

# Police divers never out of their depth

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*Locating the body of a drowned swimmer, recovering a discarded firearm, investigating a capsized boat, sunken car or plane crash – it is all in a day's work for the members of the Queensland Police Service Diving Squad (QPSDS).*

*Most jobs are carried out in zero visibility with searching by feel the divers' only option.*



Police divers must be able to handle working in adverse climatic conditions or hazardous environments such as smelly and contaminated waterways.

The QPSDS is based within the Specialist Services Branch, located at the Brisbane Water Police Complex at Lytton. The squad is made up of four full-time divers and 13 part-time divers who take part in statewide operations.

Acting Sergeant Joshua Kinghorn, QPSDS said deployments were of extreme high-risk with extended dive times, and involved entering vehicles, planes, vessels and pipe systems.

"I find working for the dive squad a great challenge, however it is by no means a glamorous job and at times extreme stress is exerted on police divers both mentally and physically," he said.

A typical deployment requires four to five divers, however a large operation may use up to eight.

The team consists of a team leader, dive supervisor, one to two divers, a stand-by diver and a diver's attendant. All are necessary to comply with Australian Standard 2299 – the diver's bible.

A recent operation involved investigations surrounding the death of a scuba diver who was found on the SS Yongala – a wreck off the coast of Townsville.

QPSDS worked in conjunction with the Townsville Criminal Investigation Branch, the Australian Customs Service and the crew of the Dame Roma Mitchell (an Australian Customs Vessel).

Acting Sergeant Kinghorn said the dive squad conducted several tests underwater, which were sent to James Cook University Marine Geophysical Laboratory.

"The victim had died at the wreck two years earlier and her body was removed by scuba divers on the day.

"The dive squad conducted further investigations, which involved taking measurements underwater and conducting scientific dives in relation to currents. Our results compiled spatial observations into a three-dimensional model for court presentations.

"Recovering evidence does require a certain method. In most cases we check the position of the body and surrounding environment and

videotape this before moving the body, if possible," he said.

Approximately 15 to 20 officers apply each year to become a police diver and 10-15% of those applicants complete training successfully.

For officers who are successful in the pre-selection process, training includes an eight-week commercial dive course conducted in Sydney.

The course covers the physics of diving, diving in zero-visibility environments, diver safety and equipment, scuba and Surface Supply Breathing Apparatus (SSBA) operations, and search and recovery techniques.

Successful recruits then complete an in-house four-week course with QPSDS which further builds on their knowledge.

Divers take part in safety drills and learn to work within small teams. They also need to become familiar with Queensland's waterways.

"From the initial pre-selection course to the formal dive training in Sydney it is extremely demanding, physically and mentally.

"It requires diving every day and study most nights – a lot of work in a small amount of time," Acting Sergeant Kinghorn said.

Presently QPSDS is upgrading their capabilities to respond to the increasing demands of the current world climate.

These capabilities are being improved by various training courses, which include Explosive Awareness Training in an Underwater Environment, Ordnance Identification Training and Crocodile Management Training.

The QPSDS is also looking at honing search patterns and techniques.

"This latest technology will increase our efficiency by reducing dive times and the number of divers required for deployment.

"We can minimise the risk to divers' safety and increase the protection of our ports and waterways simultaneously," Acting Sergeant Kinghorn said. ■