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World of Women
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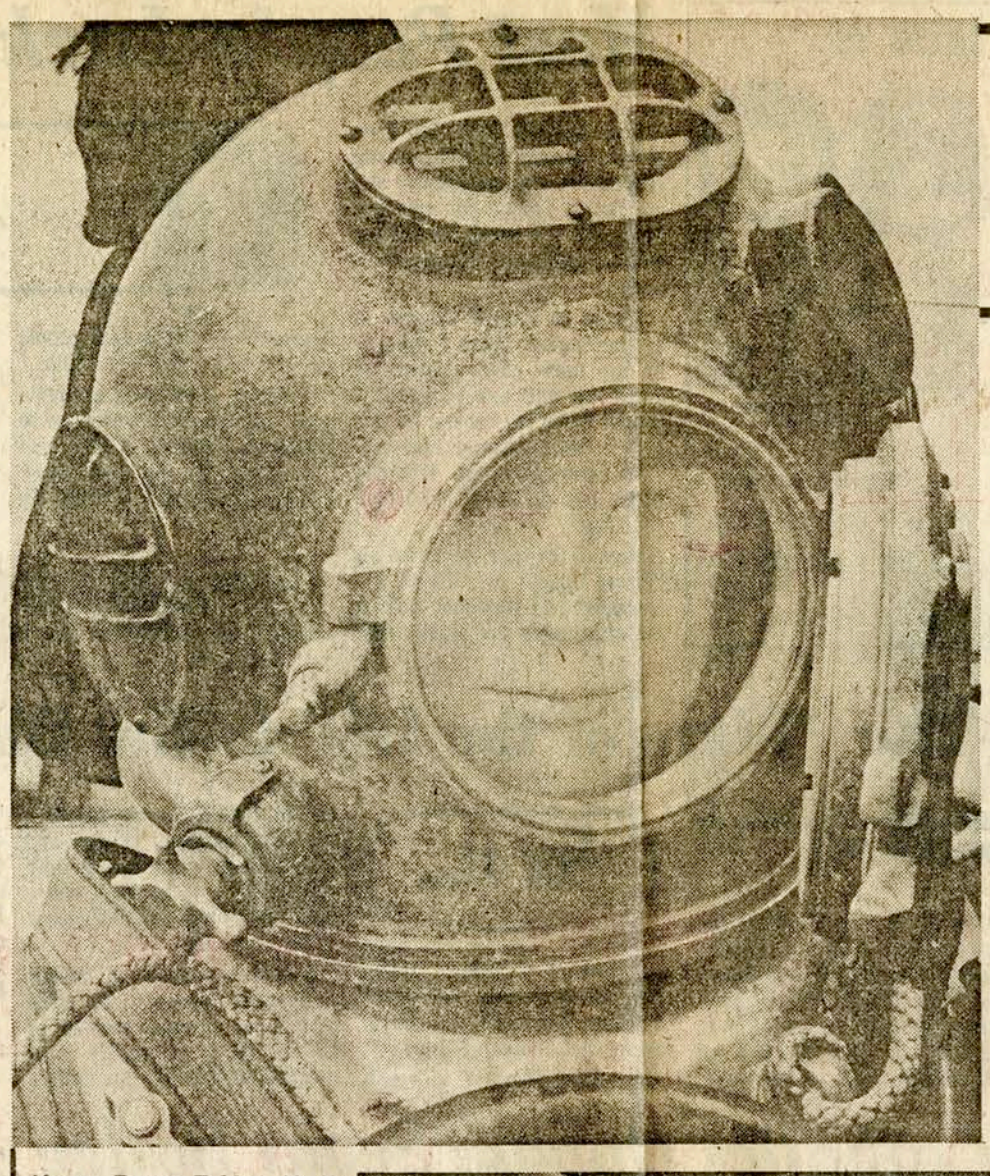
She's Diving Into Her Navy Career



Above: Donna Tobias, 22, is about to become the Navy's first woman deep-sea diver.

