



AYE, AYE, MA'AM

The Navy makes history as it sends the first U.S. warship ever commanded by a woman toward the troubled waters of the Persian Gulf

By **MARK THOMPSON** U.S.S. JARRETT



THE NAVY FRIGATE IS DODGING heavy San Diego port traffic. Bringing a 453-ft. vessel to dock on a 1,335-ft. pier in crowded waters isn't easy—particularly when the ship has to back in. The tension is evident from the cries of the crew. "Put the bridge right there where the orange sign is!" the skipper barks at a rookie officer. "Slow your motion," the captain snaps, using the clipped lingo of command. "Steer your bow."

When the hull of the U.S.S. *Jarrett* gently taps the large rubber pier bumpers, sailors and officers gather in a moment of triumph. The docking concludes more than a year's training in preparation for their looming six-month mission. "Today we got to

stress all areas—navigation, communication and ship handling—and you did it well," the captain tells the crew. As the huddle breaks, two small children excitedly run up the gangplank. They hug the captain, who asks, "Did you see Mommy's ship come in?"

"Mommy" is Commander Kathleen McGrath, who next week is expected to mark a historic first: she will be the first American woman ever to take a warship to sea. Back on land, women have already smashed through ceilings that once seemed to be made of unbreakable glass, from Silicon Valley to the State Department. But change has come more slowly to the hidebound military. Only 12 of the Navy's 220 admirals are women.

McGrath will lead the *Jarrett* and its crew of 262 to the Middle East, where they will prowl the northern reaches of the Persian Gulf. Their mission: to hunt





SHIP BOSS McGrath talks with her crew while training to catch suspected smugglers

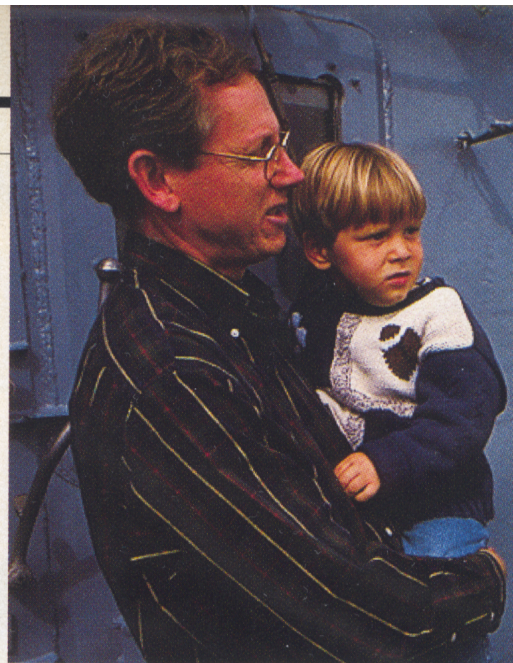
down ships smuggling Iraqi oil in violation of United Nations sanctions. It's a game of nautical cat and mouse, as U.S. spy satellites and surveillance planes pick out possible smugglers and relay their whereabouts to ships down below. The smugglers are beyond the U.N.'s reach as long as they stay in Iraqi and Iranian territorial waters. But there are a few swaths of water beyond the U.S.-recognized 12-mile limit where the *Jarrett* and other allied warships can pounce. The recent spike in oil prices has made smuggling more lucrative. During its two months on the gulf assignment, the *Jarrett's* crew expects to board at least 30 vessels and order violators to friendly ports, where their ships and cargo will be auctioned off.

NOT LONG AGO, MCGRATH'S BREAKTHROUGH would have seemed inconceivable. Women have served on support vessels since 1978, but it wasn't until 1994 that they were permitted, reluctantly, on warships. In 1991, Admiral Frank Kelso, then Chief of Naval Operations, told Congress bluntly that he didn't want women on warships at all, much less in command. "There is a delicate balance between equal opportunity for men and women," he cautioned the Senate Armed Services Committee, "and maintaining combat effectiveness of our forces."

