

mixing it with a Megalodon

: TEXT LANCE ROBB
IMAGES PAUL LEES



+ ADRENALINE JUNKIE LANCE ROBB LEFT AUSTRALIA SHORTLY AFTER COMPETING IN HIS DEATH-DEFYING AIR ACROBATIC SHOW WITH OLD FIGHTER JETS FOR A TOTALLY NEW ADVENTURE IN THAILAND - MEGALODON CCR CLOSED CIRCUIT REBREATHER DIVING AT PRO-TECH DIVE COLLEGE ON PHUKET. WE ASKED LANCE TO TAKE US THROUGH HIS NEW MISSION AND TELL US MORE ABOUT HOW HE DISCOVERED REBREATHERS AND HOW HE ENJOYED HIS TRAINING.

Diving has been a passion of mine since I was 10 years old back in the early 70s. Equipment wasn't exactly state-of-the-art – all I had was an old snorkel with a ping pong ball in the end of it as a water trap, so now as I move into the latest in rebreather technology after watching it with a close eye for many years, I can appreciate how far we're advancing in the world of sport and technical diving – and I definitely wanted to be a part of it.

My interest in rebreathers grew from being cut short on a trip to the wreck of SS *Yongala* when I had to return to the boat after only 20 minutes of bottom time, simply not enough to explore everything I'd

set out to. So the internet provided me with all the reading power needed to get my hands on the latest contraption to keep me under the water longer and more to the point, safely. I soon came across the Megalodon by ISC, the website is great and very informative, they have factory approved trainers all over the world, so all I had to do was find a unit, choose a guru to teach me and voila!

I found a Megalodon for sale on a rebreather forum that I felt happy with and after waiting for what seemed like an eternity, my new bit of kit arrived and I

was ready for action, well, nearly. I'd also decided to send the unit back to the ISC factory for the necessary checks, upgrades in electronics and some things I'd read about and experienced exceptional service from the ISC team.

My training was originally planned to take place in Australia as I'd already booked a trip to Coron Bay in the Philippines to dive Japanese war wrecks but unfortunately the instructor had to postpone my training for several months which left me high and dry for my Philippines trip. There was no way I was

From left: Lance slowly climbs back onto the Scandinavian Divers boat after 'getting the hang of it'; Mathew 'Matt' Partridge; Lance getting as one with his buoyancy!





Clockwise from bottom left: Matt leads Lance & Adam for a guided tour of Koh Racha Yai; Lance takes a giant stride to a bubble-less dive; Lance takes the weight off his fins in the training pool; Matt takes Lance through a pre-dive check; Lance concentrates on assembling his kit whilst maintaining a smile for the camera; Down to the serious stuff; Controlling the way back to the surface

only having 20 minutes on those wrecks! Back to the ISC website; I sent a few emails with my request for certification and came across Mathew Partridge (Matt) based on Koh Phuket, Thailand at Pro-Tech Dive College. He was able to train me close to my original dates so I'd still have time for practice and familiarity with the unit.

The crew at Pro-Tech booked my transfers from the island's international airport, a great guesthouse just a few doors from their main centre, which was also the pool training site so very handy and made my trip completely stress free.

The course takes 5-6 days. The morning of day one was discussions surrounding my current diving theories and refreshing the Advanced Nitrox theory, moving straight into rebreather academics and dive planning. Matt was excellent – he presented the information very well and led lots of open discussions on all subjects which was a great way to learn without just sitting in a classroom and listening. It was very interactive and professional, the centre was outstanding and seeing an abundance of different rebreather units in stock was very reassuring.

Having my own rebreather was very advantageous as on day two Matt ran

demonstrations on assembling the unit, calibrations of the head and testing the electronics. I felt very comfortable copying his techniques. Pool training came next with some skills and drills which I'd already gone through in the weeks prior to the course, so I felt ready to try them under supervision. Buoyancy was my major concern; it was difficult to stop and think about it without shooting to the surface or crashing to the bottom, but my trusty instructor gave constructive criticism and plenty of confidence-building which was a real asset to me as a beginner diver all over again!

