

DIVING PIONEER: LIZ JAMES

THE FIRST BRITISH FEMALE COMMERCIAL SATURATION DIVER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

“It would be nice to get women to think about getting into the diving industry. I might be the first, but I do not want to be the only one. It is good to be a pioneer, but you really want a legacy. Female divers should not be this rare in the diving industry. Things have changed for the better.”

Manta Ray Scientific Expedition – Liz James diving in Socorro, Mexico





At the start of the 2022 Historical Diving Society seminar in London, a representative of the company Subsea7 welcomed the participants and briefed us on the history of the company. Nothing special. But when she mentioned that she was trained and has worked as a professional diver, my interest was triggered. In and offshore diving is a virtually all-male profession, certainly so in the case of saturation diving. Here, stands the first female commercial saturation diver in the world. I take my notebook and scribble: *Need to talk to Liz!*

During one of the breaks, I approach her. During a quick introduction, I explain that I am interested in doing an interview with her to write an article about her experience as the first commercial saturation diver. To my surprise, she immediately agrees and a few weeks later, we virtually meet again.

Before the interview, I wanted to check if she was indeed the first one. Not that being second would make her career less challenging or the interview less interesting. A claim to be a historical first does stand as long as there is no proof of somebody who did it before you.

Liz James was certified as a commercial diver in 1987, and certified as a saturation diver in 1991. The first saturation dive was executed in

1962 by Robert Sténuit which makes the claim very believable.

I surfed the internet and got two major hits:

- Susan Trukken. She entered the Navy in 1978 via Officer Candidate School and attended dive school at the Naval School of Diving and Salvage in Washington, DC 1979 to 1980. She later went on to become the first woman saturation diving officer in 1983 at the Navy Experimental Diving Unit. Not a small accomplishment. Although some military divers perform the same duties, they are not commercial divers.
- Marni Zabarsky. Her name is sometimes mentioned as the first female (commercial) saturation diver, although she first started diving commercially only in 1996. Digging a little deeper and you will find the small nuance in the titles with the added precision, "in the Gulf of Mexico".

To make sure I did not miss a thing, I wrote an e-mail with the question to the Women Divers Hall of Fame, but I have still to this day, not received a reply. Unfortunately, Liz does not show up on their list of fame.

Time to set up the interview with Liz and let her tell the story.

THE INTERVIEW

Patrick Van Hoeserlande (PVH): How did you get into diving?

Liz James (LJ): Born in Antwerp (Belgium), I went to school in Belgium and France, and we used to watch a lot of Jacques Cousteau on the television. Through watching these documentaries, I had this wonderful view of diving in my mind: a wonderful colourful world of subsea ecology and diverse marine life, with brightly coloured fish and coral reefs. As a result, I tried scuba diving with my brother when I was about 16. I loved it, so I decided to make a career out of it. With this vision of tropical waters, I went to Fort William in Scotland [Editor's note: the town Fort William hosted the famous and most realistic subsea training and testing facility in the world] and enrolled in a commercial diving course.

My parents were shocked by the news because they wanted me to go to university and were not sure what the diving industry would entail. But, after the initial shock, they supported me in my decision. I went and qualified as a professional air diver; in short, the British Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Part I qualification. Though rather than diving in tropical waters, I ended up doing underwater construction type diving work in canals, sewage outlets, docks and rivers.

When I first went to Fort William, there were no female toilets or shower facilities at the school, which was challenging. We were diving in a lock all day, so at the end of the day everybody was wet and cold, and needed hot showers. Although I proposed to go last, I was always instructed to go first, which did not improve my popularity with the other all male divers on the course. They eventually built a separate female shower and toilet.

But there was also a problem in the accommodation. The training divers normally stayed in a bed and breakfast accommodation in Fort William, but none would take me, because all the rooms were for two people. I ended up staying at the instructor's house, sharing a room with his daughter.

The instructor had three daughters. I did not know it then, but there is a reoccurring theme that people who have helped me progress in my diving career, all have daughters. There are people in every walk of life and industry who try to address the imbalance of gender diversity. From my experience in the diving industry, the men who have helped me were due to wanting a change for their own daughters to have equal opportunities.

