



Recognizing “Combat Divers”

A History of Army Special Operations Diver Badges

by Robert D. Seals

Abstract: Prior to 1969, no Army Scuba Diver Badge existed. That year, the Scuba Badge was authorized, but not for wear by Special Forces (SF) “combat divers” until 1972. Full recognition for the unique training and skills of SF divers came in 2004 when the Special Operations Diver and Diving Supervisor Badges were approved.

In 2004, the current silver Special Operations Diver Badge was approved for graduates of the Special Forces (SF) Underwater Operations (UWO) course. It includes a mask and mouthpiece, typical of a closed-circuit rebreather system; daggers honoring the legacy of Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Maritime Unit swimmers; and sharks representing stealth, speed, and power.¹ This badge was a long time coming. When SF began underwater operations in the 1950s, no scuba qualification badge existed. Starting in the early 1970s, SF shared a generic Scuba Badge with U.S. Army Engineer and U.S. Navy scuba divers. Finally, SF received the Army Special Operations-unique badge mentioned above.² This brief photo essay explains how this esteemed award came into being.

Through World War I, the only Army qualification badges were for marksmanship, gunnery, and aviation.³ During World War II, this had expanded to nine Army-authorized “ground badges,” including the Expert and Combat Infantryman Badges, and four Engineer underwater “hard hat” badges (with dive courses at Fort Screven, Tybee Island, Georgia, and later Camp Gordon



The current Special Operations Diver badge. Adopted in 2004, it includes a mask and mouthpiece typical of a closed circuit rebreather system, daggers representing OSS Maritime Unit swimmers, and sharks representing stealth, speed, and power.



The Second-Class Diver badge was one of four approved for Army Engineer “hard hat” divers in 1944.



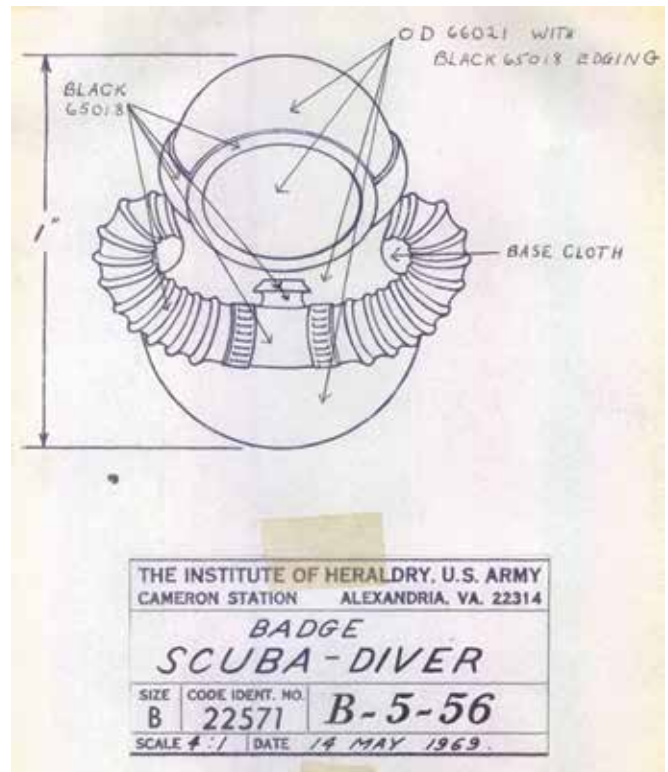
(Image credit: Colonel Charles H. Fry)

77th SF Group Scuba demonstration team, Fort Bragg, NC, 1956. ARSOF icon and scuba pioneer then-Sergeant First Class Charles H. Fry is on the far right.

Johnston, Florida).⁴ There were no badges for experimental special operations diving (e.g., the OSS use of an early closed-circuit underwater rebreathing system), which had shown potential. Postwar advances in scuba opened the door for both civilian recreational diving and increased combat application.

