

King of the Deep

By Nick Karas

This featured article first appeared in the 1980 Long Island Newsday Sunday magazine section, with cover picture :

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[Captains Steve Bielenda vita](#)

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[Photo by: Hank Keatts.](#)

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Like a slowly falling rock, Stephen Bielenda descends into the cool, green waters of the open Atlantic Ocean about 15 miles southwest of Moriches inlet. The steady stream of bubbles rising from his regulator grows smaller and smaller as the increasing pressure of deeper water closes in on him. Ahead of Bielenda is Hank Keatts, his mate aboard the dive boat Wahoo II and a professor of marine biology at Suffolk Community College.

"You'll like the Oregon," Bielenda had said before making the dive, referring to a 518-foot passenger liner that sank in 1886. "She's the perfect ship for wreck divers. 'She's not too deep, in 110 to 130 feet of waters and loaded with artifacts that are only now opening up because the boat's steel hull is beginning to break up. "Bielenda, 43, had adroitly anchored his boat just ahead of the wrecked Cunard Line ship, which had been the victim of a night-time collision with a schooner off Long Island. The schooner, thought to be the Charles R Moss, sank quickly with all hands. It took the Oregon eight hours to sink, and

in that time she drifted to a point near Moriches Inlet. There, all her 647 passengers and crew of 205 were taken off by members of the U.S. Lifesaving Service, Nick Karas, a certified scuba diver, is Newsday's leisure sports columnist.

On this descent, Bielenda is not looking for artifacts from the Oregon, but for huge lobsters that live in the wreck. As he continues his dive, the boilers of the Oregon suddenly loom in the depths before him. Nearing the bottom, he flicks on a powerful flashlight and begins looking for lobsters in holes under the steel siding or collapsed wooden decking of the wreck. He works like a tenacious hound in pursuit of a rabbit. Swiftly, he moves from hole to hole, poking his light into each. He doesn't hesitate for a second glance but continually moves on, because air is precious and bottom-time is measured by one's air supply. Suddenly, a large goosefish, half buried in the sand, opens its tooth-filled jaws, warning Bielenda that he has come too close. Bielenda rises just high enough to clear the fish and moves on to another part of the wreck. After 25 minutes of searching, he realizes his hunt has been in vain, and he and Keatts return to the surface. Though it is early summer, the ocean's bottom waters are still too cold for lobsters to be moving. Bielenda has grabbed is a 20-pounder. "I stopped lobstering last year in July because I had taken more than 20 over 15 pounds . . . all males, of course. I cannot help but respect a creature that has grown so large in such a hostile environment. Sometimes killing it, even though I eat what I take, makes me feel uneasy." I take lobsters only with bare hands, to give the crustaceans a more even chance. "If you stick your hand in a hole and are too slow he's got you, but if you beat him, he's had it for good," he said.

Bielenda is not an average scuba or salvage diver. He's a bigger-than life professional whose workaday world lies beneath the surface of the ocean. In its depths, he explores old wrecks like the Oregon for valuables, hunts underwater game like impound lobster and giant striped bass, and teaches would-be divers the lessons of the sea that he has warned over the years. With considerable justification, he could be called Long Island's King of the Deep, a disciple of Neptune and a grandson of Davy Jones. And he looks the part. He is a powerful, burly man. In 20 years of swimming with fins and carrying heavy tanks and diving paraphernalia he has developed a barrel chest and huge thighs on his nearly six foot frame. His cherubic face, often in need of a shave, belies his hyperactive, dynamic personality.

Hank Keatts knows this all too well. "It's amazing that we

get along so well," Keatts said with the trace of a soft Texas drawl. We're really exact opposites in character. Maybe that's why we do work so well together. I have been on many dives" with him and witnessed his doggedness with a problem. I remember once when we had to lift a large diesel generator off the wreck of a pleasure boat. We couldn't get lines for lift bags underneath it . . . no matter how hard we tried, because she had settled on her side in the mud. Finally, Steve decided that he had to work one of the 400-pound bags under it, through the mud, with his legs. Most other divers wouldn't do it. But Steve knew what he could do and, his limitations, and pushed them the mark. On the next descent, we inflated! the bags and we lifted it. "But don't let his easy 'smile fool you. He can be a bastard to work for if things go wrong. He can accept mechanical faults, but not human error. And he's tough, a perfectionist, because there no room for human error when you dive. He demands your very best every minute. Outwardly, he may look calm, cool, collected even when he's under intense pressure. I swear that at times I can hear him thinking and cursing. He has a great ability to keep it inside when it counts " Even his competition thinks Bielenda is unique among divers.

