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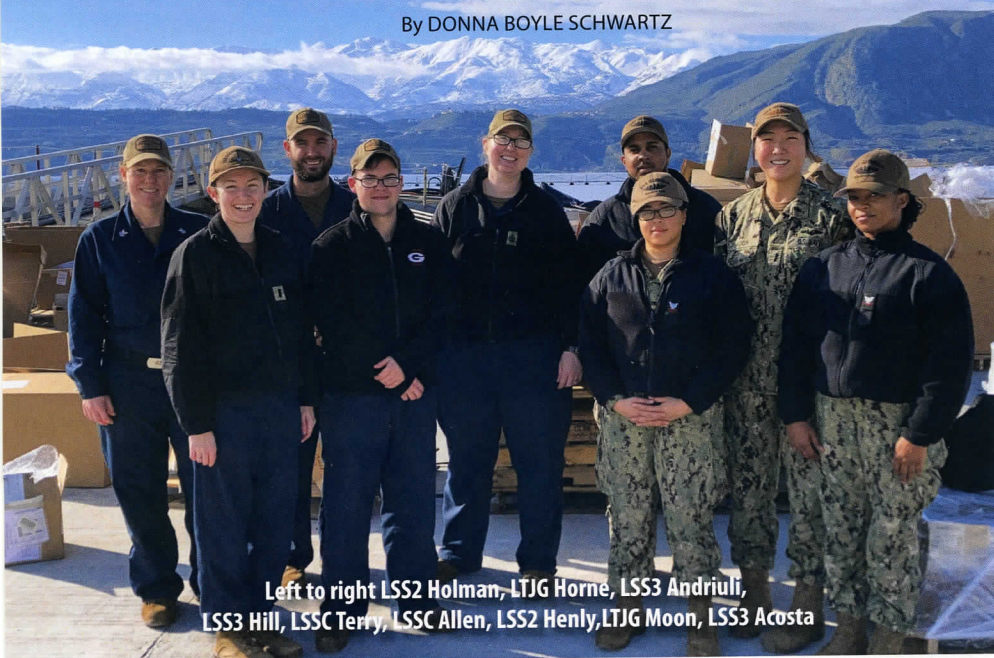
UNDER THE SEA

First Generation Women Submariners Prove
There are No Limits on Naval Service

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Cover Story

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ



Left to right LSS2 Holman, LTJG Horne, LSS3 Andriuli, LSS3 Hill, LSSC Terry, LSSC Allen, LSS2 Henly, LTJG Moon, LSS3 Acosta

Under the Sea

First Generation Women Submariners Prove There are No Limits on Naval Service

Women officers in the U.S. Navy first began serving on submarines a dozen years ago. Today, this impressive duty assignment is open to officers and enlisted personnel at all levels, allowing women new opportunities to serve.

"The Submarine Force and supporting organizations constitute the primary undersea arm of the Navy," states the Navy Press Office. "Submarines and their crews remain the tip of the undersea spear"

The introduction and integration of women submariners began in 2011 when the first female officers began reporting to Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines; they were soon followed by enlisted women. Between 2015 and 2018, the Navy made four separate calls for female sailors to convert into submarine ratings, and as of 2021, there were more than 200 enlisted female sailors serving as part of eight crews, including guided-missile submarines (SSGN) and two ballistic-missile submarines (SSBN).

According to the Press Office, "The long-term plan is that by 2030, 33 submarine crews will have female officers and 14 crews will have female enlisted sailors. All classes of submarines will be integrated with female officers...Going forward, all future Columbia-class ballistic mis-

sile submarines and all Virginia-class fast attack submarines, starting with the USS New Jersey (SSN 796), will have enlisted women in their crews."

This integration may be spurring more women to join the armed forces in general, and the Navy specifically. The Navy has experienced the greatest increases in active-duty women serving of any military branch. Women accounted for 20.4% of the Naval Force in 2020, according to the Department of Defense report "2020 Demographics Profile of the Military Community."

