

The Pat Helsham Story

Pat Helsham came into my life after coming to Australia from Ceylon where he had his initial baptism into the world of spearfishing. Pat had previously been a dedicated motor cyclist to the extent that he had won the World 250cc Championships on the Isle of Man. Pat was unperturbed and responded always with a smile as he brushed himself down. This drama associated with our travel arrangements came to an abrupt end when Pat became the proud owner of a brand new Holden. Our first planned trip was to travel to Box Beach and leave the car at the end of the bush track and proceed by foot across the headland and thence the sand spit to the Outer Light Island of Port Stephens that had become quite popular.

It was a warm sunny autumn day Sunday 15th April, 1956 and on arriving at our destination we donned our gear and with the sandwiches and drinks we needed to sustain us we were ready for departure. Suddenly Pat, almost as an afterthought, turned to me and with the hint of a laugh said "Just in case I don't come back George you won't be looking for it" and at the same time secreting the key of the car on the top of the right hand front tyre. The crossing was far from inviting with the combination of a high tide and waves crashing together from both directions creating a certain degree of indecision. But having made the crossing on a number of previous occasions the danger seemed to lessen as we stood and watched. Pat removed the haversack from his back and reversed it across his chest saying "that's more comfortable". As we waded into the water it was obvious that trying to maintain any sort of contact during the swim would not be possible in the turbulent conditions. Eventually I reached the island and looking back to the mainland beach I could see several of our expedition frantically waving. Not realising what the problem was but feeling the waving was quite urgent I discarded the bulk of my equipment and swam back to the mainland beach to be told that when some of them got into difficulties they returned to the beach and could not account for Pat. By this time the fishermen in Fingal Bay adjacent to the island had realised there was a problem and had launched a boat to assist. I swam to the boat and told them one of the divers was missing so with me holding the side of the boat and using my mask to scan the sea bed we began searching. After some forty minutes I could make out Pat's body lying on the sand although I dived down to him I found it impossible to lift him to the surface. Taking down the anchor rope I was able to fasten it around his chest and we were then able to raise him to the surface and bundle him into the boat.

Everything has done to revive him and a doctor was waiting on shore after being alerted. Although at least an hour had past the doctor indicated that he was not dead and as a last resort injected adrenaline directly into the heart but unfortunately it was all too late.

Although it was generally considered that Pat had drowned I noted that when his unconscious body was retrieved his mask and snorkel were intact and I felt this was strange because there was no doubt in my mind that the reaction of a drowning man would have been to dislodge them in an effort to gasp air. As Pat was a very competent diver I still feel he could very well have suffered a coronary rather than the presumed drowning verdict when no autopsy was conducted.

This was a most emotional experience and my first but by no means last association with tragedy in our underwater adventures. While I had survived several close encounters myself the reality of a close friend actually dying in the ocean had never entered my mind. The tragedy of Pat's untimely death was saddened so much further by his leaving behind a devastated young wife with a baby daughter just twelve months of age. A Benefit Cabaret was organised by the Newcastle Neptunes Club to assist his bereaved wife and daughter and in some small way reflect the sympathy of the club who had formed a guard of honour at his funeral as a mark of respect and a fitting tribute from his club mates.

In February, 1997 I received a letter from Deborah Pollock who resides in Victoria. The letter was most emotional as she related how an uncle was visiting his local doctor and opened by chance the magazine containing the article I had written which contained the photograph of her father. Deborah Pollock was indeed the infant daughter "Debbie" of Pat Helsham, who died so tragically on 15th April, 1956. She subsequently traced me through the editor of the magazine. Since that time there had been an emotional exchange of correspondence and all possible references and newspaper cuttings forwarded to a lady, now herself a mother, who was so desperate to learn more of the father she was sadly denied and the affection she missed over so many years when growing up' over the last twelve months I have found some pleasure in writing numerous poems and I include a copy of one dedicated to my mate.

So it was that on 12 October, 1997 an emotional reunion came to reality when "Debbie,, and her husband David visited me at my New Lambton home where my recollections of her father in those early days created the occasion for us to shed quite a few tears The opportunity was taken to photograph us together with the memorial trophy presented to the club at that time by Caltex Oil. Debbie's visit to Newcastle was not completed until she visited Fingal Bay to experience firsthand the sand spit joining the mainland to the Outer

Light Island where her father lost his life so tragically in 1956. It is so unfortunate that Pat was never to experience the daughter's love, Debbie, will always have for him and know the lovely lady she grew up to be.

George Davies

