Women in the Navy

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During the Vietnam war, nearly all Navy women played their usual role: they took over the jobs of Navy men in the United States, releasing them to fight the war. Only a handful of Navy women other than nurses—nine officers—actually served in Vietnam, but related events at home affected all Navy women.

Most Navy women served during the war in the fields traditionally assigned to them—medical services, administration, and communications. Thousands of male hospital corpsmen were on ships or with Marine troops and the Navy relied on women corpsmen, who constituted approximately 25 percent of all enlisted Navy women, to replace them. Most other Navy women were in clerical and administrative jobs where they played a key role—without them, the Navy might well have drowned in its own paperwork. Other women held non-traditional jobs.

For example, more than 700 enlisted women served in aviation specialties, working side by side with enlisted men fueling and servicing aircraft out on flight lines, or trouble-shooting engines in drafty hangars. Grease, noise, and irregular hours constituted their working environment, dungarees their daily uniform.

Almost all these Navy women served stateside, but some served overseas, most of them in Europe. To supply more men to the combat zone, the Navy filled many of its European shore billets with women.

The first woman to serve in Vietnam was Lieutenant Elizabeth G. Wylie who reported to the staff of the Commander of Naval Forces in Saigon in June 1967. She worked in the Command Information Center, which prepared various kinds of reports, including briefings to visiting journalists and politicians. She spent three to six days each month in the field gathering information and taking pictures. "I'd go back if I had the chance," she later told a newspaper reporter. "The opportunity to see the heart of the Navy at work is unique and rewarding." She did not want "to glorify what I did in Vietnam. I never was under hostile fire or anything like that." Speaking of the women with whom she shared quarters in Saigon she said, "The only difficulties encountered were the same as the men. We were all away from home, families, and not in a particularly pleasant situation."

The second line officer to serve in Vietnam between 1968 and 1973 was Lieutenant Susan F. Hamilton, who in 1968 was assigned to the naval staff in Saigon. Lieutenant Commander Barbara Bole and Lieutenant Sally Bostwick later joined her. Lieutenants Mary Anderson and Ann Moriarty in 1971 reported to the Naval Support Activity in Cam Ranh Bay. In 1972 Lieutenant (junior grade) Kathleen Dugan reported to Saigon; Commanders Carol Adsit and Elizabeth Barrett also served there. No enlisted Navy women served in Vietnam.

Barrett was the highest ranking woman naval line officer to serve in Vietnam, and the first to hold a command in a combat zone. She arrived in Saigon in January 1972, and in November became the commanding officer of the 450 enlisted men in the Naval Advisory Group, a position she held until she left Vietnam in March 1973. She was forty years old, had nineteen years of naval service behind her, and knew that some of the men in her command were "not too pleased" to have a female commanding officer. "It gave them something to talk about," she said. During her 15 months in Vietnam, she had three days off: "February 2, 1972, when I went sailing at Cat Lo, March 29 when I went swimming at Vung Tau and December 19 when I wrote Christmas cards."

Far more Navy women volunteered to serve in Vietnam than went. The women knew that if they were not allowed to carry a share of the burden, then the men would have to carry more. Lieutenant Wylie wrote from Vietnam that "given the adequate living facilities and outstanding working atmosphere, I strongly

believe that the Navy women who desire to serve here should have this opportunity." Nevertheless, the Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel for Women still did not think Vietnam duty was suitable for women, but she did agree to a policy that allowed a woman officer to be sent to Vietnam only if a Navy commanding officer asked for her by name and stated that she was particularly qualified for a certain job.

Meanwhile, in August 1972, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt announced policy changes for the assignment of women. One change was to initiate a pilot program under which a limited number of officer and enlisted women were assigned to the crew of the hospital ship USS Sanctuary. On September 8, 1972, Personnel man Third Class Peggy Sue Griffith reported aboard USS Sanctuary, the first of a group of 32 enlisted women and two women officers setting off on uncharted seas. The enlisted women were to work in the ship's deck, supply, and operations departments as well as in administration. (In addition, 21 enlisted women worked in the ship's hospital.) These women were now the U.S. Navy's first sea-going women sailors, expected to perform the same duties as their male shipmates. Lieutenant (junior grade) Ann Kerr served primarily as an administrative assistant, with significant additional watch standing duties both in port and at sea. Ensign Rosemary Nelson of the Supply Corps was responsible for the officers' wardroom mess (dining room) and also stood watches in port.

