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Trailblazers in Naval diving return to Dive School

Some of the Navy's first women divers returned to Panama City, Fla. May 8 where they got their training.

13 members of the Women Divers Hall of Fame, some of them former Navy divers, participated in tours of commands on board the Naval Support Activity Panama City, including the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center (NDSTC). The center is leading the commemoration of the Year of the Military Diver (YOTMD) events.

In 1975 women were given the opportunity to serve in the Naval Experimental Diving Unit.

"The Experimental Diving Unit is where the Navy created the (calculation) tables and schedules for diving," said Cmdr. Hung Cao, commanding officer of NDSTC. "We didn't know how deep we could go. We didn't know how long divers could stay underwater. We test the boundaries of what men and women can do under the sea."

Women divers first had to adapt to gear that were designed for men. Wetsuits, facemasks and air tanks were not made to fit a woman's body.

"When I first started my training, the equipment didn't necessarily help," said Retired Capt. Bobbie Scholley, Women Diver Hall of Fame member. "The equipment wasn't exactly setup for women. The wetsuits, masks and breathing equipment didn't fit right. There were a lot of challenges, but if you are motivated, you overcome those just like the men do."

Scholley retired from the U.S. Navy in 2005 after 25 years of service as a diving and salvage officer. She held key leadership roles in many operations including the TWA Flight 800 recovery in 1996, the USS Cole (DDG 67) bombing recovery in 2000 and USS Monitor Expeditions in 2001 and 2002 to preserve the Civil War ironclad.

Women in the diving program worked together to help each other.

"There were two other women who were basic diving officers at the time I went through dive school, so we shared tips on what we learned," said retired Capt. Marie Knafelc. "We learned how to make the equipment work for us vice working against us."

These women not only had to overcome the physical challenges of dive school, but also the mental challenges of the demanding training. Divers endure underwater problem solving, at times without being directly attached to their air supply.

"You have to really be in the mind set; if you allow the situation to get ahold of you, you will die underwater," said Knafelc. "The biggest thing that dive school really teaches and emphasizes is you have to control your emotions and the situations because you can think it through. That's the biggest thing dive school has changed in me. You have to stay focused on the job."

According to Scholley, personal motivation is key to success.

"You have to be prepared to do the things you need to do to keep yourself and your shipmates safe," said Scholley. "If you are motivated, you do what you have to do to get through physical and mental challenges."

There was no modification to the training for women. They were expected to endure the physical and mental challenges along side the men. From basic physical training to advanced deep sea saturation diving, the women proved that, whether male or female, with the proper training anyone could be a military diver.

"At dive school we have the same standards for women and men," said Cao. "We are all divers, and it doesn't matter who you are."

"It's important to recognize and celebrate these women who have lead the way and advanced the diving community to where we are today," said Cao. "In life there are your friends that you are nice to and do things for, but in the diving community it is a brotherhood where you would give your life for the person next to you, male or female."

NDSTC is recognizing 35 years of training this year and the 100th anniversary of the Mark V Dive helmet to commemorate the YOTMD. NDSTC, the largest diving facility in the world, trains more than 1,200 military divers from every branch of service each year.

Additional YOTMD events in the month of May include the Copper Collar 5K run at St. Andrews State Park on May 16. For more information on this and other YOTMD events, visit the NDSTC visit the NDSTC web page:
<http://www.netc.navy.mil/centers/ceneoddive/ndstc/>

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