Following the establishment of SF in 1952 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, scuba was one of many specialized skills eventually added to the SF portfolio. With no dive school of their own, Army SF soldiers formed clubs, attended the U.S. Navy Underwater Swimmers course, or created their own *ad-hoc* training programs. By 1963, SF formalized an underwater operations requirement to support “clandestine infiltration and attack of targets” during the conduct of Unconventional Warfare.⁵ Accordingly, in 1965, the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center consolidated existing ‘in-house’ SF dive training as the SF UWO course at Key West, Florida.⁶

By the late 1960s, the Army’s appreciation of scuba had increased. A 1968 revision to Army Marine Diver Regulation identified scuba as a subset of Engineer diving.⁷ Scuba was not considered “a separate, distinct rating,” but rather the first step to earning the “hard hat” Second-Class Diver rating and badge. On 1 May 1969, the Army authorized wear of a new Scuba Badge, but there was a catch. SF UWO graduates were omitted from the regulation, and were not eligible to wear the Scuba Badge.⁸



The approved badge, Institute of Heraldry drawing, was oxidized silver, “1 inch high consisting of a scuba diver’s hood with face mask, mouth piece and breathing tube,” symbolic of the distinctive equipment required by scuba divers.

SF divers were in an awkward situation of earning an award that they could not wear. For example, SF Staff Sergeant Ernest A. Jensen recalls his graduating class being given the Scuba Badge, but being told “not to wear

it during an official formation.”⁹ The Army corrected this in late 1972, when it authorized SF divers to wear the Scuba Badge.¹⁰ To complicate matters, the following year, the U.S. Navy approved wear of the Army Scuba Badge for graduates of its own dive programs. For over thirty years, SF graduates of the UWO course wore the same badge as U.S. Army Engineer and U.S. Navy scuba divers who had been trained elsewhere.¹¹

In 2004, at the request of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, the Army approved new Special Operations Diver and Diving Supervisor Badges. These badges, awarded to graduates of the SF UWO Combat Dive Qualification and Combat Dive Supervisors Courses, hearkened back to the legacy of World War II OSS Maritime Unit swimmers, and emphasized the tactical nature of “combat diving.”¹² The symbolic divide between the SF UWO courses and Engineer/U.S. Navy dive courses was complete.¹³

Awarded over the decades, these various qualification badges recognized noteworthy accomplishments by Army “combat divers.” Retired SF Colonel Robert W. Marrs, who commanded a 7th SF Group combat diver detachment, reflected, “To this day, the Scuba course was the most physically demanding school in the U.S. Army that I attended.”¹⁴ The first Scuba Badge in 1969, followed by the Army Special Operations-unique dive badge in 2004, testify to that fact. 🇺🇸

Image credit: LTC Larry A. Greene



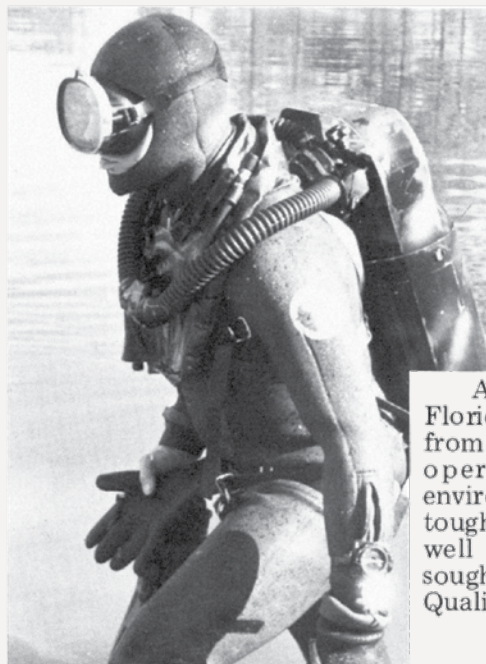
LTC (ret.) Larry A. Greene was the Dive Committee Executive Officer in 1971-72. He is wearing a closed-circuit system by the SF Underwater Operations sign, Naval Air Station Key West, Florida.

