

Water Rescue and Recovery Unit

With its shoreline on Narragansett Bay as well as the many ponds and lakes throughout the city, Cranston has had the need from time to time for divers to respond for search and recovery incidents. Early records show that drownings were quite common in the days when people swam in local waterways instead of driving south to the beaches like they do today.

In 1925, the Cranston police obtained a steel boat for water search and rescue operations in the city. The boat was 12 to 14 feet long and could be towed behind the department's patrol wagon/ambulance.



The police department boat on Randall's Pond, 1925

In the 1920's, sport diving as we know it today didn't exist. The Self Contained Breathing Apparatus, (SCUBA), hadn't been invented yet. Those wishing to remain under water for longer than they could hold their breath were obliged to don a heavy diving suit with a brass helmet. A compressor on the surface would pump fresh air down to the helmet through rubber hoses. The diver's mobility was limited to the length of the hoses.

Divers of this era didn't swim, they "walked" on the bottom with the aid of heavy lead "shoes". Their vision was restricted to the glass window in their helmet.

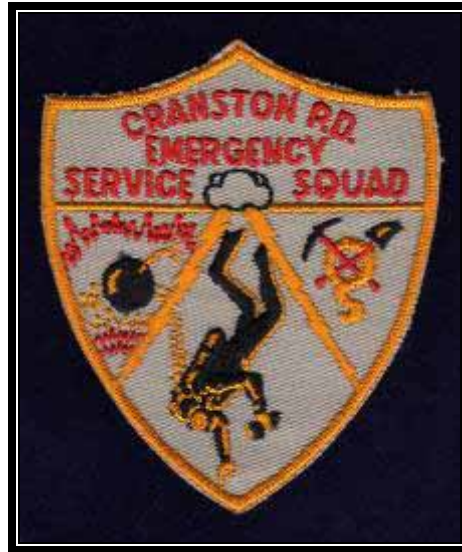
Photographic evidence suggest that the Cranston police used such a diving set-up in the early 1930's, although no records survive that relate to an organized dive team.



Cranston divers practicing on Meshanticut Lake, circa 1933.

In the 1962, the police department formed the Emergency Services Squad made up of police officers who were not only certified divers, but were also trained in repelling, cave rescue, advanced weaponry, first aid, martial arts, and explosives. They were, in effect, the forerunner of today's dive team and S.W.A.T. team. It was disbanded in the late 1960's.

The police divers would also train with fire department divers and in the event of a drowning the two departments would work together. Members trained on their own time and received no compensation.



Emergency Service Squad patch
1962



Emergency Service Divers, circa 1963

Police: Sgt. Harry Sunderland, Donald Howland, Thomas Harrington, Paul Saccoccia Sr., Herbert Mitchell. **Fire Dept:** Lt. Ronald C. Jones, Joseph L. Fagan, Norman J. Robert.

The modern Water Rescue and Recovery Unit, or Dive Team as it is more commonly called, was established by Officer Fred Simmons in December of 1986 in response to two separate drownings that occurred within the city that year.

Membership was open to all officers of the department regardless of rank, with the stipulation being that they attend classes and obtain an Open Water Diver certification. It was also required that each member purchase their own wet suit and diving equipment which amounted to a cost of about \$1200 per member!

Officer Simmons was an experienced diver as well as a certified instructor and as such he agreed to train and certify the team.

After all members completed training, the team continued to train sixteen hours per month in all types of water conditions. Many members furthered their training and became certified in other areas such as ice diving, advanced diving, law enforcement diving, evidence gathering, underwater photography, and search and recovery.

The team quickly became recognized for its professionalism throughout the state and was called upon to conduct underwater searches in many communities.

Cranston's was perhaps the first organized dive team for the era. Before the formation of the team, obtaining certified divers in an emergency was an arduous process. Communities would call upon each other asking if anyone was a certified diver, and if so, were they available? It could take hours to assemble even a few divers for a search and recovery mission. In addition, the assembled divers had not trained together, which could lead to other problems.

Officer Simmons's vision was to have a fully qualified dive team that had trained together in the latest techniques and could be ready to assemble in a short period of time. In this goal, he succeeded.

A few other departments followed suit and organized their own teams afterward. Some are still in existence, one being Cranston's, but others are not.



Officer Fred Simmons, 1973
Founder of the present-day dive team.



Dive Team patch worn on windbreakers and work suits.
First worn January 1989.



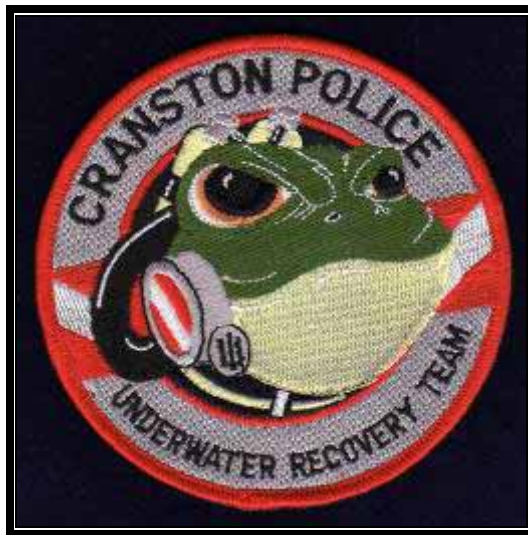
Cranston police divers at the Curran Reservoir after recovering a stolen car.
March 16, 1990

Left to Right – Jim Ignasher, Steve Lytle, Ron Jacob, Ted Walsh,
Ron Martin, and Paul Saccoccia



Cranston police divers 1991

Left to Right – Mike Gunson, Sean Baxter, Glen Gilkenson,
Ron Martin, Mike Cuddemi, and Mike Dailey



Dive patch designed by Officer John Grasso, 2001
Another variation of this patch was produced with white lettering.