

# TRAPPED AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

His air-supply cord severed, commercial diver  
Chris Lemons had minutes to live *BY Simon Hemelryk*

PHOTO: © THE SUN/NEWS LICENSING



## LEAVING HIS FIANCÉ TO GO TO WORK

was harder for Chris Lemons than for most people. The deep-sea diver was typically away four weeks, several times a year. As Chris, 32, readied to leave one day in September 2012 for a job replacing oil pipes at the bottom of the North Sea more than 120 miles off Aberdeen, northeast Scotland, he gave Morag the usual reassurances.

“Don’t worry. It’s a carefully controlled environment.”

“I’ll miss you,” replied the 39-year-old school headmistress. “But we’ll keep in touch, all the time.”

The couple had met five years earlier at a party

in Dunoon, west of Glasgow, where Morag worked at a primary school. Chris, a 196-centimetre-tall Englishman from Cambridge, was a diver and dive-boat crewman taking a course in the area. He loved Morag’s gregariousness, while she found him kind and funny. They started dating and soon Chris moved in with her. They lived frugally while he trained in specialised saturation (SAT) diving in 2011, a job that involved maintaining seabed pipes for the oil and gas industry. It had its risks, from decompression sickness to drowning—several saturation divers had died in recent decades around the world. But Morag knew how much it meant to him.

And it paid well, helping the couple plan an exciting future together. Their wedding was set for the following April. Morag had recently started work at a school in Mallaig in the Scottish Highlands, and the couple were building a dream house overlooking the sea. They talked about having children, and, after the kids finished their education, moving to France, where Chris had family. It was a joyful time.

IT’S CALLED SATURATION diving because, at the intense pressures found in the deep sea, gas that a diver breathes saturates into his body. When he surfaces and the pressure drops, this gas can emerge as deadly bubbles in his tissues—causing decompression sickness, or “the bends.” SAT divers reduce this risk by



From left to right: Saturation divers Duncan Allcock, Chris Lemons, and David Yuasa.

living full-time in a pressurised chamber within the dive ship.

For this latest job, Chris would be part of a three-man team sharing the SAT chamber with three other teams for a month aboard the 106-metre vessel *Topaz*. He was delighted to learn he’d be working with Duncan Allcock.

The 50-year-old had been diving in the North Sea for 17 years and had worked with Chris on his first few dives since he qualified 18 months earlier, becoming Chris’s unofficial mentor. In a competitive industry with only short-term contracts, Duncan had striven to make Chris look good in front of supervisors, giving him advice and nudging him away from mistakes. “If you’re unsure about something, don’t blag it. I’ll talk you through,” he’d reassured Chris. The pair had become friends; Chris and Morag had recently stayed at Duncan’s house in Chesterfield, England. Their third team member would

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS LEMONS

be David Yuasa, whom Chris knew by his excellent reputation.

For the first few days in the chamber, the men chatted about Chris's house build and upcoming wedding, and Duncan's son, who'd just started working in diving. Chris couldn't properly speak to Morag—helium in the chamber made the divers' voices high-pitched and distorted—but they kept connected by email, and Morag sent pictures of her adventures cycling or climbing local mountains.

Just before 9 p.m. on September 18, it was Chris's team's turn to dive. The three transferred to a diving bell, which was lowered on cables around 75

metres below *Topaz*. Chris and David would descend a further 15 metres to replace some pipe on a structure resting on the sea bed. Each man was connected to the bell by an umbilical cord attached at the hip to their diving suits. It was a five-centimetre-thick cluster of tubes carrying their air, a communications line, electricity for the lamps and cameras on their helmets, and hot water to keep their suits warm on the four-degrees-Celsius seabed. At the core was a steel-reinforced rope. Each diver had 50 metres of this lifeline, coiled ready on a rack inside the bell. Duncan would feed this out as needed.