In 1972, the Scuba Badge (inset) was awarded to SF divers, and was featured in a 7th SFG recruiting pamphlet.

AND THERE'S MORE TOO!



Scuba Badge



LIKE SCUBA!

A five week course at Key West, Florida, teaches selected personnel from our detachments how to operate in an underwater environment. It's some of the toughest training anywhere, but well worth it. Graduates wear the sought after silver SCUBA Diver's Qualification Badge.

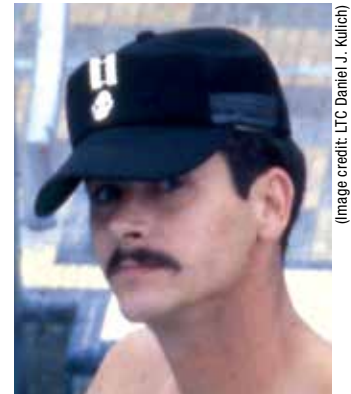
Takeaways:

- 1 In World War II, the Army authorized nine “ground” qualification badges, including four for “hard hat” Engineer divers.
- 2 Prior to 1969, no Army Scuba Badge existed; even then, SF divers were not eligible to wear it until 1972.
- 3 A modified badge for Army Special Operations combat divers was approved in 2004.

Endnotes

- 1 Email from Keith A. Garrison, The Institute of Heraldry (TIOH), to Robert D. Seals, “SUBJECT: RE: US Army Scuba Badge c. 1969,” 2 November 2018, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; LTC (ret.) Emil L. Posey, interview with Robert D. Seals, 26 August 2020, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Posey interview. LTC Posey was the Dive Committee OIC from 1971 to 1972, and stated that the only weapon used in training during that period was a “K-bar knife,” illustrative of a technical emphasis. TIOH describes the “Special Operations Diver Badge” in the following way: “The diver is wearing a low volume mask, typical of combat diving operations and mouthpiece with inhalation/exhalation hose of a stealth rebreather. The daggers recall the heritage of the OSS operational swimmers of World War II. The shark represents stealth, speed, power and efficiency in dispatching its prey. The star and laurel wreath represent the Special Operations Diving Supervisor Badge qualification level.”
- 2 HQDA, Army Regulation (AR) 611-75: *Selection, Qualifications, Rating and Disrating of Army Divers* (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1982), 1-1, 2-14. This regulation made the distinction between “hard hat” and “combat divers.” The term “combat diver” was defined as divers “mainly in SF units,” with a “horizontal combat diving mission.”
- 3 William K. Emerson, *Marksmanship in the U.S. Army; A History of Medals, Shooting Programs, and Training* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 18-21, and *Encyclopedia of United States Army Insignia and Uniforms* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 356. The initial issue U.S. Army marksmanship badge was a ‘button’ worn on the collar in 1881. After the Civil War, the emphasis on marksmanship was part of a trend towards greater professionalism. Brigadier General Edward O.C. Ord, commander of the Departments of California, Texas, and the Platte, believed in the carrot and stick method, announcing the “best and worst shooting” in monthly circulars to his command.
- 4 HQDA, AR 600-70: *Personnel, Ground Badges* (Washington, DC, War Department, 6 August 1946), 1; Forrest C. Pogue, *Organizer of Victory, 1943-1945* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 80-88. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall remained concerned about “the importance of little things to morale,” and advocated awards and badges. In 1946, the nine authorized ground badges were the Expert / Combat Infantryman, Medical, Parachutist, Glider, Master Diver, First-class Diver, Salvage Diver, and Second-class Diver badges. Only one badge could be worn, except for soldiers with the Parachutist or Glider badges.
- 5 Memorandum, Headquarters, U.S. Army Special Warfare Center, “SUBJECT: Service Test of SCUBA Diving Equipment,” 15 May 1963, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC. This underwater operational requirement included both open and closed systems to support six tactical missions.
- 6 Kenneth Finlayson, “Key West: Home of ARSOF Underwater Operations,” *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2007): 3-6. SF conducted scuba courses at Fort Bragg, NC, until relocation to Naval Air Station Key West, Florida, to consolidate and standardize underwater training. Units overseas frequently ran their own courses to save travel funds.
