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— CDR Beverly Kelley, CGC Northland CO

RISING FROM ‘BEHIND THE

8 BALL’

It was early on a Saturday in July. The crew of the CGC Northland, homeported in Portsmouth, Va., was busy cleaning and getting ready for the incoming commanding officer. History was about to be made and the crew wanted the event to be perfect.

The Navy band began playing and in came the official party. When the ceremony ended, cutter and crew welcomed the first female ever to command a Coast Guard medium-endurance cutter.

The recipient of that honor, CDR Beverly Kelley, said her challenge is the same as any other faced by a new commanding officer — to save lives and enforce maritime laws.

Kelley, a native of Miami, gained the position of commanding officer of the 270-foot Northland not because she was in the right place at the right time, but because she earned it.

“I’ve punched all the tickets that my male counterparts would have to be the commanding officer of a medium-endurance cutter,” Kelley said.

“I thank the Coast Guard for not putting me in some spot that I was unprepared for. If the Coast Guard had pushed me into something before I was ready, I could have failed. I would have been devastated and women would have been hurt by it.

“When I graduated Officer Candidate School, I didn’t know anything about the military,” she said. “The Coast Guard has done all it can to prepare me for this job.”

Kelley has a genuine concern for the Coast Guard and the role women play within it. The service, she said, has to make changes in gender policy as quickly and painlessly as possible. Her worry, though, is that in an effort to make the change quickly, women might advance into positions they are not trained for or ready to assume.

HIGH-ENDURANCE WOMAN SETS NEW COURSE AS FIRST FEMALE SKIPPER OF A MEDIUM-ENDURANCE CUTTER

Earlier, when Kelley was stationed on the 378-foot CGC Morgenthau, she ran into some obstacles concerning gender. The Morgenthau was doing refresher training with the Navy when Kelley was due to report. Refresher training is a shipboard exercise which simulates combat conditions. Since the Navy didn’t have a policy for women in combat, Kelley wasn’t allowed to report until the cutter finished training.

According to Kelley this lack of policy prevented her from attending valuable training as a junior officer. She had to wait until she became an operations officer to attend the training which she said put her, “behind the eight ball.”

“I thank the Coast Guard for at least letting me get on the ship,” she said. “The service was proactive about women on ships, although they had to work out all of the barriers with our sister services.”

Kelley has been at the forefront of the Coast Guard’s efforts to break down gender issues. She was the first woman to command a Coast Guard cutter (the CGC Cape Newagen, a 95-foot cutter based in Maui, Hawaii) nearly 20 years ago. Since then she has served as the executive officer of the cutter Legare, operations officer of the cutter Venturous and in several shore jobs.

During an interview in her wardroom aboard the Northland, Kelley emphasized that productivity is not her primary concern, safety is. “My first goal is to make it safe for everyone on board, to make sure that everybody comes back home. Ships are just inanimate objects, just a

piece of metal. The crew makes the ship, not the other way around.”

Going to sea is a special joy for this commanding officer. “It is what the Coast Guard is all about. I look forward to disconnecting the phones and getting away from shore, although the underway schedule can be demanding. Being away from home 185 days of the year, standing watches, living in close quarters, and working extended hours causes nerves to get short and the days to get long.

“Unfortunately, we can’t give Coast Guard people a bonus and I can’t cut the underway schedule. But, I can work with liberty or the time-off schedule. We’ll still get the mission done, and hopefully make it possible for them to enjoy themselves.”

Kelley believes that there are rewards for getting underway. “You can make a big drug bust and know that you are keeping dope out of some person’s head,” she said.

Kelley recognizes that there is more to each member of her crew than his or her time spent going to sea. People have their circle of friends, goals, dreams and desires. She aims to help her crew develop into well-rounded individuals who strive to meet their own personal desires.

Mentoring and developing her crew is also important to Kelley. “I had two really great captains, CAPT Ernie Blanchard and CAPT Jeff Hathaway. Terrific, terrific people. I thank them every day for putting me where I am. They taught me a lot, rewarded me for my hard work and put a lot of faith in me. I pray that I’ll be a commanding officer that people will look up to like that. My goal is to create the environment in which everyone has the opportunity to excel.”

Story & photograph by
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