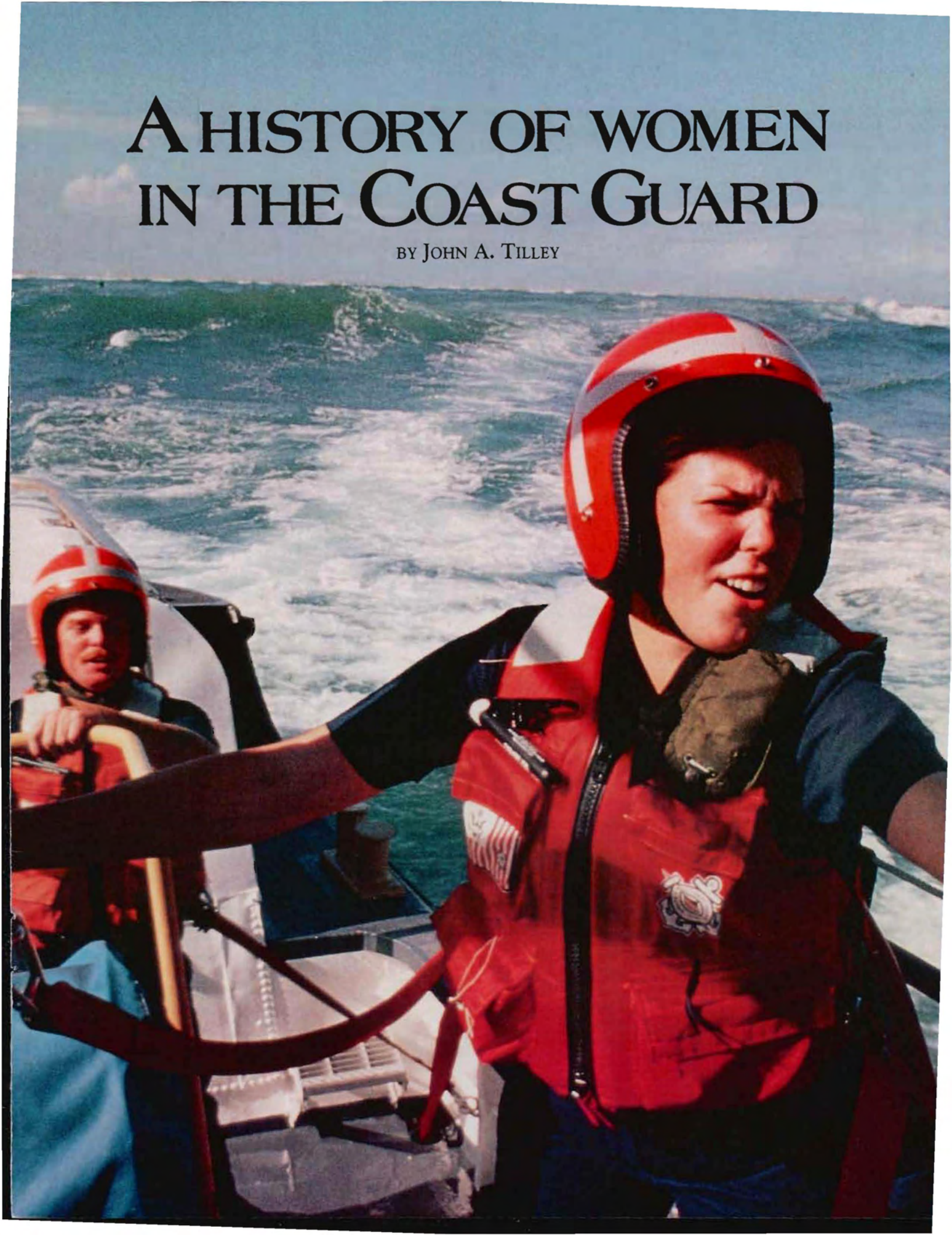
A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE COAST GUARD

BY JOHN A. TILLEY



Ida Lewis served as the keeper of Lime Rock Light on a small island in Newport, R.I., for 54 years. She began tending the light, along with her mother, at the age of 15 after her father was immobilized by a stroke. Lewis developed outstanding boat-handling skills while rowing back and forth to the mainland. During her years at the lighthouse, she rescued between 18 and 24 people. Lewis was one of many women who kept America's lights lit and mariners safe.

Women have been performing Coast Guard duties longer than there has been a Coast Guard. At least one professional ancestor of the modern female Coast Guardsman predated the federal government itself. In 1776, John Thomas joined the Army to fight in the Revolutionary War. His wife, Hannah, took over his job as keeper of Gurnet Point Light, near Plymouth, Mass.

The oldest root of the modern Coast Guard's institutional family tree can be traced back to Aug. 7, 1789, when the new Congress appropriated funds for "the necessary support, maintenance and repairs of all lighthouses, beacons, buoys and public piers ... within any bay, inlet, harbor, or port of the United States, for rendering the navigation thereof easy and safe." The first female federal employees probably were lighthouse keepers.

The old-fashioned lighthouse was a primitive contraption. Its light came from a whale-oil lamp mounted behind a thick glass lens, sometimes equipped with a weight-driven mechanism to make it rotate and pump oil to the lamp.

Along with the position of keeper went a house, usually built into the base of the light tower, and a plot of land on which the keeper's family was expected to keep livestock and grow vegetables. The position of

keeper did not require much education, training, or mechanical skill; it demanded dedication, stamina, patience, and a willingness to work for a low salary. It was just the sort of job, in the social atmosphere of Victorian America, for a woman.

There seems to have been no official policy regarding the hiring of women to work at lighthouses. The early records are skimpy, but two modern researchers, Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford, found the names of 138 women who were employed as lighthouse keepers between 1828 and 1947. The majority were the wives or daughters of keepers or other Lighthouse Board employees who died on the job.