One woman submariner certainly views her submarine service as part of her overall passion to serve in the military. "Serving this great nation is in my blood," declares Jennifer D. Terry, Logistics Chief on the Ohio-class submarine USS Georgia (SSGN 729). "My grandparents did it, and it was all I ever wanted to do growing up." Three of Terry's grandparents served in the military: her maternal grandfather Hugh Butler Gordon was in the Navy; her paternal grandfather Marion Jack Terry was in the U.S. Marine Corps, and her maternal grandmother Margret Catherine Caton Terry was in the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service).

"It's important that the military embraces gender diversity in all aspects; women on submarines are a huge step," Terry points out. "If I were to talk to a new female sailor tomorrow, I would

ask her what her definition of sacrifice is. Serving in the military is not meant to be easy, and it truly is a sacrifice. I've missed births, deaths, anniversaries and birthdays. If you're willing to be a humble servant leader, the military is for you. If you're not willing to actually sacrifice, then go to college and be good in a civilian job.

"Being a submariner is a sacrifice in and of itself," she adds. "On our patrol on the USS Maine, something went wrong with emails, so then when we were on our way home, on the surface, we got bombarded with all the emails we had missed – from when the deployment first started. It was like reading a book, watching all the emotions of our loved ones play out."

Another woman serving on the USS Georgia also comes from a military family. "My mother served in the Navy for well over 30 years; she just recently retired and has encouraged me to pursue programs that challenged me and would inspire me to grow into a well-rounded servant leader," explains ITSC Maryam "Fatima" Gaskin. "Serving in the military was a matter of survival for me. In 2006, I found myself working four to five jobs, making minimum wage, barely able to support myself. None of my jobs offered insurance of any sort and living was from one paycheck to another. I joined the military to experience financial freedom and some stability. My mother encouraged me to join since I first started college in 2000. She has always wanted me to be a naval officer, but I instead wanted to blaze my own trail and chose enlisted."

Submarine service is the latest chapter in a notable military career for Terry. Born in Alabama, she spent her childhood in Mississippi and moved to Michigan as a teen, joining the Navy as part of its Delayed Entry Program when she was a junior in high school. After boot camp at Great Lakes, she went to Pensacola to become an aviation boatswain's mate (ABE), working on catapults and arresting gear on aircraft carriers; her first duty station was the USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) in Washington. She began taking college classes and playing and coaching rugby before moving on to duty in Spain where she earned an associate degree with American Military University (American Public University).

Following her tour in Spain, Terry joined the pre-commissioning unit for the USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) where she became a motivational speaker, helping new sailors transition to life in the military. She became interested in the submarine program after seeing an advertisement and was accepted into the Enlisted Women In Submarines Program, EWIS, in October 2018. "I wanted change, and the fact that something that was so unattainable when

I came in on what made me apply," she recalls. "I'm a go-getter, and my worst day on a submarine is nothing compared to what I have seen and endured being an ABE.

"There are no catapults on submarines, so I became a Submarine Logistics Specialist," she adds, training in Mississippi and Connecticut for her new role and her new duty station, the USS Michigan (SSGN 727).

Gaskin also has had an interesting and varied military career. Born in Newark, NJ, she traveled to numerous duty stations around the world with her family, revisiting many of them in her own service. "Looking through the lens of an adult at places now, I reflect often and see how far I have truly come," she relates. Gaskin joined the Navy in 2006, achieving third class petty officer while becoming an electronics technician at Great Lakes. Her first duty station was NCTS Bahrain. She transferred to the Mid Atlantic Regional Maintenance Center (MARMC) in Norfolk, Virginia before joining the USS Iwo Jima (LHD-7) and meritoriously advancing to second class petty officer.

Following her sea tour, Gaskin transferred to the Center of Information Dominance Fort Gordon in Augusta, GA, becoming an instructor of satellite communications. While there, she became an active community volunteer, and she took up modeling and magazine writing. She also wrote a white paper for the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV) in an effort to assist single parents moving into an unfamiliar place. "I struggled as a single parent moving into unfamiliar environments finding child care appropriate to support my child," she recalls. "Something needed to be said and done."

