



# Fred Johnson:

## Never Say Goodbye to Diving or Helping Others

By Michele Kane, Chief of External Affairs, California Prison Industry Authority

**F**ifty-five years in the diving industry from contractor to business owner, Fred Johnson never imagined he would be teaching commercial diving at a prison in Chino, California. Now nearing retirement, the 73-year old dive instructor beams with pride when talking about his students at the California Institution for Men (CIM).

“They are the hardest workers I have seen and they give 150 percent all the time,” said Johnson. “It’s amazing to see them changing completely from who they were to who they can be.”

Johnson oversees the California Prison Industry Authority’s (CALPIA) Leonard Greenstone Marine Technology Training Center program and his levelheaded, rigid approach to diving captivates the most unlikely candidates to the profession. He has taught hundreds of inmates how to be commercial divers and underwater welders.

“We have an 80% drop out rate on the first day, that’s how tough this program can be,” said Johnson. “The first thing I did was to show authority from the very beginning and what I found that 90% of them had no self-worth. That’s where I knew I had to start, build their self-esteem. I taught some of these guys how to read and how to do mathematics.”

While Johnson exudes toughness, his students also see that caring side, a role-model in their life that won’t let them down. “As long as they are doing the right thing, I will always be there for them.”

The 18-month program is one of the most successful rehabilitation programs in the State maintaining a recidivism rate of less than 7 percent.

“All of these guys we line up jobs for them with the majority of them being successful

commercial divers, welders, and even business owners.”

Johnson smiles when talking about the great success of his students saying that’s where he gets his motivation. “Basically I teach them to go out and reach for the top, even if they are underwater.”

Commercial Diver Billy Pham knows firsthand the importance of Johnson’s presence in his life. He graduated from CALPIA’s Marine Technology Training Center program and has been out of prison for ten years. Now a successful business manager of Muldoon Marine Services in Long Beach, California, Pham reflects on his first few days of entering the dive program at CIM.

“He was like a father figure to me,” said Pham. “When I got to the dive school I was lost not sure what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Mr. J taught me patience and how to be a good diver and a good man. We talk every couple of weeks and share stories and he still gives me good advice. I owe a lot to that man.”

Even as an instructor or “life coach”, Johnson knew early on that diving was going to be part of his life.

“I knew what I was going to do when I was 8 years old, I wanted to be a diver I read everything about diving, my Dad took me to the Naval Shipyard at Mare Island when I was young and that had a great influence on me.”



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Fred took up diving when he was 12-years old and through his teenage years got to practice diving in the chilly waters along the Northern California Coast.

“I went to work as an apprentice in San Francisco Bay and it was a grueling experience, it made me tough. When I started I weighed 110 pounds, I wasn’t that big and the gear weighed 200 pounds. It definitely made me tenacious.”

In 1972, Johnson started his own company, Dive Tech International in San Francisco. After running his company and

working at various Marine Construction jobs, Johnson worked as an underwater welding instructor for the Navy in San Diego.

At that time, Navy Veteran and successful businessman Leonard Greenstone who also was a member of the Prison Industry Board re-opened a dive school through CALPIA at CIM in May 2006.

“I knew about Chino, because I hired a Chino Diver at Dive Tech. When I came here, it was an empty school, I had to build this program like a business and I stepped on toes.”



Johnson realized he couldn’t continue to build a school and teach at the same time. In 2008, Navy Chief Jeff Powers joined him.

“That was the best hire,” added Johnson. “He was a man who knew the ins and outs of diving, but also a great role model and leader. Our first class of divers had 24 men graduate. We had a secondary school for them and to give them self-worth and gave them challenges. The ultimate test was the brutal five mile swim. That’s when we knew they were becoming men.”

Johnson and Powers continue to run a program that has gained positive national attention. It’s accredited through the Association of Diving Contractors International and both make certain to carry on Leonard Greenstone’s legacy.

“When the men in our program leave here, they leave optimistic. They know they are winners,” said Johnson.

What does Johnson hope to see in the future as he leaves behind the program he helped revive?

“I would like to see the dive program continue to grow with more inmates taking part and participating. We are always in need of diving equipment and welding materials.”

Even as he gets close to saying goodbye, Johnson is always looking out for his students. As for Johnson himself, he is looking forward to retirement.

“Diving for me is when I’m at peace, it doesn’t matter the job once I’m in the water I’m in my element. I don’t have to deal with land people and all the chaos. It’s a great day when I look back at the bed and I’m not in it. I don’t see myself idle, I will be in Europe and you probably will find me in the water.”

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# Marine Technology Training Center (CALPIA)

By Aaron Lay

If the old saying, “There are no second chances in life” were true, more than just a few of us would be in a world of trouble. We can all think of a time when we were given another opportunity to prove ourselves. Another chance to get it right.

