The Sea Witch

The first woman to command a Navy cruiser rose fast through the ranks—until reports of her abusive command style caught up with her. The inside story of Captain Holly Graf's stunning fall

BY MARK THOMPSON/WASHINGTON

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN CLEAR TO THE U.S. Navy that Holly Graf wasn’t fit for command when her destroyer steamed out of a Sicilian port in 2003 on the eve of the Iraq war. Without warning, all 9,000 tons of the U.S.S. Winston S. Churchill, her flagship, was adrift. “What the hell happened?” Commander Graf demanded from the bridge. She grabbed her chart and her navigator and pulled him onto the bridge wing. “Did you run my f---ing ship aground?” she screamed. Not only was this a possible naval disaster, but it was a diplomatic one as well: The navigator was an officer in the British Royal Navy, a billet unique to the Churchill.

But amid all the chaos and shouting, the sound heard next was more startling. Sailors on the Churchill’s stern, suspecting that their ship had run aground—meaning Graf’s career would be instantly over—broke into song. “Ding dong, the witch is dead!” Newly arrived Navy chaplain Maurice Kaprow could not believe what he was seeing and hearing. “Someone came up to me and said, ‘We’ve run aground—she’s finished,’” he recalls. “I was flabbergasted. They were jumping for joy and singing on the fantail.” As it turned out, one of the ship’s propellers had broken. But seven years later, Kaprow still cannot fathom which was worse: that U.S. sailors were openly heckling a captain or that the captain seemed to deserve it.

Graf’s next command, as captain of the guided-missile cruiser U.S.S. Cowpens, would be her last. Graf was relieved of duty in January, after nearly two years on the Cowpens, for “tirade and maltreatment” of her crew, according to a blistering Navy inspector general’s report obtained by TIME. The report has rocked the service to its core because it calls into question the way the Navy chooses, promotes and then monitors its handpicked skippers. The saga of Holly Graf suggests the Navy had been ignoring warning signs about her suitability for command. And while news of her spectacular fall instantly raised questions about institutional sexism, the lesson may be the opposite: as her case highlights, how the Navy has pushed to integrate women into its warfighting fleet.

Master and Commander

HOLLY GRAF HAD DREAMED OF SKIPPING A Navy vessel ever since her high school days in Simsbury, Conn. Her father was a Navy captain, and her sister Robin wanted to go to sea too. (Robin eventually became an admiral—and married one; Holly is single.) After she graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1985, colleagues sensed that Graf was on a fast track to flag rank.

Graf alternated tours aboard a destroyer tender, a frigate and a destroyer with shore assignments at the Pentagon and as a Navy
"Persons in authority are forbidden to injure their subordinates by tyrannical or capricious conduct, or by abusive language," the Navy says. But Graif did so "by demeaning, humiliating, publicly belittling and verbally assaulting ... subordinates while in command of Cowpens" with "harsh language and profanity ... rarely followed with any instruction."

—Nyet's report, Dec. 10, 2009

The Cruel Sea

ON JUNE 2, 2007, 42 YEARS AFTER LEAVING ANnapolis, Graif was promoted to captain. Her assumption of command of the U.S.S. Cowpens in March 2008 was a special day for her and for many female officers in the Navy. The 57-foot, 10,000-ton vessel is the Navy’s largest surface combatant, and Graif was the first—and is so far the only—woman to command this class of ship, with its 400-member crew. Driving a heavy cruiser requires ship-handling skills more deft than those needed to skipper a sleek destroyer or a frigate. But commanding the crew proved to be a far greater challenge for her.

A six-month Navy investigation found that Graif had assaulted members of her crew and pressured junior officers to do her improper favors. She grabbed them to get their attention—usually while on the bridge in a heated discussion. She asked junior officers to play piano at her personal Christmas party and to walk her dogs. Then there were the things she failed to do, like train her crew adequately. This charge seemed to generate the most anger among young officers, who must make the most of their time at sea and pass critical tests if they are going to win promotion. "I don't have time to train junior officers," she allegedly told a fellow officer, even though the probe concluded that it should have been one of her "highest priorities."

