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NEWSLETTER

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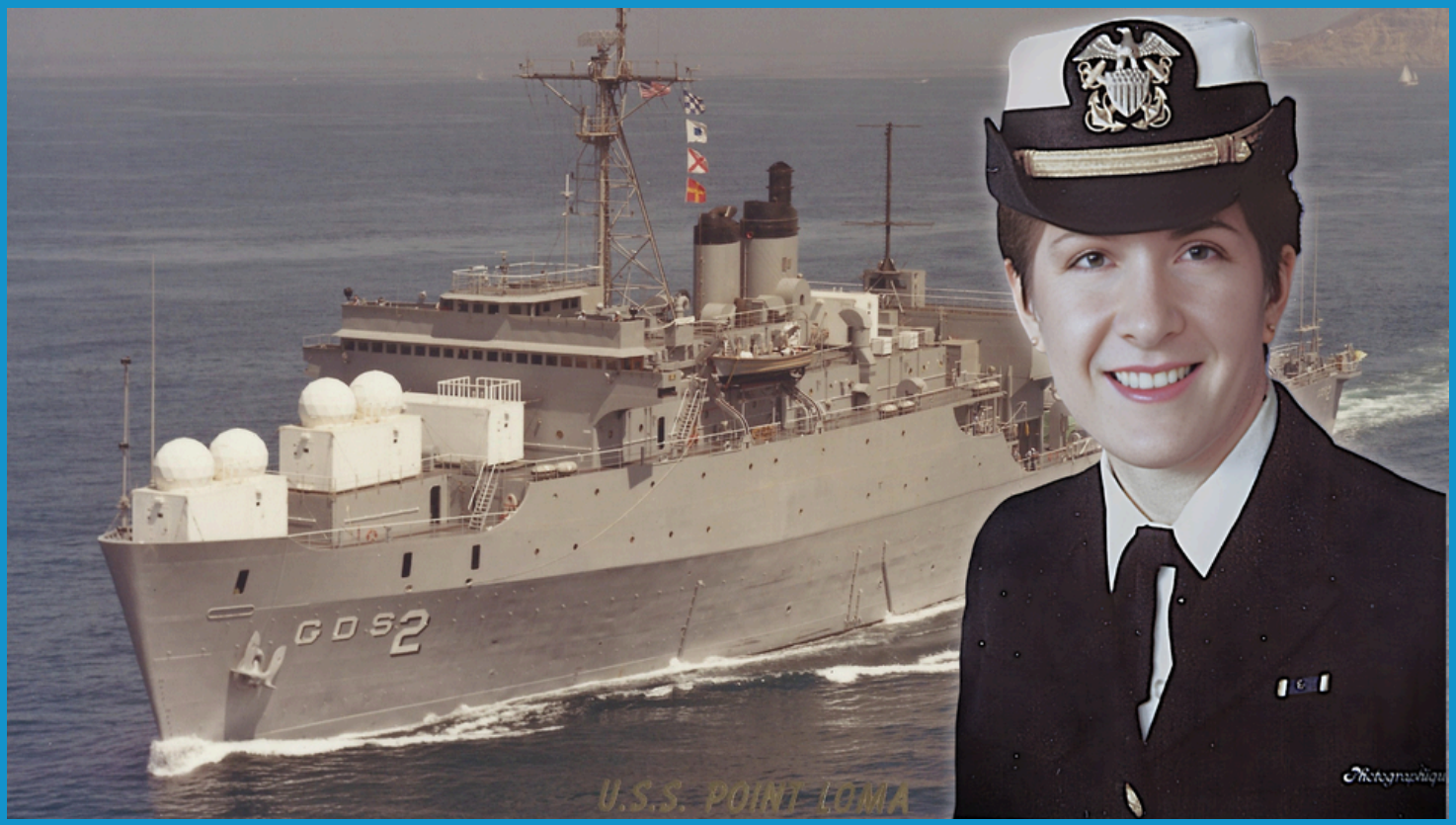
I WAS PROMISED OPPORTUNITY, I FOUND SOMETHING ELSE



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I Was Promised Opportunity, I Found Something Else

In 1978, Congress lifted the ban on women serving aboard Navy ships. I was a young Ensign stationed in Guam, and I remember exactly how it felt: like a door had finally opened.

The Navy told us we were entering a new era. Women would serve at sea. We would be evaluated on merit, given opportunities to lead, and treated as professionals. I believed that.

In 1981, I was selected for the Women at Sea Program—as one of the few women entering the Surface Warfare community. We were told we were pioneers whose performance would shape the future of the Navy. I accepted that responsibility willingly.

What I didn't understand then was how wide the gap was between the Navy's promise and its reality.

The Promise

The Navy's message was clear: professionalism, equality, accountability. The barriers, we were told, had been removed.

We were not told the culture had not caught up.