The inmates taking part in the Marine Technology Training Center (MTTC) at the California Institution for Men in Chino, California know this all too well. The MTTC is an 11-18 month program that offers offenders an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in commercial diving. The program offers training in just about everything someone wanting to break into the industry needs—diving physics, physiology, dive medicine, proper tool handling, blueprint reading, navigation, report writing, air systems, welding and cutting, seamanship, rigging and marine construction... the curriculum content goes on and on. MTTC certifications are fully accredited and meet the standards required by the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of Labor and ADCI.

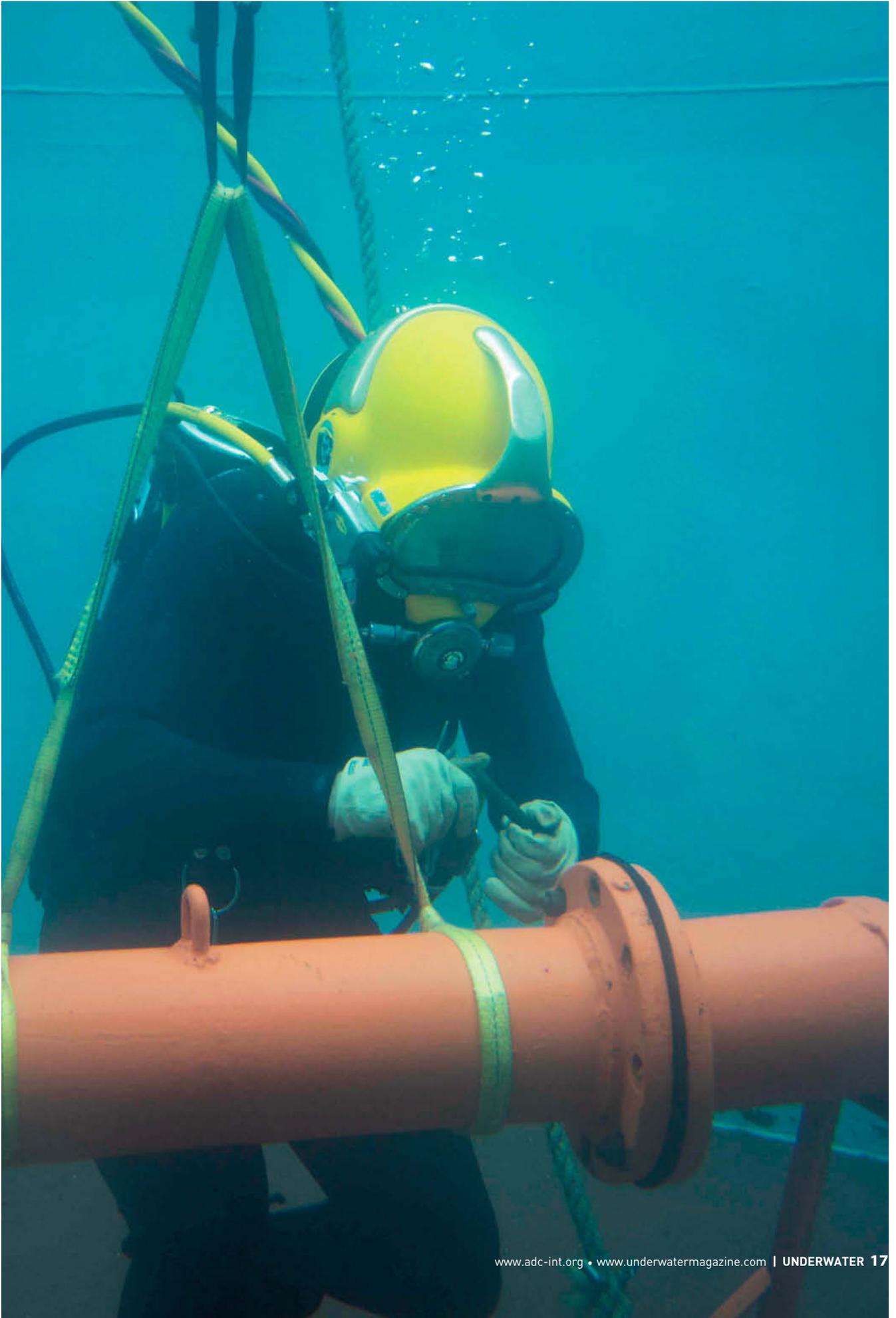
The late Leonard Greenstone founded the program in 1970. Greenstone was an ex Navy salvage diver and Prison Industry Board Member. According to Chuck Pattillo, General Manager of the California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA), Greenstone’s affinity for diving came after he played an integral part in the response to one of our nation’s greatest tragedies.

