

Don't you just love our Saturday morning Farmer's Market? I do – I'm always out there bright and early, my dog Sam leading the way, and as we weave through the crowds there's always a cheerful "Hi, how are you?" or "Hey Cliff, I'd like you to meet my friend..."

And that's how I met Jill Williams, who, within 30 seconds of meeting me, said "You should meet my husband Bob. He's dove to the Titanic twice". No sooner said than done...

Submerge me, my sweet submersible you...

By Cliff Roles

Bob Williams has been married to Jill for forty-four years and they have two married daughters and two grandchildren. They reside most of the year in Longboat Key and spend the rest in Bay Harbor, Michigan. He's a master plumber by trade, and used to run Genova Products Inc., a \$100 million plumbing and heating supply corporation founded by his father in 1962 that specialized in PVC and plastics for drain waste and vent systems. Very successfully apparently, because nowadays he can concentrate fully on the two loves of his life: his wife Jill and deep-sea exploration.

When he was eight, his English grandmother gave him a book entitled *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Great Sea Disasters*. It left a lasting impression, as he has since spent his life studying the world's most famous wreck and traveling the world on various explorations. Numerous walls and cabinets in his homes proudly boast a superb collection of dive memorabilia. He has visited the Titanic twice, the German battleship Bismarck (400 miles south of Ireland, off the coast of France), as well as the Hydrothermal Vents, the major tectonic plates located on the mid-Atlantic rift 280 miles off the Azores archipelago. This summer he'll be making his third trip to the Titanic.

In January 2001 Jill surprised Bob on his 60th birthday with the best present he could ever have wished for: a \$36,000 trip to the wreck of the Titanic in July of that same year.

"I was speechless. I never thought I'd ever do it. Jill had been watching a Good Morning America Special on it the previous year, just after the Russians had made their two MIR submersibles – mini-submarines – available for three people to make the dive. The Keldysh, the vessel that holds the two submersibles, is one of the largest in the world. When the government in Russia broke down, there was no money to keep it running. So they learned

about capitalism very fast."

A company called Zegrahm Deep Sea Voyages - www.travelchoices.com - in Seattle, Washington, has been running these trips to the Titanic since 1998. To date, fewer people have seen the wreck than the number of astronauts that have gone into space.

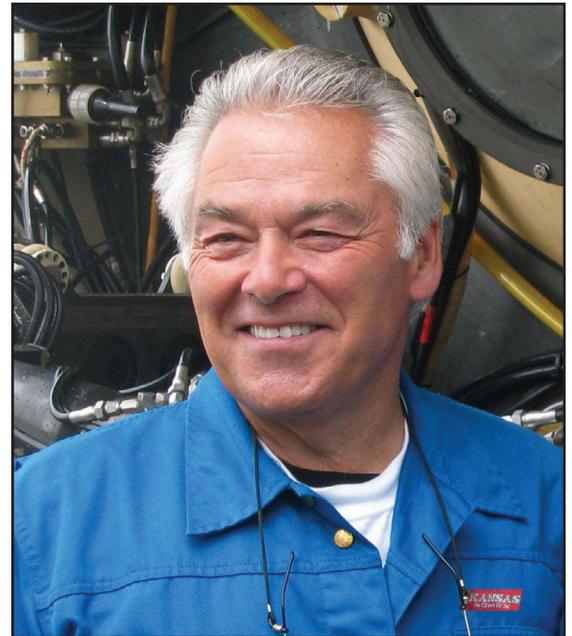
The RMS Titanic struck an iceberg 360 miles southeast of St John's, Newfoundland on April 14, 1912 and sank 12,500 feet to the bottom of the Atlantic. 2,228 people were aboard. 1,523 of them died, 705 survived.

What sparked his interest?

"I had always been fascinated with the Titanic. Beyond the tragic loss of life, of course, you had the entire spectrum of the human population "on a little island", from the dirt poor to the super rich. Now, think of a situation where you're told that there's no way out – you're going to die in an hour and a half, regardless of your level of intelligence or how much money you've got in your pocket. You're not going to hear the "thump-thump" of helicopter blades coming to the rescue, or the sirens of a coastguard boat. You knew your life was going to be over."

