



The SUB 750T is the latest version of the legendary DOXA orange-dial dive watch.

Raising the Doxa Sub

In the early 1980s, the DOXA SUB, the world's first orange-dial dive watch, disappeared and was not produced for 20 years. Now it has resurfaced with a splash.

BY JOE THOMPSON

The DOXA SUB dive watch, it must be said, deserved a better fate. It debuted in 1967 and boasted a number of historical firsts: the first Swiss commercial divers' watch, first divers' watch with an orange dial, first watch with a no-decompression dive table bezel, and the first, in 1969, with a helium release valve.

But, impressive as the DOXA SUB 300T was, fate dealt it a cruel blow. It had the misfortune to be a thick, oversized mechanical born just as

history was ushering in a new era of sleek, electronic watches. The DOXA SUB, with its 43x45x13 mm case and 17-jewel, self-winding Swiss movement could withstand pressure at 990 feet deep and temperatures 76 degrees below 0. But it could not withstand the cresting tide of time technology. It was doomed from the day it debuted. In 1978, Switzerland's Montres DOXA, reeling from the quartz crisis, was sold. A few years later, production of the orange-faced SUB stopped.

Now, in a surprising twist, fate seems to be smiling on the DOXA SUB, 25 years after its demise. Four years ago, the Jenny family of Bienne, Switzerland, which has owned DOXA since 1990, and marketing expert Rick Marei launched a re-edition of the original DOXA SUB sold exclusively on the company website www.doxawatches.com.

Since then, the watch has been living the *la vida loca*: It's had a starring role in hit Hollywood movie, will have its story told in a soon-to-be-published book, and is worshipped by a rabid fan club at www.watchuseek.com and other websites where fellow "doxaholics" share their passion for what they consider a horological rock star.

So strong is the DOXA revival in America that Marei, now DOXA's European-based managing director, is in the process of establishing a new subsidiary in the United States, DOXA Watches USA. He plans to shift DOXA's Internet-only retail sales policy to an authorized dealer structure through fine watch and jewelry stores. In addition to the orange-faced SUB re-edition, DOXA sells re-editions of other DOXA blasts from the past like the SUB Sharkhunter and SUB T-Graph automatic chronograph as well as the Flieger II (based on a model from 1948) and the Deco (from 1956). For now, the entire DOXA Re-edition Collection is available at the Doxa website, ranging in price from \$900 to \$3,600.

Ugly duckling

The DOXA SUB story begins in the mid-1960s when Urs Eschle, the operations manager for Switzerland's Montres DOXA SA, had, literally, a bright idea. Eschle noted that thanks to the efforts of high-profile pioneers like Jacques Cousteau, scuba diving was growing into a popular sport. He decided that DOXA should develop what is known today as a dive watch (the term did not exist then), i.e. a durable, functional, easy-to-read, easy-to-operate piece of timing equipment for recreational and professional divers.

DOXA was a substantial Swiss watch producer in those days. Founded in 1889 in the Jura Mountain town of Le Locle, it employed more than 150 people and had distribution in 87



Dirk Pitt, played by Matthew McConaughey, and his orange DOXA in the movie Sahara

countries. It had the resources to devote to the divers' watch project that Eschle launched in 1964. He assembled a research team consisting of DOXA engineers and professional divers, including Claude Wesly, the first man to spend seven days 33 feet under water, who had collaborated with Cousteau on most of his expeditions.

To ensure reliability under water, the team developed a massive solid stainless steel case. For the dial, they wanted something easily legible with hands loaded with tritium for greater

visibility. To determine which color would work best in the murky deep, they ran tests. The nearest body of water was Lake Neuchâtel, just down the mountain from Le Locle. Eschle noted that it was pretty polluted and would be a good testing ground. They tested a number of colors – turquoise, orange, yellow, red, etc. – and what they found dismayed them. At a depth of 30 meters, the brightest, easiest-to-read dial color was orange. A bright orange dial, everyone agreed, would be one ugly duckling of a watch. But for a divers' watch, function would have to trump fashion.

So it was that when DOXA unveiled its first-ever divers' watch at the 1966 Basel Fair, the SUB 300T, it had a bright, some might say garish, orange dial. (The name SUB 300 referred to the fact that it was water-resistant to 300 meters; the T stood for tritium.)

But a funny thing happened when DOXA's ugly duckling went on sale the next year. Divers thought it was just gorgeous. One California diver, who worked in a Santa Ana dive shop, recalls his delight at receiving the orange-dial DOXA SUB 300T as a gift in 1969. To this day he still has it. "This watch had a huge steel band, which most watches didn't have in those days," he says. "It was a heavy watch, very massive and masculine-looking. People would always remark about the thing. The 'in' color was orange. DOXA also had silver and black dials, but you were big-time if you had an orange watch."