'Sturdy little women'

Mary Reynolds became keeper of the lighthouse at Biloxi, Miss., in 1854 with a salary of $400 per year. She augmented her income by caring for "a large family of orphaned children" who were "heirs at law to a considerable estate," the executor of which sent her an annual stipend. Seven years later, Reynolds' world suddenly disintegrated when the city government ordered Biloxi Light extinguished and some characters in Confederate uniforms absconded with her valuable store of lamp oil. She appealed to the governor of Mississippi for help, offering her services to make clothing for the soldiers "to do my share in our great and holy cause of freedom." Lighthouse Board records do not indicate whether Reynolds continued to be paid her salary through the Civil War, but she was listed as keeper of Biloxi Light until 1866.

In 1881, Navy CAPT Charles McDougal drowned in a storm off the coast of California. He left his widow, Kate McDougal, with four children and a Navy pension of $50 a month. McDougal's friends at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Vallejo, Calif., arranged to have her appointed keeper of the nearby Mare Island Light. She lived there for 25 years, raising her children with the help of donated schoolbooks and tending the residence with the help of a Chinese-American cook. During most of the year her only contact with the outside world was via a telephone line to the naval shipyard, whose officers set up the poles and strung the wire for her as a Christmas present.

The loneliness and independence of life at a lighthouse exerted an odd attraction to some people. John Walker and his German

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Front Cover: Today, Coast Guard women perform all of the Coast Guard's missions. They have proven themselves under some of the most strenuous conditions.

Back Cover: Women have been working aboard Coast Guard cutters since 1977.

immigrant wife, Kate, were appointed keeper and assistant keeper of Robbins Reef Light, off Staten Island, N.Y., in 1883. The light was a conical iron structure at the end of a submerged reef — a man-made island within sight of the Manhattan skyline. When Walker died of pneumonia in 1886, his widow took over his job. For the next 33 years she climbed to the top of the light tower and filled the kerosene lamp several times each night, assisted by her son and daughter. The children went to school on the mainland, but Walker rarely set foot outside the lighthouse grounds. Over the years she saved some 50 people from drowning. According to a *New York Times* reporter who interviewed her in 1906,

> "All that she knows from personal experience of the great land to which she came ... is comprised within the limits of Staten Island, New York City, and Brooklyn ... As a wife, mother, and widow, the happiest and saddest days of her peaceful life have been spent within the circular walls of her voluntary prison. She declares that if she were compelled to live anywhere else she would be the most miserable woman on earth, and that no mansion on Millionaires' Row could tempt her to leave of her own free will."

Walker retired in 1919 and moved to a house on Staten Island, where she died 12 years later. The *New York Evening Post* carried an obituary:

> "There are the queenly liners, the grim battle craft, the countless carriers of commerce that pass in endless procession. And amid all this and in sight of the city of towers and the torch of liberty lived this sturdy little woman, proud of her work and content in it, keeping her lamp alight and her windows clean, so that New York harbor might be safe for ships that pass in the night."

In the early 20th Century the number of female lighthouse keepers declined steadily. Steam-driven foghorns replaced the old fog bells, and oil lamps gave way to electric lights. A 1948 issue of *The Coast Guard Bulletin* commented that these technological improvements had "placed the duties of keepers of lighthouses beyond the capacity of most women." The last of the woman lighthouse keepers apparently was Fannie Salter, who lived at Turkey Point Light, Md., from 1925 to 1947.

'The best clerical assistance'

The Coast Guard was created Jan. 28, 1915, when President Woodrow Wilson signed a congressional law consolidating the Revenue Cutter Service and the Life Saving Service. The new service was to operate under the Department of the Treasury during peacetime, and to be absorbed by the Navy upon declaration of war. A little more than two years later, the latter provision was put into effect when the United States declared war on Germany.

Nineteen-year-old twin sisters Genevieve and Lucille Baker were the first Coast Guard women in uniform. They transferred from the Naval Coastal Defense Reserve during World War I.

American society in the early 20th Century saw three spheres of the professional world as proper domains for women: the school, the office, and the hospital. During World War I the United States undertook an unprecedented expansion of its armed forces, producing a manpower shortage and a stupefying mass of paperwork. The Navy, which had been operating an auxiliary Nurse Corps since 1908, concluded with some reluctance that war had created a legitimate role for women in uniform.

"Enroll women in the Naval Reserve as yeomen," said Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, "and we will have the best clerical assistance the country can provide." On March 19, 1917, the Navy authorized the enlistment of women in the Naval Reserve, with the rating "Yeoman (F)" and the popular label "Yeomanettes."

The Navy's policy was extended to the Coast Guard, but personnel records from World War I contain scarcely any references to the Coast Guard Yeomanettes. A handful of them apparently were employed at the diminutive Coast Guard headquarters building in Washington. Nineteen-year-old twin sisters Genevieve and Lucille Baker transferred from the Naval Coastal Defense Reserve to become the first uniformed women in the Coast Guard.

With the war's end the Coast Guard Yeomanettes, along with their Navy and Marine Corps counterparts, were mustered out of the service. Daniels bade them farewell: "As we embrace you in uniform today, we will embrace you without uniform tomorrow."

During World War II, Navy LT Dorothy Stratton transferred to the Coast Guard and assumed the rank of lieutenant commander. Stratton became the director of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve. She also created the term SPAR.

'Make a date with Uncle Sam'

During World War II more than 16 million men joined the armed forces — while the country's industrial and agricultural production had to increase. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, noting the examples provided early in the war by Great Britain and the Soviet Union, realized even before Pearl Harbor that women would have to play a major role in the U.S. war effort.

