

Golden opportunity for prison inmates

An inspirational rehabilitation programme is helping prison inmates get out of crime and into the water, writes UCI's Michael Cocks

The inmates at the California Institution for Men in Chino, California, USA, now have a golden opportunity available to them that will help change their lives after release from prison. Those chosen to attend the new Marine Technology Training Center (MTTC) will be trained to become commercial divers or tenders, ROV operators, riggers, or one of many other jobs related to the marine industry.

As the journalist granted the unique chance to visit the new centre following its reopening in late 2006 and to dive with the students, I am convinced that these inmates have been given a great opportunity to turn their lives around, and to avoid the 70 per cent recidivism rate that is common of released prisoners. It was also a wonderful experience for me.

INSPIRATIONAL

During the past 17 years I have visited and dived at 27 commercial diving schools around the world – a record I think. My visit to the Chino prison, about an hour's drive east of Los Angeles, was the most inspirational of all. The new MTTC was reopened as part of the revived inmate vocational training programme initiated by Arnold Schwarzenegger,



The trainees at Chino

governor of California. The centre is named the Leonard Greenstone Marine Technology Training Center, in honour of the former Navy Diver and successful contractor who founded the original programme in the 1960s. MTTC is expected to reach an enrollment of more than 100 students in a variety of marine-related courses. At this time there are 19 students on the initial course. Nine of these students are doing topside training as tenders and riggers and the rest are training to become commercial divers. Two previous graduates have already been hired to work in the Gulf of Mexico, joining hundreds of previous inmates who trained at the diving centre during the 30

The outdoor pool was constructed by students of the new programme

years of its successful tenure. The original diving programme released 98 per cent of its graduates to become productive members of society, before it was closed by a former governor due to lack of financial support. This is a remarkable record. I was pleased to have the opportunity to see how the pro-



gramme operates and to meet the students since its reopening. Sometimes when I visit a commercial diving school I am disappointed by what I find and the way that I am hosted. Not at this centre. I was able to do everything I asked to do and the students happily signed a waiver allowing me to take their



As part of the training programme, students are required to perform two hours of physical exercise each morning

photographs and be named in this article. For this courtesy, I will be certain they each get a copy of the magazine with the article. I hope it helps to bolster their pride in their achievement of becoming working members of the marine industry.

CLOSE-KNIT

The sentences of the men that I had the opportunity to speak and dive with ranged from three to 10 years for crimes such as robbery and drug offences. Unlike the rest of the prison, where inmates are separated by ethnicity and skin colour, the MTTC programme is open to all races and nationalities. Most of the men have been in the programme for about a year and work well as a close-knit team. They were allowed to run the tasks themselves with advice from their knowledgeable instructor, Fred Johnson, who has more than 40 years of com-

mercial diving experience. The training programme is not easy. Each morning the students have to perform two hours of physical exercise, half on the hot concrete and half in the pool. Every three months they are required to do a five-mile swim. Their tasks are developed to be as realistic as possible. As members of the new programme, these students constructed an outdoor swimming pool and replaced all of the planking around the three tanks, with the deepest tank at 20 feet (six metres). The training exercises include the use of all makes of diving helmets and masks, and simulated decompression stops, with some dives lasting up to four hours. I observed the students carrying out a variety of physically and mentally demanding jobs, such as constructing a small cofferdam. The intent of the programme is to give each student

325 hours of diving in water, with a minimum requirement of 215 hours for all students. This is nearly 10 times the amount of training given by some of the other schools that I have visited. To show that I recognised their skills in the water and that I had every confidence in diving with the students, I had my umbilical changed out underwater by Arturo Hernandez, and I watched him while he replaced his Superlite underwater. I challenged a Vietnamese student, Tuan Pham, to swim six lengths of the pool wearing a Yokohama heavy helmet with fins, rather than boots, and he willingly did so. Later I learned that all of the students were capable of this task and that one former student actually swam a mile (1.6 kilometres) heavily weighted. Wearing a comfortable Desco free-flow helmet, I also watched another student, Eric Pawling, working

on a cofferdam. As I thanked each man for sharing his accomplishments with me, it was easy to see that it had been a long while since each had been recognised for doing something worthwhile.

