



Mick Russell

“It’s not the most glamorous job in the world, and it’s not the highest profile because the river community can’t see us in action, but we’re always closer than they think”

**O**n the bottom of the Thames, Mick Russell is blind. The water’s thick with silt and, just a few inches from where he’s standing, there’s total darkness.

He can’t move easily - he’s carrying weights; the riverbed’s treacherous under foot; and, although the high tide’s almost on slack water, the remaining current’s still strong enough to buffet him.

It’s cold, bitter cold - just three or four degrees. The mask of his Kirby Morgan dive helmet has already misted over.

But Mick is used to it - as one of nine Port of London Authority divers, he spends most of his working days like this. In fact, the soundtrack to his life is churning water; his own bubbling breathing; and the distant high pitch mosquito buzz of boat propellers above him.

Today he’s looking for a petrified tree that’s appeared in the shifting mud of a dredged channel.

Tomorrow he could be inspecting lock gates at Richmond, recovering a sunken barge at Westminster, securing moorings at Greenwich, or freeing a ship’s propeller from fishing nets in the

Thames Estuary.

He rarely knows what the day will hold or, once he’s under the water, what will loom out of the darkness - driftwood, disturbed wartime explosives, the occasional corpse.



Mick said: “You wouldn’t believe a lot of the stuff we find - a WWII German fighter plane engine, even an Elizabethan shipwreck.

“Some of the lads dived on what we thought was a generator in the Thames Estuary, but when we got it to the surface we realised it was a mine.

“The problem is we can’t see what we’re dealing with while it’s on the bottom - we have to work by touch.”

As commercial diving goes, the PLA team doesn’t go deep - typically around eight to 20 metres. But poor visibility and shifting currents in some of the busiest port waters in Britain, makes the Thames a challenge.

Many of the PLA divers have a military background; all are put through rigorous training and repeatedly assessed throughout their working lives. As a result, each one knows the river like the back of his hand.

Kevin Leadbetter, the PLA’s Diving Supervisor, said: “It may be one river, but the Thames has very different characteristics depending on when and where you dive.

“We always work around low or high water, when the current’s at its slowest. But near Richmond the current is always quite noticeable because the river’s natural flow takes over when the tide slows down.

“In central London, the bridge piers cause unnatural eddies and whirlpools. At Gravesend, the river bed is very muddy and visibility’s extremely poor. And, from Southend to the North Sea, the bottom’s pretty much sand, so visibility gets better but you’re exposed to the full force of the sea.

“Because of the river’s shape, there are certain sections that shelter divers from the currents caused by

a falling tide, but leave them vulnerable on rising tides. So everything we do has to be timed precisely, according to where in the river we’re expected to work.”

The divers get their jobs from either the PLA’s Marine Services team, Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) officers, or from the authority’s Hydrographic Department.

Diver Peter Semple said: “VTS will call us if a ship fouls its propeller.

“But we get most of our work from Hydrographic. They’ll give us details and coordinates for anything they find when they’re surveying the river bed.

“Then it’s a case of anchoring at that location and lowering a diver down the anchor chain. On the bottom, he’ll attach a line to the anchor and swim or walk in a circle around it until the line catches on the object we’re looking for - it’s called a snag search.

“It’s a very effective way of finding objects in poor visibility, and it’s rare that we come back empty-handed.”

Any diving has its dangers - the bends or burst lung are probably the most widely known. But commercial divers also run a greater risk of being trapped. And they can face ‘blow-back’ - an explosion caused by gas trapped during underwater burning.

Peter said: “The force of it can damage your regulator - the bit that feeds air into your helmet - and when this happens, your headgear fills with water and you lose surface communication.”

To reduce risk, PLA divers work in teams of four - a dive supervisor,

the diver, a stand-by diver and a tender or dive assistant.

They can dive from any vessel; but they prefer to use their own specially designed boat *PLA Diver*. It was built in 1992 by Searle Williams on a Blyth 33 hull. At 10 metres long and with a displacement of seven tonnes, she’s capable of speeds of around 20 knots.

Kevin said: “She gives us a large deck area to work on and her speed’s very important. In an emergency we may only have a narrow tidal window to work in, if we miss it, we could be waiting up to 11 hours before the conditions are right again - so it’s vital we get on scene quickly.”

Back on the river above the petrified tree, Mick emerges from coffee-coloured water.

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# What lies beneath.....