

## Ombudsman of the Year Award – Remarks of Mrs. Wanda Allen-Yearout

I'd like to add my congratulations to Christine, for being Ombudsman of the Year and the first to win with the award named in my honor – The Wanda-Allen-Yearout Ombudsman of the Year Award. That's a real mouth full. I expect to become part of the Coast Guard alphabet soup and have it shortened to W.A.Y. (way) Ombudsman of the Year Award. Then they can say, "Way to go! That's the way to be an Ombudsman!"

But seriously, I wouldn't be here to say this if it wasn't for the efforts of Master Chief Bowen to have this award named in my honor. And, of course, none of this would have been possible without Admiral Gracey having started the Ombudsman Program and Work-Life. Next there has been a long list of people in Work-Life at headquarters and in the regional offices, and for the last few years that's been Rodney Whaley, supporting and working with me. They are now off and running without me. And last, but not least, my family. My husband Tom has wondered more than once if he would be called on the carpet for some of my actions.

As noble as all of this sounds, it was really a selfish emotion that drew me to the Ombudsman Program to start with. Being the Chief's daughter, then the Ensign's wife, I tell everyone that the Coast Guard and I have a cradle to grave relationship. In 1982 when I started graduate school at San Francisco State, I had one thing in mind. I wanted my Masters in Childhood Development and Family Relations to specialize in military families. My research with the DOD services brought me to the Navy to observe their pre-deployment, deployment and reunion workshops. This is where I discovered their Ombudsman Program. This was my AH-HA moment! I wanted this kind of support for myself. I had grown up watching my mother cope with my father's comings and goings, thought I had a good handle on things, but this program could have saved her and me a lot of sleepless nights. I wanted THIS program and I needed THIS program. And in my own self-centered way, I thought that if I needed it, the rest of the Coast Guard needed it more. So I asked for the Ombudsman Program.

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I wrote that first letter to Admiral Gracey. He was kind enough to write back and say he had been thinking the same thing. Then, a few months later, I happened to be in D.C. at a training, and called him – One evening – At home. This is where Tom started worrying about his career. When I finished my Master's thesis on Coast Guard spouses I sent Admiral Gracey a copy. And we finally met at a social function when he and Randy made an official visit to the Bay Area.

Let me go back to my thesis real quick. When I started, I thought my research project would come up with characteristics of the ultimate super spouse. What I got was the characteristics of a population at risk: the spouses were young, with low educational levels, poor coping skills, perceived their quality of life to be very low, and had little or no participation within the Coast Guard or local communities. The problem was when these spouses went down, they took their families with them, sometimes ending with the member leaving the Coast Guard or divorce. Here was the reason to have the Ombudsman Program and Work-Life. We needed swimming lessons for our drowning families, not just a life-line. We needed them to learn to swim—to become self-sufficient. And when it came right down to the bottom line, it was all financial. Keep the spouses informed and supported and that keeps readiness and retention levels high. That's a good investment and return.

Growing the Ombudsman Program has been like watching transportation go from the Model T to the jet. Now it needs to grow into the space age. When we first started we hoped the Ombudsman had a typewriter or at least access to one at the unit. This was for the purpose of keeping the spouses (mostly wives then) in the informational loop with a printed Ombudsman newsletter. We taught scripting for calls made on the telephone tree. We cautioned spouses to number their letters to their spouse on patrol in case the mail delivery system failed, which it usually did. And sometimes we had the 100 word or less radiograms. After a few years, we moved into home computers and desk top publishing. And the phone company came up with a phone

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system for soccer moms to call the team that we stole and used for the phone tree.

Then we thought we had it made with a 800 number for the unit “care line”. Spouses weren’t just wives. We had husbands – some dual military couples, and distant spouses of geo bachelors – not to mention single parent families. Well, cell phones and email came along, changing the traditional informational loop. And that brings us up to video chats, websites, Facebook and Twitter. Proving once again that the Ombudsman Program needs to be flexible and change with the needs of the spouses it supports.

Since I started with all this in the early 80’s, I am, as the Coast Guard would say “retirement eligible”. So it’s time to make that graceful exit. I want to leave with this:

ATTENTION Coast Guard Spouses:

The Ombudsman Program is yours. But it will only be as good as you make it. My husband tells me that the world is run by people who show up. So, I’m asking you to show up. I challenge you to work your way up the Ombudsman organization.

First: Volunteer to be an Ombudsman. Take the training. Work with your unit families.

Second: Become a mentor to other Ombudsmen.

Third: Bring your knowledge to train new Ombudsmen.

And fourth: Put it all together and become a Volunteer Ombudsman Coordinator at one of the Work-Life Offices. This program needs to be for you and by you. No one knows what a Coast Guard spouse needs more than another Coast Guard spouse. I had my turn. Now it’s your turn!