



PIONEER OF THE DEEP

Harpswell man explores famous shipwrecks, including the *Titanic*

BY BONNIE W. MASON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW DELORME

You may spot deep-wreck diver John Chatterton whizzing along Highway 123 in Harpswell on his Harley-Davidson V-Rod motorcycle. He would be hard to miss in a faded T-shirt that advertises Spam and orange sneakers with palm tree decorations. Above or below water, he's one of a kind.

On a recent sunny afternoon, the tall and trim 57-year-old walked his two labs on the meandering trails near the spacious, light-filled home that he shares with his wife, Carla. His long fingers punctuated the air with enthusiasm, and his speech, laden with a Long Island accent, became animated as he discussed his profession. Then he nodded toward his dogs. "They're totally unimpressed with me."

But most who know Chatterton are not so blasé.

"One of the world's top ten," says Sean Harrison, vice-president of training and membership services at Scuba Diving International and Technical Diving International in Topsham. "John goes where other divers don't go, or if they do go, they don't come back."

Chatterton has co-hosted 57 episodes of *Deep Sea Detectives* on the History Channel and has been featured, along with his New Jersey diving partner Richie Kohler, in two books: the best-selling *Shadow Divers* (2004) and *Titanic's Last Secrets*, just released.

Exploring the deep is his life's work. He takes strict precautions, often filming underwater before he goes, then planning every move. He determines what could go wrong if he touches this wire, what he will do if that wall collapses.

"Like a chess player," Kohler says, "Chatterton has a way of analyzing, looking, and planning ahead."

He knows, for instance, where he will place his extra breathing equipment and if it should fail, what he will do next. "We make the plan, we execute the plan. And we don't deviate," Chatterton says. "Shipwrecks do not tolerate foolish people."

DEEP-WRECK DIVER JOHN CHATTERTON CHECKS HIS GEAR AT HIS HARPSWELL HOME.



According to a new book, John Chatterton's and Richie Kohler's exploration of the *Titanic* by submersible revealed a chilling cover-up of the facts.

Those who don't understand why he would risk his life to solve an underwater mystery might think he is foolish, but the diving community uses words like meticulous, professional, and prepared. Chatterton prefers to describe himself as driven and determined.

The spotlight first shone on him with the airing of *Hitler's Lost Sub*, a 2000 PBS documentary about the identification by Chatterton and Kohler of a World War II German U-boat off the coast of New Jersey, a boat that the U.S. Navy said sank off the coast of Africa.

It was a dangerous adventure that took the lives of three of their fellow divers and may well have caused the loss of their first marriages. It's explained in detail by Robert Kurson in *Shadow Divers*, a book that has sold over a million copies in 21 languages.

Brad Matsen, author of *Titanic's Last Secrets*, calls Chatterton not only "smart and observant" but also a historian. "It was his knowledge of past and present history that made him interested in finding the truth."

Chatterton and Kohler mortgaged their homes to support their exploration of the *Titanic* in an expensive deep-sea submersible, a vessel that allowed them to descend 12,500 feet to where the ship lay off the coast of Newfoundland. But they have no regrets. They believed they've discovered why she sank as fast as she did.

Their exploration also revealed a chilling cover-up of the facts, which is explained in the book. "The wreckage really shows us that the reality of the passengers' situation was quite different than history has related to us," says Chatterton. "Steel never lies. It has no agenda."

The pair's successes with the wreck of the World War II U-boat and the *Titanic* have brought more offers to dive. "How lucky I am to dive with lots of heroes, how lucky am I to have these guys interested in doing something with me," Chatterton says. "I would not have made these discoveries without Kohler, the best diver I know. And the only reason I can run off [to the Dominican Republic, where his business is based] is my wife. She doesn't ever say, 'You got to stay here and mow the lawn.' She totally supports me."

Life hasn't always been easy for Chatterton. A few key experiences helped mold his character, he says. The first was his time as a medic in Vietnam, in 1970-71. Rather than crawl to a wounded soldier, he ran. "A fast target is hard to hit," he says. "Sometimes, you just got to figure out what works best, go for it, and forget whether you live or die. If you're afraid, you are likely to get hurt."

