

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Winifred Quick Collins. *More Than a Uniform: A Navy Woman in a Navy Man's World*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997. xxiii + 240 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57441-022-8.

Reviewed by Pat Jernigan (Colonel, US Army (Retired) and)
Published on H-Minerva (December, 1998)



Women in the Navy

Winifred Quick Collins was one of the first women selected to be an officer in the Navy. She was commissioned an ensign in August 1942 and served for twenty years before retiring as a captain in 1962. *More Than a Uniform* is an anecdotal autobiography detailing Captain Collins' early struggles, her Navy years, and some of her post Navy activities. The book is easy and interesting to read. While Collins highlights her book with many interesting personal stories, the result is disappointing in its lack of detail and limited research.

The early chapters are inspiring and attention-holding reading. Collins overcame many obstacles with hard work, courage, perseverance, and luck. Collins was born Winifred Redden in Great Falls, Montana in 1911. She was briefly married to Roy T. Quick after graduating from college. Although she was divorced within a few years, she kept the Quick name. In 1961, the year before she retired from active Navy service, she married Howard L. Collins, a retired Navy admiral.

Winnie Redden spent her early years in a prosperous home. About the time she entered school, her family's fortunes began to decline. Her father's business failed and her mother failed in her efforts to manage the family farm. The family moved to Missoula, where her father bought a small hotel. A year later her parents divorced and her father moved away, turning the hotel over to her mother to manage. At the age of eleven Winnie contracted a mild case of polio but was fortunate to suffer no lasting disability. The hotel failed, and Winnie's mother

abandoned the teenaged girl. After Winnie located her, her mother refused to let her live with her. Winnie was forced instead to live with a series of relatives in various locations. She finished her senior year in high school living in a cramped Seattle apartment with her brother.

Winnie wanted to go to college but had no money, so she wrote to many colleges about scholarships. She received a small scholarship from a pharmaceutical company to attend the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. The company also gave her a part-time job. After graduating in 1935 with a major in business, she went to work full time as the personnel director for the pharmaceutical company. She used her training to analyze and evaluate the company's personnel practices and to recommend changes to the president. Her recommendations were innovative for the times: she suggested paying employees the same salary, regardless of gender, based on the type of job and the person's performance. Productivity and profits skyrocketed. Her ability to identify problem areas, analyze the causes, and make recommendations for improvement were hallmarks of her career.

In 1937, she was selected for a new management training program at Harvard. Because women were not allowed to attend Harvard in those days, the program was conducted at Radcliffe College. Five women were enrolled under the watchful eye of the Radcliffe president, Ada Comstock. The Harvard professors came to Radcliffe to conduct their lectures. Collins reports that one pro-

fessor later admitted that he had to have a few martinis before each class because he was terrified of teaching women (pp. 22-23).

Collins recounts with candor how she came to join the Navy. After the war started, Dr. Comstock served on a committee examining the issue of recruiting women for the Navy. She contacted Collins in June 1942 to suggest that she should apply for a Navy commission. Collins writes, "In retrospect, I would like to think that I jumped at the opportunity for a path breaking career ... I was not merely lukewarm to her request ... I was actually chilly" (p. 33).

Public Law 689 was signed on July 30, 1942, amending the Naval Reserve Act of 1938 to allow women to join the Navy. Winifred Collins was commissioned as an ensign on August 4; she was a member of the first training class for women officers held at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The courses included "lectures on military protocol, identification of ships and aircraft, and Navy history, customs, and traditions" (p. 49).

Collins was selected to remain at the Naval Officer School at Smith College as the personnel director. As a department head, she was given a promotion to lieutenant junior grade. Collins participated in an evaluation of the personnel system in the summer of 1943. The results of the survey identified Navy shore jobs that could be filled by reservists, and many of these jobs could be filled by women. Visits to the school by Eleanor Roosevelt, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge, and other famous people are interesting highlights. Collins notes that Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Coolidge were great supporters of women in the Navy.

The Navy did not permit women in non-medical specialties to be assigned outside the Continental United States until late 1944. Lieutenant Collins was the first non-medical officer sent to Hawaii, then considered an overseas assignment. Her job was to prepare the way for the large number of officers and enlisted women who would follow. Everything had to be arranged. There were no quarters for the women and these had to be built. The conditions sound pretty grim by today's standards: thirty-two women lived in each Quonset hut. Every third Quonset hut had shower and toilet facilities along with hair dryers and laundry facilities. Every eighth hut was a recreation facility. The first five hundred enlisted women arrived in early January 1945.