The Reality

After Surface Warfare Officer School, I reported aboard USS *Point Loma* in 1981, ready to do my job—to learn, to lead, to contribute.

Almost immediately, I saw patterns that didn't align with the promise or my training.

Initially, I assumed it was part of the adjustment to shipboard life. But I quickly learned: this wasn't about adjustment. Something was fundamentally wrong.

What I Witnessed

The problems weren't isolated. They were systemic.

There were inappropriate relationships between senior officers and subordinates everyone knew about—but no one addressed. Rank provide protection. Accountability was selective.

Professional standards were inconsistent. Warfare qualifications—supposed to reflect competence—seemed influenced by favoritism or personal bias, not merit.

Operational failures occurred: collisions, preventable accidents, lost materials, financial mismanagement, basic personnel and security readiness violations. For example, the ship had a reputation for its significantly high number of "positive" random drug urinalysis test results, mostly for THC. All of these reflected lax or absent leadership, and should have triggered formal investigations and accountability. Instead, consequences were minimal to nonexistent.

Sexual harassment was overt. At one group dinner at the officers' club, male officers openly shouted their hotel room numbers at women. Senior leadership was present—and silent. That silence communicated everything.

Even among women, there was division. Some adapted to the environment, aligning with the prevailing culture. There was little mentorship or trust—only isolation.

The Double Standard

I expected to be held to a high standard. I welcomed that.

What I did not expect was that the standard would not be applied equally.

I was given responsibility without adequate training or support. At the same time, my success depended on a system that was not objective.

One senior officer repeatedly offered to help me pass my qualification board in exchange for a sexual relationship. When I refused, he voted against me. Another board member stated openly that women were not expected to qualify—and voted accordingly.

These were not misunderstandings. The message was clear: I was not expected to succeed.

The Breaking Point

For a long time, I tried to work within the system. I believed performance would matter. That the system would correct itself.

But the pattern became undeniable.

I reported the sexual harassment and discrimination through my chain of command. At the time, there were no meaningful whistleblower protections. Still, I spoke up.

Nothing changed.

I reported to higher authority. Again, nothing changed. Instead, I became the problem.

What It Cost

After I reported, the consequences were immediate.

My performance evaluations shifted from strong to adverse. I was labeled as having lost "motivation." My duties were reduced. Opportunities disappeared.

Rather than addressing the environment, leadership redirected scrutiny toward me.

I was denied a fair qualification process. I was reassigned. Over time, I was passed over for promotion. In 1987, after nearly a decade of service, I was forced out.

The impact extended beyond my career. It affected my personal well-being and mental health.

What Stayed With Me

What stayed with me most was not what happened—but what didn't happen.

No one intervened when they should have. Standards were not enforced when it mattered. No one protected me when I spoke up.

Then and Now — The Gap Remains

Today, the Navy tells a powerful story of progress. Women command ships, lead units, and serve across the force. Representation has increased significantly.

There has been real progress.

But representation is not the same as resolution.

Government data shows women still leave military service at higher rates than men, often citing organizational culture and experiences related to harassment and discrimination. [1]

Surveys indicate nearly one in four active-duty women report experiencing sexual harassment the previous year. [2]

Sexual assault reporting data reflects similar challenges: thousands of reports annually, but far fewer cases resulting in accountability or disciplinary action.[3]

These numbers reveal something important: although policies have improved, the underlying issues—leadership and accountability—remain unresolved.

Recent reforms shifted some legal authority outside the immediate chain of command, particularly for sexual assault. That change is significant—but it also reflects a deeper reality.

When an institution moves accountability outside the chain of command, it acknowledges a lack of trust in its ability to enforce standards internally.

That is the clearest connection between then and now.

In the 1980s, the system wasn't ready. Today, the system is more developed—but still struggling with many of the same challenges.

Why This Still Matters

My experience is not universal. It does not represent every command or every leader. But it illustrates something enduring:

Culture is not what is written. It is what is tolerated.

Tolerance is revealed in moments—when leaders choose to act or not act, when reports lead to accountability or silence, when standards are applied evenly or selectively.

Those moments define an institution far more than its public messaging.

The Risk of Speaking Up

Speaking up carries risk.

It disrupts systems. It challenges authority. It creates discomfort.

That was true in the 1980s. It remains true today.

Policies and protections matter—but only if individuals believe they will be enforced
.

What I Believe Now

I don't regret serving, nor speaking up.

I understand now how difficult real accountability is within institutions. Values are easy to state, but much harder to enforce—especially when enforcement carries consequences.

The Real Measure

The Navy's promises matter - merit, accountability, and equal standards.

The real measure of any institution is not what it says—it is what actions occur when its promises are tested, quietly and away from public view.

I was there when those tests came.

And I know what it looked like.

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PETITIONS: SIGN THIS PETITION demanding that our leaders in Congress change the DoD's unjust administrative investigatory system.

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