After Vietnam, he flirted with various ways to make a living. Eventually, he was drawn back to the water. He became a scallop fisherman for a time, then a commercial diver in the New Jersey area. He worked at that for 20 years.

A cancer diagnosis came around the time of PBS's *Hitler's Last Sub*, but even that did not keep him from his passion. He drove ten miles on his motorcycle to chemotherapy, and against the advice of doctors, continued to scuba dive with the pick line of chemo still imbedded.

Deep Secrets

The *Titanic* should never have sailed, and the shipbuilders probably knew it; a secret internal investigation of the disaster reveals that the ship was flawed from the beginning. So alleges author Brad Matsen, as he explains the contents of the shipbuilders' archives and tells the story of the recent discoveries made by deep wreck divers John Chatterton and Richie Kohler. His book, *Titanic's Last Secrets*, published by Twelve, Hachette Book Group USA and released this October, is a gripping page-turner, according to early reviews. Chatterton, of Harpswell, will speak about his diving experiences in various venues across the country, including New York, Las Vegas, and Miami. At the time of this writing, his only public appearance in Maine is scheduled for December 8 at Brunswick's Curtis Memorial Library, at 7 p.m.



CHATTERTON AND KOHLER EXPLORED THE WRECK OF THE *TITANIC* BY SUBMERSIBLE.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JOE PORTER

"The diagnosis made me appreciate how valuable time is. It has caused me to renew my vows to appreciate every day. If anything, I am a survivor."

And survive he did again, on September 11, 2001, when he, as underwater construction supervisor, got all ten divers at the World Financial Center near the twin towers in New York City safely out of harm's way.

His illness also helped him understand compassion. Just ask Diana Norwood, a location scout for commercials, films, and catalog shoots who lives in Brunswick.

When her husband, Michael Norwood, a co-host of *Deep Sea Detectives*, died of natural causes during a dive with Chatterton on the U.S.S. *Perry* in Palau off the coast of Micronesia in December 2003, Chatterton stayed with Norwood's body for two weeks until it could be sent back to England, where he was born.

"John didn't have to do what he did," explains Diana. "He has become a friend, a brother, a confidante. He always called at the right times, was there through the difficult times, made me laugh when otherwise I would be crying. He just didn't have to be the guy he was to me."

Chatterton and his wife moved from New Jersey to Maine in 2004 partly because of the friends they have in the area, such as Kirk Wolfinger of Lone Wolf Documentary Group in South Portland, and Diana Norwood, whom Chatterton says has become their "dearest friend." "We lost Michael," says Carla Chatterton, "but we gained a sister."

Kohler and Chatterton's scariest dive was in the Aegean

Sea, in September of 2006. The two were attempting to solve the mystery of why the *Britannic*, the younger sister ship to the *Titanic*, sank twice as fast. They wanted to discover if testimony concerning a closed, water-tight door on the *Britannic* was true.

Chatterton got stuck between two boilers, and it looked as if there was no way out. To make matters worse, he and his partner had stirred up clouds of silt, causing zero visibility.

"It was a recipe for disaster," recalls Kohler. He told Chatterton to abort. But the question remained: how?

"I needed to feel my way out, and backing out meant a greater risk of entanglement," says Chatterton.

But the diver didn't panic. After considering several options, he finally poked his head into a small space, curled his legs up into a ball to turn around, and then felt his way. "It's called Braille diving—something as a commercial diver I learned to do when I had to work underwater in zero visibility."

Incidents like this one have made him a stronger, more intelligent diver, Chatterton says. "I could have imagined that because I somehow survived, my methodology was validated. But it really pays to realistically evaluate one's self from time to time."

What's next for the fearless deep-wreck diver? He is on the board of directors of a technology company, Nanologix, and is working on two specials for PBS on World War II as well as a pilot program for the History Channel.

His favorite shipwreck? The next one.

"The thing that keeps me jumping in the water is the story that hasn't been told yet." ✕



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