

My Journey to Technical Fundamentals

After leaving the Navy, I was convinced I was done diving.

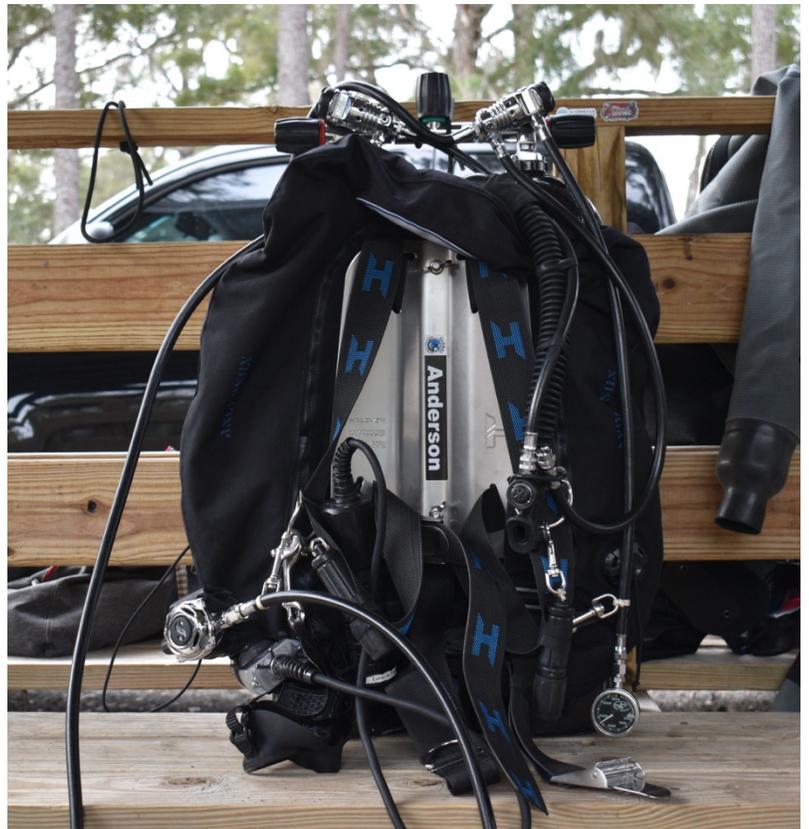
My name is Ian Anderson, I am a biophysics major at Columbia University, a 2025 GUE NextGen Trainee, and most recently, a GUE Technical Fundamentals Diver. Prior to Columbia, I spent seven years in the Navy as a Deep Sea Diver, accumulating hundreds of hours of high-risk bottom time. When I transitioned from the service, I believed civilian diving had little to offer. My diving days, or so I thought, were firmly behind me. Two years later—and after a celebratory phone call (with Jenn :) that set things in motion—my bags were packed, and I was headed to Cave Country to begin training as a GUE NextGen Trainee.

Day 1

Despite my operational experience, I had no clear idea of what to expect from training. My last “introductory” dive course involved a cadre of instructors shouting over me as I did push-ups to the point of complete physical exhaustion. I expected this time would look different, but how remained unclear.

After an early morning rendezvous at Extreme Exposure in High Springs Florida, I was introduced to my fellow class mates, and our instructor for the week, Jon Kieren. His resume proved nothing short of humbling, surpassed only by his actual performance in the water.

Inside the classroom it became clear that his approach extended beyond proficiency. His instruction reflected a level of technical rigor I had seldom encountered in diving. I was learning from someone who operated at a different level. I was in the right place.



Days 2-4

The following days were challenging, humbling, and deeply rewarding. Each day started with land drills—what we called “dirt-dives” in the Navy—rehearsing procedures until they were solidified in memory. These repetitions are integral to the learning process and the hallmark of professionals who strive for perpetual improvement.

Then came the dives. As a seasoned Navy Diver, I thought I knew what it meant to be neutrally buoyant. Then I met Jon. His stillness in the water demonstrated a level of control that I was unaware could be

obtained. In contrast, I found myself making near constant micro-adjustments, chasing stability, but never reaching it.

As the days flew by and the standards tightened, my frustration grew. Despite careful attention to my drysuit and wing, I could not replicate the control I was observing. Then came the breakthrough.

After watching my repeated corrections and apparent frustration, Jon motioned towards my power inflator and calmly signaled for me to make what I perceived to be a negligibly small adjustment. Begrudgingly, I obliged. And the effects were immediate. Skills that had proven inexplicably difficult moments earlier, suddenly felt trivial. It was a lightbulb moment. Elite performance is not about doing more, it's about doing less, more precisely. The difference between "almost" and "perfect," is not a matter of effort, but a matter of scale.

Day 5

After several days of steady progression, we reached the final day of diving.

The morning land drills were finally becoming automatic. In the water, my positioning had improved dramatically, and the team was functioning cohesively. Phase one of the dive proceeded smoothly. Minor mistakes were promptly identified and resolved by the team, without requiring instructor input.

The final evolution consisted of a simulated out of gas scenario followed by an emergency ascent, making a safety stop at ten feet. The initial response and ascent were controlled and executed as planned. As we approached the ten-foot stop however, small inefficiencies compounded. Gas expansion in my drysuit began to outpace my corrections. My buoyancy shifted from controlled to reactive, eventually becoming unmanageable as I struggled to maintain depth.

Shortly after, we surfaced. Back on the surface, it was time to debrief. As a team, we combed through each phase of the dive, identifying mistakes, critical moments, and corrections moving forward.

I was dissatisfied. After a week of progress, I wanted a perfect dive, but in the final ten feet, fell exceedingly short.

I prepared for a harsh critique. What followed was different.

Jon reinforced many of the points we had identified as a team, while adding his own observations of what had gone well. When I expressed frustration, having fallen short of a "perfect dive," Jon reiterated what I already knew, but had long forgotten.



There is no such thing as a “perfect dive.” What mattered was not the absence of error, but the ability to recognize it, understand it, and correct it. To that aim, the dive was a success, and his mission was accomplished.

On the following dive, we applied those corrections, uncovered new errors, and continued to improve. It was uneventful in the best possible sense.

Reflection

In many ways becoming a GUE Technical Fundamentals diver felt familiar. Land drills, emergency procedures, and team-based diving, echoed much of my prior experience. What was new was the standard. In a single week, I returned to a past level of proficiency, then quickly moved beyond it. Through precise refinement of fundamental skills, I developed a new understanding of control and the outsized effects even the smallest of inputs can have on an outcome.

More importantly, I gained a new perspective on what it means to improve. Progress was no longer measured by what I could accomplish in the water, but how precisely I could execute it. I left with more than improved technique. I left with a clearer understanding of the kind of diver I am capable of becoming, and the realization that reaching that level depends not only on doing more, but doing less, with greater precision.

Special thanks to Ed Hayes with Evolution SCUBA for getting me back in the water and up to speed in drysuit and doubles. And to Jon Kieren of Kieren Technical, for his professional dedication and unwavering commitment to positive student outcomes.