

VETERANS DAY

HONORING ALL WHO SERVED

Seeking adventure ...

McBride looks back on time in the Navy

By KYLE DOMINY
Staff Reporter

Joe Ann McBride got a rude awakening on her first day of boot camp.

At 3 a.m. she, and 79 other female recruits at a Naval training center in Orlando, Florida, were jostled from bed by the crashing sound of a metal trash can lid tossed between the rows of bunks in the barracks. When the noise died down, a voice barked for them to fall in line.

"I thought I had died. Everybody was scared," she said. "I thought I had landed in the bowels of Hades and the devil himself was standing in front of us."

It was 1983, and McBride had joined the Navy almost on a whim. She and a friend had agreed to enlist together, to seek adventure outside their hometown of Dublin. Only McBride, however, followed through on the plan.

"I had lived in Dublin all my life," she said. "I love my city, but I had never gone anywhere or done anything. Going to boot camp was awfully frightening. For those eight weeks you are in knots, not knowing what's going on."

McBride endured the eight weeks of training, which included two jumps from a high-dive diving platform into a deep pool and converting different parts of her uniform into flotation devices and learn-

ing what it meant to "curse like a sailor." After graduation she was shipped across the country to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego, where Navy fighter pilots were stationed and trained.

Her first assigned duty was on the flight line, caring for planes before and after takeoff. Responsibilities included chocking the wheels, cleaning the planes and passing repair notes between the pilots and mechanics.

"It was so noisy and so hectic," McBride recalled. "The planes were always taking off and coming in. It was an exciting time for a young woman from Dublin, Georgia."

Tragedy would seemingly strike the base after one of McBride's superiors, Lt. Commander Schaffer, crashed his aircraft in the Pacific Ocean. She said the whole base was worried of the commander's fate and rushed to his bedside after he was found alive.

"By the grace of God, he was OK. He was able to eject," McBride said. "Then six or seven months later he did it again."

"That time we had to have a talk with him about wrecking those expensive planes," she added with a hearty laugh.

The Miramar air station would gain some notoriety in 1986. At the time the base housed the Navy's Strike Fighter Tactic Instructor



MCBRIDE

Program, better known as Top Gun. The hit film of the same name starring Tom Cruise and Val Kilmer was filmed at the base.

"That was a very exciting time," McBride said.

By that time, she had been reassigned to the

Squadron Room, a still exciting but more clerical job, maintaining the flight logs and keeping track of secret, coded messages. Important notes were filed away, while the rest were burned at the end of the day.

In 1987, McBride left the Navy. The service branch was integrating more women into ship crews, and McBride said she had no interest in serving on a ship, citing the cramped quarters and the harrowing dive test taken in boot camp.

She returned to Dublin, enrolled in classes at the then Heart of Georgia Technical College and went to work for South Construction Co. Now at 68 years old, McBride is retired yet still active. She lost her sight to diabetic neuropathy in 2014 and programs through the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center have helped her adjust.

McBride has embraced sports and games, compet-



Joe Ann McBride (right) with Lt. Commander Austin /SPECIAL PHOTO

ing across the country with other veterans in the Golden Age Games, an Olympic-style event for veterans at least 55 years old.

"I never played any sports in high school," she said. "But at 58 years old, I decided I could be a sports girl."

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