduated High School at 15 and dropped out of Los Angeles City College at 17 when he discovered surfing. He quickly became one of the early scuba divers with the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, where he developed and prepared America's first national recreational scuba diving instruction manual, *Underwater Safety*.

He followed this by opening one of the region's first dive store's, Dive 'N Surf, and started manufacturing early diver's wet suits. After writing the influential early diving book *Diving With Safety*, he took off for a scuba diving adventure to the South Pacific. For two years he filmed and photographed some of the worlds most pristine diving locations, becoming one of the pioneers who recorded the first underwater footage of these remote and exotic areas. As an accomplished photographer and writer, he recorded these adventures in his column in *Skin Diver Magazine*.

He returned to southern California in 1959, and during his spell as a commercial abalone diver, developed the surfing wet suit company that would soon become Body Glove. Staying true to his surfing roots he became editor of *Surfer* magazine before migrating north to Santa Barbara and entering the rapidly expanding field of commercial oil field diving.

Using the fiberglass skills he learnt forming surfboards, Morgan quickly manufactured the lightweight masks that would revolutionize commercial deep sea diving. Joining forces with master metal-smith Bob Kirby, Morgan's experiments with fiberglass soon brought the United States military to their door wanting specialized diving equipment built. With the military now a client, albeit an often shadowy one, Kirby and Morgan had the financial stability to construct the helmet that changed international commercial diving equipment permanently; the Kirby Morgan Superlite 17.

For all practical purposes, the success of the Superlite 17 swiftly condemned the traditional copper and brass deep-sea diving helmet of the prior 120 year to extinction. As the success of the "17" infiltrated almost every commercial and military market in the world, Hollywood started knocking on Bev Morgan's door for access to his talents. Today it has been estimated that the Kirby Morgan Diving Systems company has a world market industry share of over 80%. And quite possibly much higher than 80%.

Back in 2014 when this article was written Morgan was still looking ahead after almost 70 years in the diving industry. He was also reflecting on an influential career that can be referenced in many different aspects of diving education, safety, equipment design, photography, filming, writing, Hollywood, and successful company development, and that established some early historical milestones, while revolutionizing the world's commercial diving equipment.

"Not a bad life's work for a college drop-out and surfer!" he observed when he proof-read and fact checked this article before its publication.

THE BEGINNING

The sport of scuba diving in Southern California was launched immediately after the end of World War II, when free-diving spear fishermen started converting oxygen demand regulators from military aircraft for underwater use. These were the Do-It-Yourself handyman divers, and it was not until a few years later, in late 1948, that a few of Cousteau and Gagnan's Aqua Lung unit's became available for purchase in California. At the time there were dozens



Bev Morgan, Lowell Thompson and Bob Meistrell, spearguns, wetsuits, 2 hose regulators. Bahia de Los Angeles. A small resort run by a local family. Good fishing. Tropical fish as well as most all Pacific Ocean California fish. 1956 Lowell had a Bonanza airplane to get there.



Bev Morgan looking over the new Rix water lubed high pressure compressor in 1955. Rear yard of Dive 'N Surf.



1955. Bev Morgan with surfboard outside his Dive 'N Surf shop in Redondo Beach, California.



Circa 1956. Bev Morgan by Lowell Thompson's Beechcraft Bonanza in his fly 'n dive days.

of spearfishing clubs that operated along the hundreds of miles of California coast that run up from the Mexican border to the San Francisco Bay area. Many of these traditional spear fishermen disliked the new Aqua Lung scuba system when it arrived, calling it a Bubble Machine. However, many also saw the advantages of staying under water longer and so took the step towards scuba diving.

The new Aqua Lungs were not cheap and came with hardly any safety information for their operation. Organized scuba instruction had not been established and the Aqua Lung was often sold with no more safety briefing from the salesman than "Do not hold your breath on the way up." One of these early California scuba divers was Bev Morgan, who had been hanging around the waterfront since 1946, and who was also a surfer.