But times have changed. In part it's simply a matter of the available labor pool. In these booming times, the Navy can't recruit enough men for its 315 ships. The other driving force has been the Navy's resolve to bleach the stain of the 1991 Tailhook Association convention, at which naval aviators sexually assaulted 83 women and then tried to cover it up. For years the Navy has been fighting the perception that women are not welcome in its ranks.

The Navy has come a long way since then. Kelso, who was tarnished by the scandal, retired early. In his wake, women stormed aboard warships. They are now assigned to 155 vessels—106 of them combatants—and they account for 11,400 of the 155,000 officers and sailors afloat. Some ships have substantial numbers: the carrier *Eisenhower* has 600 women in a crew of 4,700. The *Jarrett* has only four, all officers, because the lack of berthing space has kept the enlisted ranks all male. By 2004, when nearly all vessels will be opened to women, the Navy is projecting that the average crew will be 12% female. (In January the Navy closed a chapter on the Tailhook scandal, restoring official ties with the group after ex-

PHOTOGRAPH FOR TIME BY ED KASHI



NATIONAL ARCHIVES; U.S. NAVY

acting a pledge that the misconduct of 1991 would not recur.)

The Navy's new generation of women are not just swabbing decks. They've been moving into the highest echelons of the Navy—and the Pentagon as well. Vice Admiral Patricia Tracey is a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Personnel. Rear Admiral Jacqueline Barnes directs the Pentagon's On-Site Inspection Agency, charged with verifying arms-control pacts with other nations. Rear Admiral Barbara McGann is the Navy's top recruiting officer. And Rear Admiral Bonnie Potter is the Atlantic fleet's top doctor.

But sending women into battle remains controversial. Skeptics point to Navy studies showing that female sailors are physically weaker than males and leave ships at more than twice the rate men do, often because they're pregnant. But officers who have commanded ships with women on board have generally brushed aside such concerns. Writing in the Navy journal *Proceedings*, Commander Gerard Roncolato, former skipper of the destroyer U.S.S. *The Sullivans*, declared that there is no job on board a ship today that cannot be done by a woman because of a lack of strength or stamina.

And Navy women have in fact been playing an increasing combat role. In 1996, Lieut. Junior Grade Erica Niedermeier became the first woman to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles from a warship in combat, helping send 13 into southern Iraq. Two years later, flying her F-18 off the

U.S.S. *Enterprise* in a mission over Iraq, Lieut. Kendra Williams became the first female pilot in U.S. history to drop bombs on an enemy target.

MCGRATH, 47, DIDN'T GROW UP DREAMING of making naval history. "I'm an accidental Navy officer," she says. "I joined on a whim." The eldest of six children, she spent her high school years at a U.S. base on Guam while her father—James McGrath, a 29-year Air Force veteran—flew B-52 bombing missions over North Vietnam. After graduating from Cal State-Sacramento with a degree in forestry, she spent six years with the U.S. Forestry Service. When she grew bored, her father suggested she give the military a try.

McGrath's career at sea began with a visit to her dentist's office. She stopped off to check out an Air Force recruiting office in Merced, Calif. The recruiter was out to lunch, so she wandered into a nearby Navy office and signed up, lured by the promise of overseas adventure. She went on to officers' school in Newport, R.I., then landed in a Navy personnel office in Yokosuka, Japan. Once again, McGrath started daydreaming. "I was proofreading stuff that I really didn't understand," she says. "I wasn't doing what I had trained for—navigating, driving boats, seamanship and engineering." She hitched a ride on a Navy support vessel touring the region. "They had me stand watch, do a man-overboard drill, let me drive the ship," she says. "I

went, 'Wow, this is neat.' I remember thinking, 'Yes, this is what I want to do.'"

The Navy told McGrath she couldn't enroll in the Surface Warfare Officers School. All 17 slots set aside for women had been filled. That school would have prepared her to sail on a support vessel—one of the tenders, oilers and suppliers that women were then confined to. But she was already setting her sights higher. After sailing out of Yokosuka on a visiting frigate, McGrath was more determined than ever to serve on a warship. "It was a lot more fun, like driving a sports car," she says. "They go fast, handle better, and they're sexy and glamorous."

