

By Secretary Rod Hutter

With historical records  
supplied by WPS  
Underwater Search &  
Recovery Unit

# Winnipeg Police Underwater Search and Recovery Unit

## 50 Year Anniversary

# 1970 – 2020

The concept of Police Diving in Winnipeg had its beginnings in 1969 with Constable Armin Stojke of the Fort Garry Police Department. Being an active scuba diver, Stojke believed trained divers could be used to search underwater for persons or items instead of traditionally employed methods of dragging with hooks.

Constable Stojke initially approached Fort Garry Police Chief

Art Bridgewater with a proposal to form a Police Dive Unit for the Department. The Chief was quite interested in the concept, but at the time would not provide any funding or resources for the initiative. Instead he allowed Stojke to explore the feasibility of such a unit, and recruit potential members from the Police force who may be interested.



*Fort Garry Police Department Dive Unit*

Constable Stojke partnered with Brian Stevenson who at the time was the President of the Manitoba Underwater Council, and Tommie Towns who was a civilian diving enthusiast. The trio then set out to recruit and train a Police Dive Team.

During this campaign, 6 members of the Fort Garry Police Department signed up and were trained by Stevenson, who was also a certified scuba diving instructor. The members of

this volunteer group bought their own diving gear and paid for their own training, which was geared to the blackwater conditions of the Winnipeg River Systems. This “team” commenced operations which mainly consisted of recovering property or evidence and performed such services for the Winnipeg Police, RCMP and other agencies.

The working conditions faced by divers is described as extremely hazardous. Due to high silt levels in the Winnipeg rivers and city ponds, there is little to no visibility and most dives are conducted in total blackness. To search the bottom of a river or pond, divers were pulled on a tow bar and swept through the mud using their hands in a half circle pattern. When they found something, the diver had to determine by touch what they are handling. The river bottom is congested with garbage, concrete, rebar, wood, trees and just about everything imaginable. People have been throwing things into the river probably ever since man came to the area!

The fledgling dive team quickly proved themselves in the late summer of 1970, when under trying conditions they located and recovered a young boy who had drowned in the Red River. The youth went into the water as the result of a canoe accident within the Maple Grove Park area of south St. Vital.

After being called to the scene, the Fort Garry Police initially commenced their search by boat, employing traditional methods of dragging the river bottom with sharp hooks attached to lines. Hours went by without success while deeply upset and grieving family members watched on from the shoreline.

Constable Stojke approached Chief Bridgewater and requested permission

to use the volunteer Dive team which

under the trying circumstances was granted. Divers entered the water and found the boy within an hour, gently raising the child to the surface, and bringing a compassionate closure to an absolutely tragic incident.

Chief Bridgewater was suitably impressed, and he officially sanctioned the dive team as the Underwater Rescue Unit. He allocated some departmental funding, and the dive unit members were able to “scrounge” their first dive vehicle from the Winnipeg Fire Department, being a 1959 International Harvester delivery truck. The dive unit also obtained a 16’ aluminum boat and trailer.

In 1974, the surrounding municipalities of the greater Winnipeg area, including the municipality of Fort Garry, amalgamated to become the City of Winnipeg. With this merging, the Underwater Rescue Unit from Fort Garry then became a specialty unit for the Winnipeg Police Department.

In 1979, the Underwater Rescue Unit was restructured, and only police members were accepted where before civilian members had been allowed. The Underwater Rescue Unit increased in size to 12 members and changed its name to the Underwater Search & Recovery Unit (USRU).

Between 1975 and 1995, the USRU supported a program called Police and Pal. Police Divers would teach scuba diving to disadvantaged youth in the community and would also certify other police officers. This was a great introduction to scuba





diving for the youth and for the police members. This program helped complement USRU, as newly certified members were often expressing interest in the unit.

By 1979 the unit had grown to 15 members but not everyone was active. Some restructuring occurred where inactive divers were “retired” which left a core group of 9 who were actively involved with training and operational deployments. In 1979 the unit also began joint training with the R.C.M.P. who joined up with the Winnipeg Police members to participate with their annual ice dive training at West Hawk Lake.

During 1980 the unit drew to 12 active divers and 3 apprentice divers who would work and train with the unit until a regular spot became available. 1981 however became one of the busiest years the unit ever had with the recovery of 12 drowning victims and numerous searches for evidence and stolen property.

In 1984 the unit began training in advanced lifesaving with the Royal Lifesaving society of Canada and started working with other units such as the RCMP Bomb Squad to train in underwater explosives detection and removal. The Unit also cross trained with the Winnipeg Fire Department, and jointly attended the Lac Du Bonnet School of Wilderness survival to learn swift water rescue. This doctrine encompassed surface swimming and boat rescues of persons trapped in fast flowing waters or rapids.

In 1985, all unit members became certified as P.A.D.I. (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) advanced open water divers. Further cross training in open water rescue also occurred with the Winnipeg Fire Department.

In the ensuing years, the unit members became certified in the P.A.D.I. Rescue Diver Program which focuses on diving medical emergencies and rescue diving. They also certified in ice diving, and later started training with the Department of National Defense to learn Military Diving. This partnership lasted many years throughout to 1991 where unit members became well versed with underwater navigation, night diving, and performing underwater tasks on worktables.

Today the Underwater Search and Recovery Unit has 12 full-time and 3 part-time members who continue to maintain the high levels of training and professionalism seen over the last 50 years. During 2020 the unit finalized a new logo and worked on plans for a new Dive Truck which will be ordered in 2021. They are also looking at the acquisition of a Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) which can be piloted underwater without the need of a diver.



# Did you know...

- The average depth of searches in the Assiniboine River ranges between 8 and 15 feet.
- The average depth of searches in the Red River ranges between 18 and 25 feet.
- There are some “holes” in the river system which are estimated to be up to 50 feet deep (and possibly more).
- The Unit is responsible for approximately 50 miles of riverways (Red/Assiniboine/Seine), several miles of creeks, and over 120 retention ponds and man-made lakes.
- Diving conditions in both the Assiniboine and Red Rivers are very dangerous, and categorized as “blackwater” where the diver is unable to see anything around them – searches must be done by “feel”.
- For hundreds of years the Winnipeg rivers have been a dumping ground for construction materials and general refuse – as such, divers can quickly become entangled in submerged trees, concrete, rebar, wood structures, and general debris.
- Though many large aquatic creatures live in the Winnipeg river systems - such as Lake Sturgeon which can grow up to 2.5 meters (over 8 feet) and 140 kg ( over 300 lbs) - the greatest biological threat to divers has been huge snapping turtles which are predominantly found in the Seine River.