A chance meeting on a San Diego beach introduced Morgan to scuba divers Connie Limbaugh, Andreas Rechnitzer, and Jim Stewart, who were all part of a scuba diving group at Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla, just north of San Diego. Their haul of lobsters and shellfish impressed Morgan and he quickly caught their diving bug, and struck up a very close relationship with Limbaugh. The meeting created life-long friendships for Morgan, and would be the nexus for the first formalized scuba diving instruction course in America.

During the early 1950's the sale or rental of Aqua Lungs without adequate training resulted in a growing number of scuba diving deaths, and it was the scuba divers of the California beach life-guards who had the unpleasant job of recovering the bodies. During this period Morgan was working as a Los Angeles County Life Guard on the rescue boat, *Baywatch*, and got first hand experience of recovering dead divers. The scuba diving death rate was so high that the County of Los Angles County Board of Supervisors began to take steps on banning the Aqua Lung from its beaches.



1956. Advert in the February issue of *Skin Diver* magazine for Morgan's Thermocline wet suits from Dive 'N Surf. Courtesy Ed LaRochelle collection.

Morgan knew that his friends at Scripps had a developed a scuba diving instruction program, and convinced his supervisor at Los Angeles County to send him, and Al Tillman, down to Scripps to learn more.

After attending the Scripps scuba-training program, Morgan reworked their curriculum into the Los Angeles County Diver training program, and then later upgraded it to America's first scuba instructors training program, complete with America's first instructors training manual. Published in 1954 by Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, it was titled *Underwater Safety*, with the credit "Prepared by: Bev B. Morgan July 1954." It became the foundation document for certifying divers and instructors in America.

THE FIRST BUSINESS

Having got this new "diving bug" Morgan decided to try and make a career from it. He and his surfing buddy, Hap Jacobs, opened up a store named after their main passions, called Dive 'N Surf. In doing research for his new business Morgan visited the Scripps library and discovered a report by Hugh Bradner that basically endorsed foam neoprene as the best material for making a suit that would insulate a body in the water. Bradner called it a "wet suit" and Morgan quickly acquired some foam neoprene and built himself his first suit, which worked very well. Spurred on by his initial success, Morgan started building suits for his dive buddies and soon wet suit manufacture became part of the business at Dive 'N Surf, along with the full line of U.S. Divers dive gear and shaping and fiber glassing surf boards. But Jacobs soon decided to open a pure surfing shop and sold his share of Dive 'N Surf to the Meistrell twins, Bob and Bill.

While a partner with the Meistrell's at Dive 'N Surf, Morgan's mechanical aptitude came to the fore when he re-engineered

improvements to a U.S. Divers Mistral twin hose regulator. Without permission or acknowledgement, U.S. Divers soon incorporated Morgan's modifications into their Mistral production, signaling to Morgan that he had good mechanical instincts and giving him the confidence to later develop and engineer his own diving equipment. But at the time, Morgan was looking for more than confidence from U.S. Divers and phoned the company to complain that they had stolen his work and had not paid him anything for it.

He later recalled.

So Rene Bussoz, who was related to Cousteau and founded U.S. Divers, takes my call. He has a French accent but after listening to me says, "Well, I tell you what, you have a pick up truck?" I said, "Yeah, so what?" Bussoz says, "How about if I give you everything you can put in your pick up truck out of my warehouse and we'll call it even?" I said, "You've got a deal!"

So I told the Meistrells about it and we all ended up in the damn truck and drove to U.S. Divers and to meet Bussoz. He asked me what I wanted to fill the truck with and I told him that a deal is a deal and to fill it up with watches. He turned white and speechless for a moment then started yelling in French. I just laughed and told him it was a joke and when he finally settles down mutters under his breath, "Americans!" We loaded that truck down to its axels. Everything they had, regulators and tanks, then drove off. I was happy and he was happy, it worked out fine."

