

Neil George Shahan

U.S. Navy, Lieutenant Commander

1911 - 2000

Written by Jenna Austin, Payton Farance, and Autumn Knotts

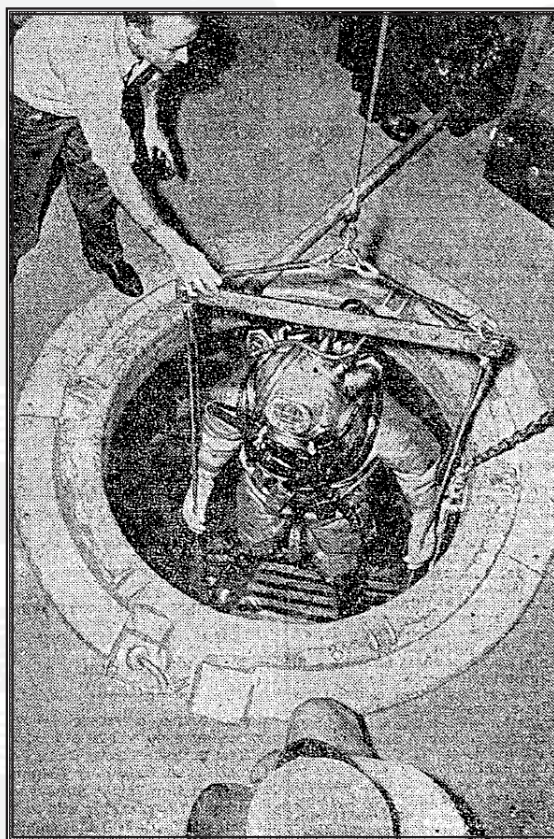
Instructed by Rebecca Bartlett

Neil George Shahan lived a long, momentous life. He was born on November 29, 1911, in Morgantown, West Virginia, to Otis Walter Shahan and Sarah Maude Shahan (née Cool). Young Neil would go on to have an illustrious, thirty-one year career in the United States Navy, participating in daring rescues and difficult salvage operations during a period of explosive growth in naval technology.

Not much is known about Shahan before he joined the Navy on December 2, 1927, just a few days after his sixteenth birthday. His father worked as a foreman at the American Tin and Sheet Company located just east of Morgantown in Sabraton. Joining the military so young, it is likely Neil never received a high school diploma, but beginning his naval service when he did may also have shielded Shahan from the worst effects of the Great Depression.

Shahan served in the Navy during both World War II and the Korean War. Beginning in 1940, he trained to join a deep sea diving team that helped refine the dangerous techniques required to conduct deep sea rescues. Shahan helped rescue thirty-three men from the downed *USS Squalus* (SS-192) off the Isles of Shoals near New Hampshire on May 24, 1939. He and another diver went deep into the ocean time after time in a rescue chamber to bring men up. For “extraordinary heroism” following the sinking of the *Squalus*, the Navy awarded Shahan the Navy Cross.

Shahan continued his career as a U.S. Navy diver, testing new electrically heated dive suits and participating in other missions, including the rescue of *USS S-26* (SS-131) off the coast of Panama on January 25, 1942. Eventually, Shahan was promoted to the rank of lieutenant and placed in



Neil Shahan is lowered into a test tank in 1940 wearing an experimental electrically heated diving suit. The test was successful, and the Navy announced it would adopt the new suit technology. This photograph was widely reproduced in newspapers around the country. *Science In The News*, 20 October 1940

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command of the salvage ship *USS Hoist* (ARS-40) between 1948 and 1951. At the helm of the *Hoist*, he helped free the famous *USS Missouri* (BB-63) after it ran aground near Hampton Roads, Virginia in January 1950.

On June 1, 1953, the Navy again promoted Shahan, this time to the rank of lieutenant commander, and put him in charge of the *USS Recovery* (ARS-43) from 1953 and 1955, despite his lack of formal education. Such a posting would be highly unlikely today, and it seems probable that Shahan was promoted primarily due to his exceptional service record.

Shahan retired from the Navy on January 14, 1959, after serving more than 31 years. He moved on to community projects, such as helping to establish the Fort Washington Marina in Virginia. The Shahan family—Neil, his wife Nettie, and daughter Karen—moved around a great deal before settling in Palm Bay, Florida, where he spent the rest of his life enjoying many a game of shuffleboard.

Neil George Shahan passed away February 9, 2000, in Palm Bay, Florida, at 88 years of age. His wife, Nettie Maude Kerns Shahan, whom he had married on September 2, 1938, passed five years later in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where she had moved to be near their daughter, Karen Calnan. Neil Shahan left behind a heroic legacy as a Navy rescue diver and salvage expert, and he lived his life according to the Navy creed: “Ready to Lead, Ready to Follow, Never Quit!”



A special team of Navy divers assembled to rescue the crew of the submarine *S-26* in 1942, which collided with another ship near Panama. Unfortunately, the rescue was unsuccessful. Shahan is pictured at far right. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 9 February 1942

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Top left: The bow of the *USS Squalus* (SS-192) breaks the surface on September 13, 1939, five months after it sank to the ocean floor due to mechanical failure. Navy salvage crews were able to retrieve the sub. Neil Shahan won the Navy Cross for helping save 33 sailors from the wreck in one of the first successful underwater rescue operations of its kind. *NavSource*

Top right: Neil Shahan (left) speaks to fellow Navy personnel during rescue operations for the submarine *O-9* (SS-70), a training sub that sank during exercises in 1941. Unfortunately, the rescue efforts were unsuccessful, and the submarine was lost with all hands. *New York Times*, 22 June 1941

Bottom: *USS Squalus* back in port after being raised in September 1939. *NavSource*

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section C1
Site 115

Date of interment: June 2, 2000

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
programs@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
304.346.8500