My diving days started at 7am for kitting up and rebreather preparation before heading to the pier for the boat trips out to the local training site off the island of Racha Yai. The first dive after thorough briefings was running through the drills with Matt and having a bit of a swim around, easy right? Well easy, all except for that buoyancy control again but by the end of the second dive I was starting to get the hang of it. Each dive saw loads of drill practice until Matt was satisfied that it was second nature to me, which really started to really sink in by the end of the second days diving.

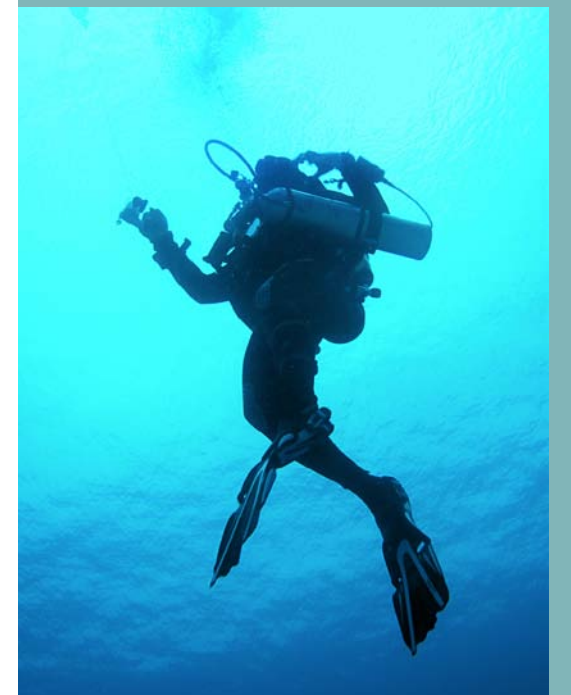
There was one part of my 4th dive when things started to go bad. This drill was to

try an unresponsive diver and ascent drill and yes, you guessed it, I took two goes to get it right and about now things went from bad to worse. I had trouble with my buoyancy again, my O2 was running low thanks to a leaking o-ring on my gauge and Matt signaled for me to bail out onto O/C which is a standard process. But in doing so I forgot to shut off the O2 and so it was quietly shooting gas into my loop. I deployed my SMB and I wound my way up to the surfac. I had a real problem venting gas and trying to slow my ascent, my reel tangled and I suddenly found myself bobbing around at the surface. I wasn't impressed and neither was Matt! During the de-briefing (after pointing out obvious problems) I was relieved to hear that making mistakes is all part of the process and it may even make me a better diver knowing how to handle these problems if they should occur again.

The final day was what diving is all about – no drills and skills, just relaxed bubble-free diving. I got so close to an octopus I almost ran into it and also had a lot more time to concentrate on my buoyancy and felt very comfortable and controlled.

Dive 2 on the final day started off the same way and I thought I was in for a really relaxing dive. Then Matt motioned me to swim to him and before I knew it

“ Matt was excellent... very interactive & professional ”





Top: Matt goes through the pre-dive briefing with Adam and Lance
Bottom: Matt pays particular attention to Lance's buoyancy control



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there were bubbles everywhere and I was frantically winding the tank valves to turn them off! To top it off he casually shook my hand pulled off my mask and shut my valves off again! A sure sign never to be complacent. The rest of the dive was totally relaxing, but I made sure I kept my distance from Matt this time!

This was the only location that I've dived where all you do is swim off in the predetermined direction, pop the SMB up and wait for the boat to come and pick you up – easy! So it was back to the Pro-Tech centre to have my exam marked. I was keen to find out the results and when

Matt put his hand out to shake mine in congratulations. I was all done, and we'd go diving again the next day, without all the drills as I was now officially a certified Megalodon CCR Diver.

All in all, I was totally overwhelmed with becoming a CCR Megalodon Rebreather Diver and I couldn't have done it without Matt's help and guidance, I'd highly recommend Pro-Tech to anyone interested in technical or rebreather training and Megalodons are definitely the way forward. I'm proud to be a part of the experience.

