

Women at sea. Is this a regularity amongst many Naval vessels? No, not unless you are deployed on a tender or an oiler. The Navy is changing and so are the many "regularities" in its forces, and women at sea is one of those many changes. Up until now, the Unitas mission has not included females in its diverse operations. The expectations and responsibilities that embarking females on board a combatant ship have up until now gone untested in the Atlantic fleet. I am proud to convey my reactions and experiences in lieu of the important step that the Navy has taken by affording me the opportunity to be history in the making.

Initially, our squadron (VC-6) had selected four females to accompany the detachment and I felt I had no chance to be a part of this history making evolution. I made it known to my chain of command that I had a huge interest in going on the cruise. I felt this was a once in a lifetime experience that, if given the opportunity, I wouldn't miss for the world. I needed some space, some change, something new. Being in Virginia on shore duty made me feel like I was going to die if I couldn't see the world. After all, I didn't join the Navy to sit on my butt in Virginia. Over a period of a few weeks it came to my attention that my dream wasn't too far away. Through extenuating circumstances I found I was the first alternate if, for some reason, someone might have to return. Then the phone call came. I was informed that I would be leaving for approximately four months in just two days from the time I received the call.

I went over and over in my head what to expect and how to act on a ship with 200 males (respectively). The whole attitude in the Navy surrounding the sexual harassment issue had me worried. I felt that we (the females) would be shunned and treated as outsiders with no way in. When I arrived on 29 July, 1993 in Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico it was blatantly apparent that shunning would not be the case. Camaraderie and friendship abounded on USS Stark. The first people I met greeted me with firm handshakes and true smiles. I was welcomed into the Stark family with open arms. I felt that this was what being shipmates was all about (being on shore duty, you don't have this kind of bonding). Although I am a female and I was "the new kid on the block" I didn't find it too hard to adjust. I had no problem learning about different people and the things they did. I found that I had become the General Workshops' "HT with wings", and keeping in step with the crew, I received a nickname. They called me Hamptster.

Not everything was fun and games though. Underway watches made for late nights and early mornings. I stood watch in "the Hole" for awhile and learned all about our SSDG operations. After that I was given a 180 degree turn and set to work on the bridge. There I learned about being a helmsman, forward lookout (hey, I got a C g u 11 at about bearing 229!), and keeping up with "the board". I found underway watches much more exciting than the in port watches, where I became Messenger of the Watch qualified.

Watches weren't everything. PQS were very, very important and becoming Basic Damage Control qualified was no laughing matter. In doing this I learned how to save myself, my shipmates and my ship in the worst case scenario. I was instructed on everything from first-aid to CBR defense to where I could find #1 firepump or what activated the Halon. I also became an active part in repair locker three. I assisted in setting yoke and zebra during our many General Quarters drills along with volunteering to don an OBA or set fire boundaries when needed.

My work schedule for VC-6 was as hectic as any and, being a novice in the area of target operations when I boarded, I was unaware of the rigors we would be put under. Preparing for our Drone operations and keeping our targets in tip top shape was no easy feat. Sometimes our day began at zero dark thirty and lasted until late evening. After a lot of hard work I received three

qualifications in three months. They consist of Ordnance Team Member, Start Console Operator, and First Mechanic. All of these qualifications would require longer than three months to acquire in the squadron back on the beach, but here under hard charging leadership and fast paced work days becoming qualified was just another part of supporting the team effort. Being part of a detachment and being "integrated" with the crew made for some very stressful times. I felt that either we should be treated as a helo det would be or treated as part of ships' company. I was drawn between the two on many occasions. In the future, I think, if women are to be deployed on a combatant, they should be part of ships' company. This will eliminate any confusion on their duties and responsibilities by having one set of guidelines to follow and one schedule to meet. It will also help the crew and the ship see how **exactly** a female would contribute to the workspace and the overall effectiveness of the mission.

Aside from the work day and all encompassing duties, many good times were to be had. The ceremony of crossing the line was a much anticipated event. I looked forward to it from day one. It was one of those rare occasions when everyone had to pull together to make something happen and then stand together and face the music. I was just "one of the guys" during this evolution. I was treated in exactly the same manner as the other lowly "wogs", and this made me feel even more strongly towards my new found shipmates. Hey, if they had to go through that then I was going to go through it just the same. I knew that there was to be no preferential treatment and, if there was I wanted no part of it. I was a crewmember and gender didn't matter.

If I were to say that my record is spit polished clean I would be wrong. I got a taste of XOI and boy was it scary. Although it was a farce and was designed in conjunction with the crossing the line ceremonies it is something I'll never forget. We (my female counterparts and I) were taken all the way through each procedure necessary for the final judgement at XOI, from the report chit to getting our rights read. Until they had read me my rights I was able to convince myself it was a joke, but as I signed that paper and stood in midships passageway I felt as if I would explode. I stood there, in front of the XO thinking "great now I'm gonna get it here and when I go home - oooh watch out!". Then Davy Jones walked in and the tone of the ceremony turned upside down. Never in my life have I seen so many kakhis laughing at one time. Although the fun was at our expense I think that was a moment I'll treasure for the rest of my military days. (It will make great stories for the grandkids too!)

Port visits, port visits, port visits-- need I say more? Well, I guess I could. There were two very outstanding ports on my list and one **outstanding** country that we visited. Cartagena, Columbia was the first real show stopper I encountered. There I bought a gorgeous sweater and found that dancing into the night could never grow old. Next, on my list of chart toppers was the infamous Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. There I got as much sun time as possible, picked up some inexpensive evening dresses and bargained on a wonderful little brazilian swimsuit. I also danced until I couldn't dance anymore. I also experienced the traditional sailor hang outs and let me tell you, I do have some terrific stories to tell!

Then there was Chile. Yes, super, great, magnificent Chile. All four ports we reached were very exciting but two took the cake. First Valpariso, where I first took one of those neat MWR tours and went skiing at Portillo (the ski resort). Along with about 8 other Stark shipmates and a handful of shipmates from the Pintado and John Rogers we embarked on the snow capped Andes. I got to know some crewmembers that I hadn't actually talked with and learned a few interesting ski pointers (like, watch out for that kid!). My second choice for the most terrific Chilean ports was Talcahuano. I went skiing there also, this time at Termas de

Chillan. But....IT WAS AN OVERNIGHT TRIP!!! I had my own room, with my own shower and two (count 'em two) double beds. The fact that I had a room overlooking the natural hot springs pool also made my night complete. Here, I enjoyed the towering mountains and the antics of the "I have never skied before, but I'm going to the top" marines, along with three five course meals and room service.

All of the ports we visited were interesting and some opened my eyes to the true poverty and desolation of other people in the world. I took part in the COMREL project in Cartegna. It was rewarding not only for the children whose school we refurbished, but also for myself. I saw a sparkle in small eyes and tears in some of the older ones, therefore showing me that our actions and our care can make a difference in the life of someone else. I feel these small steps are just the pathway leading to a greater understanding between the different cultures and people.

All in all UNITAS XXXIV has been a truly rewarding experience. I look at life from a different angle and see myself in a different light. It feels as if I've grown up about five years. I know in my heart that this will not be an experience easily forgotten or even easily looked over. Women at sea will depend on the outcome of what we have accomplished here. I hope only that in the eyes of others our triumphs here won't be overlooked.

*AMSA Sampet*