

Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial Dive at Dutch Springs, PA. 1/19/13

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Marty Folan, Nick Lappano and I from The Scuba Sports Club attended the Memorial Dive for Sandy Hook Elementary School at Dutch Springs in Bethlehem, PA on January 19th. The Candlelight Vigil Dive was organized by Connecticut's Newtown Underwater Search and Rescue (NUSAR). While NUSAR itself was not dispatched to the site of the atrocity, many of NUSAR's staff are also firemen and ambulance corps EMTs, and they were at the school that day because NUSAR's building is virtually adjacent to the Sandy Hook Elementary School. All of the proceeds of the Memorial Dive were donated to the Sandy Hook Support Fund to benefit the families of the children and teachers murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School on 12-14-2012. Dutch Springs' owner honorably offered the whole facility to NUSAR for the event. Many local food vendors and local and national dive gear manufacturers and service providers contributed products and services for a raffle. NUSAR, as well as everyone who participated in the day's Memorial Dive, was grateful for this outpouring of support from all of the event sponsors. After a horror like this, knowing that your peers in the dive community-at-large have your back, and are your 'virtual buddies' providing support and solidarity is greatly comforting. Comfort and solace has been in terribly great demand by too many people – including the first responders.

Event Coordinator and NUSAR diver Jeremy Stein began the Memorial Dive with an invocation and then led those assembled in a moment of silent reflection and prayer. While the event had many laughs and good times (and some great pizza and BBQ courtesy of some local restaurants), the underlying reason for the Memorial Dive was never far from the surface - honoring the memory of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School (SHES) shooting, and raising funds for the Sandy Hook School Support Fund in support of the victims' families and first responders.

Earlier in the morning before the 11AM Candlelight Vigil Dive kickoff, NUSAR Team Captain Brian Solt and NUSAR team members Hans Williams and George Robinson headed into the water to install a memorial plaque on the familiar submerged bus in Dutch Springs. The plaque reads "In memory of the victims of Sandy Hook Elementary School. Our hearts are broken but our hope is unbreakable". The state

of Connecticut is the Sandy Hook Memorial Dive background for the graphic, including a heart symbol at the geographic location of Newtown, CT. The plaque was designed by Jeremy Stein and John Almstead (also of NUSAR), and their design is forever powerful, direct and compelling. The graphics art company *Concepts and Design* of Connecticut made the plaque itself.

The Candlelight Vigil Dive profile for the day was simple and meaningful - a processional of 26 divers (representing the 26 victims of the school shooting), each stopping to review the plaque, their green and white glowsticks serving as candles and representing the colors of SHES. The divers included public safety divers, civilian divers, and Search and Rescue personnel from a wide area from Connecticut to Virginia. Northeast Search and Rescue provided surface support for divers entering and exiting the water. For everyone who will dive on the bus in the future, please take a moment while you are down there to remember the children and teachers and their families - and also remember the first responders who were at that horrific scene, and the first responders' team mates, as well.

Why was Dutch Spring selected for the Memorial Dive? Jeremy Stein explains: "We wanted to create a permanent memorial to honor the victims and the first responders involved on that tragic day. This is our way of supporting the town that has done so much to support us." Stein added that Dutch Springs provided an ideal place to create a permanent memorial with access for millions of people. A combination of the central location, the size of the facility and the clarity of the water, not to mention the school bus that seemed like a perfect medium, made Dutch Springs the perfect place. Dutch Springs is near and dear to all Northeast divers' hearts; and many of us earned our open water and advanced certifications while diving there. The water is clear and 'cool' (in a literal sense at times... on Saturday the surface Temperature was approximately 50F and closer to 45F at the bus).

NUSAR also selected Dutch Springs because of the bond we all have with the site, and the bond that all divers share. All emergency services team members share a bond; maybe it is similar to the 'band of brothers' combat infantry or submariners' bond. All search and rescue teams who train at Dutch Springs from this point forward will see the plaque, and will remember not only the victims and their shattered families, but will also remember and honor the Emergency Services first responders who have come before them to this spot.

NOTHING could POSSIBLY have prepared even the most experienced and hardened veterans for the atrocity at Sandy Hook. And the agony of the day affected not only the first responders who were on site at the school - but also their fire department, ambulance corps and NUSAR team mates - some of whom heard the horror unfolding in real time over the extended radio network, and heard the parents' screams. The abject devastation of not being able to help or change the outcome at all was for many of the team the most shattering experience of all.

Perhaps this dive and the memorial itself was a way for NUSAR and other first responders to "do something" and to feel a little less helpless, if only for the day. Stein explained that this memorial dive was a way to come together as a community to create something beautiful and moving. Having met some of them, it is certain that all of these first responders would have laid down their lives to save these children and teachers, but they were powerless to do so in this situation. Every generation has members who are 'the greatest generation'. The Emergency Services men and women divers at Dutch Springs this day were among them. And it is good that future first responders and SAR teams will see that plaque on that bus during their training, and they will know that the diving community came together as a family to support one another, honoring the victims and the first responders of the SHES shooting.

NUSAR team captain Brian Solt comments "...The day was a step in the long process toward healing and recovery for the town, and we certainly could not have made it a successful day without the tremendous support from Dutch Springs, the many public safety drivers and companies in attendance, as well as the many vendors and volunteers who donated their time or food and dive equipment to the cause..." May Providence provide some peace and solace for the families of the murdered children and teachers, and for the emergency workers/EMTs who were there - and their team mates, too.

Gary Lehman

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