Ultimately the Navy relented and found her an open slot in the surface school. After graduating, McGrath flourished aboard the Navy's fleet of support vessels. She served on four different ships from 1983 to 1994, including an 18-month stint as a commander of

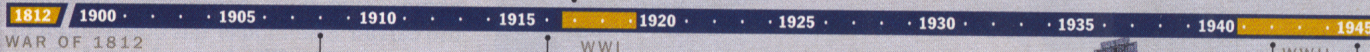
WOMEN IN THE NAVY

1812 First U.S. record of women at sea; they are nurses in the war



1917 Shortly before the U.S. enters World War I, Navy Department authorizes enrollment of women in Naval Reserve with ratings of yeoman

1948 Women permitted to enlist, although new law says they cannot make up more than 2% of the force and cannot be promoted to rank of admiral

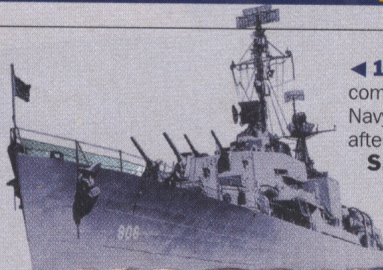


1908 U.S. Navy Nurse Corps established

1916 The Navy Reserve Act calls for the enlistment of qualified "persons," which leads Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels to ask, "Is there any law that says a Yeoman must be a man?"

1942 F.D.R. signs law creating the WAVES—Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service—to fill World War II slots

1945 U.S.S. *Higbee* commissioned, the first Navy warship named after a woman, **Lenah S. Higbee**, head of Navy nurses in WWI





ED KASHI FOR TIME

HOME PORT McGrath's husband and children welcome her home after a training voyage

age in the Pacific—McGrath buzzes up and down the *Jarrett's* ladders like a streamlined torpedo. She barks orders on the bridge, offers praise to sailors in the lower decks and sometimes snatches a few minutes alone in her stateroom to practice Haydn's *Military Symphony* on the violin. Her days often begin before 6 a.m. and stretch until "mid-rats"—midnight rations—are served to sailors standing night watch.

McGrath doesn't plant herself in the captain's chair. She roams the bridge, chatting up her crew, her arms crossed or on her hips. And she has struck a deal with her crew. They can drive the ship—something not all commanders permit—as long as they keep her fully informed about what's happening. McGrath's job requires her to discipline a handful of sailors every month for infractions ranging from unauthorized absences to drug use. She resists the temptation to prove that she can be just as tough as a male commander. "I don't try to emulate a man, nor do I try to do what a guy would do," she says. "I have to be myself."

The *Jarrett* may be one of the smallest warships in the Navy fleet, but it packs a wallop. It carries 1,100-lb. Standard missiles, which are capable of blasting enemy aircraft out of the sky 20 miles away. And its Harpoon missiles, weighing nearly 1,400 lbs., can sink an enemy ship more than 60 miles away. The *Jarrett* has a pair of SH-60 Seahawk helicopters on its fantail, poised for search and rescue, antisubmarine warfare, supply runs and special operations. The ship also boasts a 3-in. gun, torpedoes and antiaircraft weapons.

For the past 15 months, McGrath and her crew have been gearing up for their gulf mission. They spent the first few months fixing ailing systems and upgrading others. Then they moved on to training exercises, preparing the ship's departments—combat systems, navigation, engineering, operations—to work under battle conditions. In one exercise, McGrath trains her binoculars on an object in the distance. As a nondescript oil tanker comes into view, a dozen sailors cram into a small boat that's lowered over the *Jarrett's* port side. Armed and nervous, they're preparing to climb aboard the tanker (actually a Navy supply ship) to ensure it is not smuggling Iraqi oil in violation of the U.N. sanctions. It's risky business: despite a radioed message from the tanker granting the sailors' request to come aboard, an ambush could await. But the captain is confident, and not just because this is only a practice mission. "I know each member of the boarding team, and I know how hard they've trained," she says. "The harder we train in peacetime, the less we'll bleed in war."

