

Recollections of Donna Tobias by her diving school instructor, HMCS(DV) Chris West
Written in late 2011, after her death

As the Senior Instructor of the ComServLant Second Class Diving School, [then located at the Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek, VA], I was contacted by a former shipmate, HTCM Del Strode, for whom HTFN Donna Tobias was working as a Shipfitter (welder).¹ He told me that she desired to go to diving school. He said he was very impressed with her intelligence, work ethic, and sheer courage, and would I please consider talking with her with an open mind about the possibilities of allowing her to enter an upcoming class.

I have to admit that I was initially incredulous. The deep sea diving rig [Mark V hard hat system] weighed nearly 200 pounds on dry land, and one has to climb down and back up a steel ladder to enter the water with the air vent turned off. This was to prevent the suit from “blowing up” once out of the water, as the water pressure keeps the suit collapsed around the body. This requires a certain amount of strength, not to mention a certain mind set. Our washout rate of previously all male students was from 60-75%.

But I had a great deal of respect for my shipmate, and if he was asking this of me, I was willing to consider her request, however unlikely it would be that she would be admitted. I stipulated that I wanted a face to face interview with her and that she was to understand that there were no guarantees that anything would happen past the interview. HTFN Tobias showed up the following week, and after an hour long interview, where I did my best to point out to her all the difficulties that stood in the way of her actually graduating, as well as what trials and tribulations would follow given the unlikely prospect of her actually making it through the course. I did my level best to discourage her, but at the end of the interview, I knew that if any student would make it through to graduation in the next class, she would be that student.

I informed her that I would approve her request for the next class as long as I had her promise that she understood that while the men in her class had to demonstrate an ability to accomplish all the physical tasks of being a diver and maintain at least a passing grade in all other aspects of the curriculum, she would have to be nearly flawless in all aspects of her training. I knew that if she were to graduate and have had some weak area, which nearly everyone did, that the whispers would start, and that all her hard work would be denigrated and slighted. She promised, and I signed her request chit as approved. I also told her that as long as she worked hard to reach her goals, I would do my level best to shield her from any untoward political pressures from above my level so that she only had to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

I can tell you that, academically, she was at the top of her class, and that through MOST of the physical training, she exceeded all expectations, with the one problem of simply not having enough leg strength to lift the lead weighted diving shoes high enough to clear the rungs of the ladder upon climbing out of the water after a dive. Her tenders attempted to reach down and help

¹ Tobias was working for Master Chief Strode, who was also a 1st class diver (We had served together on the Opportune in 70-71) at a new command at NOB that was doing maintenance on the ships, FMSG is what comes to mind, but I am not sure as to the whole name. She was also the first woman HT if memory serves me right, and she was a really good welder and burner.

lift her leg up onto the rung, but I ordered them to leave her alone, she would have to either make it on her own or she would have to quit. It took many minutes of anxious waiting, but she finally made the effort and got her footing on the next rung and made her way up and out of the water. As a result, I made her wear the 35 pound pair shoes after working hours until she went to bed at night. By the end of the week, she was able to climb up and out with a minimal amount of difficulty.

My Commanding Officer was not at all happy with my decision to allow HTFN Tobias into the class. He was my CO, but the school and my role as Senior Instructor were outside his purview; we were the representatives of his boss, the Commander of Service Force, Atlantic Fleet.² So he was not able to directly give me orders as to what I could and could not do, and I politely deflected his wishes to disenroll her. He repeatedly made his displeasure known to me until it became apparent that she was indeed going to pass the class and that the Admiral saw this as a very positive thing. Suddenly he was all smiles and wanted to bring the local press down for interviews, but again I denied his plans, as I felt this would create undue pressures upon her as she still had several classes to go before she could consider herself "home free." I finally consented to an interview for her once she had completed all of the classes which stood as traditional roadblocks to graduation. The interview was in the local Norfolk papers and I believe that it was also on the national TV news as well.

As I remember, Donna graduated either as #7 or #8 in a final class size of 13. I believe that there were originally 46 or 47 people who started out on day #1. As a sidebar, in the next class, another woman presented herself as a candidate to become a diver, and as the ice had been broken, nothing stood in her way as a candidate once she had completed all the prerequisites that any male candidate had to meet. This woman however was never prepared to endure the hard work and physical and mental demands required for the training and quite frankly, appeared to have nothing to offer other than petulant sexuality. Her classmates would attempt to hold her up and carry her on the morning runs and I demanded they allow her to drop out and either make it on her own moxie or lay where she fell. It was not their concern. She soon dropped out of the class, and this made what Donna Tobias had accomplished all the more real and positive. My concern all along was that the petty class of people, who enjoy dragging down those who dared to accomplish, would start the whispers that she had made it "on her back", I believe the terms were. It became apparent that this was something that had not and would not be tolerated nor condoned.

After several months out of diving school and returning to her own command, she was transferred back to Harbor Clearance Unit Two (host of the diving school), where I had moved from the diving school to duties as Medical Department Representative and also as dive team leader. Donna worked on my dive team for the next year until I was transferred to another command. I remember that she was an excellent diver, no nonsense, very practical and hard working and I often made the comment to those who would disparage her as a woman diver that I would prefer to have her to any other male diver I had worked with.

² Commander, Service Force, Atlantic was the overall commander over all the service forces and salvage ships and HCU2 out of Norfolk (Little Creek) Va. The diving School was under the direct command of the Admiral using the personnel and space assets of HCU2.

The Navy went through some very profound changes in the middle of my career and somehow, I was prepared to meet those changes as they impacted upon me. I would say that I had been a very conservative, traditionalist in my approach to Navy life, but I had always had an ability to see when the emperor had no clothes and not much ability to keep my mouth shut about it. My good friend Del Strode called me and asked me to talk with Tobias with an open mind. No other pressure than that. That interview changed everything. Regardless of what preconceived notions I may have had prior to the interview, I had none afterwards. And I have to say that I never again saw things in life the same way.

As I am sure you understand, this did not always sit so well with a lot of my shipmates in the Goat Locker. I can remember attending a Navy Diver conference of some kind in San Diego in '76 and I was not well known on the West Coast, so I was sitting on a couch next to a rather large group of mostly 2d class divers who were gathered at a table behind me. And there was one unusually loud and obnoxious male who was bemoaning the fact that Chief West (who was 3' away from him) had destroyed the world of Navy Divers by allowing a ---- to get through diving school, and that he had good evidence that she had done so by sleeping with me. I let him go on for a while and then started questioning him without revealing my identity and after several pointed questions, he made it apparent that he actually knew nothing, was simply a blowhard, and did not even know who I was, standing right in front of him. Needless to say, he shut his mouth and melted away.

Donna and I became close friends and visited each other over the years. I met her mother, younger brother, and dear father when I was stationed in San Diego, going through Saturation Diver training. I was interested in woodworking and was doing some carving and as she seemed interested, I bought her a small set of carving tools as a birthday or Christmas gift. The next thing I knew she was carving big chunks of stone. We had not made contact with each other for the past 2-3 years, which was normal, and I looked her up just a month ago, thinking it was time we had brought each other up to date, and that is when I found her obituary and not her email address.

Despite all the personal tribulations that attended my part in this, I look back and know that I had a hand in training and selecting a good many of the people who were to become Master Divers over the next 20 years and I was able to instill in them a different way of thinking about people and their jobs, and to know that in her footsteps, people like yourself followed. And that allows me to be at peace with myself.

Donna stands as a hero in my eyes for all that she was. I see my role in her life as that of a gatekeeper, I had the good sense to recognize that she was someone I needed to allow in. She made her own path and her light showed the way for others to follow.

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