

SEALAB

BY BEN HELLWARTH

REVIEW BY AARON M. LAY



AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST BEN HELLWARTH'S NEW

book, *SEALAB: America's Forgotten Quest to Live and Work on the Ocean Floor*, has been called the underwater version of *The Right Stuff*. Like Tom Wolfe's 1979 classic novel, *SEALAB* is replete with fascinating character study, captivating American history and enough adventure that the reader would swear this tale was pure Hollywood fiction. But Hellwarth tells a very true story of a group of brave individuals who, beginning in the late 1950's, set out to see if divers could live and work on the ocean floor.

The story hinges on the improbable father of SEALAB, George Bond. Before heading the Medical Research Lab at a U.S. Naval Submarine base in Connecticut, Bond was a country doctor in Bat Cave, North Carolina - scurrying up and down rural hallows delivering babies and administering vaccines. After joining the U.S. Navy, it did not take Bond long to fall in love with underwater work and life at sea. Bond got his first taste of fame in 1959 when he and a partner performed a "record-setting swim to the surface from a submarine that was more than 300 feet below." He wanted to prove that an "emergency escape from such depth was indeed possible with little more than a lungful of air and the proper technique." After this feat, Bond was hooked on pushing the limits and seeing just how deep a diver could go and how long he could stay down. He became keenly interested in bringing a "Jules Verne-style fantasy into the realm of reality." Bond envisioned an undersea world where humans would live and work.

When Bond and his Navy colleagues began experiments to test diver depth and time limitations, there were very stringent physical limits that divers simply could not overcome - or so was the popular notion of the time. Bond, being a man of science who was naturally prone to questioning the status quo, began conducting clandestine experiments in a makeshift compression chamber on rats, guinea pigs, goats and

ultimately human beings to test the physiology of existing decompression theories. These experiments were the very first steps in developing the life sustaining / saving techniques that modern-day commercial divers use everyday.

Despite have little financial or logistical support from the Navy or otherwise, the SEALAB experiments inspired many of the preeminent underwater explorers and innovators of the era. By the time SEALAB was underway, Jacques Cousteau had already received worldwide fame for being the celebrity underwater authority of the time. Cousteau enjoyed the full financial support of the National Geographic Society and conducted "experiments" which were inspired by the questions Bond and the SEALAB crew were raising. However, Cousteau's work with underwater living were more or less publicity stunts conducted at safe, shallow depths that did not glean any of the useful, empirical, physiological data that Bond was seeking.

At a time when America had its sights firmly set on the stars and was in a heated space race with the Soviets, SEALAB and the very notion of living and working underwater got little recognition or support. Nevertheless, the work that Bond and his colleagues conducted and the questions of endurance and the limits of human physiology they sought to answer were nothing short of revolutionary. There is not a single person who has gone below the water's surface since who has not benefited from the cutting-edge discoveries made by the SEALAB crew.

If you are holding this issue of *UnderWater* in your hands, then it is safe to say that you have more than just a casual interest in diving. This is not to say that you would have to be in the commercial diving industry or enjoy recreational diving to appreciate Hellwarth's book. *SEALAB* is so meticulously researched and the story so profoundly interesting and thrillingly told that anyone, within the diving industry and otherwise, will find this book simply hard to put down. 