

Mike Fletcher, with underwater camera gear, came from modest beginnings to become a commercial diver making shipwreck discoveries that led to success in television productions including the series, *Dive Detectives*

Mike Fletcher

—*The Dive Detective in Depth*

Text by Robert Osborne
Photos courtesy of Mike Fletcher

Mike Fletcher is a scary guy. Not because he's violent or aggressive. Quite the contrary, when I meet him in person he turns out to be quite modest and charming. But when you listen to Mike talk about some of his dives, it's a terrifying experience.

I'm sitting in a coffee shop in Port Dover, Ontario, Canada, having lunch with someone I consider to be one of the pre-eminent figures in diving today. He's telling me about a salvage job he'd been recently hired to do in Collingwood, Ontario. In a voice that could be describing something as matter a fact as how to catch a bus to his house, he's talking about crawling in near zero visibility through the bowels of a ship that's settled on the bottom and filled with sediment. The maze of steel is filled with jagged shards of metal, anyone of which could tear his suit or his air hose and leave him dead within minutes.

I'm no commercial diver, but I know enough to understand that his margin of error in this situation is pretty low. I also know a little bit about what its like to try and wriggle through restrictions, and what he's describing is an extreme challenge by any stretch of the imagination. Either he does it right, or he's in a world of hurt. But for Fletcher, it's just another day at the office. It's an "office" that Fletcher never dreamed of occupying when he

grew up in Nanticoke, near Port Dover, Ontario.

Fletcher's roots do not scream world famous diver. In fact, his beginnings are very modest. He was born on a dairy farm on the shores of Lake Erie in 1955.

His family had been in the area since 1796 when they left Philadelphia as United Empire Loyalists.

Mike was the youngest of three children; he had an older brother and sister. The family was not what you would call

wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, Fletcher describes his upbringing as "poor".

Fletcher's parents worked the farm and drove school buses just to make ends meet. The family had little spare money,

and as result, the confines of his world were fairly narrow, according to Fletcher. He said, "My parents used to try and protect us from wishing for things. They didn't want us to be disappointed. My father used to always say 'hard work is for us.'"





Fletcher preps for a dive on the HMS *Repulse* and the HMS *Prince of Wales*

Bitten by the dive bug

Education didn't look like a way out for Fletcher. He said he wasn't a particularly good student, though he likes to say that as he got older, he got a little better. Nevertheless, Fletcher's world took a turn for the better when he was 13 years old in 1968. That was the year his father finally sold the family farm.

That simple action completely changed their lives. For a start they had some money. His father went out and brought 36 acres—an old Boy Scout camp—on the shores of Lake Erie. Suddenly, a life restricted to dairy farming wasn't the only option open to Fletcher.

Around the same time, Fletcher began watching a show on his grandmother's television called *Diver Dan*—a character who worked as a hard hat diver. Lloyd Bridges soon entered the picture with his TV series, *Sea Hunt*. And shortly after that, Jacques Cousteau began making under-

water films for *National Geographic*.

Mike developed a bug for all things diving. He was worried that he didn't have the grades to be a marine biologist. But at night, he used to lay awake listening to the sounds of the oil and gas rigs just off the coast and imagine the work the divers working on those rigs would have to do.

In the evenings and on weekends he would ride his bike down to the local docks and watch the hard hat divers working. The whole experience opened up a new series of possibilities for Fletcher. Suddenly, he knew one could make a living in this undersea world. Never one to wait around for an opportunity, Fletcher decided to take his diving career into his own hands.

He'd managed to save up \$360 picking cucumbers as a summer job. He told his father he was going to buy diving equipment with the money. Using a mail

order catalogue, he ordered a tank, a regulator and a back plate (he already had a mask and fins).

The gear finally arrived in October. Undeterred by the lateness of the season or the fact that he didn't have a clue how to use the equipment (other than having read a book or two), he went down to the local duck pond, geared up and jumped in. He sank to the bottom and stayed there until he'd breathed the tank dry, while his father paced anxiously back and

forth on the shore. And just like that, Mike Fletcher was a diver.

