

## Written evidence submitted by Commander Andrew Loring<sup>1</sup>

### WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES – PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

These are the personal recollections of Commander Andrew Loring who served as a regular officer in the Royal Navy between 17 September 1980 and 31 October 2015.

On leaving the Royal Navy he completed his Post Graduate Certificate in Education and worked briefly as a supply teacher in Bristol before moving to Kuwait. There he spent four years as a Kuwait Ministry of Defence Civil Servant, working as an instructor at the Mubarak Al Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College alongside serving members of the Kuwait and UK Armed Forces.

He rejoined the Royal Navy on Full Time Reserve Service on 1 September 2020 and works for the Director General Joint Force Development at MOD Shrivenham.

#### In the Beginning ...

The Service I joined employed women primarily as members of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and as medics who were either members of Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service or what were known as Women Naval Officers: a small number of female medical and dental officers. WRNS officers had different ranks from their male colleagues and all WRNS 'enjoyed' very different terms and conditions of service. Relatively few women signed on for a career in the Service and were forced to leave if they became pregnant. There were a number of roles where they worked in the same jobs as their male counterparts, primarily in the Supply and Secretariat (now logistics) branch, but they could serve neither at sea nor elsewhere on the front line. All women joined the WRNS as ratings, initially at HMS DAUNTLESS and latterly at HMS RALEIGH though a small number were sent to Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC) as Officer Cadets after one year in the Service. Most WRNS were better educated than the majority of male ratings joining at the time. Most had O levels and many had A Levels; the first female graduates were starting to join at a time when the majority of male entrants were still non-graduates.

For me, the first major change to the status of women in the Royal Navy came with Operation CORPORATE, the liberation of the Falkland Islands, in 1982 when Naval Nurses served in the hospital ships close to the front line providing afloat role 2 and 3 medical support to injured servicemen. A year or so later saw the first female Naval Engineer Officer pass out of the Royal Naval Engineering College as an Air Engineer Officer (AEO) and who could therefore work in second-line support doing exactly the same job as male AEO except not at sea.

#### The Winds of Change ...

At this time the possibility of WRNS serving at sea was a hot topic in the Royal Navy and widely discussed at all levels. On the whole the view was that women should not serve at sea; that it was not an appropriate environment for women and that it would be very disruptive, adversely affect fighting efficiency and damage *esprit de corps*. This view was held not only by a large number of Naval personnel but was supported by the majority of the hierarchy, including various First Sea Lords. Even amongst my fellow junior officers opinion was divided and I, as a strong supporter of women serving at sea, was in the minority. Change, when it came, was sudden. The Minister of the Armed Forces, The Rt Hon Archie Hamilton MP, addressed the female members of the Ship's Company of HMS OSPREY, the Royal Naval Air Station at Portland. He asked for a show of hands from those who would like to serve at sea; the majority raised their hands, and Their Lordships were presented with a *fait accompli*. The rumour doing the rounds at the time was that Mr Hamilton was looking to do something to get himself back into Mrs Thatcher's good books. It was highly unscientific, but as a driver for change it was unprecedented.

The first trials, such as there were any trials, were conducted on board HMS [...] in which I was serving at the time [...]. They were largely to do with testing out various uniforms as WRNS clothing was not entirely appropriate for life at sea and various combinations were trialled by two WRNS officers from [...] who joined the ship at the tail end of one of her training deployments. One of the two officers concerned suffered so badly from seasickness that she had to leave [...].

---

<sup>1</sup> Minor redactions made by Committee staff to protect the identity of others. These are shown by "[...]"

Other than domestic considerations: sleeping accommodation, bathrooms etc, it seemed that very little other preparation was done, in particular to ensure women going to sea for the first time had a reasonable understanding of what life at sea was really like.

### **A Troubled Start ...**

I was not there but I was very aware of HMS BRILLIANT deploying with the first female members of any Ship's Company in late 1990. Her deployment was the subject of a television documentary which did not necessarily show the Royal Navy in a very good light. It was widely watched and we cringed with embarrassment at the behaviour of the male members of the Ship's Company though the focus was largely on the small number of women whom we watched with fascination. Soon after I was serving in HMS [...] and three Able Rate WRNS joined her after a period of Upkeep with numbers ramping up thereafter, with a number of officers joining in various roles. Although the BRILLIANT WRNS are on record as stating that they were treated 'exactly the same as the male members of the Ship's Company', I am not sure this was entirely true in [my ship] [...]. The very gentlemanly but old-school Commanding Officer insisted on referring to his 'Lady Officers' and the atmosphere on board was different from previous ships in which I had served. Some of the WRNS definitely adopted the 'Ladette' culture of the times, whilst some of the men on board clearly did not think they should be there though there was very little overt sexism. My overall impression was that some people were over-compensating and trying too hard to treat everyone the same even if they did not support the idea, whilst others tried to pretend it was not happening. Good leadership overall prevented any major incidents of which I was aware but they were 'interesting times'. My personal impression was that there remained a high degree of institutional sexism though much was unintentional and of the 'I'm not sexist but ...' attitude in which the female members of the Ship's Company were not treated fundamentally differently but were seen by many as 'other' and not quite part of the team.