The original: a DOXA SUB 300T from 1969



DOXA SUB 750T PROFESSIONAL

DATA

DOXA SUB 750T Professional

Manufacturer: Montres Doxa S.A.,
Bienne, Switzerland

Functions: Hours, minutes, seconds, date, non-decompression dive table on bezel

Movement: Automatic ETA 2824 base modified and decorated by Doxa; 25 jewels; 28,800 beats per hour; 42 hours of power reserve

Case: Satin brushed solid stainless steel, non reflective scratch-resistant crystal; screw-in case-back; water-resistant to 750 meters/2,460 feet; Incabloc shock protection

Bracelet: Solid stainless steel replica of original Doxa SUB bracelet with wetsuit expansion

Dimensions: Diameter = 44.7 mm excluding crown; length = 47 mm including lugs; height = 14 mm

Price: \$1,349 (plus \$30 shipping)



Jacques Cousteau wearing the black-dial DOXA SUB 300T Sharkhunter

Consulting Cousteau

It wasn't just the orange dial that made a splash. It was also the bezel. To add functionality, Eschle developed a new unidirectional rotating bezel that incorporated U.S. Navy Dive Table limits for no-decompression air dives. The idea was provide a bezel that would time the dive and show the diver how long it was safe to

ring. In addition, the bezel has a descent marker, consisting of two colored dots on each ring. The diver turns the bezel so that the dots line up with the minute hand at the start of each dive.

Eschle's research trip also yielded big sales dividends before the watch was even launched. As Eschle recounted it later, "The U.S. Divers Company research team was so impressed by this rugged and innovative timepiece that they

to-be-published book "SUB 300T: A History of the DOXA Dive Watch," Peter Millar, moderator of an independent Doxa website called www.doxa300t.com, argues that while Doxa is famous for the innovative dial and bezel of the SUB Professional, "it has received very little recognition for another and arguably greater achievement in dive watch development, the helium release valve."

"In 1969, the 'in' color was orange. You were big time if you had an orange watch."

CLIVE CUSSLER

stay under water without having to use a decompression chamber. The bezel was created with the assistance of no less a luminary than Jacques Cousteau. When Eschle was working on the bezel, Claude Wesley recommended that Eschle confer with his friend Cousteau, who was then head of U.S. Divers Company in California, the leading supplier of advanced high-tech diving equipment.

Eschle did. Working with U.S. Divers, he tested the no-decompression table bezel, and registered the U.S. patent. The bezel has two rings. The outer ring indicates the dive depth in feet for a no-decompression dive. The inner ring indicates the corresponding dive time in minutes. It shows the allowed dive time for a no-decompression dive at a depth indicated on the outer

decided to exclusively market the orange face DOXA SUB under the name The US Divers DOXA. So I returned home with the finished and approved diver watch and the first order of 4,000 units to be delivered to the US Divers Company with the no-decompression bezel."

The orange SUB turned out to be a hit. DOXA, knowing that not everyone was wild about orange, quickly followed with different dial colors: the Sharkhunter (black), Divingstar (yellow), and Searambler (silver). It called the orange version the Professional.

Two years after it launched the SUB 300T Professional, DOXA struck again with another historical orange-dial dive watch. The DOXA SUB 300T Conquistador is the world's first watch with a helium release valve. In his soon-

The benefit of a helium release valve (HRV) in a watch is that it prevents the buildup of helium molecules. Helium penetrates the case seals and too much helium pressure can blow off the watch crystal. The HRV relieves pressure by allowing the helium to escape. Millar notes that Rolex and DOXA co-developed the HRV; the two share the patent. Rolex fitted a prototype of the valve into some Submariners, which COMEX divers used. However, Rolex did not introduce the HRV into its regular production until the Sea-Dweller in 1971.

As the 1970s progressed, ultra-thin, ultra-accurate quartz watches became the wonders of the watch world, and the DOXA firm struggled. The SUB continued to have its devotees, of course. Jacques Cousteau took to wearing

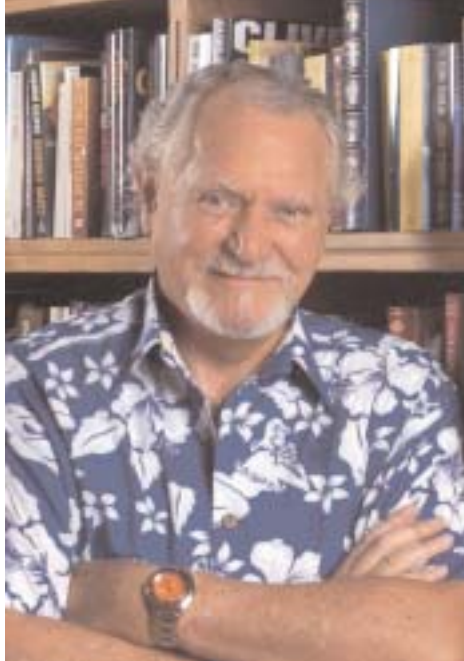
DOXA SUB 750T PROFESSIONAL

Sharkhunter version with the black dial. Robert Redford wore the same watch in the movie "Three Days of the Condor" in 1975. But the SUB's days were numbered. Aubrey Freres, which acquired the Montres DOXA in 1978, continued to make some orange-dial SUB watches into the 1980s, but it was a different model that lacked the panache of the original. The orange-faced DOXA SUB 300T was gone.

