

Reprinted from an article by  
Colin Taylor in Dive Magazine (UK), March 2000.

Dr. Phil Nuytten's interest in diving began at the age of 13, when he became the seventh member of his local scuba club in Vancouver. It was 1955. He was taught to dive by Canadian policeman Basil 'Pat' Molony, who became a lifelong friend. The Pacific waters along the British Columbian coast are a treasure trove of wildlife that compares with any dive site in the world. A true pioneer, Nuytten enjoyed some of the best diving in the world at a time when the underwater realm was largely unexplored.

At the age of 15, he set up Vancouver Diver's Supply, a dive shop which supplied the meager amount of equipment then available in Canada. He was too young to obtain a business license, so his mother had to apply for one in her name. The schoolboy entrepreneur was so successful that he was soon earning more than his teachers at school. At the time, he was diving in a latex waist-entry suit that failed to keep divers warm and was prone to squeeze. He decided to try his hand at making wetsuits and obtained some patterns from an American friend.

At 17, he was working flat out and always had back orders for between 50 and 100 suits. All was going well until the day a friend dropped by on his motorbike with a girlfriend. Nuytten couldn't join them because of the workload, and realized he was missing out on some of the finer things in life. He decided to sell the business and go back to school.

After high school, Nuytten returned to the world of commercial diving. He was competing with seasoned helmet divers who poured scorn on his attempt to work with scuba equipment. So he bought some second-hand US Navy gear, taught himself how to use it, and re-launched himself as a commercial diver in the construction industry. Working a seven-day week in the logging camps and pulp mills of Canada's Pacific Coast, he saved enough money to start his own firm, Can-Dive, in 1966.

The big breakthrough came later that year when he forged a partnership with oxy-helium expert Lad Handleman; together they won a lucrative contract to work for the oil company, Shell. With Nuytten's gift for lateral thinking and Handleman's no-nonsense approach to business, the success continued and a new parent company, Oceaneering International, was formed by combining Can-Dive, and Handleman's company, Cal-Dive (soon joined by Wide World Divers Inc. out of Morgan City, Louisiana). Oceaneering rode the boom created by North Sea oil exploration in the Seventies, and won 70 per cent of the contracts up for grabs at the time. Oceaneering was grossing about \$40 million a year at

this point. Currently, Oceaneering is a publicly traded company with annual sales of about a half billion dollars!

During his diving years, Nuytten helped pioneer new tables for mixed-gas diving and deep diving to depths of more than 300m. This alone required a fearless dedication and self-belief. In the process, he suffered vestibular bends, which left him partially deaf. But he has no regrets. Today, a pared-down Can-Dive still operates out of Vancouver: the boom of the Seventies may be long dead, but its elite team of divers are in constant demand to meet the challenges of the 21st century.