

Navy skipper likes being first — even if it's an adventure

BY MARK THOMPSON
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NORFOLK, Va. — Darlene Iskra, a steaming mug of coffee in her hand, sits in the wardroom of the salvage ship USS Opportune and grins as she talks about the challenges of being the Navy's first female skipper.

"I think I swear more than they do," she said of her almost all-male crew. "Some of my sailors actually have told me that they'd prefer I don't swear — so that's kind of embarrassing!"

In this and in many other ways, the 40-year-old lieutenant commander is trying to show that women can move easily into key jobs in the military. As a presidential commission votes this week on whether to recommend sending women into combat, Iskra says she's hoping that she and her female



SCOTT KINGSLEY/Knight Ridder Tribune

Lt. Cmdr. Darlene Iskra, the Navy's first female skipper, takes charge.

colleagues will get a chance to serve aboard — and someday command — warships.

"We're shrinking the Navy, but we want to keep the people who can do the job the best," she said in an interview Friday as a thick Atlantic fog shrouded

the gray hulk of the Opportune, which she has commanded for almost two years. "Why are we barring half the population from even trying?"

She also discussed the inevitable —

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shipboard sex — and how it felt to take command, and to be the only woman aboard her ship.

Fewer than one of every six women in the Navy — 8,800 of 58,000 — is at sea, less than half the rate for men. That's because Congress bars women from serving aboard combat ships, such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines, and restricts them to support vessels, such as oilers, tankers and tenders.

But that ban may end as the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces prepares to decide today and Tuesday on whether to allow women in combat.

Eight of the 15 commissioners last week said they opposed putting women in ground combat units. But commission aides said the panel is expected to recommend that women be permitted to fly warplanes and perhaps serve aboard combat ships.

Iskra assumed her historic command quietly, on the eve of the Persian Gulf War nearly two years ago. Because of the war, and because she took over in Italy after the previous skipper fell ill, her ascension has been little noted.

"I was scared to death," she recalled, "afraid we were going to crash

the ship into something," as she ordered it out of Naples.

The Opportune spent the next several months steaming in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, ready to clear mines or sunken ships from the vital Suez Canal.

For eight months, Iskra was the only woman among the 110 sailors and officers, although now there are two other female officers. "It wasn't on my agenda to be the first," she said. "It just happened."

Members of her crew admitted that they were concerned at first about serving under a woman. Several said they now endorse putting women aboard combat vessels.

"It's not a matter of being male or female," Jason Webster, 23, an enlisted navigator from Nashville, Tenn., said from his desk in the chart room. "If they're capable, they should be there — even on a warship."

Lt. Dave Randall of Panama City, Fla., the ship's second-in-command, said: "As far as the crew and I are concerned, Cmdr. Iskra's first name is 'Captain.' There is no difference."

Iskra, a California native, said her husband, Lt. Cmdr. Marc Thomas, a Navy SEAL commando, is supportive. They have decided to remain childless so their careers can flourish.

Aboard the 213-foot, 2,000-ton Opportune, built at the end of World War II, privacy is often a problem. The crew's bunks line common passageways. "We don't want a crew member getting dressed out here with his bare rear when I come by," Iskra said.

There are more daunting concerns. "There's a perception that women need to be more morally pure than men, and that part of the problem with women on ships is that suddenly you'll have these Jezebels stealing husbands or fornicating all over the ship," she said.

Such concerns are especially real for Navy wives, and shipboard sex could be a problem, she acknowledged.

"Few 18-year-olds are very mature, their hormones are raging and they're going to do stupid things," Iskra said. "When you add women to the equation, you start having problems like unintended pregnancies."

Iskra is likely to serve as commander of the Opportune until it is decommissioned, perhaps next year. Then, she said, it will be time for another pioneering mission: supervising the handling of live ammunition.

But once again, she played down her uniqueness.

"I just feel like the average Joe," she said. "Er, Josephine."