

The Pipe

By Bev Morgan

I leaned against a bulkhead as our small boat set out of the harbor and went North along the coastline. Here and there light wind from the West formed ripples on the smooth surface of the ocean. The morning sun was low on the cloudless horizon, promising a warm day for our diving operation. Frank Donohue and Ramsey Parks were dressing into their wetsuits, as Ramsey explained the job.

“The pipe is about 2,000 feet long, by 10 feet in diameter. The engineers think part of the pipe has sand in it, our job is to find out how much sand is in the pipe.”

I quickly glanced at the breathing equipment, which they were going to use. Twin seventies with a single hose regulator and pressure gauge, piggy-back, and a single seventy with one hose regulator mounted on it.

Ramsey continued, “There won’t be any current in the pipe, so we’ll have to swim the full distance.” “When we start – we’ll be heavy, but once the air is used up, we’ll be neutral.” Usually, they have a little current to help push through the pipe, but not on this job.

Each of the full seventies weighed about six pounds more when full. Frank and Ramsey they were starting the dive with about 17 or 18 pounds more weight from the air in their bottles, than at the end of their air supply. In a single seventy this is not so noticeable, but it becomes an important factor when the diver is wearing 200 plus cubic feet.

“The pipe joints are about 20 feet apart, so every five joints I will stop and fill one of my sample bottles with the sand and continue on. This will give engineers a good look at the type of sand that is in the pipe,” said Ramsey.

The boat slowed down, as the operator eased back on the throttle and we came alongside the buoy which marked off-shore end of the pipeline. The sight of the buoy brought back memories of other dives, I had made in pipelines.

I have never been completely comfortable when wearing free swimming gear in a

pipeline. The specter of equipment malfunction - though remote, always seemed to hang over my head, especially if it was alone one, like the one Ramsey and Frank were going to do. I knew what was on the other end of that buoy chain. The pipeline terminates its off shore run, and abruptly turns up to an elevation of about 15 or 20 feet off the sandy bottom, ending with a roof- like structure having horizontal intakes around the pipe under the roof. I had always entered one of these structures cautiously and had always given a thought or two, as to who was standing over the pump controls, to make sure they were not turned on at the wrong time or in the wrong direction.

I helped Ramsey and Frank into their triple bottle set-ups and handed Ramsey his bag of sample bottles. They sat on the gunnel a few moments, nodded to each other and rolled over backwards into the water with their heavy bottles. They kicked a few feet to the buoy and started down the chain. I watched as they rapidly disappeared from sight into the murky water. Visibility was six to eight feet, and with excessive weight Ramsey effortlessly drifted down the anchor chain. The pressure of the water compressed his suit, causing an acceleration in his speed along the chain. He kicked his fins slightly, causing his body to go horizontal and resist the downward acceleration a touch. He glanced over his shoulder to see Frank swimming down behind him. Frank looks light, he thought to himself, noticing Frank had to swim to stay with him on the descent. Well, it's not important, he thought, we're already here and we'll get the job done.

Ramsey noticed the change in an angle on the chain, and soon the lower appeared in front of him. He waited for a moment for Frank to catch up, then eased into one of the big intake holes. He flipped on his light and dripped to the bottom of the tower.

Frank was there next to him and Ramsey noticed that his buoyancy seemed to be O.K. now. They glanced at each other's equipment running their flashlights over the spare regulators, weight belts and harnesses. Everything was in order so they started their long swim down the pipe toward the beach. Ramsey counted five joints in the pipeline, indicating they had traveled about 100 feet. He stopped to inspect the bottom of the pipe, which had about two feet of sand in it. He filled his sample bottle, as Frank inspected the area. Then, they moved on. It was absolutely black now, except for their hand lights.

Ramsey looked behind him and could not see even the faintest trace of light coming from the tower. This is the moment when the cave diver and the pipeline

swimmer realize they are truly on their own, and this is the moment when the planning and the equipment must do the job. But there is no time to dwell on equipment and planning. It was important not to hesitate. They only had certain amount of air, they must do their job and make it to the end of the pipe, with plenty of air in reserve.