On Nov. 23, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Public Law 772 of the 77th Congress, 2nd Session, creating the Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard. The purpose of the act was, "to expedite the war effort by providing for releasing officers and men for duty at sea and their replacement by women in the shore establishment of the Coast Guard, and for other purposes." The Women's Reserve was to be modeled on the one the Navy had created a few months earlier. Two Navy restrictions were carried over to the Coast Guard. Women were not to serve outside the continental United States, and no woman, officer or enlisted, could issue orders to any male serviceman.

The armed forces, never having confronted the prospect of organizing a large contingent of young women, sought help from the academic community. Navy LT Dorothy Stratton, former dean of women at Purdue University, IND., agreed to transfer to the Coast Guard and, with the rank of lieutenant commander, became director of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve.

Fifty years later she said, "I am sometimes referred to as the commanding officer of the SPARs. Actually I had no command authority. All I had was power of persuasion ... . I didn't even have authority over the enlisted man at the desk across the hall."

An informal proposal to call the Coast Guard women WARCOGS was mercifully abandoned. Stratton suggested that the Women's Reserve be known by an acronym based on the Coast Guard motto: "Semper Paratus — Always Ready." By early 1943 the WAAC and WAVE recruiting posters on post-office walls and telephone poles were joined by placards urging women to "Make a Date With Uncle Sam" and "Enlist in the Coast Guard SPARs."

Recruiting for the SPARs

The initial estimate was that the Coast Guard would need 8,000 enlisted women and

400 women officers, with a recruiting target of 500 enlisted and 25 officers per month. Applicants had to be between 20 and 36 years old (the upper limit for officers was 50) and have no children under the age of 18. Enlisted women had to have completed two years of high school and officers two years of college. "Married women 'may enlist provided their husbands are not in the Coast Guard. Unmarried women must agree not to marry until after they have finished their period of training. After training, a SPAR may marry a civilian or a serviceman who is not in the Coast Guard.'" A SPAR who became pregnant "must submit her resignation promptly."

The first 153 enlisted SPARs and 15 SPAR officers were former WAVEs who agreed to be discharged from the Navy and join the Coast Guard. Several of them were assigned as recruiters and dispatched throughout the country.

Recruiters were told not to sit in their offices and wait for women to walk in, but to go out in the field to talk to prospects and their families. At least one recruiting office took that advice literally, sending its staff on repeated treks through the cotton fields of the South to seek out potential SPARs. Recruiters made speeches on the stages of movie theaters. Mobile units traveled in jeeps with "Don't Be a Spare — Be a SPAR" painted on their vehicle's spare tires. A song-and-dance show called "Tars and Spars" played in the cities of the East Coast.

The recruiters faced some serious obstacles, for military women were experiencing an image problem. In 1943, a nationwide rumor mill gave rise to public speculation about American women in uniform. One popular tale had it that the female recruiting effort was a front for a government-sponsored prostitution ring, the function of which was to slake the sexual appetites of new male soldiers and sailors. Each uniformed woman supposedly was receiving a monthly issue of prophylactics to help her accomplish her mission. Newspaper editors and clergymen started warning parents not to sell their daughters into slavery.

The Coast Guard pictured World War II SPARs as attractive, wholesome, impeccably groomed young women. It is rare to find a non-staged Coast Guard photograph of a SPAR.

The Coast Guard constructed what it wanted the public to perceive as the real SPAR: an attractive, wholesome, high-spirited young woman with impeccable grooming habits, perfect teeth, and no ambition beyond serving her country, "releasing a man to fight at sea," and getting married — preferably after the war.

The SPARs adopted a slightly modified version of the WAVE uniform, which had been designed by Mainbocher of New York, a women's fashion firm. Newspapers and magazines were bombarded with glossy prints of SPARs smiling as they marched in formation, smiling over

again relied on assistance from academe. The first enlisted SPARs were former WAVEs who had received their basic training at Oklahoma A&M University in Stillwater. When civilian women began joining the SPARS they were sent to Iowa State Teachers College, in Cedar Falls. A joint training center for WAVEs and SPARs was established at Hunter College in New York City.

In the middle of 1943, the Coast Guard set up its own indoctrination facility in what had been the Biltmore Hotel in Palm Beach, Fla. The slogan "Train under the Florida sun" was added to the recruiters' propaganda arsenal and during the next 18 months, more than 7,000 SPARs received their basic training at Palm Beach.

After graduation, the new SPARs were ordered to various specialized schools throughout the country where they received the same training as their male counterparts. Late in the war, as the SPAR recruiting effort met its quota and the number of new recruits diminished, the Palm Beach facility shut down and newly-enlisted women were trained

steaming pots, smiling at assorted vehicles, and smiling at male Coast Guardsmen. One managed to look as though she was smiling while blowing a bugle. There is almost no such thing as a casual photograph of a World War II SPAR.

SPAR Training

To train the new recruits the Coast Guard alongside enlisted men at the Coast Guard training facility in Manhattan Beach, N.Y.

Enlisted men were assigned specialties when they enlisted, but the service's initial policy was to give all enlisted SPARs the rating of seaman second class. It was assumed that a woman could not bring any useful civilian skills (other than typing or working a

telephone switchboard) into the military. Then a former policewoman demonstrated in boot camp that she knew how to shoot, and a former professional photographer suggested that she could qualify as a photographer's mate. The policy changed, and by the end of the war SPARs held 43 different ratings from boatswain's mate to yeoman.

