

# Deep thoughts of seasoned inventor

**DIVING:** Renowned ocean-tech expert takes state-of-the-art Exosuit from North Vancouver to New Jersey

BY KENT SPENCER  
THE PROVINCE

The first thing a visitor learns about deep diver Phil Nuytten is that he thinks big.

Shortly after being ushered into his nautically themed office in North Vancouver, he explains why the Earth was misnamed.

"We're the first generation to see the planet from space and realize it should not have been called Earth. It should have been called Ocean," says the softly spoken 70-year-old.

The renowned inventor is unveiling his latest gear at a U.S. diving convention this weekend in New Jersey. The Exosuit is a state-of-the-art diving suit that looks like something Buzz Lightyear might put on.

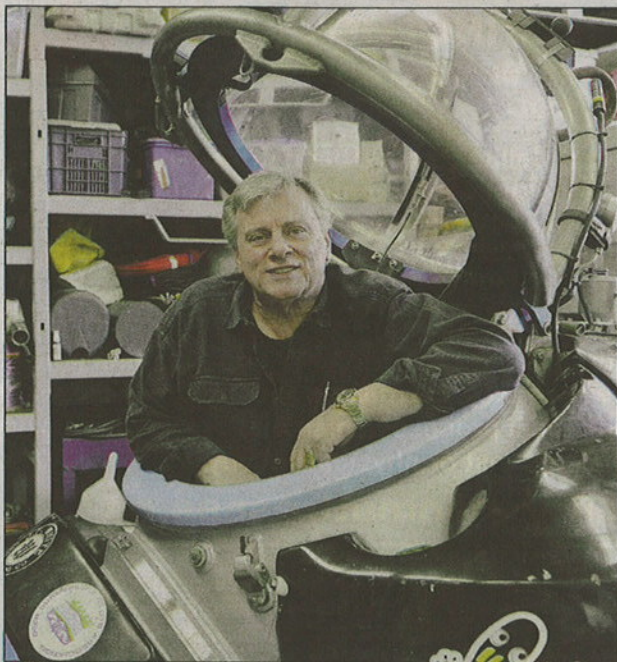
Nuytten has a deep-seated relationship with the water that goes far beyond the nuts and bolts of making useful things.

He scoffs at fear of the deep and says the reason is because he "drowned" at age 18.

It happened when he was a hotshot spear fisherman taking part in a breath-holding competition at Horseshoe Bay. There was one fellow he wanted to beat.

The plan was to free dive 20 metres down, swim 30 metres horizontally, and come back up 20 metres to the surface. A safety diver stood by on the bottom with an aqualung.

He decided to do the 30-metre section three times, one more than the other guy. But on the last leg, on the verge of blacking out, he realized the safety diver wasn't there. Believing Nuytten had



Inventor Phil Nuytten, above, with submarine similar to the one used by James Cameron last week. At right, his state-of-the-art Exosuit. JENELLÉ SCHNEIDER PHOTOS — PNG

surfaced, he went up himself.

"My lungs were on fire. Finally, I exhaled all the air and immediately sucked in water. It went all the way down to my stomach," he says.

The feeling was incredible, but in a good way.

"The water felt like lemonade being poured down my throat on a hot day. . . I kept kicking and just when I thought I was getting to the surface, my feet hit bottom. I was disoriented," he says.

He survived when a diver noticed his absence and quickly jumped down with a fresh tank. On the boat, water was poured out of his lungs.

He says the experience

didn't put him off — just the opposite, in fact.

"There is a great fear that drowning is a terrible way to go. It's not that way at all. It was kind of a pleasant. . . I tell people I only suffered partial brain damage," he deadpans.

He never wanted to be a diver as a youngster growing up near Lost Lagoon. He wanted to carve totem poles and believes the urge came from his Métis ancestry.

The ability to create art in the form of cool designs has formed the basis of all his subsequent underwater work.

Dozens of native carvings, bronze sculptures and old-style diving helmets are on display at Nuytco Research's



head office.

One photograph stands out: film stars Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio hugging each other on the *Titanic*.

The picture's location next to his desk is a salute to film director James Cameron, a fellow adventurer whom he knows as "Jim."

The office is buzzing with talk about Cameron's 18-hour trip to the bottom of the sea last week in the *Deepsea Challenger* submersible.

"Some people believe Cameron is a wealthy dilettante who hired people to build a machine so he could set a record. Nothing could be further from the truth. He's had the idea for eight years," says Nuytten.

The 35,000 foot-plunge to the Marianas Trench is equivalent to a 3,500-storey building, he says.

The manufacturing end of the company's operations is located in a machine shop, where 22 employees service Exosuits and one-man mini-submersibles called Deep Workers.

A half-million dollars will buy the Exosuit, a diving suit with full mobility of motion set in a hard shell. The gear can transport divers 300 metres down and back up without having to bother with time-consuming decompression.

The company's \$750,000 mini-submersibles are popular with oil rigs and navies around the world.

Nuytten says his business has been a financial success for 40 years. The ideas start with elaborate sketches.

"Esthetics are very important in creating quality. They say form follows function, but in my case, function follows form," he says.

"When I finally croak and they carry me off in a pine box, I'll have a flashlight in my teeth and still be designing as I'm going down."

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