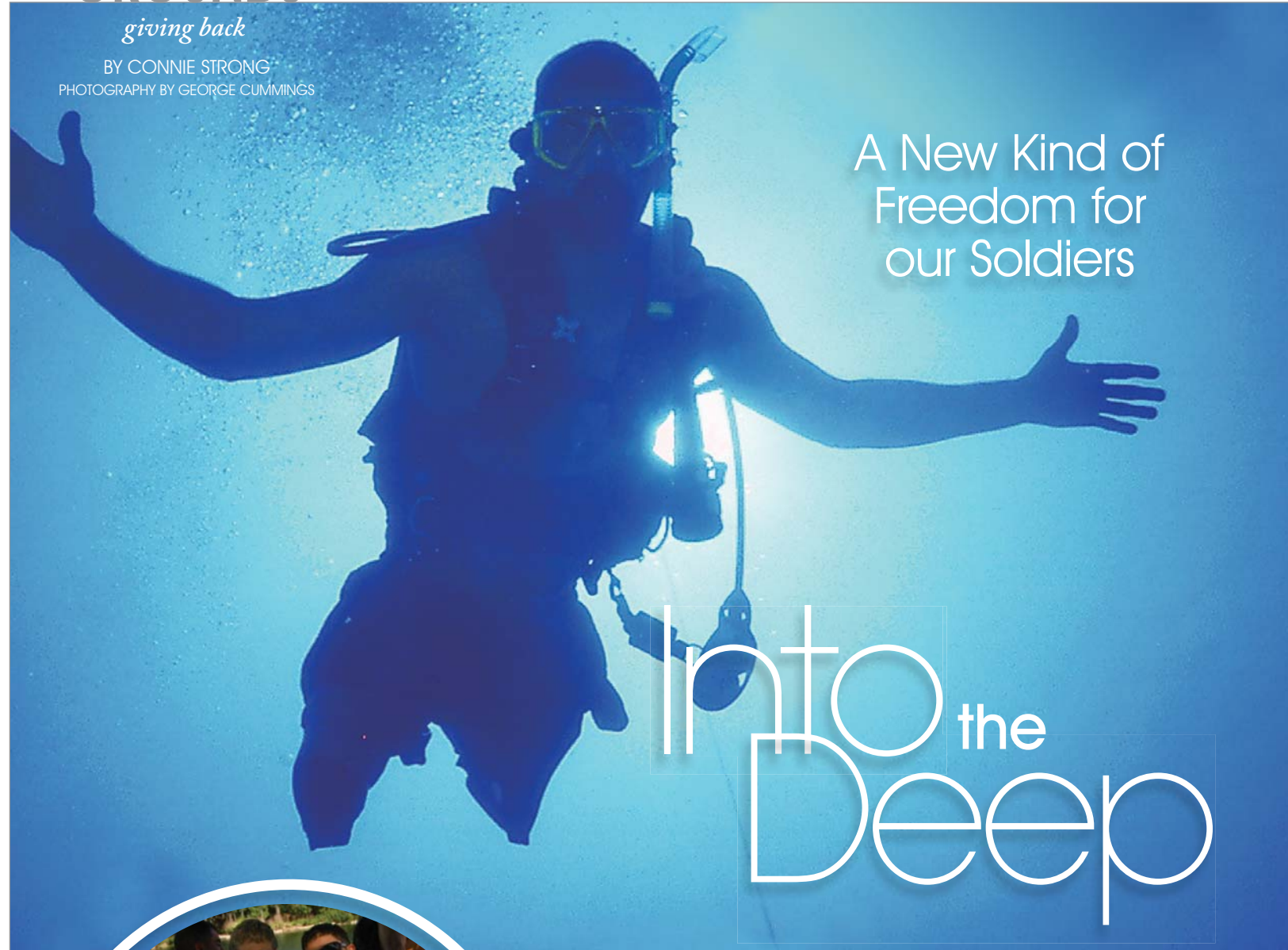


giving back

BY CONNIE STRONG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE CUMMINGS



A New Kind of
Freedom for
our Soldiers

Into the Deep



TOP: Bilateral amputee finds freedom in the water
ABOVE: Wounded warriors, strong spirits
RIGHT: Leaving prostheses on the shore in exchange for freedom

"This program just shows that **these guys can do anything we can do** ...all they need is a chance."