With the end of the war, most of the women expected to return to civilian life. Collins was no differ-

ent, but she was asked to stay on to work on personnel matters that would lead to the 1948 Women's Armed Forces Integration Act. Here Collins misses the opportunity for an in-depth discussion of the behind-the-scenes process that preceded the passage of the Integration Act. Since she was assigned to projects that were part of this effort, one would expect some detail and considerable insight into the events of the time. While the details are lacking, she does relate one story dealing with discussions in Congress concerning the perception among the male congressional members "that menopause would preclude women's participation in the regular Navy" (p. 99). Senator Saltonstall (Massachusetts) noted the assumption that women would become disabled during the menopause period. He worried that disability payments to the women would increase the cost of women's programs.

Collins did, of course, remain in the Navy and held a progression of increasingly senior assignments in the Bureau of Personnel, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Twelfth Naval District (San Francisco), the U.S. Navy, Europe in London, and culminating with her selection as Chief of Naval Personnel for Women. She noted a peculiarity of the time: there could be only one woman captain in the Navy. When her predecessor, Captain Louise Wilde, completed her tour as the senior Navy woman, she had to resume her permanent rank of commander in order to take a new assignment. Only women in the military were limited in this way. A man promoted to a similar position received a permanent promotion.

One of the challenges of Collins' new position was that she was junior to her male contemporaries who were admirals or senior captains. As a result, a major portion of her work had to be accomplished through diplomacy and the power of persuasion. Her early experiences in working around the established bureaucracy undoubtedly helped her accomplish her job. Captain Collins retired in 1962, justifiably proud of her twenty years of service and of her efforts to improve assignments, training, promotions, and morale.

In addition to the lack of depth, there are some lapses in accuracy. Collins describes the terrible living conditions that enlisted Navy personnel were subjected to in the Washington, D.C. area. The barracks were uninsulated wooden structures near the Pentagon that had been built as temporary quarters in the early 40s. She leaves the impression that these barracks and other substandard living quarters were gone before she retired in 1962 (pp. 130-31). I visited the Washington barracks in 1965 and

can testify that they were still there, and that conditions were indeed still terrible.

There are other instances where the information in the book is misleading. She says, "the Navy women received much the same basic training as the college men ... learning about Navy history, ships, aircraft, leadership, protocol, and etiquette although they did not receive the operational knowledge about seagoing skills" (p. 140). The statement is absolutely true; however, it leaves one with the inaccurate impression that the difference in training was not important. To the contrary, the difference was very significant. Even though women were excluded at that time from operational assignments, the lack of operational training meant that women were at a disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts all of whom had the operational training.

Despite these comments, the book is a good read. Collins tells her story with candor and humor, and her reminiscences are interesting. In the later years of her service, she doesn't have great events to relate, but she did what was probably most needed at the time. She maintained steady leadership and made the small advances in training, assignments, and career progression that were possible under the circumstances.

The book includes endnotes which provide useful amplification of information in the chapters, but references to other materials are limited. An interesting series of photographs illustrates Captain Collins' Navy career and provide examples showing women in the Navy during

the period under discussion. A biographical appendix lists key facts and accomplishments in Collins' life. An index provides a useful tool for finding people or topics. There is no bibliography.

For a more detailed treatment of women in the Navy during the world wars and the process of integration following World War II, the book *Lady in the Navy A Personal Reminiscence* by Joy Bright Hancock, Captain, U.S. Navy (Retired) (Annapolis: The Naval Institute Press, 1972, ISBN 0-87021-336-9) is recommended. Although out of print, copies should be available through inter-library loan. Another good source is *Crossed Currents: Navy Women from WWI to Tailhook* [Revised] by Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1994, ISBN 0-02-88112-7). With extensive notes, a detailed bibliography, and photos, the Ebbert-Hall book is a good review of women in the Navy brought up to the 1990's. An excellent book on the history of women in the military is the classic *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* [Revised Edition], by Maj Gen Jeanne Holm, USAF (Ret), (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1992, ISBN 0-089141-450-9).

This review was commissioned by Reina Pennington for H-Minerva.

Copyright 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

Citation: Pat Jernigan. Review of Collins, Winifred Quick, *More Than a Uniform: A Navy Woman in a Navy Man's World*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2547>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.