Above water, the wind was about

30 knots and the seas some four metres high. Rough, but nothing *Topaz* couldn't handle. Instead of fixed propellers, the ship had five thrusters that could each be rotated. A dynamic positioning system kept the ship locked in

Up on the ship, dive supervisor Craig Frederick sat before a bank of controls and monitors showing the feeds from the divers' helmet cameras. He followed their progress, giving instructions by intercom for each stage of the job. Meanwhile, in the cramped bell Duncan sat surrounded by gauges. He monitored his colleagues' oxygen and carbon dioxide levels, but he had no communication with them.

Chris had been working around an hour when he heard a noise in Craig's control room. An alarm. Perhaps the crew were running a test?

In fact, *Topaz* had a major problem. The green light on Craig's instrument panel was suddenly amber...then red. *I've never seen that before*, Craig thought, alarmed. The positioning system had failed. The boat was drifting—and would soon drag the divers with it.

"Leave your tools and get back to the bell," Craig ordered. It was a highly unusual request, but Chris and David started climbing hand-over-hand up their umbilicals toward the top of the structure. In the bell, Duncan, who couldn't see what Chris and David's helmet cameras relayed, didn't know what was happening but followed Craig's instruction to start hauling in the cords.

Glancing up, Chris had expected to see the bell's lights, but there was only blackness. Then he felt his umbilical tugging as he reached the top of the manifold, and saw it had looped around a metal outcrop. He struggled

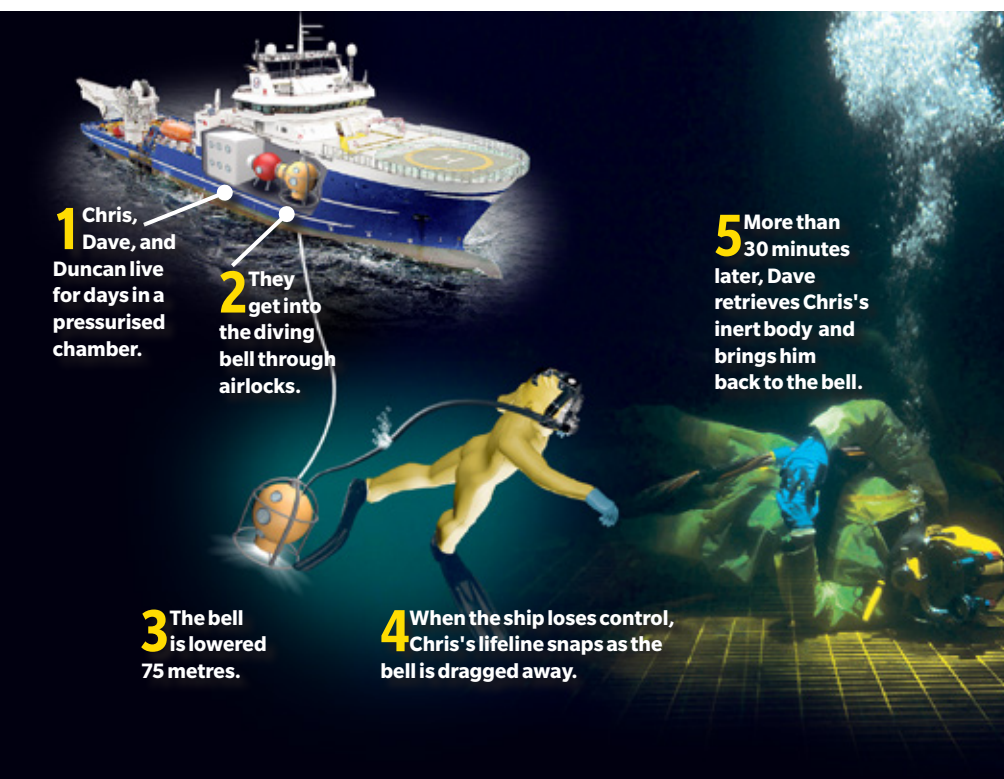
**THE SHIP HAD  
A BIG PROBLEM.  
"GET BACK TO  
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place by constantly adjusting these, so there was no need for an anchor.

Though it was a routine job, as Duncan secured Chris's heavy helmet he told him, "There's no rush. Take your time." Chris gave him the thumbs up. He felt relaxed, focused, ready to go.