Bob DiBono, a diver for more than 17 years, operates the Diver's Why, a shop in Bay Shore. DiBono also acts as a divemaster, chartering other boats and taking divert to various wrecks. He often meets Bielenda on the bottom when his and Bielenda's vessels anchor over the same wreck. "It's a comfortable feeling belong in the water with Steve," DiBono said. "His reputation for exactness, for safety and technique is well- known. Maybe it's why I like to move around the bottom with him. On top, he's tough. I know he runs a tight ship. And he's been filling his tanks in my shop for the past five years. He's a stickler for good air. That's the way every diver should be. Clean, filtered air is something you should demand and get."

Wrecks offer the ultimate challenge to the more than 55,000 recreational scuba divers on Long Island, a fascination that rivals even reef dives in the tropics. "It has variety, something that is missing when diving down South," Bielenda said. "After you've been on two or three reefs, there isn't anything new. But up here, every wreck has its own character." Many who dive only occasionally in Long Island waters claim that visibility underwater is poor. Bielenda disagrees. There's excellent visibility in the areas he dives. It varies from 20 to 150 feet. Recently, on the Oregon, visibility was more than 100 feet. From the surface, he could see the white scuba tanks of the divers on the bottom.

**He's Stephen
Bielenda, a salty**

**professional
scuba diver,
teacher and
salvager. who's
risen to the top
of his
underwater
trade**

By Nick Karas

**This article
appeared in the
1980 Newsday
Sunday
magazine cover
story:**

**Long Island
section**

One of the more interesting wrecks Bielenda dives upon is the Lizzie D. "We brought up a couple hundred bottles of bourbon from her," he said. The Lizzie D was a rumrunner during Prohibition whose career came to an abrupt end after being chased by a Coast Guard cutter in 1922. Her boilers must have been working at their maximum capacity as the Lizzie D tried to escape, and a fire broke out. She sank in 80 feet of water ' nine miles south of Jones Inlet. She went down with three kinds of whiskey in her holds, rye made in New York, bourbon from Kentucky , and scotch imported from Canada. Most of the liquor that has been recovered is 100-proof bourbon. But the bottles are also valuable be. cause they were made between 1880 and 1890, and some, with the liquor still in them, have sold for as much as \$100 each. Prohibition reduced the demand for nest bottles, so liquor producers had to use supplies of older bottles left over in warehouses. At first some of the bottles exploded after being brought to the surface because they had become pressurized under water. That problem was solved by puncturing each cork with an ice pick. Nearly 100 cases were retrieved by Bielenda and other divers. He believes there are still a few bourbon bottles left that have been recovered were given to friends or have found their way into museums. "It's a unique feeling opening boxes 60 years old. It gives you a real rush."

For all the excitement of such exploration diving does have its inherent dangers, even for the most experienced divers. In June, one of Bielenda's closest diving companions, Ray Ferrari, lost his life. Together with several other experienced dived, Ferrari and Bielenda had been on a routine dive on the Oregon. On the first descent, Ferrari's tank valve mal-functioned. Two other divers, who were nearby, shared their air regulator with him and took him to the surface. "Ferrari tapped his valve, once back in the boat, and it worked," said Julius Pignataro, of Shirley, another Wahoo mate. "But before anyone could stop him, he donned the tanks and dove, hoping to find Bielenda on the bottom. He broke the cardinal rule of scuba diving. He went down without a buddy. The valve again malfunctioned and he drowned. When he popped up on the surface we knew something had happened and quickly got him into the boat."

There I saw Bielenda under stress. He was cool, exacting in the way he gave commands, coordinating the total effort while seemingly unaffected by the dead man lying in the boat. He assigned everyone tasks, from giving Ferrari CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation), to calling the Coast Guard and making ready to get underway."