The women performed their duties competently, often exceptionally so. The Sanctuary's commanding officer concluded, after a year's experience with his mixed crew, "Women are capable and may serve on board the Sanctuary, under the present administrative conditions, in perpetuity." During the ship's time with a mixed crew, she was underway at sea for several brief training periods. She also sailed from San Francisco to Buenaventura, Colombia, then through the Panama Canal to Haiti, and finally to her new homeport of Mayport, Florida. Compared with other Navy ships, this was little time at sea, yet some women line officers assigned to the ship earned their qualifications as Of ficer of the Deck underway. Not only could the ship handle women, women could handle the ship.

Women also served on small Navy craft. As early as the fall of 1972, 11 enlisted women reported straight out of boot camp to the Annapolis Naval Station for duty aboard the station's yard patrol craft used to train Naval Academy midshipmen. From this modest beginning, the number of women serving in small craft increased steadily.

The Navy's wartime decision to put women on board ships—its distinctive operational platforms—started the women on a journey from the naval profession's periphery towards its heart. The nine women line officers who served in Vietnam had a significance far beyond their tiny number. Like hundreds of women in the other services, they made it impossible to deny that women other than nurses could serve in a combat zone. Their competence, industry, and patriotism demonstrated that Navy women were both ready and able to serve wherever they might be needed.

REMEMBRANCES

Compiled by Captain Georgia Clark Sadler,

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Nine women line officers served in Vietnam and brought back lasting, vivid memories of their time in country. But women were also in jobs directly supporting the war effort and some were on the other "front lines"— college campuses and the streets of Washington, D.C. Regardless of where they were or what they did, the Vietnam conflict was an emotional experience for all of these women.

I spent New Year's eve 1968 at Red Beach, a Seabee camp outside of Da Nang on the shores of Da Nang Bay. It was a beautiful beach with miles of white sand—right out of a resort poster—only for as far as the eye could see, there were coils and coils of barbed wire. The Seabees had built a small club and we gathered there for happy hour. I took my drink out onto the lanai to enjoy the breeze and view, barbed wire not withstanding. Flashes of light caught my eye from the nearby hills—they were flashes of gunfire and you could hear the echoing of the gunfire and mortars. And as I stood there with my drink, I realized that there were people—human beings—up on that hillside killing each other and I was overwhelmed by the feeling of the incongruity of it all. It is a memory I shall not soon forget. (Carol A. Adsit, Da Nang 1968)

I was the personnel officer for about 260 enlisted personnel and 350 Vietnamese civilians at the Navy's air facility at Cam Ranh Bay. Because the facility was closing, I spent most of my time getting orders for my enlisted troops and carrying out a reduction in force (RIF) of the civilians. Despite being in the middle of a war, I had to follow the same RIF procedures as were used in the United States. Thus I found myself going to villages to give laid off employees their severance pay. It was a sad duty. Some Vietnamese said they were concerned for their lives and asked me to help, but there was nothing I could do. I sometimes wonder what happened to my Vietnamese personnel officer. He probably ended up in a reeducation camp.

Following U. S. RIF procedures was not the only incongruous thing I encountered. I was not allowed to live in the Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ) because it was considered inappropriate for a woman to live in the same building with men. Consequently, I lived on the other side of the base with the U.S. Air Force nurses. The difficulty was that I had to call Washington, D. C. frequently to check on the orders for the enlisted personnel. This meant driving outside the base at 3 am to get to the naval facility on the other side. On these trips I constantly saw flares and heard bombs as fighting went on nearby. Despite the danger, I was not allowed to carry a weapon because I was considered a non-combatant. It always struck me as strange that they were more concerned about my living in the BOQ than they were about my safety on these early morning trips near the battlefield.

