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## A View from the Gender Fault Line

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*The integration of women in combatants isn't easy, but it is inevitable, it is the right thing to do, and it can work.*

Over the past two and a half years, the crew of the new destroyer *The Sullivans* (DDG-68) has participated in what has been called both a "great social experiment" and "the end of the Navy as we know it." From our viewpoint, the integration of women in combatants is neither—it ain't easy, but it is inevitable. It is the right thing to do, and it can work.

The pre-commissioning process has provided us a unique vantage point. We have been together as a team for about 30 months and have not had to suffer the loss of one-third of the crew every year. In addition, we have had women integrated in the crew since our first days together. *The Sullivans* never has not had women in her crew, and to many of her younger sailors, gender integration is nothing out of the ordinary.

In a crew of 320, *The Sullivans* has 43 women. Of those 43, 3 are chief petty officers and 5 are officers. The senior woman is our chief engineer, the first woman to serve in this position in combatant history. The ship was built from the keel up to accommodate women—two of the 18-rack berthing compartments were modified from the original *Arleigh Burke* (DDG-51)-class design, and the chiefs' quarters and officers' country were similarly revised. Unless there is an emergency, such as a fire or flood, there is no reason for watch standers to transit berthing compartments in the routine performance of their duties.

### **First, the Bad News**

Of the 43 women first assigned to the precommissioning crew, we lost 5 to pregnancy; 2 others were placed on medical hold for psychological reasons; 2 were administratively separated for disciplinary reasons, and one refused to incur the service obligation required to serve in a precom crew. One female senior chief petty officer was detached for cause for professional failures, and

1 male officer was awarded a punitive letter of reprimand and detached for cause for fraternization and conduct unbecoming an officer. There have been three equal opportunity grievances filed, one of which involved administratively separating the male sailor involved for commission of a serious offense. The other two cases are pending, but it is interesting to note that one was brought by a woman against a man and the other by a man against a senior woman.

These numbers aren't pretty, but they probably are not statistically significant. Over the same period we also have administratively separated 20 male sailors for patterns of misconduct or commission of serious offenses. In addition, we have lost 15 male sailors to a variety of medical ailments, the most prominent of which were knee and lower back pain. As unfortunate as these data are, they are not unusual. Many ships—precommissioning units in particular—are seeing agonizingly frequent medical and behavioral problems with first-term enlistees.

The bottom line is that about 6% of the commissioning crew has been discharged for disciplinary infractions, 2% transferred ashore because of pregnancy, and 8% moved to limited duty for medical reasons. Pregnancy is not a statistically more significant cause of manning problems than are injuries incurred during basketball or flag football games. It is simply a new cause. And because the pool of women eligible (and often anxious) to go to sea is large compared to the number of racks available, it is relatively easy to fill billets left vacant by women. We have yet to deploy, however, and have not had to handle the myriad problems that tend to crop up in the weeks prior to departure or during the prolonged and stressful operations of a six-month cruise.

### **On to the Good News**

Women have been integrated effectively in the day-to-day routine of *The Sullivans*. They stand watches in every area, participate as members of firefighting teams, and have been promoted at a rate commensurate with their male peers. Because the crew has been mixed gender from the beginning, there is no sense, particularly among the younger sailors, that there is any other way. Four women serve ably as leading petty officers, one has been command advanced for sustained superior performance, and two female junior officers have qualified as surface warfare officers. The chief engineer was selected early for lieutenant commander, and our female master-at-arms recently was promoted to chief.

The arguments against women at sea that have been foisted on us by those who neither understand the issues nor have to live with the consequences have proved untrue. First, there is no job on a ship today that cannot be done by a woman because of a lack of strength or stamina. (The biggest problem we encountered in this area was locating sufficient small- to medium-sized organizational issue clothing.) Second, the idea that male sailors will be too busy "protecting their women" to be effective in combat is equally untrue. This narrow, staggeringly antiquated view is insulting, at best. When command climate is established correctly, male and female sailors consider themselves shipmates first—the gender distinction tends to fade and the protection issue becomes moot.

So, if it is not the superficial issues of pregnancy, strength, or a misguided sense of chivalry, what is the source of our problems? The issues we have had to address have been extraordinarily complex, and often go straight to the core of gender relations in our society as a whole. Our number one challenge is societal/sociological: young American men and women often do not have the self-discipline or maturity to work together in this close environment without establishing unduly familiar and inappropriate relationships.

The problem is that intimate personal relationships on combatants don't work. Period. They tear at the effectiveness of a combat team as ferociously as poor training, poor leadership, or a lack of logistics support. Intimate relationships—or even the perception that they exist—undermine the authority of the senior, erode the trust that shipmates have in one another, create resentment, foment gossip, and break down those characteristics most needed by a combat team to succeed in battle.