Bob and Jill set sail from St John's on the Keldysh on July 16, 2001. They arrived at the site two and a half days later. The hair stood up on the back of his neck, he says, when he was informed that weather conditions were similar to what they were on that fateful night. They then spent a couple of days circling the site, preparing for the dive, listening to lectures from scientists and familiarizing themselves with the ship and the submersible.

"MIR I is a titanium steel ball, 6 feet in diameter, surrounded by an aluminum housing so it looks a little streamlined on



Bob Williams

the outside; you get in through a single hatch on the top, 20" in diameter. It has three truncated, 7"-thick Plexiglas port-holes and there's room for 3 people plus equipment."

And if it developed a leak at the bottom of the ocean?

"It would be like laser surgery – the water would cut you in half because of the pressure – more than 3 1/2 tons per square inch."

In the meantime Jill had also plucked up courage to go down with her husband, so together with the Russian pilot, the three began their 11-hour dive on July 20, 2001.

"It took us two-and-a-half-hours to descend, during which you're treated to the most unusual light-show imaginable. It's like sitting in a field on an August night watching fireflies, because all the creatures that reside at the various depths are luminescent, all flashing different colors. There's a lot of life on the bottom – gigantic star-fish, rat-tails (something like a

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cross between a shark and an eel), crabs – all so fascinated by us they would come right up to the portholes to look in.”

The MIR landed on the bottom, outside of where the wreckage is and moved slowly along the seabed.

“That’s a heart-thumping experience; you come upon a hill, which is really the mud that was displaced when the ship’s bow hit bottom and burrowed in about 20 meters. With the help of the MIR’s thrusters, we suddenly came right in on the base of the bow (think Leo & Kate shouting “I’m king of the world”). Then you realize how massive it is. It’s in two major pieces down there: the bow section alone is about 400 feet long. That part of the ship is in pristine condition, everything’s pretty identifiable. We spent 5 hours exploring the two sections of the ship and the debris field, photographing as we went; we were even able to drop down where the grand staircase was, because that’s a big cavity now in the top deck. You can still see the pillars, chandeliers in the rooms, shoes lying there that had been previously occupied by a now dissolved body – it was very eerie. We went down close to three levels. It was an experience I’ll never forget.”

Eleven months later Bob and Jill flew to Spain and then on to the Azores archipelago located in the southern mid Atlantic Ocean, where they once again boarded the Keldysh and dove aboard the MIR submersibles.

“Near the Azores we ventured down approximately 8,000 feet below the ocean’s surface to visit an eco-system that few have had an opportunity to see. We visited the “Rainbow Vents” ...a truly amazing and hostile environment that occurs along a mid ocean rift where the Earth’s tectonic plates meet. Super-hot water spews from fissures in the sea bottom, reaching temperatures as high as 700°F. A lot of scientists now believe that life on Earth actually began in this type of environment!”

Bob has meanwhile made a second dive to the Titanic - “to gather more information on my developing theory about the true causes of the Titanic disaster” - and also joined the 2005 Deep Ocean Expedition to the German battleship Bismarck, completing his deepest dive to 15,300 feet.

“The Titanic met its fate only four days after heading out on its first voyage, but the Bismarck bettered that record by managing to last just over eight days. However, staying afloat twice as long didn’t mean that fewer people lost

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their lives... when the Bismarck made its plunge to the bottom on the morning of May 27, 1941, some 2,100 souls also followed this ship to their deaths.”

Bob was accepted as a full member of The Explorer’s Club - www.explorers.org - on December 6, 2003, and has meanwhile become a Trustee at Mote Marine Laboratories, where he regularly shares his experiences with its new archaeological department and the “Monday at Mote” series. And this summer Bob and Jill will be returning to the Titanic for a third time.

Why the Titanic again?

“Because I’m still trying to put the pieces together. I don’t know if I’ll ever have all the answers, but I’ll spend the rest of my life searching. There’s just no fantasy for me that equals it.”

If you’d like to learn more about Bob’s expeditions, visit his website www.rmwxplorations.com.

Listen to Cliff Roles on Talk of the Sun Coast every weekday live from 2 to 3 p.m. on 1220 AM WIBQ.
Contact Cliff Roles:
Tel.: **(941) 685-9017**
Email: **RoCli17@aol.com**
Website: **www.cliffroles.com**