But even someone as professional as Bielenda has had his close calls. One was on the USS San Diego, another wreck popular with Long Island divers. The heavy cruiser was torpedoed in 1918 by a German submarine . It flipped over as it sank about 10 miles southeast of Fire Island Inlet, A few years ago, Bielenda, along with Hank Keatts and Ray Ferrari, penetrated the wreck. They hadn't planned to enter the hulk, so they didn't bring a penetration line, a long length of line on a large spool, one end of which is tied outside a wreck and unwound as a diver enters. it insures that by retracing the line, a diver can get back. "We went in two levels," Bielenda said, "and I could still see outside through several holes. I thought it was okay. I looked down along a corridor and spotted a bright, brass star, the muzzle cover off a six-inch gun. That's a spectacular find. I decided to drop down just to the deck to pick it up. Keatts stayed outside, loosening one of the vessel's brass valves while Ferrari bottom-dusted, fanning his hands back and forth to blow away silt. As they worked, the surge of the ocean's currents began to feed the wreck. Unknown to Ferrari, it pulled the silt down onto Bielenda. In seconds he lost visibility, engulfed in turbid water "Suddenly, everything went cloudy and a sense of fear. spread over me. First I had to orient myself. I knew I was along the bulkhead and touched it so I wouldn't get vertigo. Then I checked my air tank gauge. I had 1,800 pounds of compressed air remaining, more than half my double-tank supply. I could last a while. I said to myself, 'Steve, be cool, you'll find a way out.'" As Bielenda held onto the wall, waiting for visibility to return and trying to decide what he would do if it didn't, a strange idea flooded his mind. 'What a way for me to die' he remembers thinking. Was this going to be it? I've been diving for so long and with so much experience . . . to make one stupid mistake like this was ridiculous. I violated the first law in wreck diving."

Suddenly, the visibility improved. Ferrari had stopped dusting, but Bielenda couldn't find his way out. He swam up the bulk" head, looking through holes and spotted Ferrari's fins. But he still couldn't reach him because the

hole was too small. He searched until he found a larger hole in another room, and finally swam outside. "That's the worst experience I've ever had," he said. "I don't mind talking about it. Maybe it will benefit others because it shows what a well trained, disciplined diver will do in a tough situation . . . and one must be disciplined underwater, because your life depends upon it."

But the experience has not stopped Bielenda from revisiting the San Diego many times since. Divers have been exploring its hull since 1960 and have brought up almost every artifact imaginable. One found a gold watch, others ammunition, forks and knives. It's a diver's gold mine and is now yielding more artifacts than before because the hull is starting to collapse. To most divers, portholes are a wreck's most cherished item, because they can later be hung in the living room, den, or over a fireplace to attest that he has been down deep, on a wreck. Salvaged portholes are, in a sense, a diver's diploma.

Bielenda also salvages brass, bronze and other metals from the wrecks. He dives equipped with chipping hammer, crowbar, pliers, wrenches and the tools needed to take a wreck apart. The Oregon has yielded most of the valuable artifacts that Bielenda has found. In the last year, he has taken off three portholes and a dozen Cunard Line dishes of Davenport china. Some pieces have been appraised at \$500. He retrieved three thunder bowls or chamber pots appraised at over

\$1,000 each, a crystal decanter and several pounds of solid silverware. A year ago, Jeff Pagano of White Plains found a ceramic vase with gold and silver inlay, signed and dated 1881. It was appraised at \$10,000.

Scattered around his home in Miller Place are old anchors from schooners, sinks from luxury liners, large bronze ship's screws (propellers), bottles, wooden beams, stainless' steel engine struts, bottles and wrecked brass chamber pots. They give his home the air of a dry, land Davy Jones' locker. His wife Grace, an avid gardener, tolerates the nautical intrusions by planting her flowers around his-finds-." "I used to worry about him at one time," she confessed, "but doing

it aloud did little good. I still do, but I keep it mostly to

myself. I try not to think about it when he is on a dive, but that's really difficult." Bielenda's son, Lance, 23, is also an accomplished diver and seems to be following in his father's fins. His two daughters, though not as avid divers as their brother or father, don't seem to have inherited their mother's Inhibitions.

One would imagine that Bielenda has the ideal life - doing what he wants to do and getting paid in the process. But it wasn't always that way. The grandson of Polish immigrants, Bielenda was born in Harlem, and later moved to Brooklyn after his father got a job in the Navy yard during World War II. Bielenda attended a vocational high school but dropped out in his senior year. "I thought there wasn't anything they could teach me," he says. "I was a rowdy, a wise guy who knew it all, but really didn't know which end was up. I've come a long way since but it could have been easier.

I realize what education does." At first, he bounced from job to job, finally finding work as an auto mechanic's helper. Then he became, successively, a mechanic, a shop manager and the owner of three service stations. He sold his businesses in 1977, he says, because he couldn't take the routine and frustration. Fortunately for Bielenda, he now had alternatives. He had always been interested in diving and recalled his fascination for underwater movies, Navy frogmen and diving stories in magazines. And when in 1960 the Central Skin Divers in Brooklyn opened one of the area's first dive shops, he had immediately enrolled in their scuba training course. Under the tutelage of Roy and June Kieser, two of the nations earliest certified scuba instructors, he learned to dive.

