

Underwater missions look tough in the movies – but an

Pictures: MARK KELLEHER

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AIR WE GO:
Star reporter Geraldine Comiskey barely had time to draw breath on her day with the Navy divers

007 does it. So did Arnold Schwarzenegger in "True Lies" – and virtually every other action hero worth his salt.

But secret underwater missions are not just the stuff of films.

Ireland has its own elite underwater unit – and they're far tougher than anyone you've seen in a film.

I should know – I joined the Navy Diving Unit for a day. Even though I knew it would be demanding, nothing could have prepared me for the day at Haulbowline Naval Base in Cobh, Co. Cork.

"When the Garda Sub-Aqua Unit and the Army Divers have been called out, and neither has managed to carry out the job – that's when we're called in," explained the officer in charge of the unit, Lieutenant Eddie Mulligan, who was trained by Britain's Royal Navy.

He heads the elite unit of 45 men stationed at the base and at sea.

Exploding mines deep under the sea, searching hulls of ships for bombs and drugs, carrying out underwater surveillance work and recovering bodies from the sea are just part of the job for these guys, who are on call 24 hours a day in case of an emergency.

Gruelling

But before they are accepted into the unit, they must prove themselves physically and mentally, taking part in a gruelling 11-week course which has a high failure rate. Of the 50 Naval Servicemen who applied to join the diving unit this year, just five passed.

"It's very easy to get injured during the first four weeks," says Eddie.

Thirty-six were eliminated during the Diving Aptitude test, which took place even before they started the course.

I took the test along with two others: Able Seaman Kevin Heade, 21, from Coolock, Dublin and Ordinary Telegraphist Gillian Hamilton, 18, from Cobh.

She may be the first woman to join the

By GERALDINE COMISKEY

Navy Diving Unit, if she passes the stringent medical and fitness tests, and then the course which begins in January 12.

Both had never dived before – unlike me. Having earned a basic amateur diving qualification two years ago, I had a head-start – or so I thought until our instructor for the day, Petty Officer Martin Buckley outlined our tasks.

A stint in the decompression chamber was first. The small white cylinder looks like a space capsule for astronauts.

Inside, it has two long benches, two oxygen masks, an intercom so you can communicate with the operators outside, and an opening which allows the doctor to administer medical aid from outside without releasing the pressure on the people inside.

Pressure

I felt a squeeze in my ears as the pressure was turned on – to a simulated depth of 35 metres. Because such high pressure affects the body's chemical make-up, divers can experience "the marks" which acts like a mind altering drug.

With the hazardous work Navy divers do, they couldn't afford to have someone who would start acting weird at depth.

Martin tested us by asking us to spell words backwards but failed to get us to sing "Baa Baa



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