The legal community will tell you that you cannot forbid sailors of similar pay grades to date. We did not; instead we drafted our command fraternization/harassment instruction to ban conduct that was inherently detrimental to good order and discipline or that compromised the authority of one of those involved. It is our position that on a combatant with only 320 crew members, nearly everyone will have positional authority over someone else in the course of the normal execution of their duties. For example, a fireman may very well be a scene leader during a fire, and have under his command a team made up exclusively of first or second class petty officers.

A "dating" ban creates its own problems. How does one define a "date?" Is it a function of who pays, how many pints of beer are quaffed, or the tempo of the dance music? The issue is one of intent, and we felt that it was too difficult to

weigh into an area this vague. We deliberately left the definition open-ended (much to the chagrin of some) and told the crew, "If what you are about to do is going to damage the team, don't do it." Despite some nominal grumbling, the majority now understand and accept the program.

We cannot claim complete success. Despite clear and repeated articulation of policy in a variety of fora, personal and very frank discussions at indoctrination division and CO's calls, and the full support of the chiefs' mess and wardroom, we have had to deal with the fallout from unfortunate numbers of people who chose to disregard the rules. We have been made aware of and pursued a number of fraternization cases—each involved a flagrant violation of expected behavior norms; each was widely known by the crew to be occurring; each involved other violations of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice; and in each case the participants admitted their guilt. Tragically, each case eventually involved a personnel loss to the command: one officer forcibly retired, one first class petty officer in the brig, one sailor administratively separated for lying and drug abuse, and one sailor transferred because of pregnancy and eventually court-martialed for drug abuse. The amount of time, effort, and administrative elbow grease expended on these cases far outweighed their significance to the Navy. The challenge is to maintain an emphasis on appropriate behavior without creating the perception that you are engaged in witch hunts, and to deal with these cases in a way that allows the crew to focus on the more salient issues of mission and combat readiness.

So why not just ignore the problems that intimate relationships on a small ship create, and press on, hoping that it won't happen on your watch? Our experience has been that the head-in-the-sand method is a profound mistake. The costs are too dear, the impact on combat readiness too profound, and the erosion of trust between shipmates too complete. Command is obligated to hold the line. Many young sailors (and a certain number of older ones) still do not understand this, but we have tried to stay the course. Here are some suggestions born of our struggle with this issue:

- Meet the mixed-gender issue head on. Young sailors, in particular, don't pay close attention to the red light-yellow light-green light films, and certainly don't think the warnings apply to them. Find a variety of other ways. Make sure they understand. Say it again and again.
- Tap into the experience of senior female leaders in the wardroom, chiefs' mess, and first class association. Convey to them the importance of their roles as examples. Leadership by example is the most powerful way to get this one right.
- Establish a command climate in which everyone understands the rules and appreciates the costs of breaking them, and in which men and women treat each

other professionally—as shipmates. Here again, peer pressure can be a powerful tool.

- Work to stamp out gossip. Frankly, we have been singularly unsuccessful in this regard. Ships with only men gossip; on ships with men and women it is the national pastime, and it's a costly game.
- Enforce the standards rigorously and fairly across the board. Hold both parties accountable. Explain to the crew how and why you are doing so, then explain it again. Integrate women into the crew as early as possible. It makes integration more difficult when you are forced to offload 50 men just in time to on load 50 women onto a ship that has never had women on board before.
- Don't preach fear or retribution. We have seen ships where the fear was so great that men would not even talk with women, much less work with them. From our vantage point, this is the most reprehensible form of discrimination and a particularly effective killer of combat capability.
- Remember the families. Wives and girlfriends often are horrified by the prospect of their loved ones being at sea for months at a time in such close contact with other women, and the converse also is true. We discuss gender issues frankly at each support group meeting and with our ombudsmen.

*The Sullivans* has had many highly professional, competent women assigned to her crew. For the most part, they have integrated themselves well and have proved themselves completely capable of handling the daily challenges of living on a warship. Dealing with the mixed gender issue has not been easy, however, and we have spent far too much time agonizing over how to handle the situations created by those who did not believe that the rules should apply to them. The salient issues are not strength and chivalry; nor is integration difficult merely because of the resistance of men. It is more subtle and complex than that. The questions that should have been asked during the gender integration debates are: Are we mature enough as a society to have gender-integrated combatants? Do our young people have the self-discipline to serve together in a close, stressful environment without behaving in a way destined to have a profound impact on combat readiness? Our answer to the first question is no, not yet. To the second question it is frequently no.

Unfortunately, societal norms are a given, and we can do little to change the prevailing winds. These norms, however, do add complexity to the already high stress environment of a modern, confined surface warship. There always will be factors outside of our control, but like racial integration and the eradication of illicit drugs, it is time for change. We on the gender fault line are going to have to make it work despite the challenges and again wait for society to catch up.

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