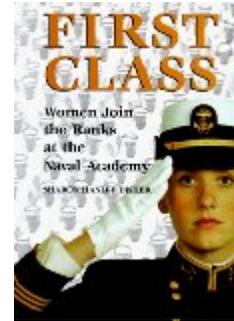


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sharon Hanley Disher. *First Class: Women Join the Ranks at the Naval Academy*. Annapolis: Nafal Institute Press, 1998. 361 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-165-3.

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## First Women At Annapolis

### First Women At Annapolis

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, none of the women who were members of the first gender-integrated class to attend Annapolis in 1976 (Class of 1980) have written and published books about their experiences. Disher, a graduate of this class, mentions this in her Preface, and speculates why this might be. It was only after discussions and interviews with many of her classmates that she decided to correct the situation. She is no longer in the Navy, having served for ten years before resigning to care for her family.

Rather than speaking in the first person voice, Disher uses a literary device of creating characters from composites and one “real character”, using pseudonyms for all the characters except readily identifiable public figures, and writing from an omnipotent point of view. Thus, a work of non-fiction is somewhat weakened as a “true” story, in spite of the author’s statement to the contrary. The reader does not know which of the two main characters actually is the “real” one, although Sarah does appear to be autobiographical, at least as far as her ultimate career choice of the Corps Of Engineers goes. If, indeed, this is the case, this reviewer believes the book would serve as a stronger reference source had the author openly used the first person. However, if viewed only as an informative, fascinating read, *First Class* is hard to beat. The story is riveting, and the writing powerful, professional, and exciting; Disher is a good storyteller.

The book follows two primary characters, Sarah Becker and Kate Brigman, from their apprehensive, yet

anticipatory leave-taking from their homes until their graduation after a grueling four years as members of the first Naval Academy class to contain women. The women were not clustered together, but were scattered throughout the various companies, thus they were also housed in a scattered fashion, although they were assigned two other female roommates.

>From the start vicious misogyny, deep hatred, resentment and the refusal to accept these young women (just out of high school) as classmates and equals were continually demonstrated by a great many of the males. While some of the men were supportive and condemned the harassment, the violence and mistreatment of their classmates served as an ongoing campaign to force the girls to quit, which continued for the entire period. For the most part, the administration and staff failed to stop or prevent the abuse, and permitted outrages such as shouted invective and insults to be rained down upon the female cheerleader midshipmen during football games.

The girls were forced to endure endless sexual harassment and abuse (one was bitten on the buttocks in public view of snickering midshipmen during a formal dance) and it is no wonder that almost half of the initial numbers of girls resigned before graduation. Still, Disher professes great devotion to the Academy and attributes her success as a leader after graduation to her educational experience there.

In the portrayal of Sarah and Kate, and to a lesser extent, other characters who play more minor roles, Disher demonstrates the variety of coping methods used by the

young women to survive. Entering in a time before the concepts and language of feminism and women's rights were fully formed, there were no guidelines or even support systems. It was uncharted territory. Sarah mainly used denial, and was more than willing to demonstrate contempt and non-acceptance or understanding toward other women she felt violated her particular standards. Not as sensitive as Kate, she is better equipped to tough out the abuse, stress and extremely high academic demands. Kate relies more upon the solace of an eating disorder and a supportive boyfriend. However, neither they, nor any other female, is immune from the terrible effects of hatred and non-acceptance while undergoing what is already a grueling academic and physically demanding environment.

Far from being all negative, however, Disher also clearly expresses the pride and even esprit d'corps felt by the midshipmen, and tells of numerous pranks and good times. Some of the girls took part in drunken revels and possibly sexual activities, which are only hinted at, and partying was not unknown to them.

The account is balanced, and handles many issues involving Navy women well beyond the rather unreal and circumscribed little world of Annapolis. During their years at the Academy it became obvious that their hoped-for careers would inevitably be negatively impacted by the Navy's ban on women aboard combatant ships. (Disher does not make it clear whether she knows that ban was merely a policy, not a law, and that female journalists, politicians, dependents and others were allowed aboard, but not Navy women.) Later, women were allowed aboard the ships, except submarines, but they were still restricted in certain warfare specialties.

Oddly, Disher appears to be oblivious to the fact that she and her classmates were merely the first female midshipman, not the first Navy women by far. Sarah and Kate are extremely contemptuous of "paper pushers" and "desk jockeys", roles into which virtually all

Navy women were forced prior to volcanic changes in policy from which the Academy women benefited later. One of the statements made is that there were "no role models", surely a surprise to all the Navy women who had blazed the trail long before she was born. Virtually all those "paper pushers" also worked hard, endured hatred, resentment and non-acceptance, did their jobs with outstanding leadership and pride, and had been doing it since WWI. The arrogance of the "ring-knockers" of the Academy in the conflicts between themselves and officers commissioned through other sources is obvious, albeit unintended and perhaps unconscious.

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of this book is the undeniable fact that the men who demonstrated such intolerance, hatred, violence and inability to accept differences went out into the Fleet, where they would inevitably find themselves working with women. Whether in a position where they would be forced to take orders from a female superior, or given the power of an officer over a subordinate, commissioned or enlisted, it is doubtful if any one of them suddenly developed awareness and changed his attitudes. It is these men who are in the highest positions of leadership now, twenty-two years later. What impact have they had upon the miserable atmosphere and shameful treatment of women still so prevalent in the Navy?

This is a book that should be read by anyone interested in the issues of women in the military. While the fictionalization of the characters does weaken the usefulness as a typical academic reference, the events are not fictionalized; every act and event actually took place. As Disher states in her Preface, during her prefatory work for writing this book she discovered many of her classmates refused to speak, many were still too damaged to talk, and some, still on active duty, were afraid to talk. That this should be the case after all this time should be a matter of gravest concern to leaders and policy makers today.

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