

# **Serving across the Navy, Women have broken barriers**

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GROTON, Conn. – March is nationally recognized as Women’s History Month. The important role that women have played in the history of the nation is evident in many ways especially in the United States Navy.

Although women serve in almost every aspect of today’s Navy, it was not that long ago that it was quite a different story.

In support of the early Navy, women played a vital role serving as nurses during the Civil War, although their duties and responsibilities were more closely aligned with those of Hospital Corpsman than a nurse. Several African American women were noted to have served as paid nurses aboard the hospital ship Red Rover on the Mississippi River. In addition, volunteer nuns from the Catholic Sisters of the Holy Cross served aboard as nurses.

Following the Civil and Spanish Wars of the late 1800’s, the United States Navy officially established the Navy Nurse Corps on May 13, 1908. Twenty women were selected to attend the Naval Medical School in Washington, D.C. The Navy did not supply room or board for them so they had to rent their own houses and provide their own meals.

During the early 1900’s, women in the Navy expanded their roles to include positions serving as Yeomen as well as Nurses. This paved the foundation for women to expand into a variety of roles and positions as during World War II, as the Navy established the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) program.

Post World War II, the opportunities for women to serve in different aspects of the Navy expanded even more.

In 1974, six women earned their wings and became the Navy’s first female aviators.

On October 24, 1978, the Navy began assigning women to ships as regular crew members. Women were initially stationed onboard non-combat ships such tenders, oilers and other types of auxiliary ships, but in 1993, Congress repealed the Combat Exclusion Law allowing women to serve on combatant ships.

In January 1978, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) selected the first female astronauts and a door was opened for military women to journey into space.

Navy medical doctor Capt. Laurel Clark was a graduate of the Naval Undersea Medical Institute at Naval Submarine Base New London and served with the Submarine Squadron 14 in Holy Loch, Scotland, before ultimately becoming a NASA

astronaut. Capt. Clark was serving as a Space Shuttle Mission Specialist when she was killed in the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster in February 2003.

In 2010, the Navy announced a policy change to allow women to serve in submarines as regular crew members. The policy permitted female officers to serve in guided-missile (SSGNs) and ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs); and in December of 2012, Navy undersea history was made: the first female unrestricted line officers to qualify in submarines, received their Submarine Warfare Insignia while assigned to USS Wyoming (SSBN 742) and USS Maine (SSBN 741).

Most recently, undersea and combat opportunities for women expanded in January 2013. Then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that lifting a 1994 ban would open 230,000 combat jobs to women, and Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus announced that women would serve on attack submarines by 2015.

Secretary Mabus also highlighted that rescinding the Direct Ground Combat and Assignment Rule would allow the Navy to expand opportunities for women in Riverine Forces and jobs like hospital corpsman and chaplain that directly support Marine infantry operations.

So today women in the United States Navy serve in nearly every capacity: on the sea, under the sea, in the air, and out in space. Their contribution to the operational Navy is no longer an oddity; it is a necessity for the Navy to do its business in defense of the nation.



121205-N-LP168-011 BANGOR, Wash. (Dec. 5, 2012) Lt. j.g. Jennifer Noonan, assigned to the Blue crew of the ballistic missile submarine USS Maine (SSBN 741), receives her submarine warfare officer device from former shipmate Lt. Jason Brethauer during a ceremony at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor. Noonan is one of three Sailors to become the first female unrestricted line officers to qualify in submarines. (U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Ahron Arendes/Released)