Having women aboard—and especially one in command—has changed the atmosphere on the *Jarrett*. Personnelman Second Class Eldukl Ngiraingas was worried that working with women might make the crew less efficient. "I had a different kind of bonding when I was with all guys on a carrier," he says. "We didn't have to worry about offending people—everyone swore." But then he worked with a female colleague on a fire drill. "I found out that I didn't have to yell to get her to do some-

a salvage ship. Onshore she earned a master's degree in education from Stanford. Still, by the early 1990s she was beginning to be worried that her career had run aground. "I'm a dinosaur," she remembers thinking, "because the combatant ships aren't open to women." That changed in 1993, when Congress made warships—with the still notable exception of submarines—accessible to women. With that prospect in view, McGrath stayed with the service and paid her dues, serving two years in the Navy's personnel bureau in Washington and then heading to San Diego to help manage a destroyer squadron, ensuring the vessels were ready for war.

A SHIP'S COMMANDER IS LIKE THE MAYOR OF a small town. McGrath's eight-level domain ranges from the officers' staterooms above to the sailors' berthing areas to the laundry down below. When the going gets tough—which it often did on a recent training voy-

AFI; CORBIS BETTMANN; PAONI—CONTRASTO/SABA; KASHI



◀ **1972** Admiral Elmo Zumwalt kisses **Rear Admiral Alene Duerk** after the promotion that makes her the first woman to hold that rank

1990 Lieutenant Commander **Darlene Iskra** becomes the first woman to assume command of a ship, the U.S.S. *Opportune*



1994 ▶ The aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Eisenhower* becomes the Navy's first combat ship with women in its crew

1950 • 1955 • 1960 • 1965 • 1970 • 1975 • 1980 • 1985 • 1990 • 1995 • 2000

KOREAN WAR

VIETNAM WAR

GULF WAR

1973 Women begin Navy pilot training. **Lieutenant (j.g.) Judith Neuffer** is first military aviatrix



1976 First women enter the Naval Academy

1996 Lieutenant (j.g.) **Erica Niedermeier** is the first woman to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles in combat

1978 Congress changes law, allowing women to serve aboard support ships

2000 Commander **Kathleen McGrath** is the first woman to command a warship headed into harm's way. Women now make up 14% of the Navy, and are 12 of 220 admirals



thing," he says. Another difference: modesty prevails. "You can't walk around in your underwear anymore," notes Signalman Second Class Terry Cole.

McGrath has also brought a more inclusive spirit to the *Jarrett*. Last August she invited the ship's five newly minted chief petty officers and their spouses to her home to celebrate their promotion into the senior enlisted ranks. She and her husband cooked on the outdoor grill. McGrath's meal wasn't in keeping with a long-standing Navy tradition: segregation between enlisted men and officers. Command Master Chief Mike Fulton, the *Jarrett's* senior enlisted man, says that night was the first time in his 24-year career—spread over 13 ships—he ever attended such a mixed-rank social gathering.

AS MCGRATH HEADS OFF TO A WAR ZONE, she will be feeling one emotion that working parents everywhere can understand—melancholy at being away from her kids. After McGrath made her way up to command, she and her husband Greg Brandon took time off last year to start a family. They went to Moscow and adopted a pair of unrelated Russian children, Nicholas, 3, and Clare, 2. "Like everything else in my life, this was deliberate," McGrath says. She brings photographs on board, which she displays proudly. "It's real hard being away," she says. "Intellectually, I knew it would be difficult, but I didn't realize, emotionally, how tough it would be."

McGrath has been fortunate to have a husband who put her career first. She met Brandon ("I kept my own name," he says wryly) at a Navy school more than a decade ago. Brandon is proud of what his wife has accomplished. "It couldn't have happened five years ago, but it's the right time to have a woman commanding a man-of-war," he says. Brandon, who retired in 1996 after 17 years as an officer, is now the children's primary caregiver. "It was the right thing to do," he says. "Her career was a little more successful than mine, and trying to have dual careers the higher up we went would have been difficult." Off the ship, McGrath spends most of her time with Nick and Clare. "Being the C.O. has given me flexibility to get time off, to get to the doctors' appointments," she says. "I took Nick to his first day of preschool," she says proudly. "He thinks everyone's mom works on a ship."