The bag that Ramsey carried the sample bottles in, actually had two compartments. The empties were all in one and the once he filled up in the other compartment. He had twenty bottles, and the sampling was every five joints of pipe or every 100 feet. He could reach down into his sample bag and count the bottles, as he swam from one sampling station to the next. When all 20 were filled, he would be at the end of the pipe. Actually, the job was boring with seemingly endless length of pipe which was gray and drab, with a fine silty sand on the bottom. The only life to be seen, was an occasional crab who would scurry along the sand to the pipe wall and disappear into the darkness along the edge of the sand. Ramsey counted ten full bottles in his sampling bag and realized they were about half-way through the pipe.

He pulled his pressure gauge into view and read 1400 pounds. Good, he thought to himself. He started with 2400 and was halfway through. He was home free, or so he thought. On his way to the next sampling station, he noticed that Frank was getting extremely light and was swimming more than he should have been able to stay near the bottom for his inspections. Ramsey, being weighted heavy, was having an easy swim along the bottom, using his hands to walk with from station to station. He actually could pull himself along with his arms and travel very economically with this system.

After the next sampling station, or perhaps the one after, Ramsey felt Frank hanging onto his piggy-back tank in an effort to stay near the bottom on the pipe. Ramsey swung around and looked at Frank, then using hands asked if everything was O.K.? “Yes” - Frank nodded, “Go ahead”, he indicted with his hands. As Ramsey swam on to the next inspection site, he kept being lifted off the bottom by Frank’s excessive buoyancy. That, being combined with an increased swimming effort, made Ramsey a little bit more than slightly apprehensive.

After a couple of more inspection sites, Frank’s hanging onto Ramsey with his buoyant condition became intolerable, and he decided to tell Frank to swim on

along the top of the pipe and that he would finish the inspection along the bottom. About this time, Frank let go of Ramsey, and floated toward the top of the pipe. Ramsey turned around and saw that Frank had dropped his light and it was dangling by the wrist cord from his arm, while he was busily fumbling about his neck and shoulders.

Ramsey shined the light toward Frank and realized that he was very low on air from his main two bottles, and was attempting to find the single hose regulator from his piggy-back bottle which had somehow come off the neck cord and was behind him. Ramsey quickly swam up and handed him his spare regulator, which Frank promptly shoved into his mouth and took a couple of relief breaths. With all the excessive swimming with Frank holding on, and now this latest commotion, Ramsey decided he had better check his own air pressure. His gauge was down to 500 p.s.i. but that at least put him 500 p.s.i. in two seventies, ahead of Frank at this point. He quickly looked at Frank, who had become organized, and indicated to Ramsey that he was through inspecting, and was going to swim the remaining way along the pipeline since he was on his reserve air, Ramsey shook his head in agreement and set about to follow him.

Frank, being light, had turned upside down and was swimming and walking with his hands along the top of the pipe. Frank is a big man with long legs and he was making the most of it toward the end of the pipe. Ramsey was heavy and was following Frank along the bottom of the pipe. Due to no motion from the waves, visibility has slightly improved, and Ramsey could see Frank's light, perhaps twelve to fifteen feet away. Ramsey reached down and counted his full sampling bottles, he had 16. This meant they were closer than 400 feet to the end of the pipe, and could make it quite easily on the air they had. Once out, they could get more air and come back in for the remaining four samples that were needed.

Ramsey felt relieved and glad that their problems were no more serious than a scuffle to find Frank's reserve air regulator. Ramsey settled into keeping up with Frank and started counting the pipe joints that came up every 20 feet. Then suddenly Ramsey noticed he was breathing heavily, to keep pace with Frank. He had counted 10 joints of pipe, when his regulator started drawing hard. Ramsey was not sure if it was due to his increased breathing efforts, or if he was out of air on his doubles. He tried to swim up and grab Frank's fins to have Frank help him with the change-over to his emergency regulator, in the event

that he could not find it. But there was no catching Frank. The extra effort to try to grab his fins only caused Ramsey to draw harder on the regulator, and make it seem harder to get any air out of it. He decided to stop and make the change-over while he still had some air left in his doubles.

