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DISNEY'S 'BEAUTY AND THE BEAST'
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NEW JESUS: IT'S NOT THAT HE LOOKS SO DIFFERENT BUT THAT HE LOOKS SO STARTLED.

THE HARTFO

NAVY'S FIRST FEMALE DEEP-SEA DIVER TOOK PIONEERING PLUNGE

By **FRANCES GRANDY TAYLOR**
Courant Staff Writer

Donna Tobias' induction Saturday into the Women Divers Hall of Fame released a torrent of memories of her experiences in the Navy — few more vivid than her time in the Mark V.

The Mark V, no longer used by the Navy, was a diving suit made of rubberized canvas, with a spun copper helmet and breastplate and one-size-fits-all lead boots. It was a behemoth of a suit. On land, it weighed 200 pounds to Tobias' 135, but in the water it allowed her to withstand the pressure at depths of more than 100 feet.

"On a daily basis, it was the single biggest obstacle," said Tobias, a petite woman with a quiet voice and calm demeanor.

"That suit was huge on me. I'm 5-5 on a tall day, and my feet are short. Those boots were tough. They weighed 17 pounds each, and my foot only filled half the shoe. I even had dreams about those shoes."

It was an arduous climb up a ladder out of the water, trying to place her lead-weight boots on each



PHOTO COURTESY OF DONNA TOBIAS

DONNA TOBIAS is helped into a Mark V deep-diving suit during her training in Norfolk, Va., in 1975.

rung: "My foot would just hang down, trying to lift those boots. You had to get your momentum going. Once you started, you could not stop."

Her nemesis on land became her best friend in the sea.

"It was cumbersome on land, but in the water, you could move around; it was less of a problem. In the water, I felt safe in it. I can smell being in this suit — smell the air, the metal, taste it, you know? I got to be fond of it, in the water."

That suit would challenge any diver, man or woman. But in the Navy, no woman had ever won the right to wear it — not until Tobias in 1975 became the Navy's first female deep-sea diver.

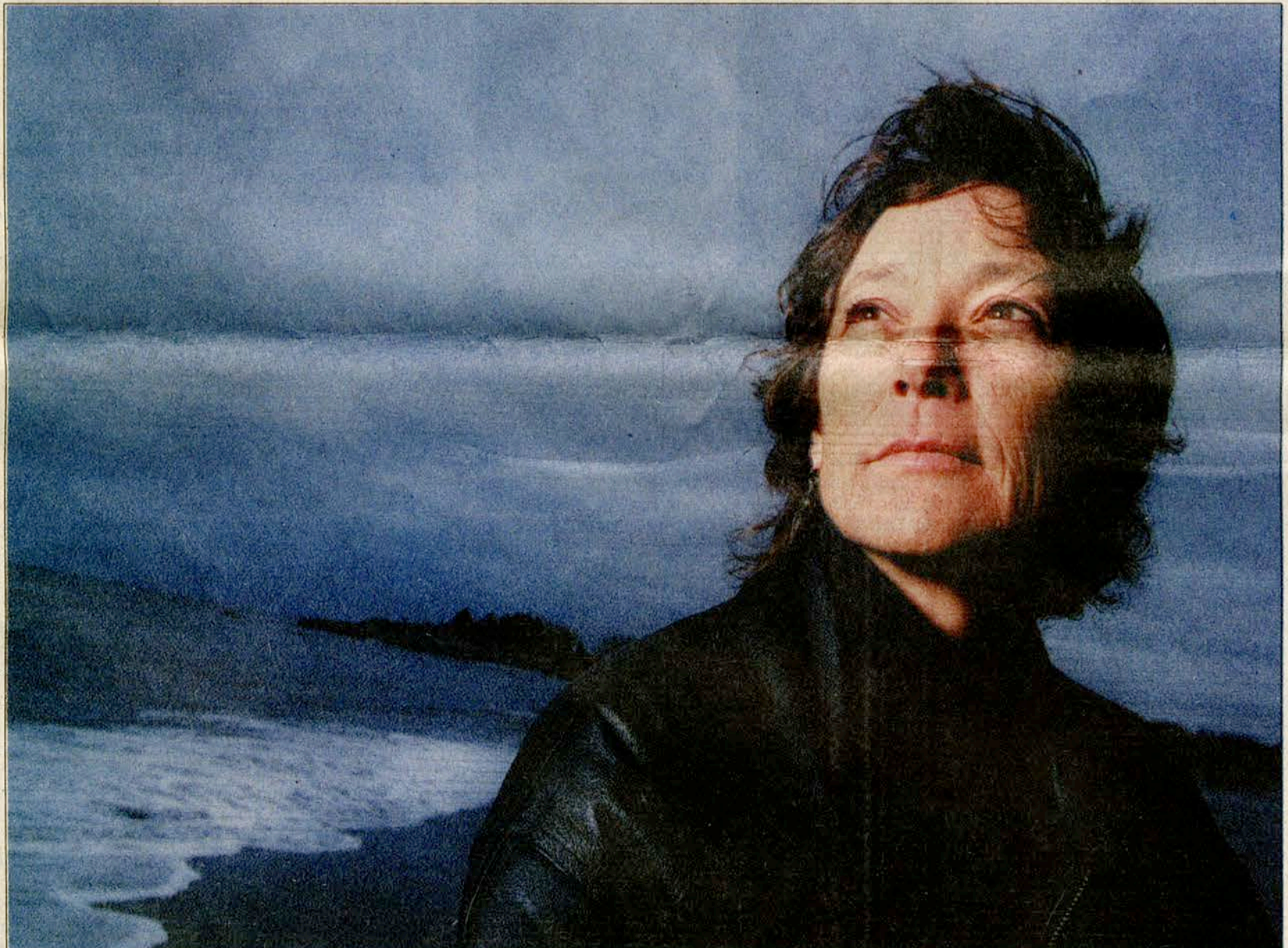
Getting Beyond 'No Way'

