

'For a Woman of My Generation, Serving in the Military Was a Godsend'

By Mary E. Lyons

A specialist in rhetoric and homiletics, she is serving in her third post as a university president—this one at the University of San Diego. But Mary Lyons began her career as a teacher and administrator in

the Navy and credits much of her success in civilian life to what she learned in uniform. Here's her story.

If I were to tell one of the young women in today's Navy how I spent my three years on active duty in the early 1970s, she'd probably stare in disbelief.

These days, female officers are fighter pilots, shipboard officers, unit commanders, astronauts, and even mothers, when they want to be. When I was a junior officer, women were barred from sea duty and aviation; pregnancy was a cause for dismissal, even if you were married. Mine was one of the last groups to attend Women's Officer Candidate School, with its emphasis on classroom training, drilling, and multiple inspections. On one occasion, our male counterparts were driving Yard Patrol boats around Aquidneck Island, Rhode Island, while my class listened to a representative from Max Factor instruct us on the proper wearing of makeup.

That's actually how it was, but not for long. By the end of 1972, the opportunities for women in American society were expanding, including for those of us in uniform. In fact, my active-duty and reserve experiences accelerated opportunities, relative to my peers in civilian life, for taking on responsibility, learning and practicing leadership, and developing skills in management and strategic thinking. Thanks to the Navy, I competed successfully to become, at age 42, president of the California Maritime Academy and the first woman to receive a commission as a rear admiral in the U.S. Maritime Service.

Even in the social structure of the early 1970s, joining the military seemed natural

to me. My dad spent 22 years in the Army, first as a Ranger receiving a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts during World War II and the Korean War, and later as an officer in the Ordnance Corps. My mother had served in the WAVES during World War II and always looked back on that experience



The author is president of the University of San Diego and also served in that capacity at the California Maritime Academy and the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota. She says her Navy service played a crucial role in preparing her for a career in education.

with pride. I studied the recruiting brochures from all four services and decided that I wanted to become a naval officer. My mother's influence won the day.

My first assignment as an ensign was as a teacher in the BOOST (Broadened Opportunities for Officer Selection and Training) program in San Diego, designed to offer enlisted sailors and Marines, primarily those from minority communities, college preparatory courses that ultimately helped them enter college and become commissioned officers. I taught speech and language arts there for a year, then moved on to VP-31, a P-3 Orion training

squadron at Moffett Field, near San Jose, as the student control officer.

After leaving active duty in January 1975, I joined a Naval Reserve unit and moved up over the years, retiring in 1996 as a captain.

By today's standards, those experiences may not seem very dramatic. But for a woman of my generation, serving in the military was a godsend. The education I received through the Navy—and later the Naval Reserve—was superb. The G.I. Bill paid for my postgraduate education, up through a Ph.D. As a reservist, I took classes ranging from communications and counterintelligence to transportation management and Naval War College seminars such as strategy and policy.

Where else would I have received this kind of education and training?

In the 1990s, when Total Quality Management was ubiquitous within civilian corporations, my reserve unit received the same course in the Navy's Total Quality Leadership that was being offered to flag and general officers at the Naval Postgraduate School. Quality experiences like that further enhanced my commitment as a university president to data-driven decision-making. Through contacts within my reserve unit, I discovered the availability of a USNS ship about to be laid-up that we eventually acquired as a new training vessel.

After six years as head of the California Maritime Academy, I served as president of the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota. I began as president of the University of San Diego in 2003.

The bottom line is that I owe almost everything that I was able to accomplish in civilian life to my service and opportunities in the Navy.

The lessons I learned on active duty ranged from the fundamental to the pointed. When I was a lieutenant (junior grade), I was fortunate to work with a senior chief petty officer who became a great mentor. Later in my reserve career, other senior officers placed their confidence in me and opened the door to command of two units.

The professional opportunities for women in the Navy have indeed been dramatic. In 1974 the service began accepting women as naval aviators. In 1976 women were admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy. In 1978 they began serving on auxiliary ships. In 1990 a woman became commanding officer of a ship. In 1998 women started serving on board combatant vessels. In 2010 a woman became commander of a carrier strike group. That same year, one of the female graduates of my university's NROTC program was among the first selected to serve in submarines.

As a career academic, now president of the University of San Diego, I am proud of the robust NROTC and other degree-completion programs we offer those Navy and Marine Corps personnel seeking a degree and a commission. Many of our employees are veterans, some having served long and distinguished careers in the military and now bringing their talent and leadership skills to our university.



Dr. Lyons poses with her then-7-year-old son Tim in 1987. As part of one of the last classes to attend Women's Officer Candidate School, she recalls listening to a representative from Max Factor instruct the class on how to wear makeup. "That's actually how it was," she says, "but not for long."

Witnessing the achievements of our newly commissioned female ensigns and seeing the warfare designations earned by the women officers who teach naval science at our university reminds me how far women have come in the Navy and in other services. Not long ago, I had an opportunity to go out overnight on the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76), which is homeported in San Diego, and to observe young women during night operations, taking off and landing their F/A-18 jets. Their achievements filled me with indescribable joy.

I doubt that they encountered a cosmetic representative as part of their training. I am very proud of them. My mother would have been equally proud. ✨

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