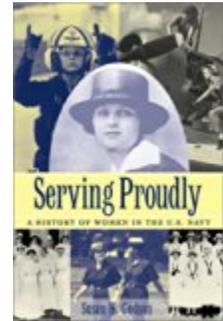


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan H. Godson. *Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the U.S. Navy*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002. xvi + 512 pp. \$38.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-317-6.

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To Sail The Seven Seas—Or Not

To Sail The Seven Seas—Or Not

This book is somewhat unusual in that Godson was commissioned to research and write it by the Naval Historical Center. It is, as the jacket text states, a “monumental work.” The notes and bibliography comprise nearly as many pages as the text of the book itself. It is at once an intensely scholarly work, bristling with notes and citations so beloved of academia, and at the same time, eminently readable for the interested layperson.

Since the literal beginnings of the U.S. Navy are subject to debate, so too are the literal interpretations of the first women in that navy. Prior to the American Revolution women often sailed aboard ships as both wives and daughters, less often as crew members disguised as men, and occasionally openly as captains of privateers and pirate ships. The official navy evolved and developed with the country as did the role of women and that navy.

Godson recounts the origins of both the present-day Navy Nurse Corps and the other women in the sea service, who evolved from Yeoman (Female) through the Women Accepted For Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) to their presence as a part of an integrated naval force today. She performs this complex task admirably, smoothly interweaving and demonstrating the very separate, yet similar histories of the two groups of women. Additionally, she sets these histories against the background of the social and cultural times of these evolutions, thus paralleling the difficulties and advances of women in the navy to those in the civilian sector. This is a critical point, because societal beliefs about the “appro-

priate” roles of women in the greater society drive beliefs about them within the military.

For ease of combining and comparing the disparate elements she primarily divides her subject matter by time frame, with subdivisions into the Navy Nurse Corps History, navy women’s history (non-nurse) and social/cultural background, particularly major shifts in societal and political policies and practices such as those in race relations and women’s rights. In addition, Godson briefly presents some of the history of women in the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, the Army, and the Air Force in order to provide a fuller context and comparison of policies and practices.

With the exception of female nurses who have always been considered essential to care for men in war, to train the enlisted medical corpsmen (male and female), and to set up and staff hospitals in various places, acceptance of women within the military has always been extremely sensitive to social and cultural values. It has been during wartime, when the supply of men urgently needed for the battlefield or the seagoing forces has proven hopelessly inadequate, that the immense surges in numbers of women permitted to serve have occurred.

Large numbers of women were first taken into the U.S. Navy during World War I, when female yeomen were enlisted and assigned to shore duties in order to relieve men for sea duty. A small number of women also were enlisted into the Marine Corps. Once the war ended, all the women were eventually sent back to their civilian lives, while a small volunteer reserve force remained on

inactive duty lest their services be needed again.

World War II saw a repetition of what was to be a pattern; large numbers of women were encouraged to enlist, then summarily sent home once the war ended with the exception of a tiny number who remained on active duty, and a somewhat larger number who made up the reserves. At least some officials, prompted by farseeing women officers, were able to see the need to retain a trained and experienced cadre of women for future wars. However, powerful forces of conservative men have always brought considerable pressure to bear upon the very concept of women in the military, feeling women had no place there, in spite of the invaluable and exemplary records they set.

Even determining the status of women proved contentious and difficult. All early navy women suffered from a lack of clearly defined status, authority or even equal pay and benefits. The first nurses were denied any veterans' benefits, including medical care, retirement benefits or death benefits. Moreover, they had no ranks as either officers or enlisted personnel in spite of their relatively advanced educations and specialized experience. Women reservists did not receive any pay for their services, nor did they even receive uniforms or a uniform allowance for some time.

It is fascinating to follow the parallel, yet divergent, histories of the various services and the nurse corps as opposed to the yeomen, WAVES, and integrated U.S. Navy women and to see the military set against the societal evolution as a microcosm of that society. Even today there are loud and influential voices fomenting against the use of women in the military, and arguing that some vague, undefined "feminization" has destroyed the effectiveness of the armed forces, despite all evidence and history to the contrary.

Godson's history does continue through to the present day, and it is painfully clear that some things have not changed. Although women in the navy have made great strides in some quarters, the resentment, harassment, mistreatment, discrimination and outright hatred continues in spite of intervention from Congress and from the navy command itself. Perhaps less overt in most cases, the male refusal to accept women in what they view as their private bastion still exists. It is simply less obvious, as it tends to be in racial discrimination, resentment, harassment and mistreatment. Yes, the incidents (or, at least, those reported or known) appear to have

lessened, and many male officers and enlisted personnel seem to accept women as peers and valuable shipmates, but there is still a long way to go.

This book is a master work, incorporating thousands of fragmented documents and other resources. It is, as stated above, also interesting to read and should be required reading for all Naval Academy students, all officers who enter the U.S. Navy through other sources, and perhaps all senior enlisted personnel so that the history of women in their service could be better understood and appreciated. This reviewer served for eighteen years as an enlisted woman and later as a commissioned officer in the navy, from 1963 to 1981, and the available history was briefly covered, consisting primarily of names and dates. Presented without any context it was dry and meaningless, even though many of the most influential women in changing the status of women in the navy still lived. I knew some of them, and interacted with some on an official basis. Little did I know it was history in the making as I served as a Woman's Representative in command after command; watched from the sidelines in Washington D.C. as Admiral Zumwalt and the last Director of the WAVES, Captain Robin Quiquley, battled for their separate and opposing visions of the directions women should take in the navy of the future; and coped with the sudden disintegration of the familiar separate structure for women as the new integrated navy appeared like Venus from the half-shell, fully grown and overnight. It is only through reading this book that I fully appreciate those who went before me, and under what conditions and circumstances.

This book is essential reading for an understanding of where navy women were, how they evolved into the force they are today, and what directions they are probably going. As the country is being forced into a new type of war which will tax military resources more and more, the issues around the use of women in the military, their participation in combat, and their effectiveness as a fully integrated part of overall military strength will be decided. The history of the United States of America is relatively short, as is the history of the armed forces, and tumultuous changes have occurred during this brief period. There is every reason to believe the changes in both society and the military will escalate, and the rapidity with which they will occur will also escalate. The navy is a part of all this, and women in the navy equally so. This book will pave the way for understanding past and future evolution, and the context within which it occurs.

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