PVH: So from Cousteau to commercial diving, that's a big jump. Besides an initiation, did you engage in sports diving?

LJ: Yes, I did a bit of sports diving in parallel. At 17 I joined the British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC).



I went diving in Spain, Malta and Majorca. I don't think I realised the full extent of North Sea diving. There was no internet back then to look it up. I read everything I could find in the local libraries and bought several books on diving. And of course, I watched all the documentaries.

When I was a commercial diver, my husband and I used to go to Australia during the winter months, when there was not as much North Sea offshore diving work. As a PADI diving instructor I then worked on the Great Barrier Reef from October to March which is summer in Australia.

PVH: So, you went from secondary school directly to commercial diving. Was that your first job?

LJ: I worked as a Civil engineer 'Onshore diving' for two years while I tried to break into the offshore diving industry. I was finally given an opportunity by Dave Dixon at Ocean Technical Services (OTS) – again he had four daughters, so wanted to break the mould to accept females offshore by helping them. Dave told me that if he did not give a woman like me a chance, then what hope did his daughters have?

I was told by several companies like Stena Offshore that they would never employ a female diver but none the less, I persevered. I would also be told that I needed additional qualifications to be employed, so I went on many courses, including a concrete endorsement course added to my diving inspection qualifications which helped me get my first job offshore. In 1990, my first Offshore North Sea diving job was for Total on a platform called the MCP-01, which was a concrete based platform. It was a challenge, as my accommodation on the platform was a converted broom cupboard, and many of the divers did not like me being there at all, but it was a start and I kept going.

Having a job was great, but I had to prove myself again, and there was a lot of resentment. People were sometimes quite horrible to me, but because I was young and perhaps naive, I put up with people not being nice to me offshore. Some divers accepted me when I proved that I could do the job, but most still refused to sit with me at mealtimes or engage in conversation with me; insisting that I make the tea at every opportunity. I used to get upset (behind closed doors) until I realised that people were not awful to me for being me, they were horrible because they did not

want a female working offshore. I eventually realised that being upset was not productive, but quite damaging for my mental health – these men did not know me, so I shouldn't take it personally when I was just doing the same job as they were and I was never rude.

However, my goal was to continue offshore in the North Sea, so I went back to Fort William and did some further training to qualify with my HSE Part II qualification in 1991.

We were doing bounce diving off the back of the boat on air and Nitrox mixes. Now after my shifts, some divers would come and sit with me. If you are the 'first', you just have to keep persisting, keep going, and eventually, some of them accept you (there will always be those that don't).

PVH: I thought in commercial diving you almost always work with the same team of divers, but that does not seem to be the case.

LJ: I worked for about three years on the Dive Support Vehicle (DSV) called the DSV Aquamarine. So quite often I worked with the same people on that vessel. That is when it started to get better. Obviously, people get to know you more, but some divers still stayed in

their groups. At times when dirty films were being shown in the recreation room and posters of naked women hung on the walls, I did not mix as much as you can in modern day offshore life. Instead, of watching the TV, I'd go up to the bridge or into the control room and would start preparing and planning for the next dives and learn about the dive planning and operations.

Offshore rotations were usually for four or five weeks at a time followed by two or three weeks off. During that time, I would get asked to come into the office to write the reports and work on future project tenders. Little by little, I gained a better understanding of project management, so to enable me to work more onshore, and start a family, I decided to go to university to study Mechanical Engineering when I was 28 years old.

PVH: Was that the end of your diving career?

LJ: 1997 was the end of my offshore North Sea diving, but when I finished my degree in 2001, we moved to Australia with our two sons. I worked there as a diver from time to time, but my main occupation was an engineering position for an onshore gas company, Duke Energy based out of Brisbane. They were installing their first offshore gas pipeline between Melbourne and Tasmania so I used my previous subsea offshore experience with my engineering degree. I worked on the Tasmanian gas pipeline project for two years.

I lived in Australia for 4.5 years, adding an Australian baby to our family and becoming citizens.

PVH: The commercial diving environment was not ready for a female diver.