Unfortunately, the precipitate method by which the first women were encouraged to go to sea proved to be something of a disaster. They were encouraged to volunteer, however, they were all given the opportunity to revert to shore service if they did not like serving at sea. A great many of them did not and the complementing plot was thrown into disarray as large numbers exercised their right to come ashore. The principal consequences of this were twofold: huge disruption to the business of crewing ships, and a shortage of female role models as Senior Ratings and Leading Hands, one of the key components of an effective chain of command. The reason? The women simply did not know what they were letting themselves into. They saw their male friends and colleagues disappearing off to sea and enjoying 'runs ashore' in exotic places but few seemed to have considered what happened in between: living in a steel box of twenty to thirty souls in three-tier bunks with no privacy; shared bathrooms with queues for the showers; water-rationing; night watches; rough weather; chipping and painting on the upper deck, and the various other privations of life at sea. It is something you either love, like me, or hate and many voted with their feet.

One observation I would like to make here in response to the numerous, spurious arguments made by reactionary males at the time that decried the employment of women as not being able to do the same work as their male counterparts, stereotyping them as lacking physical strength. In HMS [...] if we needed someone for some real heavy-lifting, we called on the Royal Navy's female shot-put champion. If we wanted someone to squeeze into a tiny space, it was our most slightly built male rating.

### **Things can only get Better ...**

Whilst I was in [...] I was also called as a character witness for a junior officer who had been caught in bed with a female member of the Ship's Company. When young men and women live together in close proximity relationships will occur and there is nothing that can be done to prevent it. It can, however, be managed with discretion, compassion and a degree of emotional intelligence. Different ships managed it in different ways, some more successfully than others. The worst example came from one of the capital ships that became known throughout the Service as the 'love boat' for its light touch (no pun intended) approach to relationships which led to areas in the Ship being effectively no go areas owing to the numbers of couple involved in intimacy. Other ships including HMS [...] took what I consider to be a much healthier approach. One which was much better for discipline in which relations were accepted as inevitable, generally known

about, and with sensible rules about limiting the physical aspects of relationships to the shore. Nonetheless, the policy was viewed with dismay by large numbers of naval wives who felt threatened, occasionally rightly but more often or not entirely wrongly, by the presence of women on board their husbands' ships, as they saw it.

Overall, therefore, there are four key issues that arise from the way the Royal Navy introduced women into sea-going roles:

- Firstly it was done in a rush on the whims of a politician who presented the Naval hierarchy with an absolute requirement and very little time to prepare for it.
- Largely as a result, the female volunteers for sea-service were not prepared for the reality and reacted as might have been predicted, voting with their feet and leaving the complementing plot in disarray.
- A number of poor leadership decisions were made at all levels at sea and within the hierarchy ashore. This did nothing to ensure the seamless assimilation of women into Ships' Companies but managed concurrently to alienate significant numbers of male sailors and sailor's wives and partners.
- Finally, human nature was not properly considered and an inconsistent approach was taken to managing the inevitable relationships that formed and failed between male and female sailors.

The outcome of all this was that it took a long time, arguably considerably longer than it should have, for women at sea to become business as usual.

#### **Where we are now ...**

Women may only comprise 10.9 percent of Armed Forces personnel and make up only 12.6 percent of new recruits, but their employment is now seen not only as wholly normal by the vast majority of naval personnel, but there is an expectation that the vast majority of formations will include a mix of male and female personnel. Younger members of the Service may think that is blatantly obvious but it represents a huge change in attitude since I joined in 1980. The Royal Navy is yet to promote its first woman to Flag rank (2-star and above) but women are represented across the Naval Service in all other ranks in most capacities including as Commanding Officers (COs) of warships. Indeed, in April 2019 the Royal Navy was named as one of Britain's top employers of women. The first WRNS who went to sea in HMS BRILLIANT in 1990 are long gone as are the men alongside whom they served. There are now very few of us still serving who were in the Royal Navy of that time and the vast majority of Service personnel have been brought up to expect and demand absolute equality between the sexes.

I have not personally served at sea since 2002 though HMS NORTHUMBERLAND where I was the Marine Engineer Officer between mid-2000 and mid-2002 had, at close to one quarter, the highest percentage of female members in her Ship's Company of any ship at the time. Even back then, it was seen as normal business though a number of ships had solely male ships' companies owing to the shortfalls in recruiting and retaining women highlighted above. Since then, in my Service career, both regular and reserve, and whilst working overseas I have worked alongside Service women in numerous different roles and capacities. I have seen young female COs, and younger female Senior Ratings and Leading Hands, successfully briefing and training officers from very conservative traditions in the Middle East, and frequently now find myself with a functional responsibility to senior officers who just happen to be female. I am aware that women continue to suffer harassment and discrimination, and are disproportionately represented in the Service complaints process, but overall I see a Service in which women are wholly integrated, fully respected for their experience, and promoted fairly and according to their abilities. Developing the skills and experience required for high command takes time and it has taken rather longer than it should have but I think we are almost there now. Women are still more likely to take a career break to bring up children and to leave before they achieve their full potential in the Service but that merely reflects human nature and has little to do with the culture in the Service. We are not there yet but we have come a long way since October 1990!

*15 January 2021*