Commercial diving

Fletcher's transition to commercial diving was equally unorthodox. In 1975, Fletcher decided to quit high school and go to work full time in construction. He was hired as part of a crew building an oil refinery. It was an invaluable opportunity because he learned a number of critical construction skills such as welding and working with concrete. It also opened up an opportunity to get into the whole world of commercial diving.

It all began one day when the foreman was asking around about whether anyone knew a local diver who could help pump concrete—specifically to sandbag the concrete form underwater. Once again, Fletcher took the proverbial bull by the horns. He told the foreman he knew how to do that and just like that he

was hired as a commercial diver. That earned him an extra \$5 per day, and from then on, he was the company diver.

What were his credentials? He had none. In fact, Fletcher had yet to take even the most rudimentary of diving courses. But he likes to say that he had the best credentials of all. "If you want to find a good commercial diver, look for a smart farm boy," he said. From that point on, he started to promote himself as a commercial diver.

It didn't take long to get his next break in the world of diving. In 1977, his foreman, Len Byman, went to a diving operation that was working the gas drilling on Lake Erie and told them about Fletcher—told them they'd be crazy not to hire him. Byman must have been pretty persuasive because Place Gas and Oil hired him immediately. Fletcher was 22 years old when he started working for them full time as a commercial diver.

Now the work wasn't what you might think. Fletcher wasn't spending hours on the bottom hundreds of feet down. The deepest well was in 45 feet of water. Nonetheless, Fletcher decided it was time to polish his credentials. That same year, he went and took an introduction to scuba course. He'd already been working as a commercial diver for a year.

As the years passed, his commercial career became more complex—deeper and longer dives. Fletcher responded by obtaining more training and more certifications so that he could do the work safely. It wasn't an easy life, but the money was unbelievably good. In the 1990s, he could make up to \$500 a day. He worked throughout the 80's and 90's as a commercial diver.

The whole time he was working underwater, he was still out on the water on his days off exploring the wrecks of Lake



Mike Fletcher prepares to dive near Punta Arenas, Chile

Mike Fletcher with son, Warren, are the hosts and cameramen in the television series, *Dive Detectives*



The Fletchers investigate the seafloor



Fletcher

into granting him sole ownership—all this even though the ship was only a few miles from the Canadian coast and well within Canadian territorial water.

Fighting for *Atlantic*

Fletcher fought back. He took Mar Dive to court in Canada. Oddly, initially the Ontario government took a position against Fletcher in the fight. Rather than protest that Morgan was violating Canadian sovereignty and attempting to pillage the wreck, they charged Fletcher for being illegally on the wreck.

It took a few years for them to

Erie. With all that bottom time, he started finding wrecks. Nobody paid very much attention to what he was doing until 1983 when he found the wreck of the *Atlantic*. That discovery changed everything.

The *Atlantic*

The steamer *Atlantic* sank in Lake Erie after a collision with the propeller steamer *Ogdensburg* off of Long Point in August 1852. The ship sank with a cargo of \$36,000 in gold in the safe. Over 150 to 250 people drowned in the disaster.

Almost immediately after the sinking, American Express, the company that owned the gold, had a diver named Johnny Green go down and look at the wreck. He did not find the gold. So in 1854, Green went back again, and yet again, did not get the gold. He did, however, get the bends. That put him out of the diving business for a couple of years.

In the meantime, in 1855, a diver named Elliot Harrington went to the wreck, and he did find the gold. Story complete? Not quite. All kinds of rumors abounded about what might be on the wreck. One story had it that there was a submarine sitting on the deck. Allegedly,

a man named Laudner Philipo brought a submarine to the wreck in 1853 to recover the gold, and the sub sank.

But shortly after the gold was recovered, the location of the *Atlantic* was forgotten, and the ship disappeared into history for more than a hundred years, until one day, in 1983, when Mike Fletcher found it.