"It's easy to recall what Steve was like in those early years of scuba diving," said June Kieser. "Even then he was unusual, different from the rest of the class. He stood out in cause he was a quick learner, talented and innovative. He's the only student my husband ever gave a 100 per cent to on a final test." "I didn't give it to him," Roy Kieser added. "He earned it." Bielenda remained a sport diver for a few years, diving only in waters off beaches and from piers. He bought a small boat and went spear fishing with a friend. Two years later he became a scuba diving instructor, a move that he feels was the turning point in his life. People got to know him as a diver and asked for his

help. At first, it was small things, like taking a rope out of a prop or finding something that had fallen into the water. The number of calls for help increased and he was now lifting sunken boats. Gradually, he lifted larger and larger craft. Though never formally educated in salvage work, Bielenda became an expert at raising craft on the Hudson River and on the East river all with scuba equipment. He learned salvage operations by watching commercial divers and taught himself. He hasn't needed hard hat equipment (diving helmets with air supplied through hoses connected to compressors on the surface) but prefers the freedom offered by scuba gear "I've raised in excess of 200 boats in the last 18 years of salvage work that range in size from a 13-foot Boston Whaler to a 140-by-40-foot barge that took air bags with a 20. ton lift capacity to raise." The largest boat he has lifted was the 78 foot St. Augustine, a fishing trawler that sank at a marina in Brooklyn. His most unusual salvage job came when he was hired by an insurance company to search for a lost diamond. A five-carat diamond ring fell off a woman's hand while she was on her dock above a supposedly mud and-silt-filled tidal creek in Brooklyn. But when Bielenda dived he found nothing but pure white sand on the bottom. He dived for two days, to no avail. The woman suggested that a fish must have swallowed it. The insurance company grudgingly paid off. To expand his scuba business, Bielenda recently finished building a new dive boat. A weekender with sleeping, shower and cooking facilities, it is designed specifically for sport diving. While boats of this kind are common to the West Coast and Florida, it will be novel here. He plans to sail the boat, Wahoo, daily as a full time sport diving operation.

The vessel can hold 49 persons, but Bielenda plans to take a maximum of 25 divers to avoid crowding. The boat will operate all year from December to May in the Florida Keys and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the remainder of the year off Long Island. The Wahoo will begin operating in August from the boat basin at Captree State Park. From Fire Island Inlet, Bielenda will be able to run as far east as Block Island and as far south as Barnegat, NJ. He has more than 250 wreck positions quoted in his book.

There aren't many underwater challenges Bielenda hasn't faced, but there is still the wreck of the Andrea Doria. Twice, Bielenda has made the long run to southwest of Nantucket Island where it lies, and despite, weather has

frustrated the dive. But not this summer, he feels. The Andrea Doria is a challenge to the scuba diver because of the depth at which it settled, well beyond the limits of recreational diving. It is in 240 feet of water with the superstructure sticking up to 165 feet. It takes a diver four to six minutes to make the descent to the wreck, and he can stay there only 15 to 20 minutes. Then he ascends to the top in stages, hanging on the anchor line for varying periods of time at levels of 30, 20 and 10 feet to decompress. The gradual ascent is necessary to avoid the bends, which can occur if the diver's blood does not rid itself of nitrogen it has absorbed at the great depths. It will take two hours or more for a diver to surface safely. Because divers cannot carry with them all the air needed, bottles of compressed air are left hanging on the anchor line at the various depths. Then there's the nitrogen narcosis that can occur on plunges below 100 feet. Divers sensing its effects must immediately rise, or they will begin to behave irrationally, which could endanger their lives. Bielenda plans to dive early in August and has signed 20 divers, who are preparing for the trip.

Each will be tested at a pressure of 200 feet in a chamber at the Queens Commercial diving Institute. Bielenda wants to know how each will react that deep before diving on the Andrea Doria. "The statue of Andrea Doria, an admiral in the Italian navy, has been salvaged off the wreck by helmeted divers," says Bielenda. "The ship has been scubaed but hardly touched! Diving the Andrea Doria is the pinnacle dive for a sport diver. But it will only work for a man who has been diving a long time, one who has real good credentials. It is probably out of reach of 95 per cent of all the trained divers in this country. But it's there and I have to Go."

Tuesday, May 15, 2007

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