"From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to the earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free." Oceanographer Jacques Yves Cousteau made this observation, and it speaks to the freedom that soldiers from the Center for the Intrepid are now gaining. For the past three years, John Duggan, of Duggan Diving in San Antonio, along with several other regional scuba instructors, have dedicated their time and efforts to helping wounded, active-duty soldiers learn to scuba dive. During the hours spent in the constant 72 degree waters of Aquarena Springs in San Marcos, these soldiers can move about freely—leaving wheelchairs, prostheses and troubles behind.

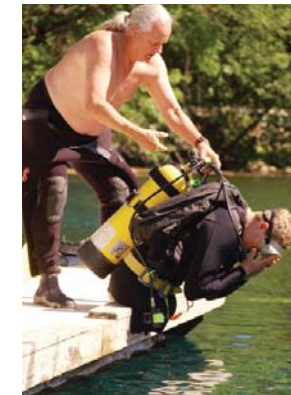
San Antonio's Center for the Intrepid, at Brooke Army Medical Center, is a rehabilitation facility built specifically to care for servicemen and women who were injured in the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan. Retired Navy Commander Mark Heniser, a physical therapist with the Center, is quick to point out that though these soldiers' bodies may have been wounded severely, their spirit is strong and their determination to lead fully active lives is evidenced by the accomplishments he sees daily. "These are 'warriors in transition,' men who are learning to live life to the fullest. We are here to make certain they are given that opportunity."

Mark, coordinator for the scuba program, attributes much of the program's success to the tireless joint effort of many volunteers and organizations. "John has been an essential part of this effort. It requires collaboration among the dive instructors, the Red River Rats, and Disabled Sports USA. These are the people who make this life changing possibility a reality."

John has certified over 90 divers in the past three years. There are four classes per year and each class consists of a three week program covering one week of academics, one week of pool lessons and two days of actual open water diving. He says, "This program just shows that these guys can do anything we can do...all they need is a chance."

When observing soldiers like Master Sergeant Dan Robles in the water, it becomes obvious that they are anything but disabled. Dan is a bilateral below-knee amputee who was wounded in Baghdad by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). Originally from Tucson, Arizona, he now resides in San Antonio with his wife of 15 years, Ernestine, and his 7-year-old daughter, Mary. Dan has participated in the scuba dive project as well as in the swimming portion of a triathlon.

Sergeant Eric Morante has been at the Center for the past two years. Having



TOP: Group underwater instruction
BOTTOM LEFT: John Duggan assists amputee onto the pier
BOTTOM RIGHT and RIGHT: Testing new skills

suffered the loss of his right leg, he feels very strongly that the scuba program is about "overcoming limitations."

While some of the injuries may be apparent, it is also obvious that the participants expect no special allowances for their circumstances. Instructor Mack Machacek explains that, while minor adaptive measures must be considered, these divers basically undergo the same rigorous training as anyone else; each diver must complete all the requirements, including an underwater rescue, in order to receive certification.

Once certified, some of the divers have additional opportunities to dive in Hawaii, Fort Lauderdale, Key Largo and other adventurous locations. There they can explore oceanic life, and experience the

freedom that this newly acquired skill offers. Underwater photographer/videographer for the program, George Cummings, states, "These guys deserve the best. We would have no freedom without soldiers like them."

Ask any one of these divers if there is anything they'd rather be doing, and you will get a unanimous, emphatic "No!" Ask the instructors and you will get the very same answer. After all, there is nothing better than giving a hero the chance at something they've been fighting for all along...freedom. •

Special thanks to George Cummings, photographer: oceanicexpeditions.org

Contributions to Red River Rats may be sent to Air Warrior Courage Foundation, POB 1553, Front Royal, VA, 22630. Specify BAMC Troop Support. Contributions are also accepted by Disabled Sports USA at www.dsusa.org.