U.S. Divers stayed in touch with Morgan and in 1956 published his book *Diving With Safety*, which was based upon his earlier writings at L.A. County. The book became very popular with divers across America and went into several reprints.

THE BIG ADVENTURE

By 1957 Morgan became restless, sold out his share of Dive 'N Surf to the Meistrells, and took off with Ramsay Parks, Jack Russell, Plazi Miller, and a small group of other divers to the South Pacific aboard a 61 foot ketch called *Chiriqui*. With a focus on diving and filming, Morgan and his colleagues spent a couple of years sailing through the waters of Mexico, Cocos Island, Galapagos, Easter Island, Pitcairn Island, Minerva Reef, and Tahiti, often becoming the first scuba divers to dive and to film there. Sections of the Log of the *Chiriqui* that Morgan kept were published as a series in *Skin Diver Magazine*. When working with Bev on the original version of this article he recalled the following from the *Chiriqui* expedition.

THE MOMENT IN TIME. AUGUST 1958.

Our final day of diving at Cocos was out in the blue at the edge of a drop-off. Three of us had just dropped in the water from our 14-foot skiff. Two very large sharks, not reef sharks, came slowly towards us. One guy, Lowell, froze. Ramsay Parks and I looked at him, then at each other. Lowell just hung there not moving. Ramsay and I had our shark billies at the poke position towards the two approaching big boys. When they were about 20 feet away they separated and split off to the side. We soon realized why. A third shark was approaching slowly behind them. This guy was really, really huge. I couldn't really see how long it was and that didn't matter. What mattered was how big around he was. He continued swimming slowly towards Lowell who remained frozen in mid-water. His mouth was slowly opening. This monster shark was

going to eat Lowell and his mouth was big enough to do the job in one easy gulp. It was as if the shark detected which of us was most scared. When the shark was about 10 feet away Ramsay and I swam towards it and started poking its nose with the billies. It broke off the approach and kicked its tail, which tumbled us as it swam away. Ramsay and I grabbed each side of Lowell and began shoving him in the boat. I don't recall how all three of us got into the boat, but somehow we were all in the boat when the three sharks returned and started to bump against the bottom as if trying to dump us out. Ramsay fired up the outboard and took off at high speed back to the safety of the big boat. There was silence as we secured everything and set out to sea to find a better island to dive.

ABALONE DIVING AND SUIT MANUFACTURE

By 1959 the voyage was over and Morgan returned to California, and seeking a new adventure, started commercially diving for abalone, using surface supplied free-flow bronze masks made by Phil Widolf. To supplement his income from abalone diving, which could be sporadic due to bad sea conditions, Morgan formed a working partnership with Parks and Miller and returned to manufacturing wet suits.

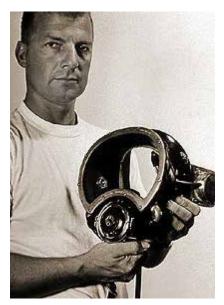
Russell pursued a writing career and in 1960 wrote the story *Oceans Eleven*, which was adapted into a hugely successful movie for Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack, and later for George Clooney and Brad Pitt. Parks remained connected to Morgan and the diving industry and became the first Director of the Santa Barbara City College Marine Diving Technician program. When he passed away suddenly he was succeeded by Morgan's long-time friend Bob Christensen.

However, Morgan's second entry into the wet suit market was aimed not at divers but at Southern California surfers, who had shunned using wetsuits as a sign of masculinity. If a surfer wore a wetsuit he was considered "chicken." Morgan focused his efforts on establishing a market for surf suits, and by using his connections, and some smart business marketing, he eventually succeeded. His business plan revolved around rewarding the top 100 surfers for all wearing his wet suit during the same week, which they did. At the end of that week Morgan had 1,000 orders for wet suits, but Parks and Miller rebelled against making suits for surfers. Morgan, with one sewing machine and a pile of neoprene, knew he had created a financial winner but his partners quit on him.

He later recalled.

