

Greg's Got Business In The Depths

Geraldine Comiskey talks to Shankill's Greg Watters, one of the few commercial divers in Ireland.

When Greg Watters goes to work, he doesn't carry a briefcase, drive a car or take the DART. His business suit is made of rubber, his office is under the sea, and the only traffic he meets is the odd curious fish, as he travels to the job blowing bubbles instead of exhaust fumes.

The Southsider is one of a handful of people in Ireland who work as commercial divers.

Working for himself, Greg is hired by international oil companies, and his work takes him all over the world, to places as diverse as Africa's Ivory Coast, the North Sea, the Red Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

And while your average businessman is expected to come across a few 'sharks' of the financial variety, Greg meets the real ones.

"You see loads of sharks off Africa," he says. "But there's a bit of a myth about the poor old shark - he's probably as scared of you as you are of him. I've seen great white sharks and they just veer away from you."

"He's not interested in eating you because he doesn't know what you are. You've got bubbles coming out of you. Sharks are used to eating something dead - fish or maybe a small whale or seal."

But Greg admits to feeling "spooky" when he heard the sharks enjoying a meal. "I was on a job off the Ivory Coast and we had to use an explosive charge to blow up these pipes. We used two or three charges on each pipe, and it went on for days, so the amount of dead fish began to build up. In the background, we heard this continual chomping noise."

Most of the jobs are with oil companies far offshore, though Greg has also worked locally, laying part of the Bulloch sewage treatment pipe in 1983, and installing and maintaining the Millennium Clock in the Liffey.

"I was sorry to see it taken away; when it was there, I was able to get work close to home", says Greg.

In general, jobs close to

home are rare. Apart from the Eastlink Bridge, the Lee Tunnel (which is still under construction) and Whiddy Island oil rig off Bantry, Greg has had few jobs in Irish waters.

When he waves good-bye to his wife and children in Crincken Glen, Shankill, he's usually away for three months. "It seems like forever. They miss me and I miss them", he says. "It's a great job when you're young and single and you don't mind travelling. But when you're married with kids it's very hard to leave home."

Little Aisling, 5, and Sam, 8, are cheered up by watching videos of their daddy working under the sea, talking through a transmitter inside his bubble-helmet. And Sam has plenty to talk about in school.

In fact, Sam became a hero among his friends in play school some years ago, when his dad gave a demonstration of diving equipment. "Now he knows all the jargon", laughs Greg.

With over 20 years' experience in the business, Greg, 40, has had enough adventure to last a lifetime. Originally trained with the Royal Navy in Britain at the age of 17, Greg got his first taste of diving during the Cod War in the 'Seventies, when the Navy gave him the task of removing nets caught in the ship's propellers.

His first commercial job was with an Aberdeen-based company, who sent him to Singapore. From there, he worked on a drilling rig off the Thai Coast.

While some of his colleagues were trained by schools specialising in training of commercial divers, many are from military backgrounds. "They tend to be ex-Navy Seals, ex-Navy ship's



● Greg Watters.

divers, ex-Marines."

Gulf War veterans rub shoulders with former amateur divers in the confined space of a diving bell as they travel to great depths. Greg has been 680 feet under the sea. "They'd easily send you down to 1,000 feet", he says.

Once they've reached the site, the divers emerge from the bell, clad in suits with hard helmets which make them look like the legendary "Man in the Iron Mask". Then they swim over to the site, and the real work begins.

Diving is, in fact, incidental to the job. "Diving is just a bicycle to get you to work. There's no point in getting down there if you don't know what to do when you're there. You would want to be very

mechanically sound; you need to be able to look at drawings and understand how a piece of machinery works just by looking at the diagram. Then you have to carry out work on it, fix it or maintain it."

Safety standards are important in a job where clocking in and out is a matter of life and death. Apart from the usual divers' considerations like coming up at the right pace and monitoring air supply, Greg has to breathe mixed gases because ordinary air is unsuitable at great depths. "Beyond 150 feet, we don't breathe air", he says.

Helium is included in the mix to reduce the risk of nitrogen narcosis. "The helium makes your voice sound

like Mickey Mouse, but you sound normal to the people on the surface because the communications equipment converts your voice back to normal."

While on a job, the divers often have to spend a month "in saturation" - living in a recompression chamber. The diving bell is inside the chamber, and when they are ready to go underwater, they get into the bell and take "the bus to work".

The saturation period builds up the divers' tolerance for the depth, but the amount of time spent "in sat" is strictly limited to 30 days by the Irish Health and Safety Authority and the British Health and Safety Executive.

"In the North Sea, we stick

to the rules, but they're not so careful in other parts of the world", says Greg. Saturation periods of 41 days are not unknown off Africa. "But over here it's a very closely monitored industry. In the old days, a lot of men were killed so they're extra careful now."

Greg does a paramedics course every two years at Hull Royal Infirmary, and also goes for a complete medical examination every year by a doctor appointed by the Health and Safety Executive.

Because of the need for divers, the job pays well. "You get £320 a day for being offshore, and saturation pay is another £18 an hour",

he says.

But Greg eventually hopes to move into the area of supervision and life-support, on the surface.

"When you've been working under the water for 20 years, the novelty wears off", he says.

Apart from the odd bout of sport diving "when you're offshore, to fill in the afternoon", Greg doesn't dive in his spare time. "You couldn't have it as your hobby as well; your wife would kill you", he laughs.

His wife, Imelda, cannot swim, he adds. "I've tried to teach her. But the two kids love it."

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