There were also very touching times. At Christmas I went with some Air Force women to Army fire support bases where we talked to the soldiers and sang Christmas carols. The men were young and lonely. It meant a lot to them to be able to reminisce with someone from their own country and who spoke their language. I also was part of the air facility group that supported a local Catholic orphanage with food and supplies. My skipper adopted two boys from the orphanage and because he left before all the paperwork was completed, I was the one who put them on a helo and took them to Saigon so they could go to America.

I am very happy I had the opportunity to go to Vietnam. My being there meant that one less man had to go. It also gave me the chance to do one of the most important jobs in the Navy — take care of the troops. (Mary Anderson Shupak; Cam Ranh Bay and Saigon, 1971-72)

During the Vietnam conflict, I worked with the secure voice mobile communications network used by our troops in the field. I remember the attention to detail and responsibility If eat to ensure the materials used to secure the system were issued and delivered in a timely manner. I am proud of my contribution in providing this important support service to our multi-service troops in Vietnam. (Jan Lucie; San Francisco, California, 1970-72)

During the Vietnam conflict, I was fortunate to serve in two billets where I felt a part of the U.S. effort. In one job I was involved with secure voice transmissions and the security of tactical messages to joint forces in the Pacific. Later I was assigned to a west coast fighter training squadron, where my being the squadron administrative officer meant that an aviator could be made available for combat duty. Although I remained for a career, retiring after 28 years of service, I never again felt the importance of my small contribution as I did during Vietnam. I am proud to have served in the

Navy during that time. (Sandra Francis; Camp Smith, Hawaii; San Diego, California, 1964-66; 1968-71)

As part of a Navy recruiting team, I was visiting the University of Kansas and we had been fairly well received— no pickets or students with record players playing dirty songs. Since this was a visit targeting the officer programs, we had planned to stay late and give the officer entrance exam.

Suddenly, we received an emergency phone call from the recruiting station in Kansas City directing us to leave the campus immediately. We protested because we had lots of applicants to test and a good visit was unusual. We were told not to argue and leave as soon as possible. When we got back to Kansas City, the Commanding Officer told us about an incident at a college called Kent State. That night the NROTC building at the University of Kansas was fire bombed. (Kathy Laughton; Kansas City, Missouri, 1969-71)

I had been selected for a full-time doctorate program at a university in downtown Washington, D. C. and was trying to arrange my schedule for the beginning of school. I had an appointment with a professor and, because I was still in my Navy job, I went in uniform. When I arrived on campus, a demonstration was going on in front of the business administration building. As I tried to find a place to park, my car was surrounded by anti-war demonstrators. I was so concerned for my safety that I left and did not keep my appointment. For the remainder of the Vietnam war, I never again wore my uniform into our nation's capital (Doris Vail, Washington, D.C., 1971)

During the first part of Vietnam war I was in jobs which only peripherally involved the conflict. That all changed when I went to graduate school. The first week I was there, the NROTC building was fire bombed. When I went into the NROTC building, I had to cross picket lines of anti-war protesters who hurled epithets at me. A classmate once asked, "What does it feel like being in an organization that has killed 100,000 babies?" A class in problems of American foreign policy quickly became a forum for discussing Vietnam. Little did I realize when I swore to protect and defend the Constitution that I would have to do it on a university campus. (Georgia Clark Sadler; Seattle, Washington, 1970-72)

I was an officer in the Naval Reserves during the Vietnam conflict. One time when leaving my weekend drill site at the Washington Navy Yard, my car was surrounded by anti-war protesters who pounded on it until I drove away. Another time, because of a large demonstration, we had to form a convoy with an armed escort to get to Virginia. Later, while I was teaching at Dunbarton College of Holy Cross, anti-war sentiment was so strong that I never wore my uniform on campus. Basically it wasn't prudent to wear your uniform in certain parts of Washington. It was a scary time. (Joan Fiske Adams; Washington, 1968-71)

As an ensign and lieutenant junior grade), I was somewhat isolated from any direct contact with people who were serving in Vietnam or those protesting against it. It was not until I became a recruiter in southern California that I was forced to think about the situation. On almost every campus, we would face protesters, sometimes in very threatening confrontations. Some campuses required us to wear civilian clothes or restricted our activity to administrative offices.