Right: Tenders buckle the wrists of Ms. Tobias' diving suit.

By LAURA WHITE
Virginian-Pilot Staff Writer

NORFOLK—Donna Tobias, within two weeks of becoming the Navy's first woman deep-sea diver, sat in the dingy school, warming up with a cup of coffee.

"When I came into the class, I told myself they'd have to make me leave. I wouldn't quit," the 22-xear-old Californian said. When she graduates March 14, after 10 rigorous weeks of training at the Naval Surface Forces Atlantic Fleet Diving School here, she will be qualified for underwater salvage, ship repair, and rescue operations.

The job is no less dangerous or difficult for men. In their seventh week of training last week, 14 of 27 candidates remained.

That morning Ms. Tobias had demonstrated again, with silemt determination, that she can dive in a hard-hat rig—194 pounds of copper hard-hat helmet, rubberized canvas suit, weighted belt, and weighted shoes. That was the biggest test for this 5-foot-4, 135-pound woman.

Out on the diving float at Little Creek Amphibious Base, the rest of the class practiced lightweight diving, breathing air fed through a hose from the surface into their face masks. They ignored Ms. Tobias with a sort of respect—the only difference between them is that she changes clothes in the bathroom instead of down on the float.

"I really want to get through this school," she said.

After 11 months in the Navy, Ms. Tobias is a Hull Technician Fireman, a $398-a-month job, on temporary orders to the school from the Fleet Maintenance Assistance Group (ship repair) at Norfolk's Destroyer and Submarine Piers.

She trained to be a hull technician—pipe-fitting, welding, sheet metal work and damage control—because the job was physical labor, outdoors, and something she'd never done before. It would also give her askill to use underwater.

Ms. Tobias had already decided being a diver was the best way to spend her time in the Navy. At first, she didn't know what jobs the divers did.

The school is tough and Chief Pierce C. West, the senior instructor, didn't change it for her. "We pressure them," he said. "The only thing they (divers) have to look