- 7 HQDA, Army Regulation 611-75: *Personnel Selection and Classification, Selection, Qualifications, Rating and Disrating of Marine Divers* (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1968), 1-7. Military Occupational Skills (MOS
- 8 00B, Diver, and 7242, Marine Diver, are the only divers listed in the detailed regulation. The Scuba Diver Badge was described as “to be developed,” and was to be awarded to enlisted Engineer divers only.
- 8 Commanding Officer, TIOH, Memorandum, “SUBJECT: Request for Scuba Diver Badge,” 13 March 1969, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Memorandum, “SUBJECT: Request for Scuba Diver Badge,” 1 May 1969, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC. The Institute of Heraldry developed five designs, some possessing dolphins and a trident, with the simplest design, “D,” selected by the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel.
- 9 Email from Master Sergeant (MSG) (ret.) Robert B. Johansen and Sergeant Major (ret.) Ernest A. Jensen to Robert D. Seals, “SUBJECT: Dive Badge Information Received,” 18 August 2018, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Posey interview. Resourceful MSG Harold Jacobson requested that his 1st SF Group Dive Detachment be awarded an additional MOS of 00B, Diver. Jacobson then submitted a request for the Scuba Badge which was approved by U.S. Army Base Command, Okinawa, on 25 September 1972. LTC (ret.) Emil L. Posey confirms that graduates were only given a certificate during his tenure at Key West.
- 10 HQDA, DA Message 131507ZDec72, “SUBJECT: Award of Scuba Diver Qualification Badge,” 13 December 1972, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Posey interview. LTC Posey attended the scuba course late in 1970, and two months later in 1971 became the OIC. The committee then consisted of one officer and twelve NCOs, who taught a six-week course six times a year.
- 11 HQDA, AR 672-5-1: *Military Awards* (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 3 June 1974), 5-7; HQDA, AR 611-75: *Selection, Qualifications, Rating and Disrating of Army Divers* (Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1982), 1-1, 2-14.
- 12 HQDA, Letter, “SUBJECT: Change to the Army Scuba Diver Badge,” October 2004, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; email from Keith A. Garrison, Institute of Heraldry, to Robert D. Seals, “SUBJECT: US Army SCUBA Badge c. 1969,” 2 November 2018, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC. As before, changes to the Army Scuba Badge were approved before a design was selected in November 2004. The new badges were manufactured and began to be worn later in 2005.
- 13 Memorandum, Headquarters, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, “SUBJECT: Request Reconsideration for Special Operations Diver Badge,” 3 August 2004, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Both services, Army and Navy, wore the same Scuba Badge since 1973. This led to confusion since the Army course was a tactical 5-week course, in contrast to the Navy technical 2-week course. Army graduates of the Navy course continued to wear the older badge after the change in 2004.
- 14 COL (ret.) Robert W. Marrs, interview with Robert D. Seals, 25 August 2020, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC; LTC (ret.) Daniel J. Kulich, interview with Robert D. Seals, 17 August 2020, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC. In 1982, Marrs earned his Scuba Badge as a 5th SF Group Communications Staff Sergeant. In Panama, LTC (ret.) Kulich commanded a 3-7th SFG ODA from 1980 to 1983, and conducted basic and advanced scuba courses for U.S. and Panamanian forces at Fort Gulick. To illustrate the difficulty of dive training, in one U.S.-only course, twenty students began with only seven graduating.

By 1980, the Scuba badge was worn by instructors during courses. CPT Daniel J. Kulich and ODA-15 ran courses for U.S. and Panamanian forces at Fort Gulick while assigned to 3-7th SFG in Panama.



(Image credit: LTC Daniel J. Kulich)