



# *CUTTERWOMEN*



## **Cutterwomen**

By MKC T. Claflin, Enlisted Women Afloat Coordinator, Arlington, VA

Reference: Diversity, History

Holding in its fury, is a beauty and mystery unlike any other natural force on earth. With settled calmness, it can soothe the most troublesome of souls but its sporadic impulsiveness will slap a mariner with a rogue wave when least expected...it is the sea! The sea holds no prejudice to the unfortunate souls that are taken to the depths of their fate nor does the sea discriminate against the saviors of those souls. To the uninformed sailor this force is obscure and daunting but the lure is natural, to men and women alike. *"All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea -- whether it is to sail or to watch it -- we are going back from whence we came."*- John F. Kennedy. Sailors have long been thought of as men bound to the sea but today sailors are also women of the sea and shipmates to us all.

## **Past**

---

Milestones have been made in the past thirty years for opportunities for women afloat. The CGCs *Gallatin* and *Morgenthau* became the first cutters with mixed-gender crews in 1977. There were 24 women assigned to sea duty aboard the two cutters, twelve on each. It wasn't until twelve years later that the number of afloat opportunities increased to 23 cutters. In 1991 the Women Afloat Plan was updated and opportunities increased to 30 cutters. Shortly thereafter the WLB and WLM class buoy tenders came into service with female occupancy as a design consideration.

## **Present**

---

As the number of women increase in the service the numbers of cutters with mixed gender enlisted crews also increases. Closing out Assignment Year 2012 we achieved over 100 cutters (more than a third of the cutters in service) with mixed gender enlisted crews and over 700 enlisted women afloat. One of Coast Guard's newest cutter, named after the first female Coast Guard Officer, Captain Dorothy C. Stratton, is also the first Cutter to be sponsored by the First Lady. *Stratton* represents the Coast Guard's commitment in affording our female shipmates equal opportunities in underway experience. Along with the WMSLs, the new FRCs are also very gender neutral and can accommodate any combination of officers or enlisted women berthing. The addition of these cutters will afford more opportunities and flexibility for our female workforce to allow them to gain valuable career enhancing experience. Many of our older cutters, such as those built prior to 1978 (WLIC, WLI, WLR, WYTL) are nearly unattainable for enlisted women to integrate due to the smaller crew size and larger berthing areas onboard. With the Coast Guard's new cutters, more flexibility can be afforded to adjust berthing areas as necessary, allowing more equal opportunities for career experience and advancement.

## **Future**

---

The improvements and available opportunities achieved in the last few years far outweigh the challenges faced by women cuttermen in the past. Assignment Year 2012 will mark the first enlisted mixed gender crew integration onboard a 210' WMEC class cutter. "Opening MEC-

210's to female enlisted opens up a whole new set of doors of opportunities, billets, geographic locations and ultimately choices to a significant part of Team Coast Guard". – CDR Daniel K. Pickles, Commanding Officer CGC *Alert*. As many of our legacy cutters face decommission how we continue to improve falls on several factors. One aspect would be the additional replacement or rehab of our older cutters to help provide more berthing configurations. These include the 210 WMECs and our inland cutters. Flexibility is essential when cutters have mixed gender crews. Rotation of berthing areas may be necessary, empty racks can and will happen until replacements are identified, and coordination is imperative. Additionally, the increase of women in the Coast Guard and overall retention of women will help to provide a greater mix of women underway while also providing valuable mentorship to our junior enlisted. This is particularly challenging at the senior levels and non-traditional rates such as engineering or weapons rates. Early identification and career counseling to women as well as men on their career diversity and goals is all of our responsibility. As leaders we need to counsel our shipmates and provide the information and mentoring so that appropriate career planning can coincide with family and personal goals. This along with our core leadership competencies will ensure the successful management of our future cuttermen and women.

There is no experience quite like being assigned to a cutter to understand the dynamics of your rating, as well as the teamwork and leadership you can learn and achieve within the cutter fleet. This also effectively gives women diversity within their own career for increased competitiveness on their next assignment and advancement. On a larger scale it contributes to the overall sense of achievement that thirty-three years ago those twenty-four women onboard the CGCs *Gallatin* and *Morgenthau* embarked on. Our female cuttermen are sailors and shipmates lured to the sea by the same salt in our veins as our male counterparts.

**Leadership Competencies Addressed:**

Followership, Self Awareness and Learning, Effective Communications, Influencing Others, Respect for Others and Diversity Management, Team Building, Mentoring, Creativity and Innovation, Human Resource Management.