

# The Irish force does them for real and their attitude is...



## You're too old at 40!

● BECAUSE of the physical demands, Navy divers retire at the age of 40.

Martin is 39 and, though he is super-fit, he won't continue diving as a hobby. "Diving is work," they say. For these men, the idea of diving off-duty is like a brickie laying bricks on his day off.

"What's the point? We're underwater five days a week," says leading Seaman Fergie Cunningham. But he concedes: "We might dive on holidays somewhere foreign."

"That would be a real busman's holiday," Niall comments.

### Commitment

But he admits the job can be fun. "You have to enjoy it - otherwise you wouldn't do it," he says.

Only those with commitment to the Naval service can apply to join the Diving Unit, says Eddie Mulligan.

"We don't want to spend 11 weeks training someone and giving them £1,000 worth of equipment and then see them walking away." Gillian has been in the Navy for seven months, while Kevin has three years under his belt.

"Also, we want someone who already has a skill - so they'll be useful to us."

As well as their own courses, which are usually held in winter ("to toughen them up"), the unit also runs the Army Rangers' Combat Diving Course.

## At sharp end of the war on drugs

● DRUG traffickers are one of the Diving Unit's main target. Working with the

Customs, the Navy divers were involved in three big drug searches this year - one of which resulted in the arrest of the trawler, "Aegir."

"There are so many places where you can hide drugs underwater," says Eddie. Divers inspect every part of a ship's hull. This often involves spying. Navy divers are highly trained in "covered or clandestine missions", says Eddie. On the course, they learn to get into an area without being seen, using a compass.

Searching for explosives is another hazardous part of the job. This year, the Navy divers blew up four sea mines and one depth charge.

Martin, Niall and Fergie recall detonating two mines. "The mines were particularly dangerous as they were still encased in their shells, it was hard to explode them."

While towing them into the shallows, one came loose, and rather than risk an accident, the divers decided to explode them 16 metres undersea.

Strong nerves are also needed for the gruesome task of finding corpses in the water. The unit recently recovered the body of a German tourist who had fallen in off Valencia

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THUMBS UP: Reporter Geraldine Comiskey with Lt Eddie Mulligan (above) and surfacing (right) after a dive

3am to dive is normal for trainees - without torches.

No torches were allowed today either; claustrophobics need not apply. Even in daytime, the murky bottom of the harbour was so dark, I couldn't see my nose, let alone my buddy (Able Seaman Keith Barrett, who is already a member of the diving unit). We used a rope to take orders from Martin on the surface, four tugs meant "come up."

### Remove

On surfacing, I was ordered to descend again, remove my mask and come up without it.

Later I went diving again, with another member of the unit, Able Seaman E n d a Broderick. On the seabed, in the dark, we felt our way

along an underwater race-track which is used to build up endurance among students on the intensive course.

The dark didn't bother me, but the leaking "dry" suit did. Soon it was full of water. With 24 pounds of lead on my hips and no buoyancy jacket, I worked hard to stay afloat.

But Martin had no pity. I had to dive several times in the same suit.

We also had to jump off a harbour wall, 20 feet above the surface. I was terrified it was bungee jumping without the bungee. But Martin is a man you obey.

"This is to prepare you for jumping off a helicopter," said Eddie ominously - but mercifully that wasn't part of today's test.

Once in the water, we had to swim on our backs across the harbour

using only our arms. Then we had to climb onto a boat, leap off it onto some steps and run back to Martin - who made us do it again, and again, and again...

Then they made us do it with diving equipment. Navy divers are expected to scale cliffs with all their equipment on.

Further out in the main harbour, we rolled off a boat and swam from one buoy to another, with Martin yelling relentlessly at us to swim faster.

### Harsh

The test was harsh for a good reason; these guys rely on each other to stay alive in the most hazardous situations.

"We're a very close unit," says leading MTD (Motor Transport Diver) Niall Browne.

"Because we've all been through the same tough course, we trust each other."

That's why no concessions are made for females, says Eddie. Safety is a priority.

"We have had only one case of the 'bends' in the 30 years since the unit was set up - and he was in the recompression chamber, attending a civilian who was injured on the Lusitania."

There is none of the "gung-ho" attitude seen among amateurs; for these guys, it's a serious business and messers are not tolerated.

"You can mess when you're off duty but not when you're diving," says Niall.

Their lives, the lives of their team, and ultimately the security of the nation rests on their capable shoulders.

Though I passed the Aptitude Test, I'm glad the responsibility is theirs and not mine.



MAKING A SPLASH: Reporter Comiskey boats home (left) with fellow divers including trainee Gillian Hamilton. Above, in the recompression chamber with Lt Diver Niall Browne