



Walter F. Mazzone

1918 – 2014

Veteran of World War II submarine patrols, and a leader in the U.S. Navy's SEALAB program

By Ben Hellwarth

Captain Walter Francis Mazzone, a veteran of harrowing World War II submarine patrols who later in his career became indispensable to the U.S. Navy's SEALAB program and played a critical role in the development of the revolutionary method known as saturation diving, died August 7, 2014 at the age of 96.

The cause was heart ailments, according to his son, Robert Mazzone, but until late in his life Walt Mazzone was in remarkably good health, living at his longtime home overlooking Mission Bay in San Diego and keeping up with lifelong favorite hobbies, especially making works of stained glass and doing painstaking restorations of antique clocks.

Mazzone's career took a fateful turn in the late 1950s when he was introduced to Captain George F. Bond, head of the Medical Research Laboratory at the U.S. Naval Submarine Base at New London, Conn., where Mazzone was working as a top administrator.

Captain Bond, the iconoclastic Navy doctor who would become the father the SEALAB program, was then starting a round of laboratory experiments at the base to figure out whether divers could stay down longer and reach greater depths than ever thought possible. Bond was aiming for historic breakthroughs in deep diving that would enable divers – "aquanuts," as Bond liked to call them – to live and work for days at a time on the seabed in a properly equipped and pressurized base, something

like the marine equivalent of a space station. This was revolutionary thinking at a time when conventional wisdom held that divers couldn't go very deep, and their stays at any significant depth – deeper than 150 feet or so – would have to be limited to a matter of minutes, not the hours, days, weeks and even months that Bond envisioned.

Fortunately for Bond, and for the history of diving, Mazzone was intrigued by Bond's vision and by the physiological puzzles that would have to be solved to realize it. Not everyone was – indeed some in the Navy regarded Bond as somewhat of a crackpot. But Mazzone, an energetic, resourceful and inquisitive man, took Bond up on an offer to get involved with running the early lab tests that would help prove the concept of saturation diving, the key to the deep, long-duration dives that Bond hoped would make it possible to house aquanuts in sea-floor stations.

The lab work was only the beginning of a long partnership in which Mazzone became Bond's indispensable right-hand man through all three SEALAB sea trials – Mazzone off-handedly dubbed the first prototype base "SEALAB" and the name stuck. SEALAB I was placed at a depth of 193 feet off the coast of Bermuda, in 1964. The second two were staged off the coast of Southern California, in 1965 and 1969, at depths of 205 feet and 610 feet respectively. Without Mazzone, it's unlikely that Bond would have gotten as far as he did with the SEALAB program or the advances in diving methods and technology

that had a swift and lasting impact on military, civilian and commercial diving operations.

Even before Mazzone met George Bond and got involved with the nascent SEALAB program, he had made his mark as a young officer on submarines during World War II. His first war patrol, aboard the USS *Puffer*, became renowned in the annals of sub warfare because the crew endured what *The Journal of Military History* called "one of the worst depth-charge attacks of World War II." The diesel sub couldn't surface for almost 40 hours while it dodged Japanese depth charges in the Makassar Strait.

Following a highly successful second war patrol on the *Puffer*, Mazzone transferred to USS *Crevalle*, on which he completed five more war patrols. One patrol was unusual because it involved a highly classified mission to the Island of Negros in the Philippines to retrieve documents vital to the war effort as well as the rescue of 40 individuals who had been hiding from the Japanese.

Mazzone received the Silver Star, the third highest award for Valor, the Bronze Star with Combat V and the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V for his submarine service in World War II.

