

Return to freedom



FREE AGAIN: Frank Gardner hovers over the holds of the wreck of the Thistlegorm

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JOHN MCINTYRE

Confined to a wheelchair following a terrorist attack, Frank Gardner was determined to get back in the water. **John McIntyre**, who filmed his return to diving, tells us the story

FRANK GARDNER'S life changed forever in a bloody and terrifying shooting while on assignment for the BBC in Saudi Arabia. Al Qaeda gunmen pumped six bullets into him and left him to die. His cameraman was shot dead.

Frank, the BBC's high-profile security correspondent, was lucky to escape with



READY TO GO: kitted up on deck

his life. His story about this terrorist attack and the struggle to rebuild his life, as a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair became a bestseller, *Blood and Sand*.

I was told by a mutual friend at the Beeb that, 'Frank would love to go diving again'. So we hatched a plot to get Frank back in the water and to document his progress in a special BBC film *The Dive of My Life*. When I suggested this to Frank, he almost said 'Yes', before I'd finished my sentence. The BBC's only proviso was that if a big terrorism story broke Frank would be needed back in London to cover it.

Knowing nothing about diving with disabilities, I turned to the Scuba Trust for help. They're a group of volunteers who specialise in getting people back into the water following a trauma. First we had to check that Frank was medically fit to dive again and to this end Dr Jules Eden who runs the London Diving Chamber certified Frank to dive again to 18m.

Jules Eden told Frank: 'It's very common among people who've had a recent paralysis to suffer from depression because of the loss of mobility and the huge change in their life.

'Doing what they did before, however, can help them. Diving can be of great benefit – it's safe for a paralysed person and they can find they are able-bodied in the underwater environment.'

A day with the Scuba Trust soon convinced Frank that he'd be able to dive again. The most important issue was to

sort out his buoyancy. Without the use of his legs to kick, the right trim was crucial. While filming his pool training, something of Frank's endearing but devilish sense of humour started to bubble through. When presented with a pair of 'webbed' gloves, he exclaimed with a Cheshire cat grin that he was a 'monster from the deep!'

As Frank was the victim of terrorism, the story of his return to diving was given added poignancy by the choice of destination – Sharm El Sheikh, itself a target for bombers 2005 when more than 60 people were killed.

We travelled to the Camel Dive Club with tour operator Tony Backhurst, who joined us on the boat – as a Red Sea veteran he knows the reefs well. Camel has built up a strong reputation as the centre of choice for people with disabilities and their dive instructor Luke Williamson oozed confidence and specialist knowledge when guiding Frank.

First stop was the inevitable Near Garden just at the edge of Na'ama Bay, where many a novice gets their 'water wings'. By the time Frank was perched on the dive deck ready to take the plunge, he was eagerness personified, if a little nervous about whether he'd scrape the corals without feeling it.

Back on board after his first dive, Frank said: 'My buddy knew exactly when to back off, while still keeping a watchful eye on his pupil. Before long – with the aid of my new webbed gloves – I was comfortable underwater, enjoying the Red



EARLY DAYS: Frank in the 1980s



FUN TIME: Frank views some clownfish



BIKE ACTION: motorbike on the Thistlegorm

Sea as much as any other diver.'

With each dive, Frank's confidence grew stronger and after one dive I had to tell him he was going too fast for me with my 23kg HD camera set-up!

The Red Sea air proved intoxicating. Frank wouldn't rest until we rounded off the evening by going quad biking in the desert and meeting some Bedouin – in Frank's words 'an official advertisement for life after spinal cord injury'.

From our dive boat, which had not been modified in any way but proved perfectly suitable, we headed out on two final dives, the greatest challenge of which was to get Frank on to the hugely popular wreck of the Thistlegorm.

But it was Jackfish Alley which was to prove the highlight of the trip for Frank. After nervously powering his arms through a small cave at the start of the dive, Frank emerged on to the reef and

allowed the current to carry him along the wall. With his legs dangling and webbed gloves outstretched, the bright Egyptian sun silhouetted his body as he drifted effortlessly along in a truly memorable dive which I have to admit gave me 'goose bumps' underwater. For after all the planning and preparation, here was Frank finally enjoying what he later described as the 'best dive I've ever done before or after my injuries'. Right on cue, a large Napoleon wrasse dwarfed Frank as it showed who was boss of the reef and swam between lens and presenter, making it appear even bigger. The Thistlegorm, on the other hand, proved a 'somewhat eerie dive' for Frank who marvelled at the museum

● *The Dive of My Life*, filmed and directed by John McIntyre, was made for the BBC World programme *Fast Track* and as a special for BBC News 24. For more information about the Scuba Trust see the website www.scubatrust.org.uk



FLOATER: John McIntyre films Frank

