The Royal Australian Navy fields very special teams of underwater operators putting themselves in harms way to secure safe passage for shipping.
Service in major warships conducting diving, demolitions and seamanship duties. ADF’s specialist divers. CD tasks include but are not limited to the rendering safe and disposal of all ordnance, including missiles, artillery projectiles and air-delivered munitions in ships, on land and underwater – clearing the wharves and port facilities of explosive ordnance. They were also responsible for their own security in the port.

There were 34 Australians attached to AUSCDT in Umm Qasr under US command, working closely with their American and British counterparts. When not in the water fulfilling their core tasking, they performed a similar function on dry land – clearing the wharves and port facilities and the littoral environment associated with amphibious operations. The clearance diving fraternity, in fact, the largest single ADF element with a direct and primary interest in EOD (explosive ordnance disposal).

During all postings the ADF’s specialist divers whose primary focus, as discussed, is the detection and disposal of underwater ordnance in areas where conventional mine-hunting methods are not feasible.

CLEARANCE DIVER COURSE.

This course is run over 34 weeks and the demands placed on potential applicants are probably not seen anywhere else in the ADF, says the Australian Defence Forces' specialist divers whose primary focus, as discussed, is the detection and disposal of underwater ordnance in areas where conventional mine-hunting methods are not feasible.

It was actually on the first Clearance Diver Acceptance Course, as it’s known today, back in 1995. We were in the field the whole time, providing our own protection,” Sub Lieutenant Hutchison says.

CLEARANCE DIVING SKILLS

The Diver Must Rely on the Sensitivity of His Fingertips to Find Unexploded Bombs by Bumping into Them in the Dark

There was also a time limit on how long the AUSCDT members could work at Umm Qasr, as huge tidal differences caused dangerous currents to sweep through the port. Tidal streams could go as strong as five knots according to Sub Lieutenant Jace Hutchison, Maritime Tactical Operations Element Officer, normally based in Western Australia with AUSCDT.

“With water running that strong on the changing tides there were only two or three windows of between 20 minutes to an hour a day where we could enter the water to get the job done,” he says.

“At the time, we also had a really strong push from both the Australian and US governments to open up the port as quickly as possible, at the same time keeping the infrastructure intact and to provide the humanitarian support to the people of Iraq. There certainly were deadlines to meet.”

Australian clearance divers don’t just clear mines, however, and in fact, are not always employed as divers.

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All personnel wishing to join this elite fraternity including officers, must undergo rigorous acceptance testing and psychological evaluation.

Clearance Diving as we know it today owes much of its heritage to a Royal Navy concept developed mainly during WWII that saw teams, known as P Parties (Pilotage Parties), responsible for clandestine reconnaissance and obstacle clearance in the maritime environment.

Since its inception in 1951, the Royal Australian Navy Clearance Diving Branch
has used contemporary diving equipment to its full capacity and, indeed, has been a forerunner in the development of new technologies in sub-aqua exploration and exploitation.

After 25 years, Lieutenant Commander Bliss has seen many changes in technology. “Wet suits and breathing equipment are two areas we’ve seen a lot of changes in over the years,” he says. “I recall the all-purpose set we used to use and it certainly looks an antiquated piece of kit now when you compare it with today’s standards.

“Today’s equipment is certainly far more advanced and, in fact, Australia is at the forefront when it comes to mixed and closed-circuit breathing apparatus development.”

Another, perhaps surprising, technological development is on the horizon for our CDs when, in the very near future, they will take personal computers under water with them. A mine countermeasures underwater computer system, to be introduced soon, will provide clearance divers with an electronic means to navigate in open water, conduct searches of inshore waters and log various data elements in real time along the way.

Far from being secretive or miserly about their equipment and procedures, however, AUSCDTs work closely and cooperatively with their foreign counterparts, on operations and exercise. Recent activity in the Gulf is testament not only to their interoperability with coalition forces, but proof of the high regard in which they are held within the international diving community. Lieutenant Commander Bliss says CDs train regularly with their international counterparts.

“Team 1 recently participated in RIMPAC around the Hawaiian islands. They are also conducting exercises with the Malaysians and Singaporeans. And we’ve just finished Exercise Dugong in Jervis Bay with the Americans.”

“This is all building up to our major exercise next year – Exercise Talisman Sabre – where Australia will host about 25,000 personnel in Shoalwater Bay.”

“We are a composite unit, able to perform myriad tasks that our US and other allies can’t do and we are well ahead of the game in that respect. “In the US, individual sections tend to focus on special roles whereas we are pretty much Jack of all trades – and masters of a few of them. We are able to perform at a level in many different tasks and roles that would require five or six or even seven American units to fulfil.”

He says CDs are often described as ‘special forces’ in the military sense or mistaken for Navy SEALS. “We are neither. We are Royal Australian Navy Clearance Divers. True, there has been a lot of redefining in certain areas and we are all evolving and moving to counter the terrorist threat since 9/11. “Our role may change and we’ll just have to wait for guidance on that. But whatever is required, Navy clearance divers will be there to meet the task.”

### TOUGH ENOUGH?

**BASIC FITNESS TESTS FOR ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY DIVERS COURSES**

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**CONTACT**

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Basic Fitness Tests for Royal Australian Navy Divers Courses

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