STRESS

This one-year-long, five days per week, eight hours per day diver's training course is one of the most intensive in the world, aimed at physically and mentally challenging the students. I have long argued that students should receive extended working dives in their training courses and also endure situations under controlled stress. This helps students become fully confident in their equipment and in working with a team. These students are learning practical work and life saving skills in this course. It fully met all of my expectations. Of course, the UK HSE would ►

► not allow some of the tasks undertaken in the Chino programme. For example, in the two schools where I trained in Great Britain I was never told that one can breathe off one's pneumo in an emergency.

Although this programme is costly for the state to operate, there are many long-term benefits, especially if the inmate is able to acquire a well-paid job when he is released. This allows for a better life for him and his family. In the long run it saves a great deal of expense for the community and the state. Restoring a sense of pride in oneself goes a long way towards helping him become a contributing member of society.

GOAL

This training course is only one of a number established by the California Prison Industry Authority. Carpentry and plumbing are among some of the other programmes that have been reopened. The state's ultimate goal is to increase the number in the Marine Technology Training Center programmes to 100 students.

I had the opportunity to chat with Joseph Armor, the branch manager, and Virginia Feaster, the Prison Industries manager, during my visit. I also spent some time with Leonard Greenstone and learned of the hard work and effort that he and his advisory group expended to get the programme recognised and re-established. Mr Greenstone, vice chairman of the Prison Industries Authority, shared with me the following:

"For clarification, all Prison Industry and vocational programmes are for the purpose of changing negative behaviour into socially acceptable behaviour through endeavors such as the marine technology training programmes.



Taun Phum swimming in Yokohama heavy gear

"The Marine Technology Training Center educational programmes are aimed at developing productive, marketable skills in the marine industry. The purpose of the programme is to teach inmates to become skilled mechanics, welders, carpenters and riggers. However, the real intent of the programme is to successfully change the criminal behaviours and habits of the inmates into socially acceptable and productive behaviours and habits in their community, thus reducing recidivism. Course training is just a tool to accomplish this end by teaching the inmates self-discipline through hard work, teamwork, responsibility and respect of self and others.

"To be a successful graduate of the vocational diver's training programme students must be loyal to the programme, recognising that their success or failure is the guideline for those who follow! A successful graduate becomes an acceptable contributor to their community, family and the rest of society!"

I am indebted to Jim Joiner,

the programme consultant and former president of the College of Oceaneering, for the opportunity to visit this special training site. He designed the programme for the prison, prepared the training manuals and served as the on-site advisor during its reconstruction. Readers will recognise him as the writer of the prestigious NOAA Diving Manual.

DEDICATED

Those who know me are aware that I am liberally inclined and always willing to help the underdog. In this case I find that Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, Chuck Pattillo, general manager of the state Prison Industry Authority, and Mike Poulos, warden of Chino Men's Institute, are all equally dedicated to giving these inmates a second chance. I am genuinely convinced that all of the students I met have learned the lesson that "crime does not pay", as did many of their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s when they graduated from the origi-

nal programme to become successful divers around the world.

My invitation to visit the Chino Marine Technology Training Center was a tribute to the international reputation of this magazine and I appreciate the chance to bring forth this inspirational story. I have asked the leaders of this fine programme to keep me informed on the progress of their students, and the editors of the magazine have agreed to allow me to keep the readers informed of the almost certain success of these men. It is my understanding that an article on this programme will soon be featured in USA Today and may even become the subject of a future television programme.

My visit made me even keener to go on helping my fellow divers and ensure that they are treated fairly. This was my first experience visiting a prison. As the temperature reached 103 degrees Fahrenheit (39 degrees Celsius) on the last day of my visit, I had an extra reason to be happy that I was just a guest and not a permanent resident.