So, I packed up the whole thing up on the truck and I drove up to the Meistrells (at Dive 'N Surf) and said, "Look, I want to sell you my new surfing wet suit business." They weren't making surf suits at the time because nobody knew how to crack that market, except for O'Neil up north because of the cold water. Anyway, I took a sewing machine, a batch of rubber and by then 2,000 orders to Billy, and he said, "I don't know." I wanted \$3,000 for the whole package, business and all. He ended up buying it. They called me a couple of months later to say they were making \$5,000 profit a day each on this deal.

The suits in the deal that Morgan sold the Meistrells were called Thermoclines, but the twins later changed the name to Body Glove, and the rest of that story is now very successful history. Morgan had been one of the first, if not the first, to introduce wet suits to the recreational diving market, but was the first to introduce wet suits to the general surfing market in America.







1964. Bev with his Morgan Mask 3, which is also listed in places as the Ocean Systems International mask. The history of this mask and how it was copied from Morgan's designs and used to launch the General Aquadyne company is detailed in *Kirby Morgan Diving Masks*, *Historical Diver* magazine, issue 33.

MASK DESIGN & SURFER MAGAZINE

Footloose again, Morgan stayed with his surfing roots and became Editor of *Surfer Magazine* in 1963, but still maintained his involvement with abalone diving. Using the fiberglass design skills developed constructing surfboards, Morgan decided to improve upon the heavy brass Widolf free – flow mask, alleviate the neck fatigue that went with it, and designed a lightweight mask for abalone diving. He made only a few free – flow masks, but once he added a scuba demand regulator to the front of one, he had taken the step that would determine his future in diving.

SANTA BARBARA

Morgan stayed with Surfer Magazine but the diving bug eventually bit harder, and in 1964 he moved up the coast to Santa Barbara to try and break into the big money being made by commercial divers in the fledgling oil field diving industry. In Santa Barbara, he entered the employ of Hugh "Dan" Wilson of General Offshore Divers, who in November 1962 made the first commercial oil field dive using helium and was starting to experiment with diving from a submerged bell, instead of from the surface. Morgan's timing was impeccable and as oilfield diving rapidly expanded, the move towards diving from bells would require a move away from the traditional copper and brass deep-sea diving helmet to a diver able to swim three-dimensionally using much more maneuverable equipment. Wilson's Purisima diving bell became the testing ground for a tethered diver equipped with a lightweight mask and who was able to swim freely and swiftly as opposed to the pedantic lumbering traditional deep-sea helmet diver. After roughly 130 years of copper diving helmets, a new chapter in what men wore to work under water had opened. In Santa Barbara commercial diving's future was NOW, and Morgan was right there.

While working for Wilson, Morgan progressed from sweeping the shop floor up to tending the commercial divers. While doing this he learnt the basics of the topside of oilfield diving operations with its terminology and array of different equipment. However, it was his mask design and construction skills that would separate him from the pack and after working a year for Wilson without getting a single working dive in he had become very disillusioned.