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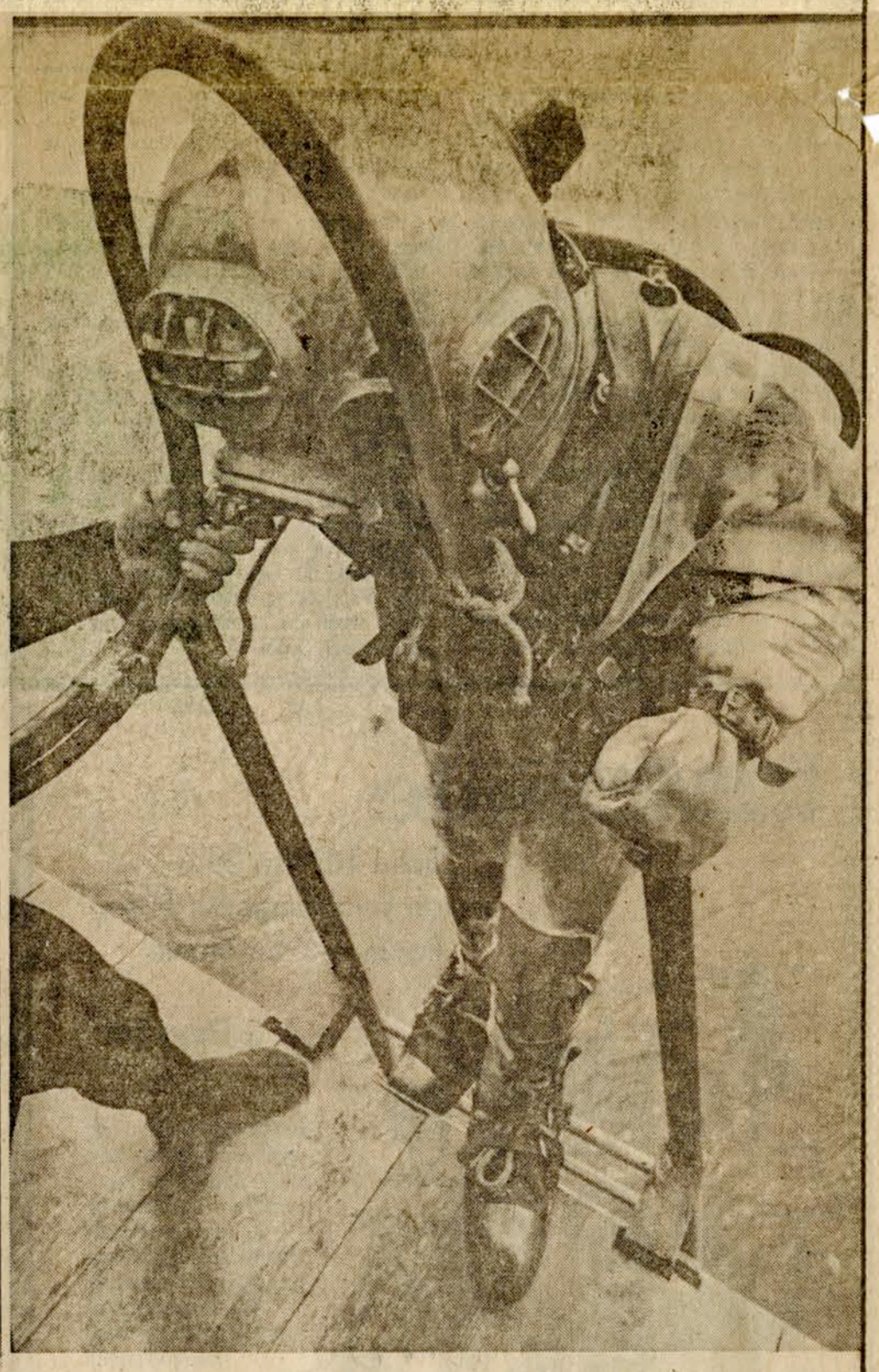

Looking like a diver from the movie "2000 Leagues Under the Sea," Donna proves she can handle the 194-pound hard-hat rig.

Tenders lace up Donna's suit legs to keep air out of them while she's diving. If the lacing isn't tight, her feet will be lighter than her head underwater.

Virginian-Pilot Photos by Mort Fryman

Instructor Calls Her Outstanding Student

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forward to after this is more hard work." Of 100 candidates he gets each year, about 44 graduate. The school trains divers for scuba (60 to 130 feet deep), lightweight (up to 90 feet) and hard-hat (up to 200 feet) diving.

When West saw Ms. Tobias pass the prerequisite hard-hat dive last December and then talked to her, he figured she'd be one of the ones who lasted. "If she couldn't have picked up the rig, I wasn't going to let her come."

She made it through scuba training during the third and fourth weeks, when most candidates are dropped because they can't handle fear of drowning or claustrophobia. Then she had trouble with the hard-hat rig.

The rig is used during hazardous diving conditions—for tunneling under a sunken ship, for instance. The heavy, thick suits anchor divers to the bottom in depths up to 200 feet, protecting them from strong currents and sharp edges. Air is continually fed through an air hose from the surface, and there is constant radio contact. Hard-hat divers are hauled to the surface. It is the safest of the diving rigs, according to West. He believes there hasn't been a death in the rig for 20 years. The suit has been modified only once since 1920.

"Once I fell and couldn't get up. They had to pull me up. I felt pathetic and mad at myself," Ms. Tobias remembered. "I wanted to quit beca se I wasn't keeping up.