He dropped to the bottom of the pipe and felt for the emergency regulator. It was on the strap around his neck and handy for the switch-over. He was still breathing very hard from the swim, and did not seem to be able to get enough air out of his doubles to satisfy the need. “Well,” he thought, as he started to switch regulators, “I counted 10 more joints of pipe, so we could not be any farther than a couple of hundred feet from the end of the pipe. I’ve got plenty of air left in my piggy-back bottle to make it out.

He made the switch-over and pushed the button on his emergency regulator to expel the water. When he let up on the purge button the regulator stayed on steady-flow blasting large volumes of air out and around his head and escaping forever along the top of the pipe. Silent curses raged across his brain as he jerked the emergency regulator out of his mouth and banged it into his hand in an effort to stop the free-flow. He shoved the regulator back into his mouth and carefully ejected the water with the air he had left in his lungs. The next breath came easily and shut off properly at the end of the breath. The regulator was working correctly. This was a bad dive, he thought to himself, as he set out after Frank. I don’t know if I’ll take another one of these pipeline jobs again. They are bad enough when everything goes right, but this was ridiculous. Ramsey settled down for the short swim out of the pipe and started counting joints again.

Six joints, seven joints, eight joints, ten joints, that’s 200 more feet and he would soon be out. He relaxed and settled down, as his breathing rate went way down. This is more like it, he thought, relax. So I’m down to my emergency bottle, it’s O.K., just a few more feet and I should see the light at the end of the pipe. Sixteen joints, seventeen joints, eighteen joints, where’s the light? There should be only two more joints. Nineteen joints, twenty joints, twenty-one joints.

Wait, something’s not right here... the engineers told me this was a two thousand foot pipe and the pipe joints were twenty feet apart, and I took samples every five joints or one hundred feet. Twenty-two joints, twenty-seven, thirty.

Good God, this pipe is much longer than the engineers told me. What the hell! Thirty joints, thirty-five joints.

This is bad, Ramsey thought to himself. This is really bad. I have to save every ounce of air in my bottle, I've got to stretch it, I've got to make it last. Then he thought about Frank. Frank had far less air and the realization hit him. Somewhere, floating at the top of the pipe was Frank. He had probably already gone by him. He had to be out of air by now. What a tragedy, he thought. What a shame, all because some engineer gave me the wrong dope. On he went, on into the black. Even his light was growing noticeably dimmer. It would soon go out.

The absolute finality of this endless pipe descended upon him. That pipe had no beginning and it had no ending. That pip was his forever. A strange relaxation melted through his body. His breathing became even slower and longer. The confusion in his mind stopped swirling and settled, as the grains of sand fell into place on the ocean floor. I am a fool, he thought. Now I know what happened.

When I switched to my emergency regulator I got turned around, and now I'm swimming back the wrong way in the pipeline. It's all very simple. I swam as far as I could on a set of doubles, then I switched to a single and swam back down the pipeline and there's no way on God's Earth I can cover the same distance on a single. I don't even have a gauge to tell me when the end is going to come.

Ramsey Parks was probably never more relaxed than during this moment of facing death. I was like falling from the tallest building, except that he had a lot more time to think about it, and think he did. The first thing he thought about was Conrad Limbaugh, who had face exactly the same situation in a cave in France and had undoubtedly gone into the same trance-like tranquility, during his last few minutes, when he realized there was no way out. I should have learned from that, Ramsey thought, but no, I wanted the money. The money was good at the start, but now, he laughed to himself ... the money was nothing. Then he thought of his wife. He had only been married a week. My poor wife, he thought, I've made a widow out of her. She will never understand why this happened.

He had stopped counting pipe joints by now. There was no reason to. He must swim on down that endless pipe until... and then he thought about how it would be when it came. The regulator would start to breathe hard.