From her first scuba dive, Tobias wanted to spend her life on the water. That passion would ultimately lead her to challenge one of the most elite bastions in the military.

"It's only been in the last few years that I've really begun to talk about it," said Tobias, who lives in

GO TO D4

NAVAL TRIUMPH



TOM BROWN / THE HARTFORD COURANT

THE FIRST female deep-sea diver in the U.S. Navy, Donna Tobias of Waterford, was inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame on Saturday.

She Dared The Depths

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Waterford and teaches at New London High School. "I didn't want people making fanfare over me, because we were all going through it. It was an accomplishment for women. It was a door opening."

Tobias, 48, grew up in Southern California and joined the Navy because of her love of the water. "Even when I was talking to my recruiter, I asked about going to diving school. He said no way, women couldn't get in there," Tobias recalls.

After basic training, "I pressed to find out what a person had to do to become a diver, and they came up with a long list of things. I still have that raggedy little piece of paper. I just went through each thing one by one."

She ignored naysayers who believed women didn't belong in diving school. She applied to the Navy 2nd Class Diving School and heard nothing until she received notice that she had been accepted, two days before the program started in January 1975. Tobias was 21 years old.

During the grueling 10-week course at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Va., where half of the class typically drops out, Tobias learned all phases of deep-sea diving: search and rescue, "hard-hat" diving and salvage, as well as studying physics and medicine.

"The nature of the school is that you can quit or be dropped at any time. If you even utter the words 'I quit,' you're gone, and you can't take it back. It's very nerve-racking. Each day that goes by, you have more invested. I'd lie down at night, holding my breath."

Diving school was a mental as well as a physical test, compounded by the men's resistance to a woman in their midst.

"I challenged this last macho domain. Some couldn't get over their own wonderment over how I could wear the metal breastplate, if it was an issue for my breasts," she said. "There were some that were so threatened — what would it say about them if a 'girl' could do this?"

Looking back, Tobias said, "I have some perspective on it now, and I feel it was a learning experience for all of us. The highest compliment is for someone to say, 'I'll go in the water with you.' And some of those who resisted me the most at first, we became the closest in trust. I watched myself grow, and what was powerful over time was watching people become their best self."

She graduated with a class of 14 in March 1975. "When you go through something like that together, you get pretty close to people," she added.

"I don't know where any of them are now, but they are always here," she said, putting her hand over her heart. "They don't forget me either, I'm sure."

Walking The 'Narrow Path'

By any measure, Navy diving school is a tough place to be. Last year's movie "Men of Honor," starring Cuba Gooding Jr. and Robert De Niro, told the story of Carl Brashear, the first African American to become a master diver in the Navy.