MCGRATH DOESN'T LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THE fact that she is about to make history. "You don't get to this position by saying, 'I'm

different and I'm special, so therefore I deserve to be the C.O.," she says. In fact, the only change her presence required was to remove the spring-loaded, always-up toilet seat in her cabin's head. The Navy insists that McGrath is under no special scrutiny because of her gender. In fact, she will relinquish her command of the ship a month before the mission ends, simply because the Navy's unrelenting personnel cycle demands it.

Not all the skeptics have been won over. There are still those who object on principle to women commanders. "These are not female jobs," insists Dudley Carlson, a retired three-star admiral who once ran the Navy's entire personnel system. "You can make anything work in peacetime, but the peacetime Navy be-

comes the wartime Navy in the blink of an eye."

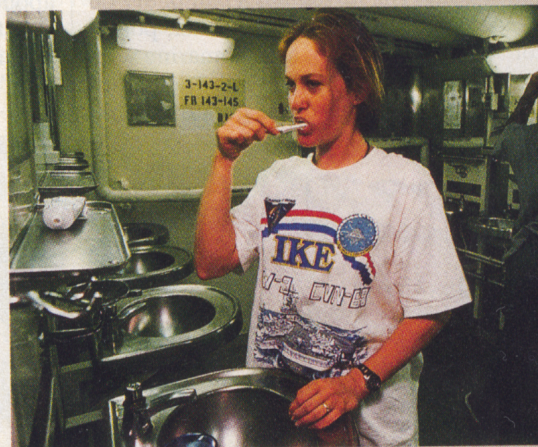
Some of the skepticism originates right on board the *Jarrett*. "I've never worked for a woman before, so I'm not really sure what to expect in combat," says Personnelman First Class Arnell Ramos. "Being a majority-male organization," he says, "most of us would prefer to take orders from a male officer."

But as McGrath has proved herself, most of the doubters have come around. McGrath's crew seems generally impressed with her. "She's not in command because she's a woman," says her second-in-command, Lieut. Commander Joseph Chiaravallotti. "She's in command because she's better than everyone else who's not in command."

ON BOARD

SHIPSHAPE, GENDER-WISE

FOR TWO CENTURIES IT WAS A man's Navy—with ships to match. But with women setting sail in growing numbers, the Navy is for the first time making gender equality one of its design specifications. The U.S.S. *San Antonio*—an \$800 million Marine troop carrier



Getting female friendly from bow to stern involves a lot of small touches

under construction in Louisiana—is being built with women in mind, from the keel up.

The *San Antonio*, scheduled for completion in three years, will carry a crew of 500, along with 700 Marines and their helicopters. Because as much as 40% of the crew may be women, the berths aboard the 684-ft. vessel will be broken

down into 24-bed units, not the massive compartments used on most Navy ships. That will give added flexibility to a commander who has to juggle gender counts when assembling a crew. (Another change: the heads won't have urinals.)

The new design also reflects the 5-in. gap in average height between men and women: key systems, valves, shelves and electrical outlets will all be lower than in the past. Valves will have to be made so they can be operated by the weakest woman but not broken by the strongest man.

Not all the modifications involve heavy machinery. Navy designers want storage space for seven rolls of toilet paper rather than the current two. Some female sailors hoard toilet paper because the heads are always running out. Navy planning documents also say the female heads will require increased ventilation "due to hair spray," along with extra outlets and mirrors "for hair and makeup."

And the ship's barber is scheduled to get a sink. Now, the Navy says, many women have to wet their hair in their berthing compartment before going to the barber shop. The Navy also reports that women have complained that the industrial laundries on board conventional ships damage their undergarments. The planners' solution: washing machines with a gentle cycle.

LES STONE—SYGMA