The first 200 SPAR officers were trained at a Navy facility on the campus of Smith College, a women's school in Northampton, Mass. The Coast Guard realized, however, that it needed an indoctrination facility for its own female officers. On June 28, 1943, the Coast Guard Academy, New London, Conn., opened its doors to women when a class of 50 SPAR officer candidates reported for indoctrination. SPAR

(Top) SPARs were originally assigned to office work but restrictions were eventually lifted. By the end of World War II, women worked in 43 different ratings. (Bottom) Women received handgun and other nontraditional training during the war.

officers, like male reserve officers, went through a streamlined program crammed into six weeks (later lengthened to eight) that bore little resemblance to the academy's peacetime curriculum. But, in using its service academy to train women, the Coast Guard was taking a step that none of the other armed services emulated. More than 700 of the 955 SPAR officers commissioned during the war received their training at New London.

'I don't suppose you could take a letter'

The largest single employer of SPARs was headquarters, located in the former (and, according to rumor, condemned) Southern Railway Building at 1300 E Street in Washington. As the war went on, most of the clerical work in the eight-story structure came to be done by SPARs and female civilian employees.

Wartime Washington was hard pressed to find room for all the military women and civilian "government girls" who were crowding into the city. They were jammed into every building the government could locate that would accommodate a few bunks. SPAR Betty Splaine recalled how fortunate she felt when she and three other SPARs, after stints in an insect-infested rooming house and the Plaza Hotel, were quartered in a dean's office at American University.

"It had wall-to-wall carpeting, and we got individual solid maple beds rather than iron bunk beds," she said.

Eventually the SPARs moved into a row of temporary barracks, named after Coast Guard cutters, on Independence Avenue.

ADM Russell Waesche, then commandant, was an early convert to the cause of the SPARs. Stratton asserted afterward that "the thing that made the SPARs successful was the support of the commandant." Not every male Coast Guardsman showed the same inclination. When Splaine reported for duty at headquarters her officer in charge gave her a look of utter disgust and assigned her to a desk behind his so he would not have to look at a woman in uniform. He practically ignored her until one day when his civilian secretary called in sick. The officer turned to the SPAR and said, "I don't suppose you could take a letter." She, in fact, could take shorthand faster than he could dictate, and soon was doing most of the clerical work in the office.

The secret specialty

Late in 1942 the Coast Guard began setting up a new, highly confidential electronic navigation system called loran. Reports from the British Royal Air Force, whose female radar operators had helped win the Battle of Britain, probably were instrumental in convincing the Coast Guard that a loran station would be an appropriate billet for SPARs.

In the summer of 1943, LTJG Vera Hamerschlag took command of the Chatham, Mass., loran monitoring station, which consisted of a 30- by 50-foot, one-story building and a 125-foot tower on the beach at Cape Cod. The 11 SPARs under Hamerschlag's command had responsibility for ascertaining and maintaining the accuracy of transmissions from several other loran stations on the East Coast. The duty involved monitoring and recording those transmissions every two minutes, 24 hours a day. The SPARs were told not to "even think loran," and never to give anyone in or out of the service any hint of what was happening inside the mysterious building.

The policy of denying women authority over men inevitably created practical problems, particularly when female officers were assigned to stations that had male Coast Guardsmen on staff. The Coast Guard eventually got around the difficulty by means of an opinion from the judge advocate general's office dated November 1943. The JAG concluded that the prohibition applied "only to authority which pertains to command," and that "the authority of a subordinate officer as a representative of the officer in command has full legal effect in the execution of his regulations, instructions, and policies. The fact that the subordinate is a

member of the Women's Reserve does not alter the effect."

In other words, a SPAR could give orders to a male Coast Guardsman so long as her commanding officer was a man. The logic behind the new policy was rather convoluted, but it put SPAR officers a step ahead of their counterparts in the other services.

On Sept. 27, 1944, Congress revised the law prohibiting WAVEs and SPARs from serving outside the continental United States. Henceforth, SPARs with good records who requested such duty could be stationed in American overseas territories. The war in Europe was almost over by this time, but about 200 SPARs were sent to Alaska and 200 more to Hawaii before VJ Day.

In October 1944, the secretary of the Navy ordered the WAVEs and SPARs to begin accepting black recruits. The first black SPAR was YN3 Olivia Hooker. By then the SPARs' initial recruiting goals almost had been achieved, and the service had stopped accepting civilian women for officer training.

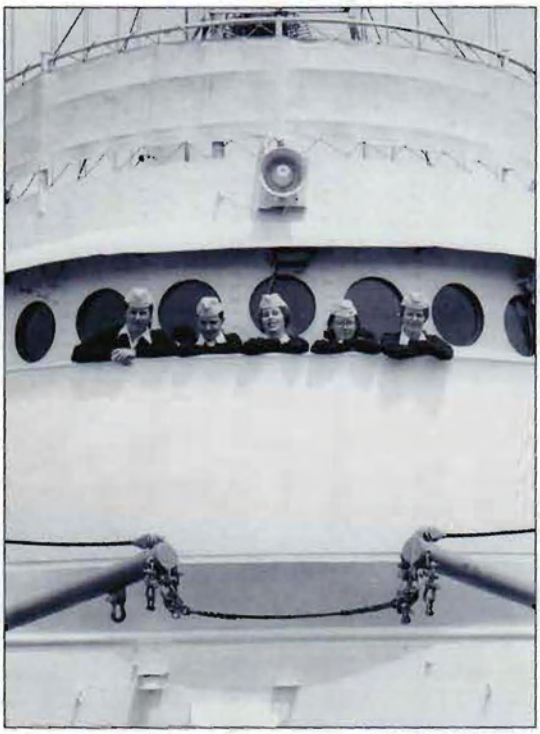
A few black women enlistees did go through OCS and were commissioned as ensigns before the end of the war. Personnel records do not indicate the total number of black SPARs who enlisted in the three months before the recruiting effort began shutting down.

