

A JOURNEY TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA.

On the morning of 23rd January 1960, at 8.15a.m. Two men smiled nervously, said goodbye to their shipmates and entered a tiny steel capsule hanging beneath a huge, cigar shaped tank.

They were about to embark on the voyage of their lives, and earn a place in the geography books. The capsule was only the size of a small car and packed with so much equipment that there was barely space for the men to sit down. But then no one had said it was going to be a comfortable ride. Slowly, the ship's crane heaved and groaned into action and lowered the capsule overboard, into the dark waters of the Pacific Ocean. The two men shook hands and wished each other luck. Their descent into the unknown had begun....

The two men were scientists, Dr Jacques Piccard and Lieutenant Don Walsh of the US navy. Their extraordinary craft was called Trieste. Technically, it was known as a bathyscaphe (bath-ee-scape) Like a mini-submarine. The scientists' mission was to dive to the bottom of the Challenger Deep, in the monstrous Marianas Trench, a gigantic gash in the seabed, and the deepest spot known on the planet no one had ever tried this before. No one even knew if it was really possible.

Piccard and Walsh sat anxiously in cramped silence as Trieste sank down through the dark icy water, waiting for their echo-sounder to warn them they are nearing the bottom.

They knew only too well how fraught with danger their journey was. But neither knew what lay beneath them. Or if Trieste would stand the strain! All that separated them from the crushing weight or pressure of the water above them (imagine having a lorry balanced in your thumbnail) was the capsule's thick steel walls. At about 9,000 metres, they put on Trieste's brakes to slow down its descent – a crash landing would be disastrous. Suddenly, there was a sickening CRACK!

“What on earth was that?” Said Piccard, looking round nervously.

For a moment, their hearts were in their mouths.... But it was a false alarm. One of Trieste's outer windows had cracked under the tremendous weight of the water. But the capsule itself stayed watertight. Then came the moment they had been waiting for and dreading. At 1.06p.m., a nail-biting four hours and 48 minutes after leaving the surface, Trieste bumped and grated along the silty bottom of the Challenger Deep and came to a juddering halt.

Heart's thumping, Piccard and Walsh switched on their floodlights and peered into a world no one had ever seen before – the deepest, darkest depths of the oceans. From somewhere in that eerie darkness, something was staring back. But that was impossible – nothing could live this far down! There wasn't enough oxygen in the water for anything to survive, not for the first time, or the last, science was proved to be wrong. The staring something was a ghostly white flat fish a bit like a flounder. Soon after a small, reddish creature, shaped like a shrimp, also went scuttling past.

Teeth chattering with cold, Piccard and Walsh spent twenty minutes on the seabed, munching on chocolate bars for nourishment. Then, releasing two tonnes of iron pellet ballast which had kept Trieste weighted down, they began their slow, steady ascent, breaking the surface at 4.56p.m., three hours and 17 minutes later.

Their journey of twenty two kilometres had taken eight and a half hours. They had dived to a depth of almost eleven kilometres, deeper than anyone else... Before or since! Piccard and Walsh's amazing record still stands today, as the deepest dive ever made. And one of the greatest feats of ocean exploration ever.



QUESTIONS.

1. What was the name of the two scientists who went to the bottom of the sea?
2. What was the proper name for the mini-submarine?
3. What is the precise name of the deepest part of the ocean?
4. What damage was done to the Trieste by the weight of the water?
5. How long did it take the Trieste to travel from the surface to the deepest part of the ocean?
6. Why were the scientists surprised to see any living creatures at that depth?
7. What two creatures did they see?
8. How deep had they dived?
9. Explain what you think the Trieste looked like.

