

Inmate Divers Earn Respect and Support



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 EPIC Divers and Marine
 To
 Chino
 Marine Technology Training Center
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Industry invests in reliable, highly-skilled workforce

FRED JOHNSON IS WELL KNOWN in the industry as the lead instructor at the Marine Technology Training Center (MTTC), a commercial diving school inside the California Institution for Men, Chino -- a state prison in California's Inland Empire. "Mr. J.," as his students call him, likes to know what's going on in the field and he isn't shy about calling people up and asking for castoff equipment for the school.

Johnson's industry contacts know that the MTTC turns convicts into the kind of men that are reliable on an oil rig. And they know Johnson is the "burr-in-the-saddle" for the school that produces the divers they will need.

Donations to the program have come from companies who either want more men from the program, or find the school worthy of support for the good of the industry. The latest addition to the MTTC is a decompression chamber called "Big Blue" donated by Epic Divers and Marine, LLC last summer. The new chamber can hold three men, larger than the chamber that has been in use at the school. This means more training in the same amount of time, and an



increase in the school's capacity for inmate divers.

Epic Divers and Marine had used the chamber on a chartered vessel, but when they upgraded to a SAT system, Big Blue was no longer needed. A routine call from Johnson yielded the treasure. "When I call people I usually ask what equipment they have in their bone-yard. Epic Divers and Marine has been very generous -- as have others," Johnson said.

Graduates of the program are certified as both divers and welders. This makes them more useful than other entry-level divers and also gives them higher potential to grow and learn.

The MTTC dive program was founded by former Navy diver Leonard Greenstone in 1970. Today, the facility bears his name and the program is the most successful inmate rehabilitation program in the State of California. Greenstone is still actively involved in the program. Around 6 percent of its graduates come back to prison, compared to over 67 percent of California's general prison population.

The State of California spends \$49,000 per year to incarcerate an inmate. Despite the millions the MTTC has saved by keeping inmates from coming back to prison, the MTTC receives no funding from California's General Fund. The California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA) runs the program and is its only source of funding. However, CALPIA funding comes entirely from the limited proceeds of its inmate-produced goods and services. Since its founding, the MTTC has survived and grown primarily through the hard work of CALPIA inmates and industry generosity.

The program's rock-bottom recidivism rate is due to the fact that inmates who achieve certification have transformed attitudes and solid skills. Both contribute to the high demand for MTTC graduates. Johnson said, "My students know they've been given a second chance and they understand that they have to give more than they receive."

When the program began, the inmates first had to dig the swimming pool and build the facility with whatever scraps they could find. The same spirit of grit pervades



today. If the students are lacking a tool, they make it. If their equipment breaks, they create what they need to get it back online. Johnson said, "If something breaks out in the Gulf, they can fix it instead of standing around watching seagulls. They are trained to be part of the solution."

Life behind a prison wall isn't a rose garden. When out in the yard, the men have to group up for safety, typically along racial lines. But when inmates arrive for a day at the MTTC, they are responsible for the lives of their fellows regardless of prison politics.

More than half the students don't make it through the required 2,040 training hours, but those that do are giving the school a reputation for excellence. Johnson said, "When an inmate comes to me, I tell him he doesn't deserve respect. They come to me as criminals. They have to earn our respect."

Inmate divers who advance in the program form a brotherhood of mutual support. MTTC Instructor Jeff Powers put it this way: "Some guys are into the macho thing, but the water makes them all equal. We take them right up to where they hit the wall and want to quit, and that forces them to make a decision about what they want to do." The demands of the program teach inmates humility and the importance of being a responsible member of a team.

A typical 6-hour session at the MTTC includes a mile swim, welding class, in-water dive training and classroom time. Despite all the challenges, it is a place inmates would much rather be instead of being back in the yard, or in a cell.

Most of the graduates begin working in the Gulf of Mexico because they are unable to work overseas until the end of their parole period. But when clear of parole, Johnson can find jobs for his graduates in the North Sea, the Middle East, Africa, South East Asia, and South America. He does this not by his power of persuasion, but the reputation of the divers the school has produced in the past.

Johnson's calls to the field also keep him abreast of what's required by industry, and the MTTC follows those changes. When Helicopter Underwater Egress Training (HUET) became a requirement for offshore platforms, Johnson worked the phone and found a helicopter fuselage from Rice Aircraft Services, Inc. and a 10-man survival raft from Avalon Rafts Sales & Service, Inc. -- both from California.

When industry steps up to make a donation, they don't have to offer twice. After Johnson shared the news of the new decompression chamber with the CALPIA general manager in Folsom, CALPIA contracted a truck to bring the 16 foot-long, 8,000 pound chamber from Louisiana to California.

Once it arrived at the prison in August, the inmate divers got it installed, cleaned, and fully operational within days. Epic Divers and Marine received a letter confirming the value of the tax-deductible donation, and heartfelt thanks from a group of men seeking a second chance at life. 