In a phone interview from his home in Virginia Beach, Brashear, who was assigned to the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, remembers being asked his opinion of a woman enrolling in the diving school.

"I used Muhammed Ali's words, 'If a mosquito tells you he can pull a plow, don't ask questions, just hitch him up,'" Brashear said. "I believe females can do whatever they want

to, and I support their right to do it."

Brashear, 70, who was injured in an accident during a search operation, also became the first amputee to be restored to active diving duty. He was scheduled to speak at the Hall of Fame ceremony Saturday in Secaucus, N.J., but was forced to cancel due to illness. He retired from the Navy in 1979.

"Being the first in anything, you have to walk a narrow path. You will get tried, and you will get tested," he said. "But she is one outstanding individual. She maintained a good attitude all the time; she was a good leader and a good diver."

After graduation, Tobias was assigned to the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, where she taught sailors how to escape from a submarine in a giant water tower known as the escape training tank. The 125-foot-high metal cylinder was filled with water more than 100 feet deep.

Steven Lechner, a retired Navy master diver, worked with Tobias at Groton. He met her in 1977. "She had to prove herself, to be twice as good at everything, and she was. She's remarkable; she has a tremendous amount of courage."

Lechner said Tobias was the first woman to teach in the escape training tank.

"After she proved herself, everyone looked up to her and admired her, because they knew she was the only woman in the whole Navy at the time doing that."

Women are still relatively few in the Navy's diving program. There are 25 female commissioned officers teaching or diving and six female sailors assigned as divers to aircraft carriers and destroyers, said Lt. Steven Curry, a Navy spokesman.

A Rough-And-Tumble Lot

The Women Divers Hall of Fame, which opened last year, has inducted 100 women divers, including marine zoologist Eugenie Clark and Sylvia Earl, diver emeritus for National Geographic.

Gary Tobias, Donna's brother, was assigned to a submarine and at one point trained under his sister at Groton. "It was a very difficult program, and she cut me no slack whatsoever," he said.

"I know that she was very well respected in that whole community," said Gary Tobias, 51, who retired from the Navy after 23 years and now lives in Norwich. "These divers are a rough-and-tumble lot. They have a lot of machismo, and she stuck it out there."

As a Navy diver, Donna Tobias worked in ports on naval vessels, took part in search and salvage operations in Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean and participated in the sinking of a World War II ship to construct an artificial reef in Chesapeake Bay.

At Groton, she also worked in the hyperbaric chamber, which treats divers suffering embolisms, as well as people with carbon monoxide poisoning and gangrene.

"We saved people's lives, which was immensely satisfying," Tobias said.

Her career had its share of scary moments.

"When you are diving around ports, the water is like coffee. And there is soft silt at the bottom, a kind of gook, where the depth can be well over your head. Things sink into it, and they are gone," she said.

Tobias was wearing scuba gear, with no voice connection to other members of the team.

"I was searching for something,

all the silt got stirred up and I became totally disoriented. I couldn't tell up from down. In a microsecond you have this conversation with yourself — there's no words because it's too fast — but it's something like 'I might die; calm down.' I composed somehow, and I got through it," she recalls.

"It's nothing to take credit for, necessarily. Somehow a person has the ability not to panic or they don't. And I don't think any of us can know that ahead of time, even though we are trained."

Tobias left the Navy in 1980 to return to college and to stay in Connecticut. She earned a bachelor's degree in education, a master's degree in psychology and became certified to teach special education. She still spends a lot of time at the beach, snorkeling from spring to fall. As a hobby, she monitors aquatic life and migratory birds in the area.

"I never in my life thought I would end up being a teacher, but when I



PHOTO COURTESY OF DONNA TOBIAS

DONNA TOBIAS makes her way into the water in a Mark V deep-diving suit during her training at the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Va., in 1975.

was teaching at Groton, I got very taken with it," she said.

Her brother says her Navy training serves her well in her new career.

"The tenacity she shows — she never lowered the bar for any of these kids," he said, "and when they graduate, they remember and appreciate that."

Said Donna Tobias: "I tell my students, 'Never let anyone tell you you can't do something. If you really want it, you can have it.'"

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