In November 1996, in response to the ending my ostensibly secure diving job with Oceaneering in Angola, I developed a profoundly fuzzy plan involving ROV’s and working with them offshore, this despite my having almost no real knowledge of their operation or their inner workings.

The acronym ROV stands for Remotely Operated Vehicle, uniquely those used in water.

By the time I went to train on them, they had reached quite a sophistication from their early days in the 70s and 80s when us professional divers chortled at their inability to do anything well, except breakdown.

The ones that I was aware of were small, about the size of a fridge freezer, and mostly yellow and that was pretty much all I knew. when I insanely gave up on diving and launched myself into a career in the ROV business.

But, as I was to find out without learning anything substantive, there was a lot more to ROV’s than I rather sniffily thought that I knew.

They were being used primarily in light construction, diver observation and inspection.

They used a combination electrical, hydraulic and mechanical power, so ROV Pilot / Technicians (Techs), as those working with them were termed, needed a good technical grounding in those three engineering disciplines, and an ability to drive the vehicle and understand the data that was being collected, to navigate and while inspecting subsea structures.

However, before all that and, In order to give me an ROV- esque qualification, I took a course at The Underwater Centre in Fort William, Scotland.

Their brochure alleged that they ran a foundation course in ROV operations and systems, which sounded just the job.

Aer Lingus delivered me ‘safely and on time’ to Glasgow at mid-morning and I took the bus north, north into the thickening rain, past Loch Lomond and Loch Ness, there was no monster evident and I arrived in Fort William at 3 PM, though with the horizontal rain reducing daylight to mere murk; it could have been eight in the evening.

The bus depot was nothing more than a quivering pole in the McDonald’s car park, so having retrieved my bag; I raced through the rain and wind to the Mac D restaurant, where I thought I might have a big Mac meal while I waited for the storm to abate.

As it happens, I could have consumed twenty big Mac meals whilst waiting for abatement, this was no storm; this was standard Fort William November weather. Another thing that wasn’t going to happen was a taxi coming to the forlorn looking taxi rank outside my window.

I sat for an hour peering dejectedly through the driving rain, hoping desolately that a cab would pull in, but just as abatement to the rain was hopeless, so to was my wait for a taxi.

I had been provided with a map directing me to the Nevis bed-and-breakfast establishment, which seemed to be just off the main street, which is where I appeared to be.

There was a church just across the road from where I sat, which was a landmark from my map. Depending on scale, I guessed that the B&B was close, maybe two or three hundred metres up the main drag. It didn’t matter, no matter how far away it was, I was walking!

I memorised important landmarks along the way, because there was no way I could take that flimsy piece of paper out in the rain.

Turn right at the Alexandra hotel & (according to the map) the B&B is 50 m up that road. So steeling myself I set off.

The map didn’t lie, in 5 minutes I was at the door of The Nevis dripping like a drowned rat. Mrs Schmidt, the owner ushered me in to her kitchen, where she and a friend were ‘having a dram’ by a roaring log fire. Very friendly, very warm, very convivial, I shed my Oceaneering Christmas gifted ,rain jacket with the company logo proudly emblazoned on the chest and sleeve , which Mrs Schmidt hung on a chair where it dripped into a spreading pool of rainwater on the kitchen flagged floor.

I shared a dram, but I was uncomfortable sitting with steam rising in the thick cloud, from my sodden jeans. I got the impression that my landlady and her friend might be happy if I stayed a while. Several times they commended me on my ‘Bob Geldof’ brogue, but I was wet through, and all I could think of was a hot shower and dry clothes. I also intended going for a drink in the Alexandra hotel which I had passed on the way. It looked warm and welcoming.

My room was in the attic and had been designed & built with munchkins in mind, I am 6’3” tall, so for the duration of my stay I was to be bent almost double when not in bed.

Mrs Schmidt had disappeared at the top of the stairs, so any protest from me would have to wait until I showered and changed.

Recounting my adventures in the Nevis B&B is a painful experience; suffice to say that I very quickly, became tired of the oppressive, claustrophobic environment of my room, and my landlady, despite the initial good impression, fell some way short of expectations. My B and B with evening meal, was actually just a B and evening meal, there was no breakfast. Mrs Schmidt explained this glaring inconsistency, by telling me that usually those on courses at the Underwater Centre didn’t want breakfast.

Her cooking was inedible anyway & she expected me to use the same towels day after day, even when soaking wet. On the second day when presented with a baked bean and sausage casserole for dinner, I snapped and left.

She whined at me as I walked out that the divers that she gets, usually break things in the house, and have low expectations and no manners.

I checked into the Alexandra hotel on the corner & luxuriated in two meals a day, a bedroom in which I could stand up, and en suite bathroom and fresh towels daily. All for five pounds a day more than I was paying to be starved and tortured down the road.

 Fort William for me at that time, with the exception of my little, tartan bedecked Victorian hotel, was a grave disappointment.

For two weeks the clouds never got off ground level, despite assurances that Ben Nevis, the loftiest mountain in Britain & Ireland was right there, towering over the town. The gloom never parted sufficiently for me to see it.

Also the Underwater Centre had somewhat overstated their ability to hold an ROV course of any type including foundation.

For four days they had tried to retrain me as a diver, until I had walked out of one of their crap lectures. Telling the young instructor (who wasn’t even a professional diver) that there was nothing he could teach me about diving. I had worked as one professionally for 12 years, and that he should stick his course up his hole.

I took myself to the administrator’s office, who had been alerted about my insubordination, and I detailed pretty much the same scenario for him. He agreed that their course was possibly not quite up to their aspirations, but they had been let down with some instructors and the ROV that they ordered hadn’t arrived, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Eventually he said that he would let me work alone on a Hyball ROV that they had lying around in bits, and read some manuals,

Should I manage to get through that gruelling program, at the end of two weeks and after a perfunctory examination, he would present me with my certificates and let me on my way.

As I didn’t really know one end of an ROV from the other, and as I really only wanted the certificate, I accepted his compromise.

So for the rest of the course I tinkered around, looked at pictures and videos of ROV’s at work, all of which turned out to be a great help to me in my future career.

Reading the manuals was difficult without having some context, but from a technical point of view the electrics, hydraulics and pneumatics worked in exactly the same principle as those used in the diving industry.

When one works as a professional diver, one learns how to service the equipment, so after 12 years, I had a very good understanding of the technical ins and outs of the gear that I had used during that time including underwater cameras and water proof housings.

I was a little worried about the driving or flying, as it was termed, of the vehicle, but I looked forward to the challenge.

I actually fixed the little Hy Ball and had it running on the bench, using the standard workshop 220 V 3 pin plug as the power source.

I was given two of the Underwater Centres employees, to assist in the launching, and without further ado, I was driving an ROV, a very small one, but nonetheless it was a Remotely Operated Vehicle.

There was a sunken white mini Metro in the dock which was actually a Loch, a fjord it would be called in Norway, which was used, as a target for their diver training, and that was the first thing that I saw remotely underwater.

I had great fun flying the little thing around, discovering all the wonders of the underwater world without getting wet.

Every day until the end of the course I spent hours practising my flying.

All the observation jobs that I had done as a diver I now tried to replicate remotely.

The course, for all of its shortcomings, gave me a tenuous feel for what it would be like to work in the ROV industry.

 True to his word, the boss, ran me through the reading of a circuit line drawing, had me re-terminate a video cable, tested my flying skills, asked me some general offshore type questions, presented me with my certificates, Intermediate and Advanced ROV Operations and Systems, and released me on the ROV industry. Not bad for such an inauspicious start.