

NATION

# 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* shuddered as it cleared the harbor's breakwater. The screws stopped turning, and the 511-ft.-long ship was soon adrift. "What the hell happened?" Commander Graf demanded from the bridge. She grabbed her cowering navigator and pulled him onto the outdoor 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 gleefully 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 "cruelty 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 bilges 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 long ignored 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 war-fighting 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



GRAF: U.S. NAVY/AP; SHIP: AP



ROTC instructor at Villanova University, outside Philadelphia. She earned a Bronze Star during the Iraq war (along with the Legion of Merit, Defense Meritorious Service Medal and two Meritorious Service Medals). Adding some academic heft to her résumé, Graf earned three master's degrees—in national security from the Naval War College, in civil engineering from Villanova and in systems analysis from the Naval Postgraduate School. Early in her career, there were few signs of the abusive commander she would become. “I knew Holly a long time ago,” wrote one acquaintance on a naval blog last week. “My memory of her is nothing like how the posts on this and other boards are portraying her.”

Graf's darker side began to emerge when she was assigned to the destroyer U.S.S. *Curtis Wilbur* in 1997, as the executive officer (XO), or second in command. Kirk Benson, who retired from the Navy as a commander after a 20-year career, says his tour aboard the *Curtis Wilbur* with Graf was “the worst time in my life.” Her constant berating of the crew led him to complain, he says, but nothing was done. “When I think of Holly Graf, even 12 years later, I shake,” says Benson. “It was hard to imagine her as an XO, never mind getting command of two ships.”

If the Navy had warning signs about Graf after her time on the *Curtis Wilbur*, it didn't seem to pay them any heed. Instead, in 2003, Graf made U.S. Navy history by becoming the first female commander of a destroyer, the *Churchill*. Kaprow, the Jewish chaplain, recalls his time aboard the *Churchill* in 2003 as the strangest of more than 200 such visits to ships in his 20-year career. Morale was the lowest he had ever encountered on any vessel. Kaprow says he tried to talk to Graf about her leadership style after 10 days aboard. “I told her, ‘I'm getting some vibes—you're a nice lady, and you have a hard job’—I'm telling her some of the junior officers are concerned and are really upset,” Kaprow recalls. “I'm giving her the spiel, and she just goes bonkers and cuts me off. She said she didn'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 Graf's superior. But his complaints, like those made by Benson and others, produced no apparent change in Graf's demeanor and did not slow her rise. Graf's command of the *Churchill* ended in early 2004 when she was replaced, after 22 months, by Commander Todd Leavitt. It was a routine hail and farewell, recalls Paul Coco, a 2002 Naval Academy graduate who served as gunnery officer aboard the *Churchill*, except in one respect: “As soon

“Persons in authority are forbidden to injure their subordinates by tyrannical or capricious conduct, or by abusive language,” the Navy says. But Graf 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.”

—Navy IG's report, Dec. 10, 2009

as Commander Leavitt said ‘I relieve you’ to Commander Graf, the whole ship, at attention, roared in cheers.”

### The Cruel Sea

ON JUNE 1, 2007, 22 YEARS AFTER LEAVING Annapolis, Graf was promoted to captain. Her assumption of command of the U.S.S. *Cowpens* in March 2008 was a second special day for her and for women in the Navy. The 567-ft., 10,000-ton vessel is the Navy's largest surface combatant, and Graf was the first—and is so far the only—woman to command this class of ship, with its 400-member crew. Driving a boxy 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 Graf assaulted members of her crew and pressured junior officers to do her improper favors. She grabbed them to get their attention—usually while 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.” At times, she seemed to prefer humiliation as a teacher. The probe discovered that she put a “well-respected Master Chief” in “time out”—standing in the ship's key control room doing nothing—“in front of other watch standers of all ranks,” which enraged Navy personnel.

Most damaging, perhaps, was Graf's 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 remarkably little conversation on the bridge at most times; swearing is extremely rare. (Belowdecks, among enlisted personnel, it is more common.) But according to 29 of 36 members of the cruiser's crew

questioned by Navy investigators—whose names were redacted from the report and who therefore could not be contacted by TIME—Graf repeatedly dropped *F* bombs on them. “Take your goddam attitude and shove it up your f\_ \_ing ass and leave it there,” she allegedly told an officer during a stressful maneuver at sea.

