

ALL HANDS

FEBRUARY 1980



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Back: Chief Boatswain's Mate Gerald Naylor's leadership shows concern for others. Front and back cover photos by PH1 Jim Preston.

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Women Aboard Spear

When USS *L. Y. Spear* (AS 36) heads out to sea, wives and girlfriends aren't the only ones waving farewell from the pier. Husbands and boyfriends of 94 enlisted women and four female officers serving aboard the Norfolk-based attack submarine tender wave goodbye as well.

Home for more than 40 officers and 1,000 enlisted men and women, *Spear* is one of five Navy ships that includes women as part of the ship's company. Women first reported to *Spear* in October 1978 when the law prohibiting the assignment of women to fill sea duty billets on ships, other than hospital and transport ships, was amended. They weren't the first women to report to a Navy ship since the new law took effect—that distinction belongs to the women aboard USS *Vulcan* (AR 5)—but they were part of approximately 400 Navy women who made history by being among the first on board ships in fiscal year 1979.

As Yeoman First Class Ruth Deussen, a repair administrative assistant said, "We weren't first—we were second. By the time we reported to *Spear*, a lot of the novelty had worn off."

For most of the women, missing out on much of the publicity surrounding women aboard Navy ships hasn't diminished their overall enthusiasm about being with *Spear*.

"You get a little tired of the publicity. Instead of letting you do your job, some-

one keeps shoving a microphone in front of you, asking you what your job is," said Electronics Technician Second Class Kathryn Anderson.

Spear provides mobile facilities, support and service to nuclear subs. Working around the clock, the ship serves as a floating industrial-maintenance complex complete with a computerized supply center, ammunition storage and repair shops.

Personnelman First Class Vickie Williamson said, "For me, the most exciting part of being here was the feeling I got when I walked up the gangway for the first time. I felt the same way when I graduated from boot camp. It's a good feeling knowing you're helping to shape history."

Talk among *Spear*'s women centers on work and how they adjust to life on a ship. Although competition does exist between the sexes, its importance is played down by most women.

"The guys I work with don't push me to carry more than I can handle," said Engineman Fireman Marie Sande. "There's no reason for me to strain myself trying to prove something. If I get hurt, they know they'll be short-handed."

Most women working with men find acceptance once the ground rules are worked out. Electronics Technician Third Class Valerie Burch said, "I set them straight right off. If something was said or done that I didn't like, I told

them. They're considerate of me and I don't try to outdo them."

Refuting the idea that women can't handle their fair share of work on a ship, Seaman Sheila Dowling, a food service attendant, said, "Maybe women can't do some jobs as quickly or maybe we can't carry as much, but little by little, we get the job done. There are some guys who have a hard time with the physical work, too."

Getting any job done means pitching in, not resorting to tears in hopes that the men will do the task. "Some of the guys are afraid we'll shirk our responsibilities by playing the helpless female who bats her eyelids or cries," said ET2 Anderson. "We wouldn't be here if we resorted to that kind of behavior."

According to ENFN Sande, a better tactic when a tough job comes along is a sense of humor. "I started off one day feeling really good. I put on a nice, clean, starched uniform and even a little makeup. We were disconnecting the outlet lines in a submarine. The guy I was working with figured the lines were clean but told me to hold a plastic bag underneath just in case. The next thing I knew, I was wearing eight gallons of very warm oil—it was running all over me. All I could do was laugh."

Getting used to shipboard routine and even finding your way around takes

Navy women meet the challenge of life at sea in traditional and nontraditional roles.





A break gives SN Jolene Schira and DP3 Karan Miller time to exchange a few sea stories.

time and practice. For many women, these adjustments aren't any different from those which have to be made by men reporting to their first ship.

"Men come here from boot camp just like women do. I came on board not knowing anything about compartment numbers, different drills or shipboard routine," said Seaman Mary Kathryn Pence. "How do you learn? Just like everyone else—get lost, ask questions, and pay attention. We all have to learn together, so it isn't that much different for women than for men."

"Actually, women have it easier than

men. Men are more willing to help a woman than another man; as women, we're more supportive of each other," said ET2 Anderson.

Finding your way around is only half the battle. "When your division officer tells you to get something, you have to learn your way around," said Interior Communications Technician Third Class Debbie Hughes. "You figure out what compartment numbers mean but more importantly, you learn the slang."

While most sailors learn all things eventually, women find the berthing arrangements take a little longer to get used to—still, the only major difference between male and female berthing areas is in the heads. Some plumbing modifications were made but just because a

compartment houses women, it doesn't guarantee women any special privileges. They found that no satin sheets, colored towels, or personal pictures grace the sleeping compartments. Just plain Navy issue is the rule for all from sleeping quarters to uniforms. Besides, decorating isn't allowed because of shipboard fire regulations.

Instead of conventional bunk beds, Navy racks are stacked three high with a storage area under each mattress. That small storage area is part of the reason why all that time in boot camp was spent teaching recruits how to fold and stow clothing.

"For older people, it's harder if they don't live off base," said YN1 Deussen, a Navy woman with 12 years in. "First and second class petty officers have been in longer and make more money so they have more household goods and personal possessions. With sea duty, you don't have room for those things, so into storage they go. You don't know when you'll see them again. It's a real letdown for someone who had a nice, two-bedroom apartment to find herself stuck with a two-by-six rack and two lockers."

Aside from the cramped quarters, some women complain about the lack of privacy and noise. But ET3 Burch still looks on her experiences from the bright side. "Sea duty is an experience that everyone in the Navy should go through. You learn to adapt. It's not that hard. Women have a lot of give and take. If you're considerate, others will be considerate, too."

Sea duty and seasickness may not be as closely related as one might think. Although some women—and some men—confess to "turning green" when *Spear* goes out to sea, remaining tied up dockside is an advantage. "There's not much movement and what is there lulls you to sleep. This is a comfortable ship," said YN1 Deussen.

But going to sea is the part that Dentist Teri Peterson looks forward to. "I turned down a billet in Hawaii to come to *Spear* and I love going to sea."

Most non-rated people reporting to their first ship—women included—start out in the first lieutenant's department.

These are physically demanding jobs that few people like. They are jobs that must be done, however, so for six months or longer, seamen handle the load. But life in the Navy on board ship doesn't deadend for a person assigned to mess cooking or to the deck force. They usually complete courses for another rate and eventually move up the ladder.

Some mess cooks may not especially like the jobs but the crew in general finds little to complain about the food mess cooks help prepare and serve three times a day, seven days a week. Whether it's working up an appetite or working another meal off, adjusting to good

food is the easy part; pushing away from the table when that food is almost too good is harder. "The food is great," said YN1 Deussen. "In fact, we hear more compliments about how good the food is than about anything else."

Most women on board *Spear* see their experiences in a positive way. Chief Storekeeper Lois Baldwin, a supervisor in the ship's supply center, said, "To me, the Navy is ships. Being part of this one helped me make chief. Even though the experience came a little late in my career, I haven't been disappointed."

By 1984, many more Navy women will have their chance at sea duty. It is planned that about 3,500 women will

be assigned to about 50 Navy ships. The latest Navy ship receiving women on board was the repair ship USS *Jason* (AR 8). *Jason* received its first contingent of enlisted women in January, joining the four female officers already aboard. The officers reported aboard *Jason* during its latest Western Pacific deployment.

By counting themselves among the first women to go to sea, the women of *Spear* have made history. They continue to break other barriers when they're among the first women to tell their own sea stories.

—Story by JO2 Barb Tein-Geddes

—Photos by PHI Jim Preston