Born on Jan. 19, 1918, Walt Mazzone was the only child of Frank and Pearl Mazzone, Italian immigrants who had settled in San Jose, Calif. His father worked in manufacturing jobs related to California canneries and his mother worked for department stores. Walt Mazzone attended

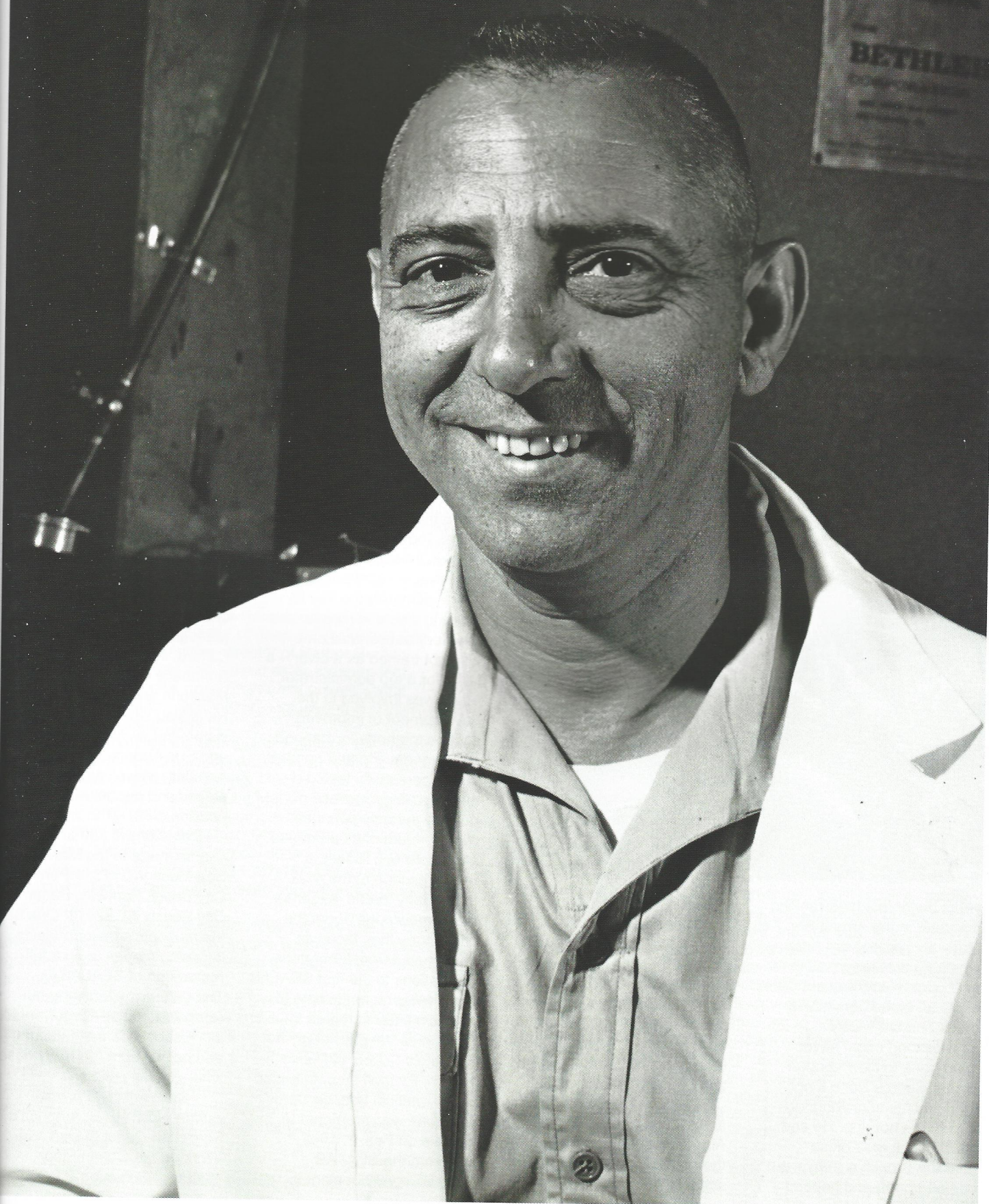
San Jose State College, not far from his family's home, and while in college he was a boxer, played football and ultimately graduated with a degree in biological and physical sciences in 1941, six months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into World War II.

Mazzone had set his sights on medical school but instead enlisted in the Navy in August 1942. He was among the first college graduates to be routed into an expedited three-month officer training program, bypassing the Navy's traditional submarine school as part of an effort to speed up the process of getting officers onto boats, where they could then get the rest of their education on the job while at war. Mazzone did his officer training at Notre Dame and Columbia universities. He was commissioned as an ensign and assigned to the *Puffer*.