Graf could be particularly withering toward females. One younger woman recalled going to Graf to seek her help. “Don't come to me with your problems,” she said Graf responded. “You're a f\_ \_ing department head.” The officer said Graf once told her, “I can't express how mad you make me without getting violent.” A second female officer told investigators that Graf was “a terrible role model for women in the Navy,” recalling what Graf 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.”

Last summer, three crew members privately sought a probe into her handling of the Japan-based *Cowpens*. In her defense, Graf told investigators that she had “no recollection” of making such comments, and she “appeared incredulous at the accusations.” Graf charged that a small group of disgruntled officers were spreading rumors among the crew “and convincing others that the command climate and [her] demeanor were far worse than they actually were.” But she followed up with an e-mail. “Many times I raised my tone (and used swear words) to ensure they knew this time, it was no kidding,” she wrote. “I also did it on other occasions to intentionally pressurize the situation.”



On the *Cowpens*' bridge Graf and Russian naval officers in Vladivostok last May

The investigators gave Graf no quarter. Graf 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 profanity were rarely followed with any instruction.” Her repeated criticism of her officers, often in front of lower-ranking crew members, was “contrary to the best interests of the ship and the Navy.”

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

### Was She Singled Out?

THE HOLLY GRAF SAGA HAS LEFT THE Navy facing two uncomfortable questions: Would the Navy have relieved a man for the errors Graf committed? And if Graf's command style was so toxic, how did the Navy miss it in the first place?

The answers are interrelated. Some officers seem to rise magically through the ranks, immune to criticism that would trip up others. Some who watched Graf climb the command ladder assumed she had an ally somewhere that mattered. But that doesn't appear to be the case. Though she came from a family with a long Navy background, she cleared every hurdle the Navy set up for her. Top officers simply didn't pay close enough attention to what happened after that.

So was Graf relieved of her command simply because she is female? “She acted like a man, and now she was being punished

for it,” says retired commander Darlene Iskra, who in 1990 was the first woman to command a Navy ship, the U.S.S. *Opportune*, a salvage vessel. But Iskra's view is hard to square with the fact that the service promoted Graf at every turn, gave her two historic assignments and made her something of an example for younger female officers. In fact, Graf was slated for a top Navy staff job at the Pentagon when the IG report scuttled that assignment. More important, the consensus among active and retired Navy officers is that Graf would have suffered the same fate had she been male.

A better explanation is that the Navy failed to move on Graf earlier not in spite of her gender but because of it. Following the Tailhook scandal—in which Navy aviators assaulted dozens of women at a 1991 convention—the service rushed women to sea to show it was no longer locked in the Dark Ages. The service was under political pressure to diversify its leadership, and Graf was part of the answer: the first woman to command both a destroyer and a cruiser. Some veterans believe Graf needed more time to prepare for those commands. “I have some sympathy for her,” says Nicole Waybright, a young female officer who served with Graf on the *Wilbur Curtis*. “The Navy felt under pressure to take a woman and put her on the best and most complicated tactical platform,” Waybright says. “But she didn't have much experience on it.” Some rookies could have stepped up to that challenge, she adds, but not Graf. “She was,” Waybright says, “a terrible ship handler.”

The Graf case is sure to make the lives of Navy recruiters more difficult. Shawn Smith is a retired Navy captain who—along with her husband, also a retired Navy captain—applauded their daughter's decision to join the Navy in 2007 after graduating from Notre Dame on a Navy ROTC scholarship. Erin Smith was “seriously considering” making the Navy a career, as her parents did, until she was assigned to the *Cowpens*. “Her experiences with Captain Graf definitely helped form her decision to do her time and leave the Navy,” her mother says. “I was appalled that this happened, guilty—I think she went into the Navy because of us—and angry, because these kids did not deserve this kind of leadership.”

Graf declined to be interviewed for this article. She is now headed for the Navy weapons lab at Dahlgren, Va., a bureaucratic backwater where she is virtually certain to face a follow-up hearing that could end her career—if she doesn't request retirement first. ■