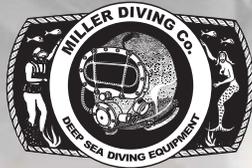
Greenstone was stationed in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. “He was just 18 or 19 years old that day,” Pattillo recalls. “Leonard trained as a diver immediately after the attack. He was working another job, and they pulled him in within hours to help salvage the wreckage and he learned how to dive doing recovery operations of bodies and other

assets. A gruesome way to learn.” Pattillo explains that that harrowing event had a profound effect on Greenstone. “That experience led him to the philosophy that he continued to have until he died: that people who make mistakes earlier in life could overcome those issues if you just gave them employment.”

It was this philosophy that ultimately led to the MTTC being founded, and Greenstone proved to be right. “He had the idea that if you taught inmates deep sea diving, they would never come back to prison. And so far, that’s been pretty much true. Very, very rarely do folks come back after this program.” Graduates of the program consistently maintain a recidivism rate of seven percent. Compared with the overall national rate of 76.6%, the folks at CALPIA have certainly been doing something right.

Yet, despite this success rate, budget restrictions caused the closure of the program in 2003. It was around this time that Pattillo met Greenstone for the first time. “The first time I met him, he began telling me that before he dies, he wanted to see the program restarted, and he was really committed to the idea. At the time, he was 79-80 years old, and his wife had just died the month before, on the day after their sixtieth wedding anniversary. So me, him and a bunch of his long-time friends from the industry started brainstorming how to put it back together, and we used a section of the penal code that Mr. Greenstone specifically





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knew about. It basically stated that if there was a program that had ceased operating, the California Prison Industry Authority could basically run the program themselves. So, we figured out a way to get the assets, and everyone worked to get the program restarted. We took about a year to get it going again, and we reopened in 2006 and dedicated it to him before he passed away. It was obviously really important to us that he was acknowledged for his contribution.”

Part of the reason the program is so successful is its design. It's structured to ensure that everyone who finishes gets a job after his release. In addition to the concrete skills needed on the job, the training also focuses on establishing a profound sense of courage and determination—attributes necessary to any personal venture, especially for those who have been incarcerated.

The program has been for male inmates only since its inception. Pattillo notes that, “We just don't have the location with a workforce of females that would allow us to operate the program effectively. We have so many other really successful apprenticeship programs [for women] that are trade union associated like carpentry, coding and Autodesk cad to name a few.

In terms of challenges the program faces, there are fortunately very few. “Luckily, the funding is locked in since the legislature dedicated money to the Department of Corrections to ensure we continue to run things like this. The only other thing that challenges us now is that we don't have a lot of inmates that qualify for the program because with California's population being reduced, we don't have a lot of minimum-security inmates. Every one of these guys in the program is a badass, but he's a badass who's not a security risk. We're challenged with filling the population with the right inmate.”

The program is so rigorous that more than half the students who enroll don't make it through the required 2,040 training hours, which certifies them as both divers and welders. And the training is so thorough and the instructors so committed and skilled that it's no issue whatsoever when some inmates enroll without even knowing how to swim. Yes, you read the correctly.

Pattillo admits, “The training is really intense, and some of these guys come into the program not knowing how to swim, but our instructors are so good that they teach them to swim first. That's really



Most of them have families, and the look in their eyes when they know they're going to get out and be able to legally support their families is just amazing.

impressive if you think about it and says a lot about our instructors and the guys in this program." He adds, "I've never seen inmates respond so well to instructors and pay them this much respect in my entire life. Even when I was in the military. I've never seen someone get this much respect. It's really something else."

Pattillo is speaking about Fred Johnson and Jeff Powers. Johnson, who, by the time this issue goes to press will be retired after entering the program in 2006, has been an extraordinary asset. Read about Johnson's extraordinary career on page 12. Powers is a Navy reserve master chief and does training for the Navy's underwater submarine recovery operations. Pattillo notes that Johnson and Powers' experience and effectiveness aren't the only reasons they're enormous strengths to the program. "The benefit of having Johnson and Powers there and all of their industry contacts is that they act as in-house job service. They've got a standing order for guys coming out of that school, and contractors know that [Johnson and Powers] are not going to let anyone out of the program that they wouldn't put their names on."

When Pattillo is asked to sum up the experience of being a part of this program, he doesn't hesitate to offer a response.

"It's the look in their eyes. When you're a father like me, their situation hits you even more. Most of them have families, and the look in their eyes when they know they're going to get out and be able to legally support their families is just amazing. It's real hope for them. Finally. Even the single guys who come in here and don't have kids, that feeling of hope they get when they know they're going to go out and do great things and see the world, that alone has been worth the investment in this for me. I take into consideration Mr. Greenstone's and my own life: if it hadn't been for the opportunities we either created ourselves or were given, we wouldn't be where we are today. And that's what these guys are getting. Opportunity." ☰

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