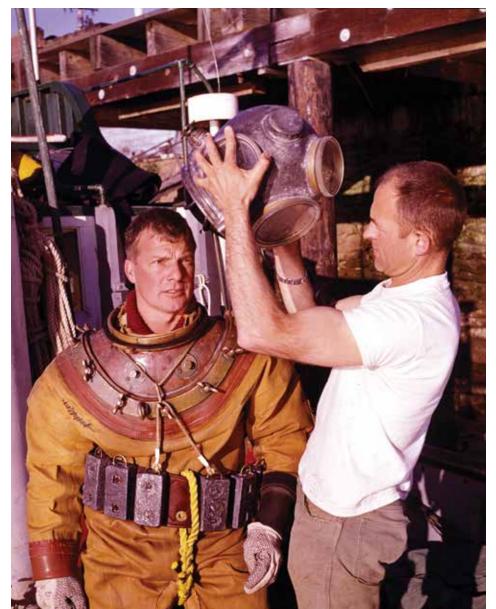
ALASKA

In 1965 Morgan and several other disillusioned divers including Lad and Gene Handelman, Bob Ratcliffe, Kevin Lengyel and Bill Bossert left Wilson to form a new diving company called Cal Dive. (California Divers) But while waiting for Cal Dive to form Morgan still need to make some money. Although still not properly trained to dive in traditional deep-sea diving equipment, Morgan soon talked himself into an oilfield diving job diving in Alaska with his friend Bob Christensen. As a naturally talented diver Morgan quickly learnt the skills to be able to work in deep-sea diving equipment in the fierce black water and vicious tidal currents running from five to eight knots. The diving conditions were known to be the toughest in the world and thus the divers in Alaska were the highest paid divers in the world. Christensen would remain connected to Morgan throughout his career, ending his working years as part of the Kirby Morgan Diving Systems team.

Meanwhile, Morgan's wife was less than thrilled with the prospect of him disappearing overseas with Cal Dive once it was established. She applied the necessary marital pressure and Morgan was forced to withdraw from involvement in Cal Dive before it was completely formed. Bossert also withdrew. Based in Santa Barbara, the Cal Dive partnership of the Handelman brothers, Ratcliffe and Lengyel eventually grew into Oceaneering International, the largest publicly help diving company in the world.

KIRBY MORGAN

Once his work in Alaska was done Morgan found himself out of work, out of money, and back on the Santa Barbara waterfront. Here he encountered ex US Navy and abalone diver Bob Kirby, who was building a new style of traditional copper and brass helmet that could be used for diving mixed gas. Kirby was a supreme metal-smith but also knew the future for commercial equipment lay in lightweight swimmable gear, and hired Morgan to work with him on building lightweight masks. After two weeks working together the two divers formed a partnership blending Kirby's metal-smiths skills and Morgan's fiber-glassing skills. These two tradesman talents, combined with their diving experience, intuition, industrial artistic flair and



1964. Bev Morgan being dressed in by Bob Christensen during construction on the Trans-Pacific telephone cable. This "Whatever it takes to get the job done," diving is exemplified by the way Morgan's weight belt is rigged and the period Japanese helmet bonnet being attached to a turn of the century, or earlier, Canadian breastplate Morgan is wearing.

Morgan's business savvy, lead them to create an equipment brand that would become the new world standard: Kirby Morgan.

Through many struggles the partners eventually revolutionized deep-sea diving equipment that had barely changed since its arrival in the middle of the 19th century. The Kirby Morgan company would eventually become the dominant international manufacturer of surface supplied diving equipment and their name replaced that of England's Siebe Gorman on and under the surface of waters around the world.

The majority of their products could be purchased through their dealers, but

they also made custom models for specific military clients. The futuristic red clamshell helmet of the U.S. Navy's SEALAB program, that appeared on the cover of LIFE magazine, was one custom model of which only a few were made. They also made what Morgan often referred to as "Sneaky Pete" helmets and masks for clandestine military operations. These are not recorded anywhere public and Morgan, by contract requirement, is unable to discuss them. However, the rebreather equipment used by the saturated USN divers aboard the USS Halibut to work on the Russian communications cable would be one generally known example. The



1964. Bev Morgan dressed in a DESCO breastplate during his work in Alaska.

precision and reliability of this clandestine diving equipment might best be appreciated by the following opinion.

The men who serviced those cables at the bottom of the Barents and Okhotsk knew they faced immense risk. The self-destruct charges they carried onboard were a grim reminder. Even men who stood as rivals to Naval Intelligence, top officers at the CIA, acknowledge that cable-tapping was the most dangerous of any long – standing intelligence operation of the cold war. That aura of danger awarded the missions respect, just as it made them especially rare. – Blind Man's Bluff, The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage, by Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew, with Annette Lawrence Drew, 1998, Public Affairs, New York

Through the years Morgan not only developed and patented the fiberglass Band Mask but also the fiberglass helmet, both of which are now the industry and military standard in many countries. This equipment revolutionized diving by eliminating the tender that was required to dress-in the traditional helmet diver, making the diver more self-sufficient.

