

# Sand Key Siren Makes A Splash

*Story and photos by PA1 Tasha Tully, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.*

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- With its white sand beaches, lazy sun-soaked palm trees and laid-back atmosphere, Florida's Gulf Coast is one of America's most popular tourist destinations. Whether it is through fishing, boating, snorkeling or swimming, many people develop an admiration for Florida's turquoise waters. However, few people love the ocean as much as to live a portion of their life underwater. Seaman Shannon Tooker, a reserve-crewmember from Coast Guard Station Sand Key, in Clearwater, Fla., is one of those people.



"I've been coming here with my family since I was three years old, but I couldn't start working here until I turned 18," Shannon said while applying brightly colored makeup to her sun-tanned face. With a dimpled smile she added, "You could definitely say that I have a strong affection for the water."

Shannon is in a locker room with a handful of other ladies getting ready for work. She finishes applying her makeup, brushes her long brown hair, and chooses a red bikini top that matches her glittering tail. Once in the water, Shannon has transformed from a lady to a mermaid.

Shannon works with 16 other mermaids and mermen at Wikki Wachee Springs in Wikki Wachee, Fla., dubbed "The City of Live Mermaids." This unique tourist attraction, nestled along the Wikki Wachee River, has captivated visitors since it opened in 1947. Five days a week, Shannon drives 25 minutes from her home in Hudson, Fla., to the fresh-water springs where she spends the day submerged in 72-degree, crystal-clear water.

WIKKI WACHEE SPRINGS, Fla. - Shannon Tooker applies makeup while preparing for work at Wikki Wachee Springs. Shannon works as a mermaid with 16 other ladies at the unique tourist attraction founded in 1947. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Tasha Tully.

"We (merpeople) do three shows a day, and we're about 20 feet underwater for about 40 minutes at a time," said Shannon. "We breathe using oxygen-filled air hoses that are built into the spring."

A 500-seat theater, constructed in 1959, was built into the side of the spring 16 feet below the water's surface, allowing a perfect vantage point for visitors to watch the mermaids and mermen perform graceful synchronized ballet moves underwater for shows such as "Fish Tails" and, of course, "The Little Mermaid."

“Being a mermaid definitely helps keep me in shape for the Coast Guard. I swim about three to four times a day at work, and with the river’s currents it can be very strenuous,” Shannon explained.

Shannon joined the Coast Guard in May, a month after becoming a mermaid. She reported to Coast Guard Station Sand Key in August and has found no shortage of strenuous work during her drill weekends.

“We are always underway, which I love. Whether it is for patrols, search and rescue cases or training, there always seems to be something going on,” said Shannon. “I really like the camaraderie. As a reservist you’re away from these people for a month, but the day you see them again it is like no time had passed.”



WIKKI WACHEE SPRINGS, Fla. - Seaman Shannon Tooker, a Coast Guard reservist at Station Sand Key in Clearwater, Fla., is no stranger to the water. She is a certified dive master and flips her fin as a full-time mermaid at Wikki Wachee Springs. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Tasha Tully.

According to Shannon, her father, mother and sister couldn’t be more proud of her. Mark Tooker, owner of S&K Trucking, Bonnie Tooker, a retired first sergeant in the U.S. Army, and Kayla Tooker, a 16-year-old Hudson High School sophomore, installed a flag pole in front of their house where they fly Coast Guard and Army flags. “The Coast Guard flag is on top,” Shannon said smiling.

Shannon finds support not only at home but at work as well. Marcy Terry, Mermaid Manager at Wikki Wachee Springs, understands the demands of the military and encouraged Shannon to follow her dreams.

“She started working here a month before going to boot camp, and I remember being surprised that she wanted to join the military,” said Marcy. “But I think it’s awesome that she joined the Coast Guard, it shows that she is responsible and dependable.”

Responsibility isn’t new for Shannon. She was heavily involved in clubs and sports in high school, including Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), student government and Future Business Leaders of America. She is a part-time employee at the Flavor Shack (an Italian ice shop in New Port Richie, Fla.), a certified dive master, an

accomplished pianist, and a freshman at Pasco-Hernando Community College majoring in psychology and elementary education.

“I would like to become a dive instructor at some point, but my life’s goal is to become a trainer at Sea World in Orlando,” said Shannon.

Whether it is pulling people from the sea, training an orca or flipping her own tail fin, Shannon seems to have a lifetime ahead of her to spend in, on or near the water.