

## **Anonymous Written Evidence Submission<sup>1</sup>**

### **Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life**

#### **Summary**

The following submission includes reference to two separate occasions whereby I was mis-treated by service personnel.

The first situation occurred on a ship with an all-male Ship's Company except for the officers. There were only [...] females onboard including myself. I believe I was bullied, judged and discriminated against on the grounds of my gender. This continued until I made an error in judgement and they had reason to remove me from the ship.

The second situation occurred on a ship approximately six years later. I was sexually assaulted and it ultimately ended my career.

#### **Background to Service**

I started with the Royal Navy in [...] at the age of 18, having decided to join the Service at the age of 14 and with the full intention of it being a career for life.

#### **First Incident**

I was the first officer in [...] to join the ship as it started to come out of refit and I was tasked with general administration roles where my primary role should have been a sea-going one. By the time the ship returned to sea, I had not been to sea in over a year. I requested the opportunity to go to sea for a few weeks in order to qualify on a similar platform and to make the transition back to sea quicker and easier. This opportunity was provided to my male colleagues but I was not allowed to do so. This is when I first felt discriminated against.

When the ship did eventually return to sea, it was to conduct sea trials. Due to these trials, there was limited opportunity to conduct the required qualifying serials and my male colleagues were prioritised first.

My confidence was slowly being eroded and I was struggling to concentrate and becoming forgetful. On two occasions, this resulted in my not properly securing a padlock to a high security compartment. I was constantly anxious and I dreaded making a mistake or doing something wrong. I regularly needed the bathroom and frequently had diarrhoea; I assumed this was stress related and believed it to be because I was so bad at my job; I did not raise the issue. My line manager was not approachable and highly critical. I conducted my annual fitness test and, on that particular day, felt as though I had very little energy. Despite achieving the required level to pass, he was not impressed with my efforts and told me so. I do not believe he would have been so critical of a male colleague.

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<sup>1</sup> Minor redactions made to protect contributor's identity.

A few days after an evening spent ashore with the Ship's Company, I was called alone into a senior officer's cabin and accused of sleeping with a junior rate. I was not asked about my activities that evening and no checks had been made as to my movements. I did not know who the individual was that I was apparently supposed to have slept with. I was informed that a piece of my underwear had been found which is only possible if it had been taken from the communal laundry although I was unaware of anything missing. I was shocked that such an accusation could be made against me with no proof and with a swift assumption as to its truth. I do not believe such an accusation would have been levelled at a male colleague in a similar situation. It was simply not true.

On another day, I was given two separate and contradictory orders at the same time by two different senior and more experienced officers, one of whom was my line manager. Neither of them discussed the matter with one another and both of them expected me to obey their order. I could not succeed no matter what I did.

In order to qualify for my role onboard, the commanding officer decided I should sit an oral board with him during which he would question me about various serials the ship might be required to conduct at sea. This is above and beyond what is usually expected but not unheard of for an officer who is struggling. I was informed that, if I did not pass, I would be put onto official warnings. I studied hard and he was impressed, particularly on the subject of serials the ship had yet to conduct. However, because I had neglected my secondary duties, I was put on warnings anyway; despite the reason I had neglected my secondary duties was to study for the oral board and not be put on warnings. At one point, I was compared to the operational role that was currently filled by one of the other [...] women onboard. This role was not in my terms of reference and my career manager had not appointed me to that position. Despite this, I was being compared to an older and more mature and experienced woman who had just returned from an operational tour [...]. I believe this was an exceptionally unfair comparison which would not have happened had I been male.

During this time, my anxiety continued to the point that I had started wetting the bed. I did not seek help or medical attention because I assumed it was stress related due to my inability to do my job effectively.

I became aware that most of the Ship's Company disliked me during another incident whereby a senior rate who was briefing a number of junior rates on the upper deck raised his voice and reprimanded me. It is not normally acceptable for a senior rate to rebuke an officer and certainly not in front of other personnel; his actions further saw to my loss of respect and status onboard as a leader and an officer. I did not feel able to tell anyone about this matter nor confront the individual myself.

My position onboard meant I was also a supervisor of an area of the upper deck where personnel would often smoke and ditch their cigarettes down the scuppers and drains which would then block. As such, the commanding officer issued the order that all smoking was to take place ashore when alongside, which would be enforced by the duty officer. The commanding officer continued to smoke on the upper deck, near his cabin. One day, when I was the duty officer, I saw two senior officers smoking on the upper deck. When they returned inside, I politely reminded them that smoking was not permitted onboard at which point one of them looked at the other and said, "I told you she would" as if they had been betting on my response. They then continued without saying a word to me.

Just before Christmas, I was informed that I had one supporter onboard who apparently had romantic feelings for me and the entire Ship's Company was aware of this. It was stated that,

whenever I was talked about or disparaged, he would stand up for me. I was encouraged to attend my department's Christmas party, during which the aforementioned individual grabbed my face and kissed me. I considered striking him but thought I would get in trouble for doing so. Unfortunately, due to my mental state at the time and the atmosphere onboard, I found solace with this individual and we started a relationship which was a serious breach of the code of social conduct and command structure. I felt I had no-one to confide in or talk to or turn to for support and advice and guidance; this feeling was amplified by my being one of only [...] women onboard.

### **Impact of the First Situation**

I was put on warnings and removed from the ship whereupon it was stated that I had breached the code of social conduct before, relating to the earlier alleged incident which had not taken place. When I transferred to another ship for sea-going experience for a few weeks, this gave me the opportunity to speak to a female officer on another ship and they encouraged me to make a representation against the way I had been treated while onboard. I believe that no disciplinary action was taken against me due to my representation which clearly explained the unfair and unjust way I had been treated during my time onboard. In hindsight, it is my personal belief that any such action against me would have risked raising an issue of discrimination and bullying. As a young woman, in a fragile state of emotional and physical health, I was unable to see this for what it was – gender discrimination and bullying.

My confidence had been severely knocked, however, I flourished on my next ship. Furthermore, a medical appointment showed that I had an undiagnosed condition the symptoms of which are all very similar to stress.

In time, I realised that I had been judged very early on in my first appointment. I was not given the opportunities given to other male colleagues, enabling them to succeed where I could not, and the commanding officer's comments made it clear that this was related to my being a small female. I have since learnt that the at least three senior officers from that ship are known bullies and mine was not the last career to be severely, negatively impacted by these individuals. This created a male-dominated culture where the continuous micro-aggressions and hostility directed towards me was deemed acceptable and the lack of support made me feel helpless and increasingly vulnerable.

### **Second Incident**

I was the victim of an extremely serious sexual assault (rape). The response of the Service to that incident was career-ending for me. It has taken me a very long time to begin to come to terms with what happened and I regret that am not in a position to provide further details at this present time; suffice to say it was both career ending and life changing.

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