End of the SPARs

The SPARs had enlisted for "duration plus six" — the length of the war plus six months. SPAR recruiting virtually ended in December 1944. Shortly after the surrender of Japan, the women's reserve branches of all the services were disbanded, and the SPARs officially ceased to exist (though the label was still being applied informally to female Coast Guardsmen in the 1960s). A few SPARs were allowed to remain on active duty long enough to finish the projects on which they were working; the remaining 12,000 returned to civilian life. Stratton, who had attained the rank of captain, became director of personnel for the International Monetary Fund, and later would serve 10 years as national executive director of the Girl Scouts.

During the next few years many Women's Reserve records were destroyed, and the federal government seems largely to have forgotten about the SPARs. But the SPARs never forgot the years they had spent in uniform. Dorothy Gleason, who enlisted in 1943 and had just been commissioned an ensign

In 1973, the Coast Guard ended the Women's Reserve and allowed women to join the regular and reserve Coast Guard. Officer candidate school also opened up to women.



Women from the first OCS class trained aboard the CGC Unimak, alongside their male counterparts. The year was 1973.

when she was demobilized, recalls the pride she and her fellow SPARs felt at having played "an active part at a crucial time in our country's history ... we were the pathfinders; we ended up doing many things because we showed we could," she said.

Doldrums in the '50s and '60s

The Women's Armed Services Act of 1948 integrated women into the regular Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force. The legislation did not mention the Coast Guard, probably because that service was run by the Department of the Treasury rather than the Department of Defense.

The Korean conflict of 1950 to 1953 saw a brief expansion of the armed forces, as reservists were called to active duty and retired members were invited to reenlist. The Coast Guard made no systematic effort to mobilize the former SPARs of World War II, largely because it had made no effort to keep up with their name and address changes. About 200 former SPARs voluntarily reenlisted in the early '50s, but most left when the military effort in Korea wound down. By 1956 there were nine enlisted women and 12 female officers in the Coast Guard, and *The Coast Guard Magazine* reported that "your chances of seeing a SPAR on active duty today have a slight edge over the possibilities of your running into Greta Garbo at the corner drugstore."

Though the Women's Reserve continued to exist as a separate entity on paper, the Coast Guard of the 1950s had scarcely any recognizable policy regarding women. In 1950 Eleanor L'Ecuyer, a former SPAR who had graduated from law school after World War II, responded to an announcement that the Coast Guard was offering commissions to former reservists who had done additional work in college. She was appointed an ensign — and was thereupon "placed in limbo" because the service had no billet for her. (L'Ecuyer joined a reserve unit and eventually was called to active duty, becoming, in her words, "probably the only officer, male or female, who never had a day of OCS training.)"

Splaine passed the warrant officer qualification test in 1957, only to be told that she would "have to go home" because "we've never had a woman WO before." It took her eight months of arguments to get her commission.

In the 1960s individual reserve units did their own recruiting, and businessmen who held reserve officers' commissions sometimes talked their secretaries into enlisting. But the Vietnam War gave the Coast Guard a surplus of qualified male applicants, and the service made little systematic effort to attract women.

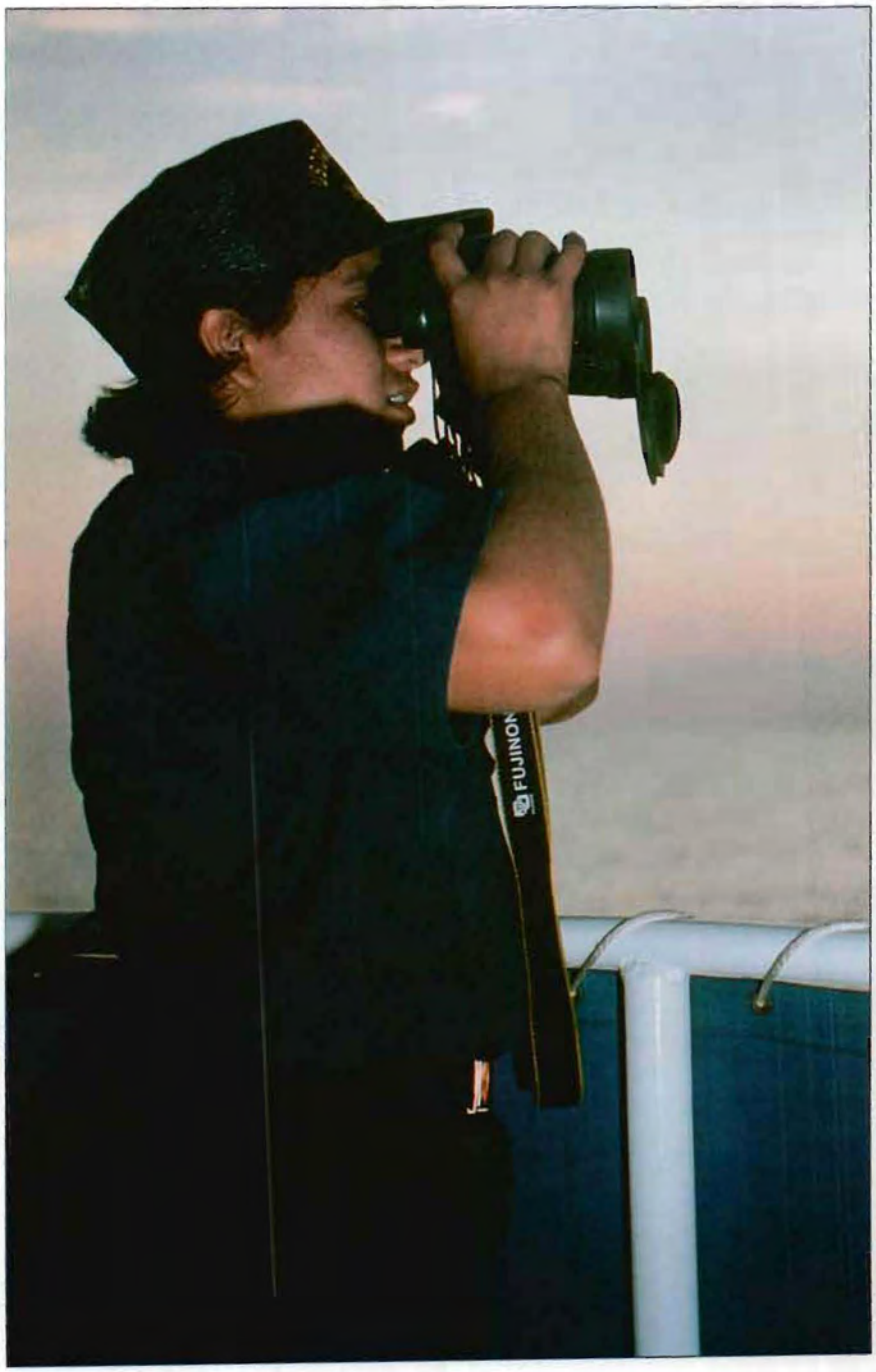
In the early 1970s, with ADM Chester Bender as commandant, the Coast Guard came to the forefront of American military policy regarding women. All the armed services were adjusting to several important national phenomena: civil rights legislation, the end of the Vietnam War, and the women's movement. The Army, Navy and Air Force wrung their hands and held back the tide as long as they could. The Coast Guard, though not without reluctance, accepted it.