Graif also was accused of making offensive comments, such as, "Oh, yes, that was a Navy personnel officer." Most damaging, perhaps, was her habit of verbal abuse. The language of naval command is supposed to be crisp and to the point. Orders pertaining to speed, direction and a host of other decisions needed to guide a warship are repeated back and forth among those on the bridge to reduce the chance of error. There’s the risk of being "out of the loop" while in a heated discussion. Graif was cited for verbal abuse by officers on the bridge at most times; swearing is extremely rare. (Belowdecks, among enlisted personnel, it is more common.) But according to 19 of 26 members of the crew's crew questioned by Navy investigators—whose names were redacted from the report and who therefore could not be contacted by Times—Graif repeatedly dropped F bombs on them. "Take your goddamn attitude and shove it up your ... and leave it there," she allegedly told an officer during a stressful maneuver at sea.

Graif could be particularly withering toward females. One younger woman recalled going to Graif to seek her help. "Don't come to me with your problems," she said. Graif responded, "You're not a ... department head." The officer said Graif once told her, "I can't express how mad you make me without getting violent." A second female officer told investigators that Graif had "a terrible role model for women in the Navy," recalling what Graif allegedly said to her and a fellow officer on the bridge. "You two are f***ing unbelievable. I would fire you if I could, but I can’t." (In the Navy, it is considered a form of harassment to fire a woman.)

Last summer, three crew members privately sought a probe into her handling of the Japan-based Cowpens. In her defense, Graif told investigators that she had "no recollection" of making such comments, and the "appearance unprofessional at the accu- mulations." Graif charged that a small group of disgruntled officers were spreading rumour among her peers that others that the command climate and (her) demeanor were far worse than they actually were. After she was named a female officer as she served with Graif on the Wilbur Curtis. The Navy felt under pressure to take a woman and put her on the ship in the best and most uncompli- cated e-mail. "Many times I raised my tone (and used swear words) to ensure they knew this was not cool, but I can't say I ever did it on other occasions to intention- ally depress the situation.

The investigators gave Graif no quar- ter. Graif violated Navy regulations by "demeaning, humiliating, publicly belittling and verbally assaulting ... subordinates while in command of Cowpens," the report found. Her actions "exceeded the firm methods needed to succeed or even thrive," and her "harsh language and pro- fanity were rarely followed with any in- struction." Her repeated criticism of her officers, often in front of lower-ranking crew members, was "extraneous to the best interests of the ship and the Navy."

When the 50-page report landed on the desk of Graif’s superior, Rear Admiral Kevin Donegan, he relieved her of command.

Was the Singled Out?

DID GRAIF SAKA BE LEFT THE Navy facing two uncomfortable questions: Would the Navy have relented for a man for the errors Graif committed? And if Graif’s command style was so toxic, how did the Navy miss it in the first place?

The answers are interrelated. Some of- ficers seem to rise magically through the ranks, immune to criticism that would trip up others. Some who watched Graif climb the command ladder assumed she had an ally somewhere that matter. But that time, she was the only female officer she came from a family with a long Navy background, she cleared every hurdle the Navy set in her path. The other officers times didn’t pay close enough attention to what happened after that. But she didn’t have stepped up, either.

So how did Graif’s relieved of her command simply because she is female? She “acted like a man, and now she was being pun- ished for it,” says retired commander Darlena Iskra, who in 1990 was the first woman to command a Navy ship, the興26 USS Oponahu. "We had a little difference of opinion, and she made something of an example for younger female officers. In fact, Graif was a fairly young commander."

Pentagon when the IG report scuttled that assignment. More important, the consen- sus among active and retired female officers is that Graif would have suffered the same fate had she been male.

Better explanation is that the Navy failed to move on Graif earlier not in spite of her gender but because of it. Following the Tailhook scandal—in which Navy aviators assaulted dozen of women at a 1991 convention—the service rushed to the edge of tolerable. The services locked in the Dark Ages. The service was under political pressure to diversify its leadership, and Graif was part of the slow: the first woman to command both a destroyer and a cruiser. Some veterans believe the Navy used Graif as a scapegoat for those commanders; "I have sympathy for her," says Nicole Waybright, a retired lieutenant commander who didn’t have much experience on it. "We were all under pressure to, you know, you know if you don’t want to talk about it?" Kaprow says she wouldn’t talk to him for the rest of his stay.

When he left the ship, he reported what he had witnessed to Graif’s superior. But his complaints, like those made by Benson and others, produced no apparent change in Graif’s demeanor and did not slow her rise. Graif’s command of the Churchill in early 2004 when she was replaced, after 12 months, by Commander Ted Koontz. It was a routine hall and farewell, recalls Paul Coco, a 2001 Naval Academy graduate who served on the Graf: "The change was not a pleasant one."

On the Cowpens’ bridge Graif and Russian naval officers in Vladivostok last May