

A History of

Dive Lab, Inc.

Dive Lab, Inc. was founded by Bev Morgan, as Kirby Morgan Florida in 1997. In 2002, the company separated from Kirby Morgan, rebranding as Dive Lab, owned by Bev's daughter, Connie Morgan with Mike Ward as its president. Since the founding, Dive Lab has been a crucial component of the ADCI and the underwater industry.

"I feel our biggest contribution to the safety of the commercial diving industry is the equipment maintenance and training we have brought forward, along with the technical information on how equipment should be used for the way it was designed," says Ward. "Dive Lab is a source of technical information for the commercial diving industry and has continued to work with commercial diving schools worldwide to maintain a uniformed approach to the training and the use, maintenance and repair of KMDSI helmets, masks and other associated equipment."

Safety is of paramount importance in any industry, but especially in commercial diving industry because when things go wrong underwater people can die quickly. Dive Lab has provided a standard for safety since its inception. This was Bev Morgan's main concern.

"We once heard a comment that more people die in Kirby Morgan Helmets than all others," says Ward. "Bev responded to me and said, 'I just wonder how many more would have died if they were not using our helmets?' Commercial diving is dangerous. Bev was committed to ensuring the diver came first."

History

After retiring from the United States Navy's Experimental Diving Unit in 1992, Ward worked for Analysis and Technology, a local government contract company that had the Navy Diving and Life Support contract

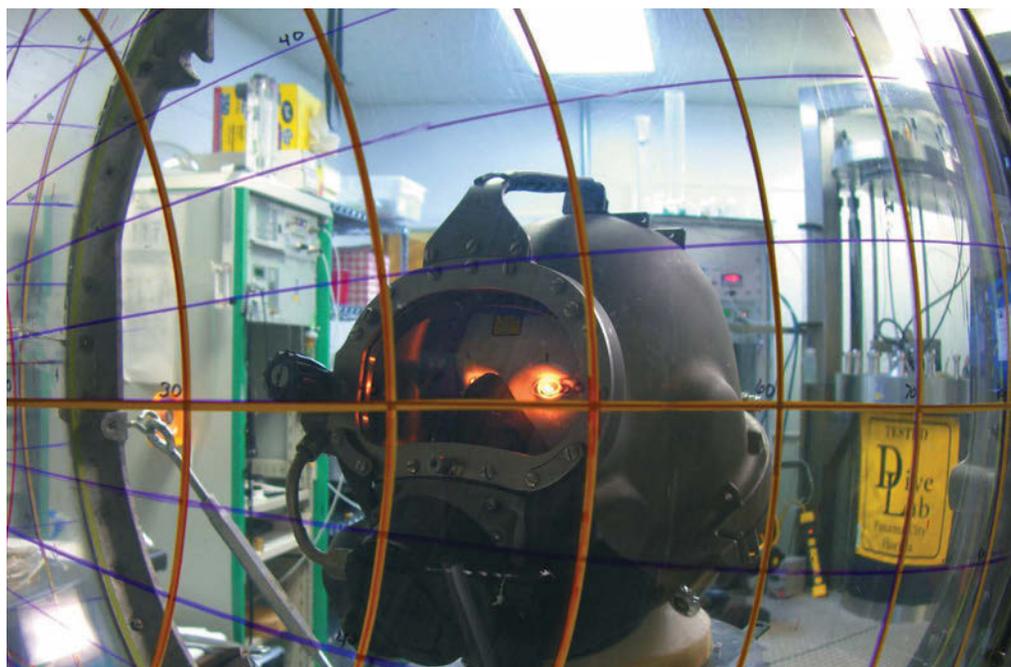
for the Naval Support Activity in Panama City, Florida. The work Ward did was in support of virtually all US Navy/Military Diving and Combat Swimmer Programs. In 1994, Bev Morgan, co-founder of Kirby Morgan, approached Ward to come on part-time as Kirby Morgan's military liaison. Shortly thereafter, Bev asked Mike to come on full-time, which he declined.

"I just couldn't see how they could keep me busy", says Ward.

However, Bev was persistent. It was always Bev's dream, to have a test and

research facility with rapid prototyping capability to allow testing and development of KMDSI helmets, masks and equipment. The facility would include a state of the art breathing simulation system, as well as the ability to do manned-diving. He saw Panama City as the perfect place to do this.

"Finally in 1997, I realized that I was basically working two full-time jobs, so I decided to leave government contracting and work full-time for Kirby Morgan Diving Systems International", says Ward. "Working for Bev Morgan was great! As soon as I started full time, Bev bought a house next door to mine in Panama City, and set up a satellite office. In those early days, I would work part of the day in the office at the house. Rest of the day was spent in my garage work shop, where I had a small lathe and an old Reimers breathing machine, which I used for rebreather and basic equipment breathing tests."





The house office also provided a place for Bev and other Kirby Morgan staff to stay while in Florida working on military projects. These were the early days of the SL-17K/KM-37 and the Navy was very interested.

He continues, “Most of the testing was done out in the Gulf of Mexico off my boat. I would get old Navy buddies to help out. I still had all my contacts, and everyone loved to play with the new diving gear, helmets, full face masks, and rebreathers as well as some really weird things like a buoyancy compensator for combat divers that was also a one-hour emergency rebreather and a gas mask pod for the M-48 mask that allowed combat divers to pop out of the water and immediately switch to the gas mask with the flip of lever.”

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In 1998, Bev bought a commercial building across from the Navy base in Panama City, which Kirby Morgan Florida worked in until the summer of 2000, before moving to its current location, at the former Radio Officer Training Center on Moylan Road.