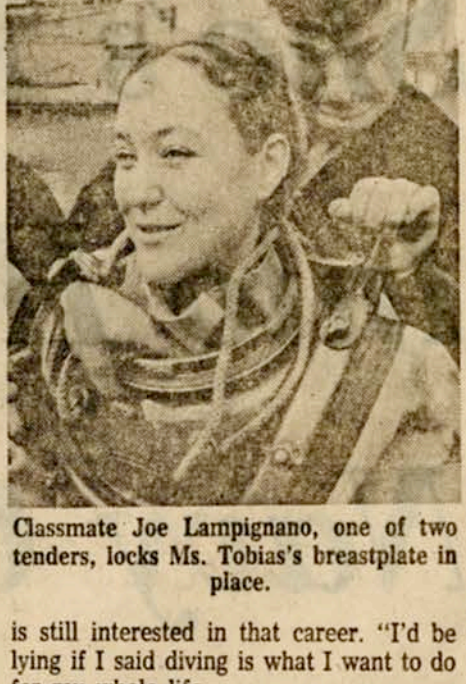
"Then the instructors brought me in here alone and told me there were techniques to use if I couldn't lift my feet straight up—like using my back and swinging my legs out to climb the ladder. They made me walk around in the shoes all day to build up my muscles." The shoes weigh 35 pounds.

Once her commanding officer, Lt. Cmdr. John F. McClogan, brought a guest to watch the woman diver. Her foot slid off a ladder rung and, "I slid back into the water like I was going down a washboard."

But she lives on challenges. The school trains divers to do underwater cutting and welding. Their last requirement is locating an unknown object underwater, identifying it, devising a salvage plan, and bringing it to the surface.

After graduation, they may be assigned to submarine and destroyer repair units, to rescue or salvage tugs, or to surface ships for aircraft recovery or towing operations, West said. Navy divers also handle civilian jobs; a group is now raising sunken ships and clearing debris along the waterfront for the City of Norfolk, he said. The school also trains Army and police divers to bring up bodies.

The complete change in her life-style was what Ms. Tobias was looking for. After two and a half years studying photojournalism at a community college and California State University, she got tired of college. During school she'd been a police cadette, working at a local station to see if she wanted to become a cop. She



Classmate Joe Lampignano, one of two tenders, locks Ms. Tobias's breastplate in place.

is still interested in that career. "I'd be lying if I said diving is what I want to do for my whole life.

"I want to continually attack new things. I looked at this as a new experience," she explained. She flinched, but said nothing, when she heard classmates being called women when they didn't measure up. "I've never said anything about it, but I'm 100 per cent a feminist. Not that I'm affiliated with any group, but it's my way of life. I want to be a whole person."

"The first day of school, there was no mention about a woman being in the class. I found out later that Chief West turned down a request to take pictures when I did my first hard-hat dive. He said, 'This isn't a circus.' I respect him."

West calls her an outstanding student. "She has not complained once. The men don't (tease) her because she's doing better than 85 per cent of them. You tell her you want a job done and she is able to do it, without your having to draw her a picture."

But he admits he still wonders whether she'll be of good use to the Navy, which essentially bars women from serving aboard ship. She will fill a shore billet, taking a place a man diver would rotate to after sea duty.

Ms. Tobias has mixed feelings about sea duty. "I think it'll happen in time. If they do, I feel like I'd be one of the first. I don't think they'd have to make all those big changes for women. But I'm not sure there's enough privacy on a ship for me."

Her parents, who are divorced, "aren't surprised at what I do any longer. I don't think they have any conception of what I do, but they're encouraging." Her brothers, 24, and 17, "just think it's another thing Donna's docng."

After graduation, Ms. Tobias will go back to the Fleet Maintenance Assistance Group to fill a diving billet there. Divers pay will add $65 a month to her salary.

"When they fvrst put all that hard-hat gear on me, I thought to myself, 'What the heck are you doing here?' But I don't think I'm a token (woman) to West. I don't think he kept me because I'm the first. I'm looking forward to graduation. "Only when I'm standing there will I be able to say, 'I did it'."