While at Fort Gordon, Gaskin saw the announcement about applications for enlisted females being allowed into submarines. "Back in the early 2000s, while I was still in college, I had visited my mother who was stationed on the USS Essex, and next to her ship was a submarine. She arranged for us to tour the boat with an officer that was an oceanographer. The tour was very detailed and interesting; I had found what I wanted to do! I had always wanted to be an oceanographer, I could do it on a submarine! I brought this up to the officer who politely told me that women were not allowed on submarines. I was crushed. What was so special about a submarine that women couldn't be allowed? I looked around at the men working hand-in-hand on repairs and maintenance and was baffled how women could not be a part of that experience."

Gaskin got her chance in 2016, and started



Chief Petty Officer Fatima Gaskin (left) and Chief Petty Officer Jennifer Terry (right) both serve onboard the USS Georgia (SSGN 729).

Basic Enlisted Submarine School in Groton, CT, graduating with honors and becoming a first class petty officer. In 2018, she joined the USS Florida (SSGN 728). "It seemed everywhere I looked, women were going above and beyond in qualifying and striving to be the best on the boat. Women in senior enlisted roles were qualifying right along with the most junior females. They were being invited into positions of leadership and were handling it professionally and with grace." After a stint on shore, where she became Chief Petty Officer Gaskin, she returned to sea on her current vessel, the Georgia.

Serving on submarines can seem a little odd or scary to landlubbers. "My family is super proud of me, and they all think I'm crazy – you have to be a little crazy to spend months underwater," Terry admits. "I don't mind. Just pretend you work nights on a plane – that's exactly how it feels."

Gaskin adds, "It's only scary when something is wrong. If for some reason there is a casualty, it definitely crosses everyone's mind what it means to be under the sea in the middle of nowhere. Submariners are a mindset. Folks down here are their own type of weird."

Both Terry and Gaskin note that submariners have a different mindset. "The challenges being faced are for men and women alike—to take the arduous environment and equipment, and take care of the people," Gaskin says.

"Submarine force mentality is definitely different from the surface Navy," Terry notes. "It's more of 'let's get the job done so we can all go home.' I remember when I was walking out of the shipyard as a young ABE3 and I would see all these super dirty sailors with torn uniforms and they were literally smelly –

when I got to a submarine, it all made sense. "The thing they teach you immediately is earning your submarine warfare device, so you can be useful to the crew," she continues. "You learn every ship system: every electronic source; every air purification source; how to fight the ship in the event of a casualty"

One type of "technology" that has changed on submarines is the bathroom, according to the Navy Press Office. The Ohio-class submarines were chosen initially because fewer habitability modifications were required to accommodate women. The Press Office stated that future Virginia-class and Columbia-class submarines are being built gender-neutral and will not require any habitability modifications; there will be male and female berthing and head facilities to maintain privacy.

"Reconfiguring the entire ship is not necessary to have women serve onboard," Terry asserts. "We don't want to be seen as different; we just want to be seen as sailors. I think the silliest thing we face as women is how taboo it is to share a bathroom. We have separate bathrooms for men and women. I live in the chiefs' quarters with other men. We are all adults, and we share a toilet, and the women have a separate shower. I'm going to be honest, by the time I get to shower and go to the rack, I don't care who is around. All of the racks onboard have curtains, so everyone has individual privacy."

The biggest problem women submariners face is not having enough duty stations available for everyone who wants to serve, according to Terry. "All of the first generation of women are getting ready to go to sea again, and there are not enough duty stations at sea for them," she explains. "Depending on your job and your qualifications, someone may already be in that billet."

Terry says she prizes her naval experiences and is proud to serve. "I have some unique memories doing unique things," she remarks, adding, "I just want to say thank you so much to all the women who served before me and paved the road so I get to be where I am today. I can only hope that my service does a fraction of what some of these amazing leaders have accomplished."

Gaskin affirms women's roles in the military are ever-evolving. "The glass ceiling has been shattered, and the sky is the limit," she asserts. "I want the young girls growing up to see faces that look like theirs. We are setting that example of what professional sacrifice and pride in our country looks like from a female perspective."