There were a number of reasons the *Atlantic* was a valuable property, even without the gold. It was a rare type of ship called a Palace Steamer. It was also still loaded with all the original affects of those on board the ship and all of the cargo and incidentals such a ship would carry. And what's more, they were all in relative pristine condition. So, the ship was of great interest to several groups.

Fletcher wanted it preserved with some of the artifacts brought up for a museum. But an American treasure hunter named Steve Morgan of Mar Dive in California had other ideas. He used a mooring that Fletcher had attached to the wreck to access the *Atlantic* and then tried to lay claim to it. He did it via a kind of legal slight of hand whereby he tried to resurrect the company that used to own the ship and then talked a California judge



Mike and Warren Fletcher head to the dive site of the 1854 steam yacht *Fox*, which sank off the coast of Greenland in 1912

profile

decide that Fletcher was actually trying to defend Canada's interests. Ultimately, they did side with Mike, and so did the courts.

They told Morgan the wreck wasn't his and that no judge in California had any jurisdiction to say differently in Canada. The *Atlantic* was left alone, and Fletcher turned over the artifacts he had already gathered to the Ontario government.

The controversy over the *Atlantic* garnered Fletcher national media attention. And there was one positive side benefit from all that publicity. It brought him to



Mike and Warren Fletcher in the dive tank on set

Fletcher

projects. All told, Fletcher estimates he's worked on nearly 100 episodes of underwater television.

And yet, despite the fame and fortune of working in television, Fletcher still likes to keep his hand in as a commercial diver. He said, "It keeps me sharp. Whether you're in a sewer or salvaging a ship, it's all training to make good TV."

Other than that, Fletcher spends time on his farm on the shores of Lake Erie. These days, he and his wife, Lorraine, are raising thoroughbred horses.

belt, he still loves to spend time underwater. He said that's still what it's all about. "More people need to embrace the joy of diving," said Fletcher. "I never stop being excited about doing things underwater."

And he still loves to make television. He's currently working on a project with a preliminary title, *The Wild Goose Files*. In this project, he is teamed up with the world famous treasure hunters, the Fisher family in Florida. It's a series about hunting for gold and making people's dreams come true—appropriate for a farm boy from Ontario who, against all the odds, managed to make his own underwater dreams come true. ■

Features editor Robert Osborne is an internationally published dive writer, television producer and reporter based in Toronto, Canada.



Mike Fletcher

the attention of John Davis, a producer at Eco Nova Productions in Halifax.

Making television

Davis approached Fletcher along with Clive Cussler in 2000 and asked him if he was interested in working on a show called, *The Sea Hunters*—not initially as a host, but as the expedition leader.

Fletcher accepted the job and was paid to make sure that all the diving would be handled in a safe manner. But ultimately, as the production got underway, Fletcher showed that he had much more value on the creative side of the show. He had story ideas—ideas about the writing and the directing of the show.

Ultimately, the producers decided that Mike and his son, Warren, were better used as hosts and camera-

men for the show.

The show was sold to the History Channel and National Geographic and lasted for five seasons. It was broadcast around the world, arguably one of the most successful dive series on television. It finally ended in 2005, but Fletcher's TV career was just beginning.

A second show was offered to him in 2008. History Television came to him again and asked him whether he was interested in doing *The Dive Detectives* produced by Yap Films in Toronto.

This was a more upscale dive show. It only ran for one season, but what a season it was. The Fletchers and their crew travelled around the world looking for lost Buddha's in the Mekong River, exploring Ghost Ships on the island of Saba and were even allowed to explore the famous 19th century ships, *Hamilton* and *Scourge*, on the bottom of Lake Ontario.

Fletcher also kept busy working on a multitude of other shows including a show called *Dream Wrecks* in which he was both a host and underwater cameraman. The series ran for 26 half hour episodes.

He's also worked on a number of single

The joy of diving

Through it all, though he's lost count of the thousands of dives he has under his



Mike and Warren Fletcher in action underwater