Goodbye gift

But not forgotten. One man, in particular, remained extraordinarily faithful to his orange-dial watch. It was the California dive shop clerk mentioned earlier who received the watch as a gift. His name was Clive Cussler. The watch was a goodbye gift from his buddies at the shop. Cussler was an adventure-novelist wannabee. He had written one unpublished novel and, wanting more time to write a second, he left his job as a creative director of a Los Angeles ad agency for the one in the dive shop. Now the novel was finished and he was moving on. As a goodbye gift, his buddies gave Cussler an orange DOXA. Cussler loved his orange DOXA so much that he put the watch into his books on the wrist of his fictional hero, Dirk Pitt, who loved it just as much as Cussler did.

It took Cussler four more years to get a novel published. Since then, he has become one of the most successful adventure writers ever. Over the past three decades, he has published 18 Dirk Pitt novels and sold more than 150 million books. The orange DOXA is alive today, Peter Millar argues in his book, because of Dirk Pitt. He arrived on the scene in the mid-1970s, just as the orange DOXA was about to enter oblivion. If the rest of the world wanted to wear thin, high-tech battery-operated watches, fine. Dirk Pitt was sticking with his massive, rugged, orange tick-tock. "In almost all of Clive Cussler's Dirk Pitt novels" Millar writes, "the DOXA SUB is featured and has helped Pitt save the world on numerous occasions. It is therefore fitting that in real life, Cussler and Pitt should be credited with saving the DOXA SUB. Pitt's daring adventures with his DOXA SUB kept the brand name alive.... New generations of divers had never even seen a SUB



Acclaimed adventure novelist Clive Cussler is a long-time orange DOXA SUB fan.

300T. DOXA was all but consigned to a footnote in watch history. But the orange dial lived on in Dirk Pitt's world."

DOXA's Rick Marei agrees. He cites "the tight link to Clive Cussler and his novels" as a major factor in the orange Doxa revival. Cussler's latest contribution to DOXA consumer recognition came this year with the release of the movie, Sahara, based on Cussler's 1992 novel of the same name. In the film, as in the book, Dirk Pitt, played by actor Matthew McConaughey, wears the orange SUB.

The orange revival

Certainly Cussler and his intrepid Pitt did DOXA a great service by keeping the SUB alive in fiction. Credit for reviving the watch in fact, however, goes to Marei. Canadian-born Marei is a watch aficionado turned watch executive. In 1998, he left his marketing job with Microsoft in Europe to devote himself full-time to his true passion, collecting vintage watches from the 1960s and 1970s. He loved the colorful looks and bold lines of watches like Zodiac, Valjoux and Fortis. But the watch that most intrigued him was the orange DOXA SUB.

Marei was convinced that there was a market for the watch. He approached DOXA in Bienne with a plan to revive the original diver's watch, which had long been out of production. DOXA then, as

now, supplied mid-priced quartz dress watches to Eastern European markets. Intrigued by Marei's proposal, DOXA, headed by Peter Jenny, hired Marei to lead the launch of the re-edition.

In August, 2002, 35 years after it originally appeared on the market, the DOXA SUB 300T came back, with the same tonneau case, no-decompression bezel, luminous markers and orange dial. It was powered by the ETA 2824-2 automatic, a modern version of the ETA 2852 automatic in the original SUB. DOXA produced 1,000 pieces. It presented watch number 001/1000 to Clive Cussler. The collection quickly sold out, as did the 1,000 SUB 300T Seahunter versions issued in honor of Cussler's shipwreck hunting team, the Seahunters. Divingstar (with a yellow dial) and Sharkhunter (black dial) versions followed. Tritium is no longer allowed to be used on watches so the re-editions use Superluminova. To maintain authenticity, DOXA has kept the T designation; now it stands for *taucher*, the German word for diver.

DOXA has continued to refine the SUB, issuing a SUB 600T Professional (water-resistant to 600 meters), and this year a SUB 750T Professional (water-resistant to 750 meters). DOXA will produce 5,000 pieces, priced at \$1,349 (plus shipping costs) on the DOXA website. Evidence on the DOXA web forums is that the doxaholics are going gaga over it.

Apparently they will have plenty more to cheer about. As Marei notes in a recent web forum post, "A new certified chronometer version, a chronograph, the Searambler, a two-time zone, and a helium release valve are all models that we are working on." ■



The SUB 600T Sharkhunter