A congressional law, passed in 1973, ended the Women's Reserve as a separate entity. Henceforth women would be eligible for active duty in both the regular Coast Guard and the reserve, in which men and women were to serve side by side. In the same year the service opened its officer candidate program to women, thereby becoming the first American armed service to do so.

New London goes coed

On Oct. 7, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed an Act of Congress requiring that the armed services admit women to their service academies the following year. The academy, to the accompaniment of despairing howls from some of its alumni, had al-

Today - women do



it all

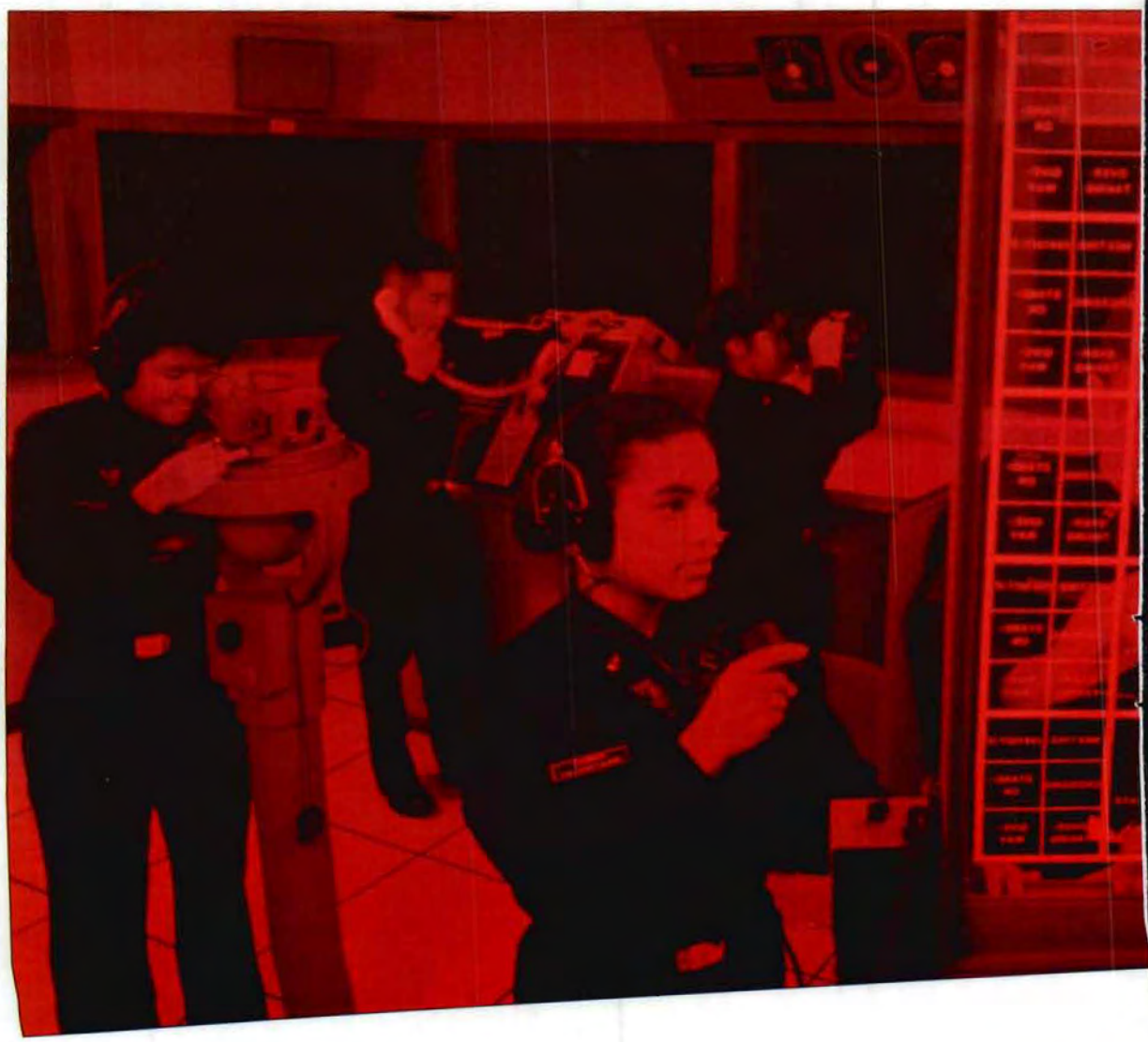
ready announced that it would accept female applicants for the class entering in July 1976. Female cadets would receive the same training as males — including summer cruises aboard the training barque *Eagle*, which had a compartment designated "Woman Cadet Quarters" added to its lower deck.