The confrontations on the campuses caused me to reflect on my presence in the military. Here were college students only three to fours years younger than me, challenging my belief in a system I had sworn to "preserve and protect." It was not a comfortable situation. Often my recruiting officer peers and I would have long conversations about our feelings of rejection while in uniform—sometimes we questioned the validity of our government's involvement in Vietnam. I had lost a good friend in Vietnam, but I was not able to visit the Vietnam Memorial for several years after it was completed (even though I was stationed in Washington), until I had met with his family in Florida. As career Army people, they gave the ultimate sacrifice, but they still were convinced their son's participation was the right thing to do. He was a volunteer and loved the Army. I had been an

"Army brat, "and was raised thinking military service was an honorable thing to do. Any doubts I may have had were erased after I visited this family. (Kathleen Bruyere; Stockton & Los Angeles, California; Washington, D.C. 1966-75)

While serving in Washington, D.C., I was assigned as a Casualty Assistance Call Of ficer (CACO). A CACO acts as a liaison between the Navy and the family of someone who had been killed or captured. My case involved a lieutenant commander who was missing in action and whose wife was in a fatal accident not long after he was declared missing. Left behind were two small children. One of the most difficult tasks I had was to show the children the pictures of POWs to see if they could identify their father. Their aunt and uncle did not see him, but the children wanted so badly to find their father in those photographs. I always felt I was not just a liaison, but a lifeline for that family. I still know them, and have watched the children grow and have children of their own. (Deanna Bowing, Washington, D.C., 1967)

Although I did not serve in Vietnam, the conflict still had a direct personal impact on me. I was assigned as Assistant Communications Officer at Naval Air Station, Lemoore. The attack pilots who were flying combat missions over Vietnam were from squadrons at Lemoore, and most of their families lived in base housing. We had standing orders in the message center that whenever a casualty message came in advising of the death or probable capture of a pilot, we were to call the Commanding Officer no matter the time of day or night so he could personally deliver the message. I knew many of the pilots and their wives, so those messages were always very personal. I hated those messages. I remember having to find a way to call a woman out of the commissary so she could be told about the message concerning her husband. What a ghastly experience. I also recall one of the worst times was when a new pilot, only recently out offraining, was captured. He and his wife had been married only a few months. She broke down completely. The most difficult times were when the news media announced an aircraft carrier had lost a pilot. Then all of us would wait in dread, not knowing who would get the devastating message.

All these events happened so long ago. Yet as I write the, the memories come flooding back and I begin to cry again. (Sandra Francis; Lemoore and San Diego, California, 1968-71)

As part of Operation Homecoming, I was one of three line officers assigned to the Returnee and Dependent Assistance Unit at Balboa Naval Hospital. Our job was to take care of all of the POWs' administrative work and assist the POWs and their families as they were repatriated. We answered and made an endless number of phone calls. Sent flowers. Handled visitors by the ton. Received and sent letters. Responded or referred people who wanted to invite POWs to dinner or come speak at their school. We answered questions from the returnees, their families, the chaplains and the medical staff. We were on the ward daily, working with the former POWs, and became a very tight little group. The experience is imprinted on me indelibly. The level of emotion was so high you could touch it. You couldn't necessarily ever feel the depth of the hurt or the height of the happiness they felt but you could see it in their faces. It was physically and mentally draining. But it was also a good feeling to be able to do something for this group of men who had been through so much and were so admired by our nation for their strength and courage. (Deanna Boxing, San Diego, California, 1973)

In February 1973, there were five of us at Women Officers School preparing to get commissions before going to flight school. Swill never forget all of us gathered around the television watching as the POWs came home. It was not lost on us that the majority of Navy POWs were aviators, and it helped bring into sharp focus the vocation we were about to embark upon. (Rosemary Mariner, Newport, R.I., 1973)

For more details see the book Crossed Currents by Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall (Brassey's (US), a Maxwell Macmillan Company (Washington, New York and London: 1993).