Dropping through the 80-centimetre hole at the bottom of the bell and into the dark ocean was always a magical moment for Chris. Leaving behind the claustrophobic SAT chamber and the bell, he felt weightless, sediment and fleeting marine life highlighted by his helmet lamp. He and David started work within the manifold, a structure nine metres high and 20 metres long; its pipes and valves managed oil flowing from wells to platforms. Toiling a few feet apart with wrenches and other tools, the pair would be under water for six hours.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: ©THE SUN/NEWS LICENSING. PHOTO OF DIVER: ©DOGWOOF/FLOATING HARBOUR FILMS



**1** Chris, Dave, and Duncan live for days in a pressurised chamber.

**2** They get into the diving bell through airlocks.

**5** More than 30 minutes later, Dave retrieves Chris's inert body and brings him back to the bell.

**3** The bell is lowered 75 metres.

**4** When the ship loses control, Chris's lifeline snaps as the bell is dragged away.

to unhitch it, but the knot only pulled tighter. *What's going on?* Chris thought.

In the bell Duncan saw Chris's umbilical was suddenly taut. Craig ordered, "Give Diver 2 more slack." "I can't!" Duncan replied. Not only was it too tight, the cord was pulling its rack off the wall, steel struts bending, bolts groaning. It was unthinkable: if the cord broke off, it would leave Chris adrift and without oxygen. Duncan also

**DUNCAN PULLED UP THE LIFELINE, BUT HIS HEART SANK: CHRIS WASN'T ON IT.**

knew that in this tiny space, if it came loose it would knock him through the bottom of the bell into the water. He quickly climbed onto his seat to get out of the way. But there was nothing he could do for Chris.

As Chris struggled to free himself, David desperately tried to get back to help, flailing his arms against the water. He almost made it. The two divers' hands were just a couple of metres apart when David's cord yanked him away. Chris saw a look of resignation and apology on David's face as he disappeared into the dark.

Chris redoubled his frantic attempts to dislodge the cord. He heard it creak

ominously—and then the air-supply line broke, followed by the communications feed. Unable to inhale, Chris opened the emergency air tank on his back, as he'd done many times in training. Seconds later there was a noise like a shotgun as the cable snapped. His lifeline had now severed completely.

Chris was thrown backwards, sinking slowly, his helmet silent without the intercom, his lights dead, his suit beginning to cool. He knew he had about eight minutes of oxygen.

In the bell, Duncan feverishly pulled up the suddenly slack umbilical, hoping Chris would be on the end of it. His heart sank as the broken hot-water hose came up. Then came the hissing air line. He felt sick. "I've lost my diver!" he shouted to Craig.

**L**ANDING ON THE soft seabed, Chris struggled to his feet in total darkness. The ship could track him via a beacon on his suit, but he knew there was a better chance of rescue before his oxygen ran out if he could get himself to the top of the manifold. Yet he had no idea where it was. What if he walked the wrong way, into the blackness?

He picked a direction almost at random and took small steps, feeling only the mud beneath his feet. Suddenly his outstretched hands struck metal. He grasped it in relief. He began struggling up the structure, breathing hard.

Reaching the top, he still couldn't see the bell. Not a speck of light. Where had *Topaz* gone? He crawled onto the



Chris lay in the cold, dark North Sea without air, warmth, or any communication from the ship above.

platform and clung to the metal grille, terrified the current would drag him away. He reckoned he had about five minutes of air left, a terrifying thought. He knew his chances of surviving this were slim.

Yet the situation was even worse than he realized. The ship was now some 225 metres away. The crew were desperately trying to steer back, but, without the positioning system, it took two people to manually coordinate the thrusters. *Topaz* was slaloming agonizingly slowly against the waves.

The minutes passed, and Chris's fear turned to grief. *This is probably where I die.* He'd never see their house finished, never have children. "I'm sorry Morag," he called out. His mind fumbled with mundane practicalities. Does she know when the next payment for the building work is due?

He shouted out for Duncan. "Where are you?"

His chest grew tighter as his oxygen dwindled. *I hope dying doesn't hurt.* He felt himself slowly slipping into unconsciousness.

