

Walker Diving Underwater Construction: Veteran-Owned Business Delivering Veteran Expertise



In the midst of the recession in 2009, David Earp, President of Walker Diving Underwater Construction, not only bought the business but nearly doubled its revenue in the first full year. He attributes his immediate success to good luck and several bids won by less than 1 percent. But in addition to good fortune, Earp as the new leader encouraged his management team to dream big.

“They had the experience and the capability,” he explained, “I empowered them to go after bigger and more challenging projects. Once they trusted that the manpower, equipment and finances were in place to tackle these projects, they went to work to seek out and take advantage of bigger opportunities.”

From Navy SEAL to CEO

The management team was just one feature that attracted Earp when the “For Sale” notice caught his eye. Founded in 1957 by Glenn Walker, a diver, the company had a strong history and had remained competitive for more than 50 years through several ownership changes. And it was located in South Jersey.

Earp grew up in South Jersey and enrolled in the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, majoring in Ocean Engineering, which included coastal structures and underwater life-support systems. He spent his first two years in service as a Navy diver, performing salvage operations and diving duties. For eight years after that, Earp was a Navy SEAL, which took him around the world and ultimately back to diving, working with SEAL Delivery Vehicles diving off of submarines.

He left the Navy for graduate school at Dartmouth, earning his MBA. It was while he was searching for business opportunities that he came across Walker Diving.

“Walker Diving seemed to have a unique place in the market,” said Earp. “Many contractors that started in diving have shifted focus to pile driving and marine construction, which offer larger volumes of revenue. Walker Diving continues to focus on work in which diving is the key element.”

As a result, Walker Diving subcontracts on a wide portfolio of projects, working with the largest general contractors and the smallest specialty companies in the region. To Earp, it doesn’t matter the size of the company or duration of the project.

“Contractors want to be able to hire a diving subcontractor who can provide the crews, tools and expertise necessary to complete the project on budget and on time. And when the diving scope can be controlled independently, we strive to quote a fixed price on a specific scope of work,” he affirmed.

Pride in Projects

The company performs operations on a wide variety of projects, from wharfs and piers to bridges, intakes and outfalls, pipelines and dams.

Pile Restoration. David Earp is especially proud of the rehabilitation of timber piles under the Brooklyn Bridge Park. Walker Diving has participated on five phases of work for two general contractors. In fact, Earp specifically sought to convince general contractors that have self-performed diving to see his company as a more attractive option. Walker Diving successfully completed the work on that site and has gone on to subcontract for those two general contractors on other projects. The Brooklyn Bridge Park work demonstrated Walker Diving’s ability to bring together the manning, equipment and materials to complete the contracted scope of work on time with minimal impact to the other activities onsite. Over approximately five years, Walker Diving installed thousands of cubic yards of concrete into individual forms around timber piles.





Emergency Assistance. When a dredging contractor suffered an unfortunate accident and operations changed from rescue to recovery, Walker Diving quickly mobilized a dive crew and seamlessly joined the team already working onsite to recover their lost teammate and bring closure to the family. Getting approval to work on a US Army Corps of Engineers project can be time-consuming, but Walker Diving worked closely with the diving coordinator to obtain approvals quickly. The state police divers had been onsite from the beginning and close teamwork enabled the joint team to quickly bring closure to the family and coworkers. Earp said, “While not a large project, or one I hope we ever repeat, I was proud of the crew for how they performed professionally in a tense, emotionally charged situation.”

Unique Challenges. Walker Diving was approached about tying in a 30” lateral into a main sewage interceptor that was to be slip-lined and grouted. The challenge was the location – 170’ down-flow from a manhole in the middle of a highway in a sewage main where the flow could only be slowed for short periods during the middle of the night. All existing procedures were based around exposing the pipes and doing all of the work from the outside. When the manufacturers were questioned about how to perform this from inside an active pipe, the product engineers asked that Walker Diving “let them know” if they figured it out. Walker Diving developed a concept; built a full-size mockup to prove the concept; and then executed the work. According to Earp, “It wasn’t fast and it sure smelled bad, but the installation functioned perfectly and the grout remained only in the annular space.”

Challenges of a Veteran-Owned Small Business

Walker Diving typically performs work primarily in New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania and New York. But running a veteran-owned business has its challenges and frustrations, Earp admits.

The federal government has spending and subcontracting goals for service-disabled veteran-owned businesses on direct federal spending, but on the major federal spending passed to the states by the DOT and other agencies, veterans are not included. The House passed a bill to remedy this, but the Senate has not yet addressed the issue.

As a specialized contractor in a region with small states, Walker Diving has had to seek work outside of New Jersey. Pennsylvania has been an area of growth, aided by the inclusion of veteran-owned business in the state-wide small diverse business program, which enables a veteran to compete on a level field. However, other states have either set different standards than the federal programs or only include those with 51% of their work in that state. Ideally, service-disabled veterans will one day be recognized for their service by competing on par with any entity, rather than at a disadvantage.

Preparing for the Future

David Earp recognizes that many new structures can be built with little need for diving, but many existing marine structures may require significant underwater repairs to extend their lifecycle. Underwater repairs can be less-expensive, reduce permitting challenges and avoid losing use of the facility, as you might while a complete rebuild is in progress.

“Underwater construction will continue to serve a vital role in the infrastructure market,” Earp stated confidently. “Our future, and our growth, is dependent upon demonstrating our expertise. Our goal is to convince the heavy and marine contractors in our market that Walker Diving can be a cost-effective and reliable answer to their underwater needs, so they do not have to self-perform that work or assume risks that make them avoid projects with an underwater component.”



He credits Walker Diving’s membership in ACCNJ as “invaluable” to the company’s success.

“Entering the construction industry from the military,” he explained, “I have relied upon contacts made through ACCNJ to educate and guide me, and help me develop a plan for how my company can be a valued participant in the construction industry. The ACCNJ staff has been patient and helpful in both negotiating with labor and explaining how a good relationship with labor can be an asset to my company.”

Earp is a bit wry when expressing his hopes for the future: “I dream of the time when I can focus more on the work and less on the regulation and the bureaucratic obstacles that seem to increase every year. But until that time, at least I can enjoy working alongside others whose companionship I enjoy.”