He would start drawing on it and drawing on it, and soon there would be nothing to draw on. And he would relax and die. It's taking so long, he thought, I'm so

relaxed, swimming is so smooth and easy.

And then it came. He first noticed an almost imperceptible change in his regulator. A very, very slight increase in breathing resistance, as he slowly drew the air out of the tank, through the hose, and into his mouth. He had taken the regulators apart many times and he could follow the air, as it came up from the tank and through the first stage regulator, lifting the seat and into the hose, and into the second stage regulator, and as he drew in on the diaphragm it tripped the lever that allowed the precious air to flow into his mouth. This was the start of there not being enough air to open those little valves, not being enough air to supply his lungs. But he was relaxed, and it was easy and it was going to happen very smoothly. After several increasingly more difficult breaths he was even deeper into his trance. He was as completely relaxed as a human can become. His light was nearly out, just showing a feeble glow in the darkness, barely reflecting on the sand.

And then he saw something. Something faint and small a long way off. Was it possible? He eased out his tranquility slightly. He squinted his eyes within his mask and strained to look, and the beat of his legs kicking his fins picked up slightly.

And then the tranquility was completely broken. His eyes opened wide. His heart accelerated. Adrenalin coursed through his body. Light! There's a light, right there, right there is the end of the pipe. I can make it, I can make it! The regulator drew hard. He strained to draw the life-giving air from the regulator. This was no time to relax and stretch his air. This was it. This was everything. He had to make it out of the end of the pipe. He had to get out of the tower. He thrust his legs as never before. He pulled with his arms. He strained with everything available and rounded the end of the pipe and entered the tower.

God, look at it... the open ocean... its right up there. He dropped one of his weight belts as he came up the tower. The extra buoyancy made him accelerate toward the roof of the tower. He reached out his arms and trimmed his body.

He hit the opening on an angle and deflected through the opening on an angle with his hands pushing hard on the roof of the tower. There was no air left now but he left the regulator in his mouth, hoping to get perhaps a slight breath from the gain in pressure differential as he raced towards the surface. He jettisoned his other weight belt and his speed toward the surface increased. Blow out, he thought, blow out, don't embolize, don't make it all this way, only to embolize. He managed to get a little air going out of his lungs. The light became stronger and stronger until it blinded him, or maybe it was the lack of oxygen that caused his already tunnel vision to close in and collapse. And suddenly, suddenly there

was no water on his face, he opened his mouth and the regulator dropped from it. Air rushed in a down to his lungs. He squinted his eyes and laid back on the buoyancy of his doubles and the piggy-back. His vision returned. That first breath he needed to give him life, but this breath, the second breath, he savored. He tasted it, he enjoyed it. It was as if he was filling his lung sacks one at a time. There's so much of it up here. There's so much of this good stuff up here. He drank in the blue sky and let the sun wash across his face. With the next breath, he noticed he was trembling and he made an effort to relax. He looked around and saw a nearby boat approaching rapidly.

On the boat, we all had given up hope. We held off for several minutes, after we had calculated he couldn't possible have any air left. Frank Donahue had come up on the inshore end and we had all assumed that Ramsey would be close behind. After quite some time lapsed, we assumed that something had gone wrong and waited until we knew his air supply would be exhausted. We started to prepare a recovery team to get his body. While we were making preparations, the boat operator kept near to the end of the pipe and then, long after giving up all hope, he appeared. Although there was a noticeable loss of color from his face, Ramsey kept a clam exterior as he climbed aboard, sat down and had a smoke. We radioed the beach that the other diver was aboard and that the job was secured. As we headed into port, Ramsey explained what had happened.

Although, he had no comments to indicate how he felt about swimming pipelines, that was the last pipeline that I can remember him entering. Occasionally after an evening of good food and drink, the conversation would slow down, Ramsey confided in me that he still awakes in the middle of the night to find that he has been swimming that same pipeline. The years will wear on with you and me, we will have good days and bad days. But somewhere late at night when the city is asleep, and the only sound is the murmur of the ocean against the beach, Ramsey will be once again swimming down that endless dark pipe.