After the war Mazzone was released from active duty in November 1945 and returned to California, where he enrolled at the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy and graduated in June 1948 with a degree in pharmaceutical chemistry. While at USC he met Lucie Margaret Oldham, a school teacher working in the nearby community of South Gate. They dated for two weeks and became engaged in May 1946. They were married on June 29, 1946. Mazzone took a job at his uncle's pharmacy back in his hometown of San Jose, where his and Lucie's only child, Robert Walter, was born in March 1949.

Pharmacy work made Mazzone restless and in 1949

Walt Mazzone, in 1963, during the final phases of Project Genesis, the lab tests that preceded the SEALAB ventures off the coast of Bermuda and then Southern California.



he joined the Navy's newly formed Medical Service Corps, just in time for the Korean War, and was stationed in Occupied Japan at the newly commissioned U.S. Naval Hospital at Yokosuka. In 1951 he was transferred to Brooklyn, New York, and within five

a subway over to lower Manhattan to get a Nedick's. While walking near the venerable hot dog stand Mazzone ran into a former submarine medical officer who wondered aloud why Mazzone was not working in some capacity for the

medical officers and enlisted rates for independent duty aboard submarines.

In the fall of 1958, not long after arriving at New London, Mazzone first crossed paths with George Bond at the base's Medical Research Laboratory and heard Bond talking about his desire to do research focused on figuring out whether it would be physiologically possible, and also safe and practical, to house divers in pressurized undersea bases. Mazzone was not easily impressed, but he was struck by Bond's can-do bravado and a partnership was born that would produce game-changing advances – and adventures – in the science and medicine of deep diving.

By 1962 Mazzone was reassigned to the Medical Research Lab as head of operational medicine. Among other duties, he took a leading role in running the lab experiments that Dr. Bond dubbed *Project Genesis* to prove the viability of saturation diving, the key to making deeper, longer-duration dives than ever thought possible – and ultimately the key to housing divers in pressurized sea-floor bases. Mazzone also got trained as a diver – a rarity for a top administrator – and was involved in the development of improved escape methods for trapped submariners. He and another officer personally tested a newly-developed piece of gear by surfacing on their own from out of a submarine at a depth of 318 feet, a record escape at the time. In the early 1960s, eager for more knowledge about the challenges they faced as they moved from laboratory simulations to the first SEALAB trial, Mazzone made time to earn a master's degree in environmental physiology from Harvard's School of Public Health. By then a commander in the Medical Service Corps, Mazzone was promoted to captain on Feb. 1, 1963.