Morgan's unparalleled success with diving equipment transported into Hollywood where his company made the helmets for the movie *Sphere* and more recently *Mysterious Island*.



1965. Bev Morgan diving with scuba gear at the Keystone Dam, Sand Springs. Oklahoma.



1966. Bev Morgan and Bob Kirby constructing two bonnets of Kirby's design of commercial helium recirculator helmets, from an order of four helmets. One of the actual four helmets is shown on page 11 of *The Helmets That Launched Commercial Mixed Gas Diving, Journal of Diving History,* issue 91, and can currently be seen on display in Santa Barbara Maritime Museum.



1967. Bev Morgan expressing joy and/or relief, at the completion of an order for 12 helmets, as seen in their individual boxes in the back of Kirby's truck. These are almost certainly the 12 SemiLite helmets for Dick Evans Divers, of New Orleans, that Kirby discusses on page 30 of A History of Kirby Morgan Diving Equipment, Historical Diver magazine, issue 32.

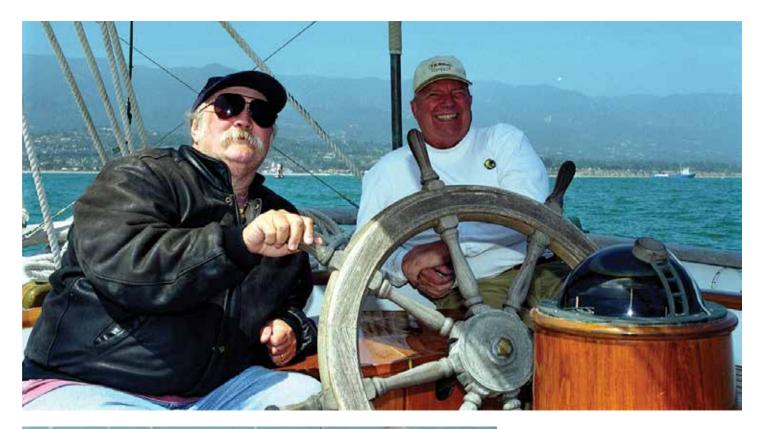


1968. Bev Morgan inspecting one of the company's commercial KMCSH-6 Clamshell helmets.

1972. Bev Morgan with his daughter Connie Lyn Morgan, who was named after Morgan's close friend Conrad Limbaugh. Photo by David Morgan.



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2003. Musician and soul mate David Crosby with Bev Morgan and aboard Crosby's boat, Mayan.

TODAY

However, even as his company approaches its 50-year anniversary, (2015) his great success has not changed Morgan, who remains at heart a California beach boy.

Shorts, T-shirt, the occasional Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops, have remained his corporate attire. These days, with his daughter Connie now running his company, Morgan lives a lot more sedate life style than

in his hell-raiser years, and has time to reflect on three ex-wives, a portfolio of various properties, various companies and his earlier fast lane rock-star life style in his Aston Martins and Ferraris.

As he approaches his 80's he now keeps an ultra-low profile and a seclude life style which keeps him off of almost everyone's radar. He spends time with his very close friend and soul mate David Crosby, of the group Crosby, Stills and Nash. Their love of the sea is their greatest connection, and Morgan says of Crosby,

"He's probably the most dedicated diver I know. I'm not saying he's the best diver in the world, but I don't know anyone who enjoys diving more. Let me put it this way. He had a liver transplant, he couldn't walk and his wounds were not quiet healed, but he wanted to go diving so badly that he called me up. He wanted to do one more dive incase he croaked in the middle of his liver replacement recovery. *I dressed him in a wetsuit that I built especially* for him. I took him out on the boat and we winched him into the water, pulled him around underwater then winched him back out, put him on deck and took him home. Now, that's pretty dedicated! He's also a dedicated sailor. And a damned good one too."

