



Shirley Joan Underwood

April 10, 1935 - July 14, 2025

Shirley Joan Underwood, Commander, United States Navy (Retired) was reunited with her soulmate Rachel, all their many pets, and many fabulous friends who departed before her, on July 14th, 2025.

Shirley was born in Helena, Montana on April 10th, 1935 to Benjamin (Red) and Marie Underwood. Her childhood was spent under the 'Big Sky' and among the vast beauties of Montana. Its wild mountains and immense natural expanse would hold onto her heartstrings for her entire 90 years of life.

She graduated from Havre High School in 1953 and attended Northern Montana College in Havre for her freshman year before transferring to Montana State University in Missoula, graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts in 1957. Following graduation she taught high school English for one year in Peekskill N.Y., prior to joining the United States Navy.

Her military career began after Officer's Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. As a career officer she served from 1958 to 1978. Her duties were many and varied. Her first duty station was at the Explosive Ordnance School in Indian Head, Maryland as a supply officer. She trained officers from all services in underwater demolition. From there, she was sent to Naples, Italy and served as a communications and cryptology officer for Naval Support and NATO.

One of her most enjoyable duties was at the Recruit Training Command for Women in Bainbridge Maryland, where she was the Battalion Commander and later promoted to Regimental Commander. She trained enlisted women as part of the groundbreaking "Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services" (WAVES) program.

She then served as a personal administrative officer at Headquarters Fifth Naval District in Norfolk, Virginia, followed by an assignment with Naval Reactors at the Navy Atomic Energy Commission under the command of Admiral H. G. Rickover, the father of the Nuclear Navy.

A tour as Head of Administration/Personnel at the Naval Amphibious School, Little Creek, Virginia preceded her penultimate post at Navy Research and Development in Warminster, Pennsylvania. Her final station was at the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington D.C. Prior to her retirement in 1978, she was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal for her outstanding service.

After retirement she and her spouse of 44 years, Rachel Sarbaugh, loved traveling, enjoying theater and museums, the Washington Mystics, the Redskins/Commanders, the company of many dear friends, and life with their beloved pets.

In addition, Commander Underwood spent time as a creative writer. A short story she wrote about her mother, which was published in Montana Magazine in 1973, was a favorite work. As a pro-life advocate, she wrote an article which was published in Celebrate Life, a Catholic Church periodical.

Commander Underwood was preceded in death by her spouse, Rachel in March 2016.

Commander Underwood is survived by her nieces Cheryl Underwood, Janet Sarbaugh, and Martha Veto, and her great-niece Elise and great-nephew Ben.

Shirley was always full of life, wit, and optimism; and was loved by many. She will be sorely missed.