

Accomplishing a dream

Wilson High School grad begins submarine officer training next year

BY CLAIRE OLIVER

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HAYHURST – For one Wilson High School grad, a college diploma from the U.S. Naval Academy is just the beginning.

Michelle Weaver, a Hayhurst native, said submarines have been a lifelong fascination. As a high school student, she even acted as the official tour guide of the U.S.S. Blueback at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

Now a senior at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., Weaver has been assigned a coveted position as a submarine officer in training that she'll assume after graduation next spring.

Securing a spot

According to Weaver, the first duty of an officer reporting to their submarine is becoming qualified to stand as Engineer Officer of the Watch, or rather, "watch over the nuclear reactor while being responsible for the entire engine room." Officers also have a division of men for whom he or she is responsible.

The process of being selected for such a position is a long and challenging one, she said.

After they've submitted their name to a selection board, those students interested are vetted for their grades and records before being asked back for an interview with the four-star admiral in charge of all of the Navy's reactors.

Weaver said that, because of the limited number of spots open to women on submarines, she initially did not make the cut for an interview slot but was called back once more opened up.

"This was a tough experience for me, but I grew a lot from it," she said.

Had she not been selected, Weaver would have served on a ship as a surface wartime officer.

During her day-long interview, Weaver met with several engineers and answered questions about calculus, physics, fluids and more.

She said the questions got progressively harder as the interviews carried on, because the interviewers wanted to test her reactions under pressure.

"My interviews were difficult, but the hours of studying in the 20 days I had to prepare, including spring break, were worth it," she said.

Once they've met with the engineers, the candidates are then interviewed by the admiral individually.

"I was one of the last and my interview seemed to last a minute. All I remember is a blue carpet, a white wall and his stern face as he asked me about my grades and why I wanted to be a submariner," she said. "After leaving his office, I waited for what seemed forever before Capt. Jarrett (the officer in charge of selecting submariners) returned, shook my hand and told me I had been accepted into the submarine



Above: "I've changed more than I dreamed possible," Weaver said of her time at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Next spring, she'll take her next step, beginning her training as a submarine officer.

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PHOTO /
MICHELLE
WEAVER

officer pipeline.”

Once she graduates, Weaver will begin a training process that starts with six months at Naval Nuclear Power School and another six months at Nuclear Power Training Unit (NPTU), both located in Charleston, S.C. At NPTU, officers-in-training work inside a prototype to develop proficiency before working with the nuclear reactor on a boat, Weaver said.

After the first year of training, there is a 12-week submarine officer basic course in New London, Conn. After this course, an officer is assigned to his or her boat, and the qualification process to earn the title of “submariner” takes about another year, Weaver said.

Blazing trails

“The Navy is hard-pressed to find people who want to be a submarine officer,” Weaver said. “This is due to the academics needed to run a nuclear reactor, and the stress found in working inside a submarine for months at a time.”

And, when Weaver entered the academy as a plebe in 2008, female officers were not allowed to serve on submarines, as the boats were designed without separate berthing facilities and there were fears of impropriety among crew members and mid-ocean pregnancies, she told the Connection at the time.

Since then, amenities for women have been incorporated into submarine designs, and the class of 2010 was the first to have women selected as submarine officers. This first group of female officers finished their training and were assigned to their boats last month, Weaver said.

She said 13 women from her class have been selected to serve on submarines.

Currently, only four submarines are equipped to have female officers assigned to them, and so Weaver said she hopes to be stationed at the Bangor Naval Submarine Base in Washington State.

“I will roughly be on a sub for 2.5 years before finishing my five years with shore duty,” she said.

Looking ahead

While there is no specific submarine training at the U.S. Naval Academy, Weaver said her time spent as part of its Dolphin Club, of which she is president, has given her some experience.

“Dolphins are the nickname for the submarine warfare pin worn by submariners, and the club focuses on teaching and connecting midshipmen with the submarine community,” she said.

Through the Dolphin Club, Weaver said she’s walked beneath a submarine in drydock, seen the components of a submarine as they are built at Electric Boat in Groton, Conn. and learned how to fix burst pipes in a training scenario.

She said that, after she was selected for submarine officer training, she was assigned a submarine cruise from Kings Bay, Ga., spending 21 days underwater on the U.S.S. Rhode Island with six other female midshipmen and two female officers.

“It was a wonderful learning experience,” she said.

Weaver said that she’s looking forward to the challenges that lie ahead, the next being her transition from midshipmen to officer.

“I look forward to meeting the division I will be in charge of and helping each person do their best for themselves, their family and the boat,” she said. “I look forward to the moment I earn the right to wear a gold dolphin over my heart and accomplish my dream of being a submariner.”