The first-generation female academy graduates tell diverse stories about their experience. Some describe the academy as a "bastion of male chauvinism" in which sexism lurked just below the surface in every realm from athletics to uniform design. A female instructor describes a survey that was taken among female cadets in the early '80s, when several new uniform options were being considered. The majority of fourth-classmen preferred a style that looked decidedly feminine, whereas the first-classmen, having concluded, the instructor suggests, that "the way to get ahead was to look like a man," opted for a uniform that differed only slightly from the men's. Other female cadets assert just as emphatically that the only women who found sexual discrimination were those who looked for it. The key to success at the academy, says one successful graduate, was "not to get wrapped up in being a female Coastie. Just be a Coastie."

Sea duty at last

In the spring of 1977, under the urging of Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams, the Coast Guard decided to conduct an experiment by assigning women to seagoing ships. The high-endurance *CGCs Morgenthau* and *Gallatin* were selected to receive 10 enlisted women and two female officers each.

The concept initially got a cool reception aboard the vessels in question. Legend had it that the *Morgenthau's* radio call sign, NDWA, meant "no damn women aboard." The crews of the two cutters were put through extensive briefings regarding the conduct that was expected of them, and



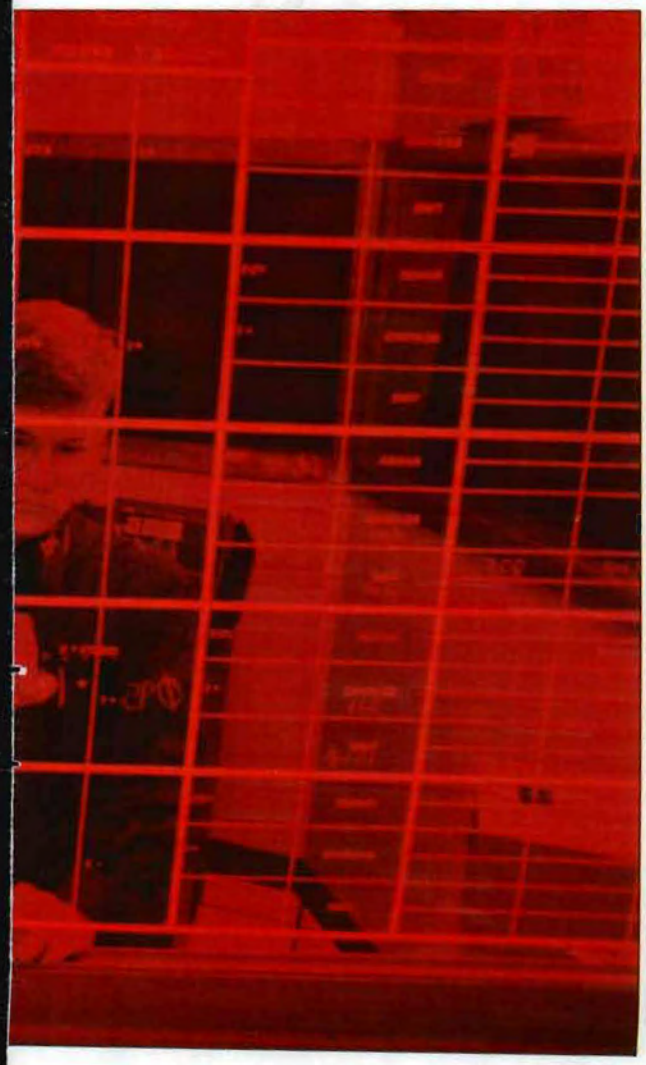
The Coast Guard Academy began admitting women in 1975. Its four-year curriculum includes nautical and academic training.

their families received a newsletter detailing the arrangements that would be made to accommodate the "mixed crews."

Some of the most vocal opposition to women's presence aboard ships came from the sailors' wives.

Women reported for duty aboard the *Morgenthau* and *Gallatin* late in 1977, to the accompaniment of considerable media attention and a couple of seamen commenting "there goes the neighborhood." Those who expected the two cutters to either sink or turn into nautical dens of iniquity were disappointed. As had been the case when the Coast Guard set up its first racially integrated ships' companies during World War II, the "mixed crews" quietly settled into a working routine and went about their business with little if any commotion.

CAPT Alan Breed, commanding officer of the *Gallatin,* acknowledged a year later that some of his male crewmembers had experienced "apprehensions, reservations, concerns, and, in some cases, frustrations" when they were told that women would be joining the ship, but he asserted that "there have been no major problems to date ... . Today, I doubt that there are over two or three who retain such hardcore opposition."



In sending women to sea the Coast Guard was steering toward a collision with the Navy. By congressional law the Coast Guard is transferred from DOT to the Department of the Navy in wartime, and the high-endurance cutters were designed for double duty as anti-submarine warships. Navy policy, based on the long-standing congressional law banning women from combat, excluded women from most seagoing billets. For a few years the Coast Guard maintained a contingency plan to replace each seagoing woman with a man upon transfer of the Coast Guard to the Navy. The Navy's "no sea duty for women" rule, however, was negated in 1978 by the Owens vs. Brown federal court decision, and the plans to remove women from Coast Guard cutters in wartime were eventually scrapped.

Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of Chanel No. 5

On April 1, 1979, LTJG Beverly Kelley, who had been part of the *Morgenthau* experiment, took command of the *CGC Cape Newagen*, a 95-foot patrol boat operating out of Maui, Hawaii. Kelley, who came from a seagoing family (her father was a captain in the merchant service), emphasizes today that she got the command "through natural progression," but she immediately became a media celebrity.

The announcement that a woman had taken command of a United States ship of war spawned newspaper headlines ranging from "Female skipper likes Coast Guard challenge" to "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of Chanel No. 5."

Kelley, who now holds the rank of commander, recalls that the biggest challenge she confronted came from the media. The *Cape Newagen's* 14-man crew adjusted relatively painlessly to the fact that their CO was a woman (though several remarked that the female voice on the PA system sounded "strange"), and the cutter, once the media attention died down, carried out its duties in exemplary fashion. The *Cape Newagen* received a Meritorious Unit Commendation for its search-and-rescue work during a major Pacific storm in 1980.

In 1979, RADM William Steward, then

From the academy, OCS and the enlisted ranks, women have risen to leadership positions in the Coast Guard.

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chief of personnel for the Coast Guard, testified before a House of Representatives subcommittee reviewing the Defense Department's policies regarding women. When asked about the Coast Guard's experience with women aboard ships, Steward replied,

> "There are times when obviously a 200-pound pump may not be able to be lifted by women; however, that same pump may not be able to be lifted by all of the male population of a particular unit as well. We have exposed the women to the gamut of our missions: law enforcement; marine environmental protection; aids to navigation; all of the other missions that we have. I can categorically state, sir, that their performance has been outstanding."

During the next few years women were assigned virtually every duty to which their ranks entitled them. In 1983, LCDR Melissa Wall, then a LTJG, took command of Loran Station St. Paul, Alaska, with a complement of 26 — all males — serving under her. By 1983, of 129 women officers in the Coast Guard, 35 were serving aboard seagoing vessels and five were aircraft pilots. Female enlisted strength in the same year stood at 1,747, including 85 enlisted women at sea.

By the late 1970s, the course the Coast Guard had charted was clear: women were in the service to stay. Official distinctions between men and women dropped away one by one. The practice of discharging pregnant females was abandoned, and the Hollywood costume designer Edith Head provided a female version of the new "Bender Blues" uniform.

Coast Guard women continued, however, to encounter discrimination in more subtle forms.

"I'm not sure I really want sea duty," said a reserve officer. "If the men hear that I'm having dinner with the captain, they think I'm bucking for promotion. If I have dinner with the exec (executive officer), I'm asking for favoritism. If I hang out with the enlisted men I must be giving it away cheap, and if I stick with the other women I must be a lesbian."

Coast Guard women in the '90s

Coast Guard women still make headlines whether they want to or not. When LT Sandra Stosz took command of the icebreaking tug *CGC Katmai Bay* in 1990 she was featured in *People* magazine and *National Geographic*, and made an appearance on the television show "To Tell the Truth." She accepted the attention because, "it was a good thing for the Coast Guard," but "I can't wait for the day when I'm thought of as the seventh captain of the *Katmai Bay* — not the first female."

LCDR June Ryan, formerly an enlisted woman who is now military aide to President Clinton, recalls that when she took command of the icebreaker *CGC Neah Bay* "they (the media) were so focused on my being a woman that my crew took a back seat. I didn't care for that." "I'm not a women's libber or a bra burner," said Ryan. "I try to keep a low profile. I just want to be a Coastie."

Wall, now executive officer of the 210-foot *CGC Courageous,* expresses a similar view.

"I'm no longer a 'female officer;' now people just say, 'okay, she's an officer,'" she said.

Coast Guard women acknowledge that a gender gap still exists in the service, but many of them see that gap as no wider than the one that exists in civilian life.

"It's okay for guys to have wives on the pier waving goodbye," said Wall, "but it doesn't work the other way around."

BMCS Diane Bucci, who became the first enlisted woman to command afloat when she became officer in charge of the tug *CGC Capstan* in 1988, says she has noticed a subtle but significant change in the relationship between Coast Guard men and women in the past decade.

"Being 'one of the guys' used to be the key," she said. "You had to not only listen to the dirty jokes but tell them. That's not so any more."

A 1990 study entitled "Women in the Coast Guard" led to a systematic effort to identify gender-related concerns and problems. The Coast Guard now has a Women's Advisory Council consisting of nine officers and senior enlisted women who advise senior officers and civilian administrators on policy matters.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, or DACOWITS, addresses the concerns of the Coast Guard as well as DOD's.

The Care of Newborn Child Program gives new mothers and fathers the option of taking a year off with the assurance of retaining their ranks and ratings when they re-

turn to active duty. All Coast Guardsmen watch films designed to define and discourage sexual harassment. Friction continues to exist between genders, but most Coast Guardsmen have found that creating the diverse environment called for by the regulations isn't as hard as they expected. Bucci recalls that when she reported aboard her first ship, she ran into an enlisted man who had the right idea.

"He just shook hands and said, 'we're glad you're here,'" she said.

International events of the '90s have put the military's new policies toward women to the test. Three reserve port-security units, all with women among their members, were sent to the Middle East during Operation Desert Shield. Cutters with women crewmembers have taken part in rescue and migrant-control exercises in the Caribbean, and a PSU was sent to Port au Prince, Haiti, during the 1994 intervention there. All the members of that unit were housed in a warehouse whose amenities did not include bulkheads.

The women consulted during the preparation of this article were unanimous in their assertion that the Coast Guard is ahead of the other armed services in its policies toward and treatment of women. Another consistent theme among Coast Guard women is an intense dedication to their profession. Splaine, who retired in 1971 as a CWO4 after a career of 28 years, summarized her attitude toward the Coast Guard:

"I love it, love it, love it, love it, love it." ❖

ADDITIONAL READING

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