

# Christ of THE DEEP

HALF A CENTURY AFTER ENSHRINING A FAMOUS ITALIAN STATUE OF CHRIST BENEATH THE WAVES, THE NOW-BLIND DIVER GABE SPATARO PROVES HIMSELF TO BE A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION



Gabe Spataro makes a visit to the statue of Christ that he arranged to be brought to the Keys a half century ago. The Christ statue is the most viewed underwater object in the world.

Legend and blind Korean Conflict veteran Gabriel Spataro waited until 2013 to dive the Christ statue that he brought to the U.S. in the early 1960's. This Diveheart in-depth story is a true journey of the Christ statue from Italy to Chicago and then Key Largo, Fla., where the statue now resides as the most viewed underwater object in the world. The statue Spataro brought to America back in the 1960s has generated more than a billion dollars in tourism revenue.

A humble man and member of the Italian-American Hall of Fame, Spataro will never toot his own horn, but at 86 and blind, this army veteran, who is an amazing storyteller, volunteers regularly at Shriners Hospital for Children, where he makes balloon animals, and Hines Veterans Hospital.

Learn how Diveheart founder Jim Elliott met Spataro, and how this national hero finally had the

opportunity to dive and see the Christ statue underwater for the first time for himself.

## HOW DID YOU DISCOVER SCUBA-DIVING WHEN YOU RETURNED FROM THE KOREAN CONFLICT?

I ran a family restaurant in Chicago, and one night, I was talking with guests, and they were talking about scuba-diving. I said, what is scuba diving? They said, come and see tomorrow with us up at Lake Geneva in Wisconsin. So I went up and tried it. Back then, you didn't need a scuba certification; you just needed to know someone with the equipment. They used to call it bootleg diving. I finally got certified with Diveheart through the blind center at Hines Veterans Hospital much later.

## WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR OF "IL CRISTO DEGLI ABISSI?"

I was on a wine tour in Italy when I ran into the creator of the statue. He made three nine-foot bronze statues of Christ; two were put on dive sites in Italy, and the third he wanted to donate to America. But we had to figure out how to get the statue to the states. My father's friend ran an Italian shipping company, and we got it to Chicago for free. We stored it in a national guard plane hangar until, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, we were able to get a military plane to bring it down to the Keys. It sat in a warehouse for years, and I lost track of it. It wasn't until 2013 that I had a chance to dive the statue with Diveheart.

## WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE IN THE STATUE'S PRESENCE AFTER FIVE DECADES?

It was very moving—like seeing an old friend. It was funny how I was able to

go down and dive on the statue after all that time. Jim Elliott was driving me home in 2013 after a Diveheart fundraiser that I went to. I told him that I was going to dive the Christ statue with a couple of my Korean War buddies. He said, "Well, you've probably [dived] the statue many times since the '60s." I said, "No, I've never been diving on the Christ statue. This will be my first time." He [asked whom] are you diving it with? I said, "My buddy Vinnie, who has one leg, and my buddy Louie, who is also blind." Jim said, "What dive operation is taking you miles out in the ocean to dive on the Christ statue?" I said, "We're going out on Vinnie's 12-foot fishing boat." He looked at me and said, "Two blind guys and one amputee, all in your 80s, are going out miles onto the ocean in a 12-foot fishing boat to dive the Christ statue?—You're all going to die," he said, laughing. He then picked up the phone and called his friend D.J., who owned Rainbow Reef dive center in Key Largo. D.J. cleared eight paid spots on one of his 45-foot dive boats, and we went out with Rainbow Reef and Diveheart to dive the statue for the first time. It was amazing—very spiritual. I'm glad Jim intervened, because in retrospect, it might not have been such a good idea for the three of us old guys to go out alone in Vinnie's boat to dive the statue. It all ended well, and the *Miami Herald* covered the event, and did a front-page story about it. It even changed history, because the *Miami Herald* originally reported that the Christ statue came to America through New York—but it didn't; it came in through Chicago at Navy Pier. The ring buoy that said New York was in the old photos of the statue when it arrived, because the Italian shipping company was based in New York; but it really came in through Navy Pier. Diveheart adaptive dive buddies kept me safe on the dive. I've been back several times now with Diveheart. They helped make a dream come true for this old, blind Korean War veteran. I can't thank them enough.