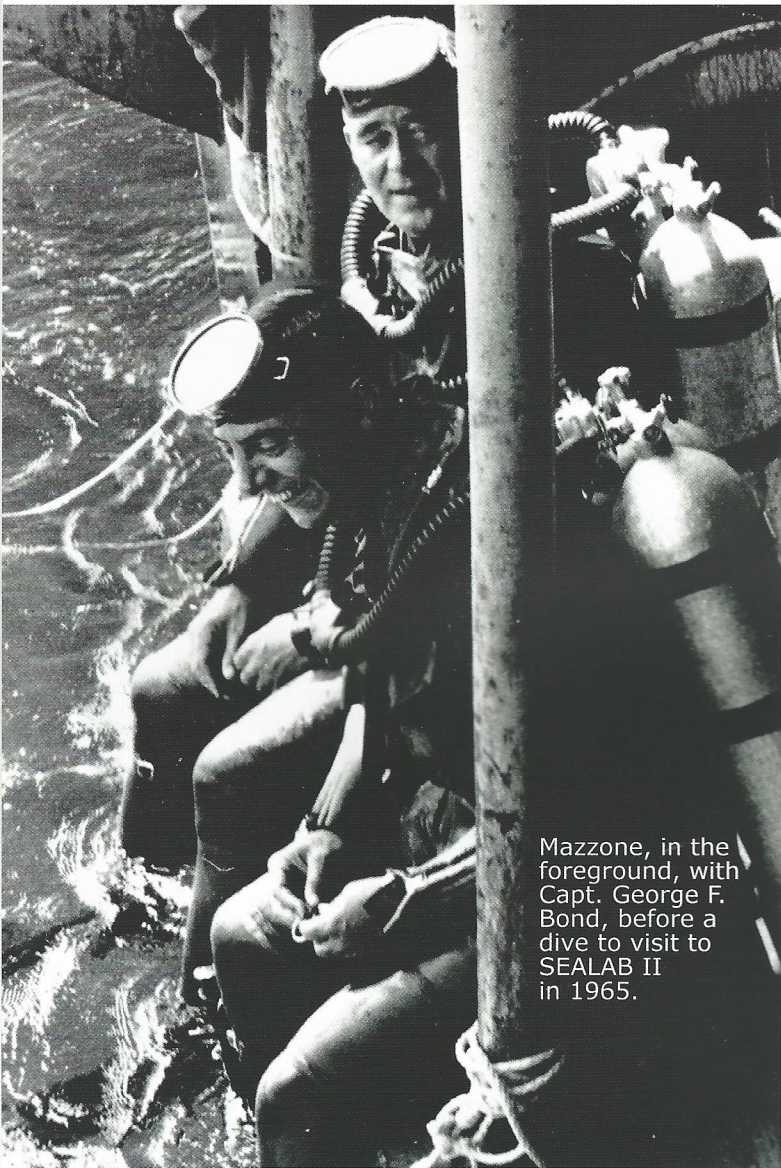
From the SEALAB program's very beginning

to its tragic, premature end, Mazzone was at the center of it all. After retiring from the Navy in 1970, Mazzone settled in San Diego, which had become a base for SEALAB operations, and worked for the next decade at the Navy's Ocean Systems Center at Point Loma. He then left government service and went to work for Scientific Applications International Corp. At SAIC he was a program manager on several Navy contracts until 2002 – and finally retired at the age of 84. The garage at the San Diego home where he had lived since 1970 still doubled as a workshop for his stained glass and clock repair hobbies. Only within the last couple of years had Mazzone curtailed his regular motor home trips.

His beloved wife, Lucie, died in October 2012, and he is survived by his son, Robert Walter Mazzone, a retired Navy captain who resides with his wife in Escondido, Calif. He is also survived by two grandchildren and their spouses, Margaret Pearl and William Clifford of North Hampton, N.H., and Michael Robert and Ashley Mazzone of Bristol, R.I., as well five great grandchildren – Carolyn Clifford, Josephine Clifford, Annabelle Clifford, Ely Mazzone and Callen Mazzone. He is also survived by his two sisters-in-law, Mary Schaffer and Sue Anderson, both of Los Angeles, as well as numerous nieces and nephews and cousins.

Donations in lieu of flowers can be made to the Man in the Sea Museum, 17314 Panama City Beach Parkway, Panama City Beach, FL 32413. One of the museum's major projects is raising money to do a full restoration of SEALAB I. The original hull, rusting but repainted and still largely intact, sits just outside the museum, and not far from the Navy base where it was built. 🍀

–Ben Hellwarth is the author of *SEALAB: America's Forgotten Quest to Live and Work on the Ocean Floor* (Simon & Schuster, 2012).



Mazzone, in the foreground, with Capt. George F. Bond, before a dive to visit to SEALAB II in 1965.

years became a high-ranking manager in the Armed Services Medical Procurement Agency, where he was responsible for big budgets and vast supplies of blood, blood derivatives, drugs and chemicals.

Mazzone might never have gone to New London or met George Bond if not for a lunchtime craving for a Nedick's hot dog. He and his boss left their office near the Brooklyn shipyard one afternoon and hopped

Submarine Service, given his distinguished wartime experience and interest in the boats. Mazzone liked the idea of doing submarine-related work and the officer apparently pulled some strings. Mazzone soon received orders to head the School of Submarine and Diving Medicine at the U.S. Naval Submarine Base at New London, where most American submariners got their specialized training. The school's function was to train