

## SHECK EXLEY, REMEMBERING A LEGEND

By Jim Bowden

"You are going your way to greatness. Peak and abyss. . . .  
They joined together . . . .

Before my highest mountain I stand and before my longest wondering: To that end I must go down deeper than I ever descended." Zarathustra, F. Nietzsche

"Every field of human endeavor from Tidily Winks to space exploration has its champions and its marks for human endurance and achievement. Without them there would be little or no human progress for we would have nothing to measure our efforts by or encourage us to try harder. It is difficult to imagine any aspect of our lives that is not enhanced by competition, the drive to excel and the recognition of excellence." Sheck Exley, *Caverns Measureless to Man*.

Mexico, April 6, 1994. Sheck Exley, my mentor and friend, and I were prepared to dive deeper than anyone has ever dived independent of submarines or commercial habitats. Sheck never returned.

Was it worth the risk of losing the world's greatest dive explorer to go deeper than any other man on scuba? It is easy to question the value of any endeavor when a death occurs. When Chris Bonnington, mountain climber and author of *Quest to Adventure*, was asked if the deaths of friends and acquaintances in climbing accidents had ever led him to question the value of his sport he answered,

"No. Because you know . . . . climbing is dangerous. . . .

You know that risk is an inherent part of the game. So you have got to accept it. It does not reduce your sadness at the loss of a friend. The tragedy is not for the person who got killed, it is for the wife, the girlfriend, the children and parents. It is the people very close to that person who are bereaved and lost and left without him. The individual who gets killed has had a full life. He has gone out right on top, doing something he enjoys doing. The tragedy is within the survivors."

So it has been with Sheck's death. I still feel a terrific sense of loss because I enjoyed his company, his passion and his craft. It is my loss, however. I believe that he was never more alive than in those moments of trial in virgin space. It is easy to die. It is very hard to live. Sheck met life head on, with few misconceptions. Only death deceived him as it eventually does us all. Even then, during our "year of living dangerously" that we spent preparing for our dive, he addressed the consequences of the myriad dangers we faced. His eyes were wide open. Never did he make light of the risk, but it was important for him to make the dive. It was personal. He already had the record. Still he had to go deeper, not to make the record unbreakable, but for his need to achieve as much as he could. He had to go deeper

for himself

I first met Sheck in 1988 when he was making his world record dive to 780 feet / 237 M in Nacimiento Mante, another deep spring in Mexico. He was alone in that great beautiful system. His support team of three was waiting his return. In this egomaniacal discipline of cave diving, it was refreshing to see a man accomplishing the impossible without the fanfare and entourage that we so often see in much lesser endeavors. Perhaps the bond we formed as dive partners was because so much of our diving history had been solo. We worked together, but the dive was our independent effort. Space and time separated our major efforts. We needed the focus that comes from being independent of others and masters of our own destiny.

Sheck took little advantage of his fame as the deepest diver. He was a modest individual, a gentleman; respectful of his colleagues and fellow cave explorers, both wet and dry. It is an unfortunate truth that the greater your accomplishments, the greater the opposition and animosity. Still, I cannot remember him ever saying a bad word about anyone. There are so many critics with an acute case of the Jehovah Complex, wanting to save us all from ourselves. I am sure that he had reservations about some of his critics and the bad manners that seem to be so much a part of the cave diving community, but he would softly say, "They are probably better divers than I am" and let it go at that. I am reminded of Mark Twain who said, "Indecency, vulgarity, obscenity — these are strictly confined to man; he invented them. Among the higher animals there is no trace of them." Sheck was, indeed, a higher being.

Perhaps the greatest complement to an individual's lifetime of accomplishments is in the respect of his peers. The best diving champions in the world still mourn Sheck. Some of these individuals, like Olivier Isler, were and still are deeply saddened by his absence. What a wonderful legacy because I believe, as Sheck did, that Olivier is the greatest cave diver in the world today. Interesting enough, he too, is a solo actor in his great accomplishments.

Recently I made a trip to Zacaton to check the water conditions before we mounted a major effort. Standing alone, waist deep in the waters of El Nacimiento, the spring entrance to El Pasajae de Tortuga Muerta and beyond to Zacaton, I noticed that the day was unsettled, stormy, windy, like the day Sheck died. The winds were blowing the palms and gusts swirling in that massive system moved the grass islands like relentless behemoths. I was alone this time, and although I had traversed the cave so many times in the last several years, I found this reminder evoked more emotion than I anticipated. We had such plans to follow our successful dive to the bottom of Zacaton. There were so many places we wanted to dive around the world. This too is my loss. I may yet dive those exciting virgin places but I cannot dive them with Sheck.

Some years ago I selfishly dedicated my life to live my dreams and to never put off the opportunities that are so often relinquished because of perceived obligations and responsibility. When we were invited to go to South Africa and dive

Bushmansgat the summer before our dive in Zacaton, I declined, knowing that I needed to train and that we had a deeper system over here. Besides, I was sure that the future held great promise for us to dive exotic and exciting systems in Yugoslavia, Namibia and other we places we plan to dive after Zacaton. Not joining him in South Africa was a contradiction to my pledge. I put off something dear for another day that will never come.

This tribute to Sheck has been a difficult task for me. I chose to try and show the spirit he possessed rather than to simply chronicle his many achievements. Those achievements are indeed grand, but it was his passion that made them possible. He was an inspiration to us all because of his spirit and passion for his craft. He was a banner for the individual and what one man could accomplish, often against great odds. Historically it is one individual's pioneering breakthrough that leads the rest of us out of the trees. And they often pay a tremendous price for the boon we receive.

Sheck still dives with me on every dive I make. He is discussed around the campfire as if he were still here. I am not a religious man, so immortality to me is in the memories of our friends, the worth of our work, the legacy of gentlemanly conduct and the inspiration that will drive future efforts to accomplish the impossible. Sheck said one night in our camp in Mexico that the greatest complement to a teacher is to have his students go on to surpass all their teacher's accomplishments, to go to greater heights in life, and I would suppose, to greater depths.