**C**RAIG HAD ORDERED *Topaz's* remotely operated underwater vehicle to go down and look for Chris. It sent back pictures of him lying on the metal grille. His hands seemed to be twitching. But was he still alive, or were his limbs just moving in the current? It had been 16 minutes since the umbilical had snapped.

By now David had made it to the bell, poised to retrieve Chris if they could get back in position. Craig kept him and Duncan updated on the boat's progress, though he massaged the truth to keep their spirits up. "We're nearly there."

David already assumed he'd be recovering a body. Duncan's thoughts were darkening, too, and he wondered how he would tell Morag her fiancé wasn't coming home. The wait was agonizing, but he tried to keep hope alive. *We've not forgotten you, lad. Hang in there.*

Attempts by *Topaz's* engineers to re-engage the positioning system had been futile, so in desperation they shut it down and restarted it. Amazingly,

PHOTO: DOGWOOF/FLOATING HARBOUR FILMS

this worked. But more than 25 minutes had now passed since Chris's umbilical snapped.

Finally, with the ship over the dive site, David dropped down and found Chris lying on his back. He briefly glanced through Chris's mask; ominously, there was water inside. He clipped Chris onto him with a rescue lanyard and began hauling them both up his umbilical cord. David was fit, but Chris was a big man; it was like trying to carry a giant starfish. By the time he was able to push Chris's upper body into the bell, another six minutes had passed.

Duncan unclipped Chris's helmet. The diver's eyes were closed, his bald head as blue as a pair of jeans. Duncan knew there was little chance of surviving that long without oxygen, but with nothing to lose, he kept talking. "You've had an accident. I'm going to give you CPR."

He gave Chris two breaths. Unbelievably, Chris suddenly inhaled. His eyes opened. He blinked.

Duncan could've danced a jig. *He's back with us!* For Craig, watching via monitor, it was a big moment. "Are you all right?" he asked on the intercom—and Chris gave a weak thumbs up.

Duncan probed Chris with questions after flushing his suit with hot water.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Yeah."

"You know you've had a broken umbilical?"

"Yeah."

Chris was groggy but, remarkably, seemed himself. Back in the ship's SAT chamber he got medical attention while David and Duncan had, as Duncan describes it, "a bit of a hug." Once Chris was stable they visited him. There were more hugs.

Over the next three days, as the men depressurized on *Topaz*, now docked at Aberdeen, they talked through what had happened, over and over. It helped them deal with the shock. Duncan gently teased Chris about the CPR. "Snogging on a dive is not normally done, you know."

**H**OW CHRIS SURVIVED, and without brain damage, remains unclear. The oxygen in divers' gas is about four times richer than normal air, so his body may have been saturated with enough to keep him going. Hypothermia could have put him in shut-down mode, too, sending oxygen to his vital organs.

When Chris phoned Morag, she was horrified and raced across Scotland to meet him as he disembarked *Topaz*. They kissed, and hugged for a long time. For a distraction, they went to the cinema, but Morag didn't see a second of the film through her tears.

Three weeks later, Chris was declared fit and returned to the North Sea with David and Duncan to finish the job. "I didn't want to lose my nerve," says Chris, who is still a SAT diver.

"I'm proud of him," adds Duncan. "Many would have said, 'This is too

dangerous. I'm not coming back.'"

The following April, Chris and Morag got married in an emotional ceremony near their home. David couldn't be there but, says Chris, "at the reception, people were buying Duncan whiskies all night. And they were telling me, 'I don't even want to speak to you, I just want to hug you.'"

"A band played until 4 a.m. and the place was jumping," recalls Morag now. "People knew it was the wedding that almost never was."

Chris and Morag have since adopted a little girl, Eubh. They finished their house. But their life plans have accelerated. "We're selling the house and moving to France already," says Morag, smiling.

"I've had a glimpse of dying and I'm not scared," says Chris. "I know I'm lucky to have a second chance. I always had a lust for life, and the accident only made that stronger." ♦

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Chris Lemons is available for public speaking ([www.chrislemons.co.uk](http://www.chrislemons.co.uk)).



Chris and Morag a few months later, at their wedding "that almost never was."

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