LJ: That was the problem. They said I could not get a job because there were no suitable facilities, toilets, showers or cabins. The cabins were often designed for a minimum of two. They could not let me share a cabin. They couldn't put me in a cabin with one or more men. I ended up sleeping in the infirmary of some DSVs on occasion.

Sometimes I got the client's cabin, which led to a lot of resentment because the men were very annoyed about that privilege. Why did she get the best cabin on the ship? The challenges were worse in the decompression chamber. You could live in a chamber for 28 days with cameras on you all the time, so this really wasn't for me in the long term.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

PVH: It is easier to have empathy with a situation when you know the situation. Did the situation improve over your career? Or is the commercial diving business still a man's world?

LJ: I think people are a lot more receptive and open to female divers, but diving is still not

something that many women want to do. It is still seen as a challenge, which is a shame really. We should try and encourage more women, especially the younger generation, to join the diving industry. There is some improvement, but it is still a very male dominated industry. We need a change of mindset, a cultural shift. There are women in supporting posts like HR, engineering... but not many divers.

PVH: If you could start over, would you do it again? Differently?

LJ: That's a very good question. I think if I had known the barriers, I probably would not have



done it. However, when I was in Fort William for the first time, the men on my course said that I would never dive, never get a job, never be accepted. This was like waving a little red flag at me. My reaction was to prove them wrong. Of course I would. There are a few things that I would have done differently, but then I wouldn't have turned out to be the person that I am now.

What advice would I give to my younger self? Enjoy everything you do. Try and prepare yourself better; to be a bit more resilient and a bit more thick-skinned. Keep your family

and friends close because talking helps. Find a mentor or coach who gives you another perspective on things. If you don't get another view, you can get quite overwhelmed by how difficult the challenges are.

Rejection is part of doing something new. You have to knock on a lot of doors, but if you have prepared yourself, that shouldn't be so difficult.

Knowing what I know now, I would have probably gone into marine biology, research, or engineering. The way I did it was very interesting, and all considered, it ended well. We go on citizen science expeditions where we tag manta rays. Our children dive too, so we have had a few family dive holidays. I realised my initial dream and earned money while doing it. It was certainly something special to be the first female diver on board.

PVH: What is the female representation in the diving industry today?

LJ: If you mean commercial North Sea divers, I don't think there are any. Fort William is closed. The Company I work for – Subsea7 supported them financially, but even with that, they couldn't remain open which is a shame.

It is physically hard, but there are a lot of fit men and women. It is more a thing of the mind. You need a certain mindset for diving offshore and living in a confined environment in a diving chamber. You need thick skin which I had as the youngest and only girl with older brothers. That probably helped me a lot to build the resilience I needed.

THE LEGACY

LJ: What is the angle of the article?

PVH (taken by surprise): I have not yet thought of an angle.

LJ: It would be nice to get women to think about getting into the diving industry. I might be the first, but I do not want to be the only one. It is good to be a pioneer, but you really want a legacy. Female divers should not be this rare in the diving industry. Things have changed for the better. The industry needs that kind of inclusion and diversity. It would be great if young women would think if they could do that 35 years ago, why not give it a try now? It was fun for me, but my example must not stay unique. We have to motivate younger people, especially younger girls, to think that you can do anything you want if you put your mind to it. Whether it is diving or something else. Just pursue your dream and do it.

Commercial diving is considered very difficult, very dirty, and very hard. While it is an exciting job, it should also be for women.

PVH: Thank you for taking part in this interview, Liz. I hope that some young women will follow in your footsteps and start a career as a commercial diver.



OVERVIEW OF LIZ'S CAREER

Liz James started her career as the first female professional offshore diver in the North Sea. Since then, she has worked in a variety of corporate, management and leadership roles and has over 30 years of experience working in the oil and gas industry including Project Manager and Director roles.

Before joining Subsea7, she worked as a Lead Project Engineer for Saipem in London, and earlier for Duke Energy in Australia, Phillips Petroleum, Conoco, British Gas, and Maersk. She has trained in management of complex programmes, executive leadership, kidnap incident management, and women in business coaching.

Liz James is currently the Group Environmental Director at Subsea7: www.subsea7.com