The chance meeting with divers on a San Diego beach over 60 years ago has lead Morgan on so many and so varied diving adventures that their telling would fill a large book.

His contributions to early scuba diving instruction, education, safety, and his central role in the revolution of commercial diving equipment are unmatched.

In the international field of diving Bev Morgan truly is a diver without any equal. **3**



2004. Bret Gilliam interviewing Bev Morgan for his *Diving Pioneers and Innovators* book.



2013. Bev Morgan speaking at the Arlington Theatre, Santa Barbara, California.



2013. Bev Morgan with his son Mike at Santa Barbara Maritime Museum during the Tribute to Ernie Brooks program.



2013. Bev Morgan with daughter Connie and her son Kili, at Body Glove's 60th Anniversary celebration. Photo courtesy Body Glove. All rights reserved.

Author's note. This article is adapted and slightly expanded from the chapter Bev Morgan. From the first dive instruction to the modern dive helmet, by Leslie Leaney, in Fifty Fathoms. The Dive Watch and Watch History, 2013, Blancpain SA, Le Brassus, Switzerland. My sincere thanks to Bev Morgan for sharing his stories with me, and triple proofreading the original article to ensure historical accuracy. I wish to acknowledge my friend and colleague Brett Gilliam who also authored chapters for Fifty Fathoms. The Dive Watch and Watch History, and published his interviews with Bev Morgan in Diving Pioneers and Innovators, by Bret Gilliam, 2007, New World Publications, Florida, from which some quotes were taken. I also wish to acknowledge my friend and colleague Dietmar Fuchs, who was Editor in Chief of the Fifty Fathoms book project, and Marc A. Hayek, President and CEO of Blancpain for inviting me to join the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms book team as author and historian. My thanks also to my friends and colleagues Connie Morgan and Christopher Swann for their assistance with historical details in the original article.

DIVING BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BEV MORGAN

All images courtesy Leaney - Brooks Archives except where noted.

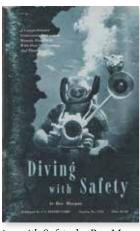
Bev was an accomplished writer and photographer. Practically all of his published writing came in the earlier part of his career, from the 1950's through to the 1960's. This included numerous articles for *Skin Diver* magazine and surfing magazines. During

that period he had also started designing and building diving equipment, and once he had joined forces with Bob Kirby in 1965, his writing was focused on operational and maintenance manuals for the equipment they manufactured. The following is an incomplete guide to some of his early writing, which is followed by a listing of publications that reference his work as a diver and with the Kirby Morgan company.

- Leslie Leaney

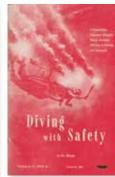


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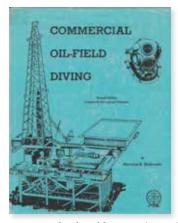




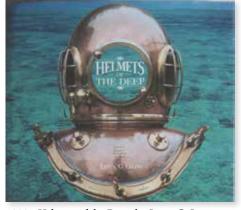
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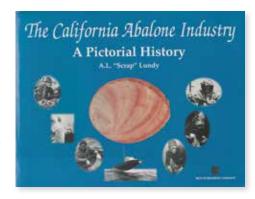


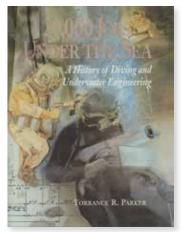
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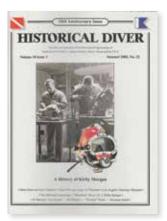
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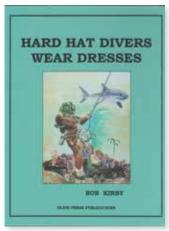
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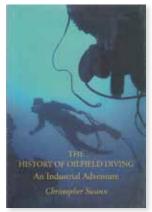
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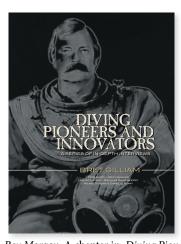
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