



Photo: Verónica Belle De Jesús, 2014.

Miguel “Pili” Pagán, Master Diver



Page from the book “A Marine Atlas of Puerto Rico,” 1976, showing Pili Pagán, left, and Jaime Braulio holding a 400 year old lead ingot salvaged from 20 to 35 feet of water and later sold to the Atomic energy Commission for shielding against radioactivity.
Photo: Verónica Belle De Jesús, 2014.

With a penchant to contribute to the certification of many divers, making diving safer, better structured, and with divers better prepared, Miguel Pagán Mir, known to all as ‘Pili,’ has certified 2,880 divers and 66 instructors during his career.

Pili became a certified diver in 1967. He was a student of Greg Korwek and Walt Hendrick and, along with Anibal Torres, Piti Leclerc and Jaime Braulio, became one of the first trained divers in the west coast of Puerto Rico. Most of his students were from the University of Puerto Rico –Mayagüez— and the Inter American University— San Germán. He trained divers along the West (Mayagüez) and South (Ponce) Coasts of Puerto Rico. He also served as instructor in the US Virgin Islands.



Caption - Photo: Verónica Belle De Jesús, 2014.

The courses he taught with Jaime Braulio were for 20-30 students and each course lasted 3 weeks; a training program they maintained for 21 years for a total of 357 classes.

“Shipwrecks have always been my weakness, even when I have never found one.” He had the opportunity of working for Dr. Leticia del Rosario, Director of the Institute of Puerto

Rican Culture, in the preparation of an inventory of shipwrecks around Puerto Rico and Mona. In this he was able to work with many divers from all areas around Puerto Rico, among them Uchi Mendoza, Kenchi Seda, René La Llave, and Jaime Braulio, divers that could free-dive to 100’. These were the best divers of the time who knew the landscape of the diving sites. They could tell when something was not quite right on the marine seascape.



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Pili organized courses that included information on the local physical oceanographic conditions of the area, presented by Dr. Manuel Hernández Ávila, the ecology of the marine resources by Dr. Máximo Cerame-Vivas, and the medicine of diving by Dr. Francisco Guzmán.

He also had the opportunity of exploring, with Dr. Ralph Brower, from Duke University, and Dr. Cerame- Vivas, areas where a “shuttle” could be established, for entering deeper waters from land.

Pili and Jaime Braulio recovered 8 tons of lead from the Santa María de Jesús, a vessel that sank in the 1500s. These were 99% pure lead cobbles, as determined by the Atomic Energy Commission, and had never been exposed to any kind of radioactivity. This made them valuable for laboratories that needed lead protection to carry out atomic energy research, such as Brookhaven, Argonne and Batelle Laboratories. The cobbles were sold for 25 cents per pound.

His first visit to Mona Island was in 1940 on the fishing vessel

JB Lewis that sailed from what is today the Neptune Dock, then La Forestal. At the time, Mona hosted the Civil Conservation Corp (CCC) that then became the National Youth — entities that brought about 150 kids to camp on Mona to apprentice as electricians, woodcutters, or farmers.

Mona was closed to the public in the 1940’s for 9 years during Operation Salt Air. Fishers and boaters were advised on days to stay away from Monito when it was being used for target practice. Strategic Air Command had airplanes in the air 24/7 during the cold war.

Many private and fishing boats went to Mona, the price then was \$35/week, food included.

Pili began working for CODREMAR-DNR in Region 2, in charge of beach clean-ups. He was transferred to do more work in Mona, including the development and establishment of the Museo de Doña Geña, a museum that displayed many artifacts rescued from shipwrecks, Pili’s passion. The museum included the bells of the Santa María de Jesús, cannons, and other artifacts, all of which later disappeared.

Caption





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The first hyperbaric chamber was established in the 1970's at the Hospital La Concepción in San Germán. The then Director and founder of the Department of Marine Sciences obtained funds to have the chamber acquired and transported to Puerto Rico. Pili participated in this endeavor by obtaining it in a National Equipment Manufacturer Association exhibit.

His fishing efforts? "Mostly trolling because my father had a boat, but if a lobster crossed my path, well ..." "I had the opportunity to fish with Ted Williams, the baseball player from Boston when he visited La Parguera." He said that he

did little fishing while diving because he spent most of the time searching for wrecks.

Pili was contracted to rescue a C-47 silver colored plane that went down in front of Ramey Air Force Base; one of the craft's engines died and after the second attempt at landing with no success it was directed to ditch at sea. The pilot and co-pilot were safely and promptly rescued by exiting through the top hatch without ever getting wet before the plane sank. A recovery missions during the first two weeks failed to find the plane. At this time they contacted Pili to find the plane.

The plane had a cargo of explosives and blasting caps on board. Trained to find things at sea, Pili Pagán and Jaime Braulio searched the area —Jaime being towed snorkeling behind the boat— and on the second try they found the plane. Two weeks in the water, the plane was covered with algae, it was green. The plane sat in 75' of water. While rescuing the material inside the plane, the first thing pulled out was a cooler, a cooler that got stuck in the hatch. “The 5 minutes pulling and tugging the cooler felt like more than 30 minutes. Imagine my desperation all the time thinking that I was going to die in that plane.”

Pili says that he fights Alzheimer by learning the scientific names of sharks. One of his frights was snorkeling off Uvero in Mona Island, when he felt the pressure wave of a bull shark, *Carcharhinus leucas*, swimming about three inches under his chest in the direction of where his son was hanging from a small boat near the beach. Probably his screams scared the shark away. Bull sharks, in his book, are probably the worst of the sharks.

Free diving and fishing for snappers in about 50' of water, he got the scare of his life when, as he was lowering a speargun to Jaime Braulio and pulling on the one already used. Jaime's

eyes became very large, a sign Pili understood to mean that there was something big behind him. Pili thought that he was a shark's meal, when he turned to see the biggest turtle he ever saw swimming toward him.

In 1968, the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) Shark Panel Meeting took place in the University at Mayagüez. Among the participants were Perry Gilbert, Jack Randall, Cerame-Vivas, and Pili Pagán.

Highlights in his memory are: finding his sister's bracelet that she had lost five years earlier in the water in Boqueron; meeting Jaques Yves Costeau in Mona Island and naming his own son Jaques Yves after him; meeting Bebe Falco, the record holder for free diving and SCUBA depths; finding 7 silver coins; thinking that they had found a treasure ...lifting a 450 pounds chest to find out that the coffer was full of horse shoes, actually shoes for mules!; studying wrecks, the history of ships transiting through the Caribbean, pirates and dreaming of treasures.

No wonder some think of Pili as the Dean of Diving in western Puerto Rico!

Caption

