

# Above and Below Caldwell's Diving Museum

By Pat Johnson

The history of early deep-sea exploration and commercial diving is told through the lifetime achievements of 98-year-old Jim Caldwell at the Above and Below Caldwell's Diving Museum located at 82 East Water Street in Toms River.

Caldwell was just seventeen when he began diving in the U.S. Navy in what would become the Navy Seals. He took part in historical events such as the nuclear experiments at Bikini Atoll, laying intercontinental underwater cable communications and exploration of the deep sea and shipwrecks.

In a recent interview with his son Stephan, Caldwell related his incredible achievements. His son created the museum and produced a movie on his father's life that can be viewed at the museum. The centerpiece of the museum is the 'Diver Dan' mock-up of Jim Caldwell's original diving suit. It used to be part of the diving shop he operated when he first got out of the Navy.

It is an impressive sight—the bronze helmet weighs 54 pounds, each canvas-encased boot weighed 40 pounds and Caldwell wore a 90-pound weight belt when he dove. On shore he was a weighted down turtle but underwater he was incredibly buoyant—a control valve on his belt would control the amount of air. Early divers were tethered to their boats by air hoses and men would operate the pumps that supplied regular air to the diver. Only later with the advent of scuba were divers able to swim free with air tanks.

Caldwell enlisted with the Navy when he was 17 and volunteered for dive school. He was stationed in the



Jim Caldwell and son Stephan Caldwell, with Jim's original diving suit.  
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

South Pacific during World War II. His unit was charged with underwater demolition. "We would go in ahead of a landing force and set off dynamite to clear the way for the landing force," he explained.

He was also part of the underwater team that followed the 1946 nuclear tests on Bikini Island. The detonation site was ringed with captured battleships and submarines to test the force of the nuclear explosion. "We raised two of the submarines that were sunk, one we (the Navy) towed back to Pearl Harbor and one back to San Francisco. Servicemen were not fully aware of the dangers, nor were scientists since this was the first test of a nuclear bomb. "Scientists would come out and measure your radiation and would tell you when you could dive, in another day or

Children engaging with  
Diving Museum exhibit.  
Photo credit: Above and Below: Caldwell's  
Diving Museum.

two days—depending on the amount of radiation you received,” said Caldwell.

Upon his discharge from the Navy, he opened Ocean County Diving Ltd. Located in Toms River in the early 1960s. He taught sport diving and his first wife Jerry took care of the store. “She never swam,” said Stephan of his mother, “She used to teach the business end of diving. They also taught the military, local police and fire departments search and rescue and recovery skills.”

In the 1970s, Caldwell transitioned from teaching scuba to using his knowledge and skills to start an underwater construction business, Caldwell Diving Ltd. The company specialized in underwater dock and dam repairs, bridge-work, repairs to water towers and beach replenishment operations. As his reputation grew, Caldwell Diving Ltd. began laying transatlantic communication cables.

Stephan said his father revolutionized the cable laying process. “He designed a jetted underwater plow that went down at the stern of ship, dug the hole, laid the cable and then covered it up—all in one pass.”



Since divers work in all kinds of places and under all kinds of conditions, working in murky water, under docks or even under ice, communications are key to safety. Laying pipelines and communication cables took Caldwell and his divers all over the world. During his trips Caldwell collected many artifacts and diving helmets that are on display in the museum. The evolution of Caldwell's business is the evolution of diving.

Caldwell is sanguine about his many achievements—he grew up in the Toms River area and dropped out of high school to join the Navy. It's a story of hometown boy does good.

*“I was fortunate to come out of the service and start Caldwell Diving and I traveled all over the world—it's been a good life.”*



The Museum is open from 12 to 4 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and is just around the corner from the Toms River Maritime Museum. Admission is free, donations accepted.

Stephan Caldwell gives visitors a  
tour of the Museum.  
Photo credit:  
Above and Below: Caldwell's  
Diving Museum.