“We came to what is our current facility to buy some much needed office equipment from the Radio Officers Union facility that was going out of business,” says Ward. “The facility sat on five acres of prime business land, about 1.5 miles from the Navy base, and 1 mile from the Gulf of Mexico. It was being shut down, because with modern computer satellite navigation and radio, radar operators had become obsolete and were no longer needed or required on board commercial ships. I kept finding all kinds of tables, benches and cool stuff; we could not make up our minds on just what to buy. Finally Bev just laughed and said, ‘Let’s just buy the whole place.’ About fifteen minutes later, he signed the deal and about a month later we moved in. Bev immediately had me call a contractor to put up another big building for our planned test facility.”

From 2000 to 2004 the company stayed extremely busy. In 2000, it started a helmet and full face mask repair/technician training program and Operator User Course for all KMDSI dealers, commercial diving schools, diving contractors, and freelance divers. During the same time, it got its first ANTSI breathing simulator system and began the process of setting up an unmanned test facility to enable breathing performance testing



of KMDSI equipment to the Military and European requirements.

“Also during that time, we finished the design and fabrication of a very small pure oxygen rebreather/ man-worn CO2 scrubber. This unit was solely developed for the US Navy Submarine Rescue program and were awarded a contract from the US Navy for 175 units. It seemed at this time everything was coming to a head at once and we needed help”, says Ward.

In 2002, Bev decided to spin the company off into a new standalone company

Product Spotlight

As the company transitioned from Kirby Morgan Florida to Dive Lab, Inc., it debuted a new complete surface supplied diver system, called the EXTREME Lightweight Surface Supply System (XLDS), designed to be used with all the KMDSI helmets and full-face masks. The new system originally started in Mike Ward’s garage in the 1990’s, with much of the testing done by diving only. Now we were able to test and verify everything on the breathing simulator, so we finished the system and went into production. The XLDS system consists of, a



called Dive Lab, Inc. to be owned by Connie Morgan. At the time, the company consisted of Ward, his son and one office worker.

“It was all work and no play, so my wife came to help in the beginning with no pay. She took over the issuing of training certificates, invoicing, and paying of the bills and helping my son Mike and I with ordering parts, writing manuals, procedures, and assembling our QA manual, as well as everything else. About the same time, we then enlisted the help of my youngest son. Steve, so it was pretty much a family affair,” says Ward.

Within the next six years the test facility grew both in size and capability, and so did the machine shop.

“We went from a manual lathe and mill, to two a CNC lathe and Mill but by then we were totally out of room, so Bev had us put up two more large 5,000 square foot buildings,” says Ward. “Now the back building was dedicated primarily as the test facility,

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three-diver surface supply console, 3 leg HP supply system, harness with buoyancy wing with emergency gas bailout system, and very lightweight (55 lb.) 300 foot umbilicals. The Dive Lab Certified XLDS system is basically a turn-key, the system supplies three helmets or full-face mask divers to depths of 190 fsw.

Main advantages of the XLDS System:

- Light Weight
- Small foot print
- Ease of use, maintenance and service

The US Army was the first to use the XLDS. The Army already had one complete system in use in Iraq, diving surface supply out of rubber boats in the rivers, clearing bridges and obstructions. After about two years of using it, they followed on by buying 14 more systems. To date we have sold around 60 XLDS systems, to mostly US government agencies such as the FBI, Coast Guard, US Customs and Border Patrol, US Marshals Service, as well as a number of Law Enforcement Sheriff's department. Also a few to commercial diving contractors, as well as a couple three diver XLDS control consoles to the Army Corp of Engineers and even a few in Europe. The XLDS system as well as many other Dive Lab products can be seen on the Dive Lab web page www.divelab.com

with breathing machines and test chambers, as well as a small twelve-foot-deep test tank for manned diving. One of the new buildings is dedicated to rapid prototyping with two CNC mills and lathes as well as other machinery."

Ward continues, "None of what Dive Lab does would have been possible without the support of KMDSI. Dive Lab's primary purpose in life is to support KMDSI, especially when it comes to the military, commercial, and all end users of KMDSI helmets and equipment. Everything else we do is side work. Kirby Morgan does all the manufacturing of the helmets, masks and products, and we are there to support them through testing, prototyping and equipment training to technicians world-wide."

Over the past 18 years Dive Lab has focused closely on diver equipment training and has been developing and improving the training courses on the KMDSI and Dive Lab equipment. Dive Lab has developed a surface supplied configuration and course,

which aimed at the type of diving done by public safety divers and government agencies. In 2008, Dive Lab hired a retired Army master Diver, Rocky Heikkinen, who now does most of the technician training.

Besides the training, which continues to grow, Dive Lab provides testing services for government and military agencies, as well as private equipment manufacturers of diving, mine safety, firefighting and hospital respiratory equipment.

"Pretty much if it can be breathed we can test it", says Ward.

Dive Lab manufactures a number of products to support the commercial and military communities such as an umbilical testing kit, life support gage comparator, rebreather test consoles, custom high and low-pressure manifolds, as well as all kinds of custom fittings and components.

In 2018, Mike Ward was inducted into the Commercial Diving Hall of Fame at Underwater Intervention. Dive Lab, Kirby Morgan and Mike Ward have contributed so much to this industry and we thank them for their continued service. 🌊

DIVERS SUPPLY, INC.

2396 Belle Chasse Hwy. • Gretna, LA 70056
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