

ZOO BECO MES A NAVY DIVER

We ask the Royal Navy what it takes to become a bomb disposal expert. Answer? A lot more than we can manage...

When you think of the Royal Navy, you probably picture a load of men in Popeye-like uniforms on a big boat in the middle of the ocean. What you might not think of are the most physically fit blokes in the country running around the desert in Afghanistan, disposing of potentially lethal bombs.

If that's the case, we suggest spending a day with the Fleet Diving Squadron (FDS) at Horsea Island, near Portsmouth. There are about 160 men in the squadron, which makes up about 40 per cent of the Navy's entire diver pool – the men responsible for underwater bomb disposal across the globe.

It's also where the Defence Diving School (DDS) puts young wannabes through their paces to see if they can make the grade.

Wriggling into a giant wetsuit at a minute's notice is not all that easy



The DDS deals with about 200 students a year. After three months of Royal Navy basic training "to knock the civilian ideals out of them", they go from knowing nothing about diving to being 60m underwater in hostile environments. And the 200 are just the ones who make it. Roughly the same number again have to

pull out, simply because their bodies can't cope with it. Yes, it's that tough.

Luckily, it's (supposedly) summer when we are invited to take a dip with the new recruits. The lake at the base gets pretty cold at other times of the year. "It froze in December," one of the divers tells us. "So they made us run over it until the ice broke – and then swim through it!"

Brilliant. Fortunately, we're not loaded with equipment. The new kit is worth £35k (as one officer tells us, "They're going under with a Porsche Boxster on their backs") so unsurprisingly, it's decided we're not to be trusted. But that didn't mean they were going to take it easy on us...



NAVY... IN THE DESERT?

One of the Fleet Diving Units (there are three of them in the Squadron) is now based in Afghanistan. But given there isn't a whole lot of sea in the desert, what the hell are the Navy doing out there?

"Ha! That's true," says AB Diver Les Cockerton – one of the four-man team which has just got back. "We got some T-shirts with 'Royal Navy Bomb Disposal' on the back just because the soldiers were

looking at us thinking, 'What's the Navy doing in the middle of the desert?'"

The reality is it's all hands to the pump out there, so whatever service you're with, you get used – even underwater specialists. "No one was bothered we were Navy," says Les. "We were another body with a rifle, who could search for bombs. Everyone has to muck in."

DOING THE HURT LOCKER

These fellas have to be experts in bomb disposal above and below water, so God knows why sending ZOO out to defuse a car bomb seemed like a good idea to them. Fortunately, "the wheelbarrow" robot used in these situations is able to "remove the power source" first. Using a remote control from the safety of a truck, a technician can have it break through a window, and then fire a high power charge of water into the detonator. All that's left then is for a lumbering journalist in a heavily padded suit to waddle up to the car and pull it all apart...

This suit can save your life – but it's not built for comfort



CAR BOMB RECREATED!



LONG WAY DOWN

To give us a flavour of what it takes, we're invited to join in with the "mini-circuits" – a drill where you have to get out of your clothes and into a wetsuit as quickly as humanly possible (not easy), jump off a 20-foot diving board into the lake (really not easy), pull yourself out of the lake back onto land (very difficult) and repeat the whole thing over and over again (near impossible).

The fact we managed four mini-circuits in the same time the young recruits managed to do 10 – and then almost had a heart attack – says everything...



HARDER TO GET OUT THAN GET IN!

HEAVY, HEAVY, HEAVY...

It was pretty obvious the kit we were invited to do a full dive in wasn't state of the art – it was withdrawn from Navy use in the late '80s – but it did allow us to get properly under the water.

It's claustrophobic in the suit (James May "was sh**ting himself", we are reliably informed), but the worst part is

the weight – 90kgs. And when you're above the surface, 67kgs of that rests on your shoulders. And that hurts.

But the worst thing about the old-school suits? It relies on someone constantly turning a wheel to pump air down to you. Which is a pretty scary thought when you're at the bottom...

ZOO MAN: KNACKERED

