
Navy Women Riding the WAVES: An Analysis of the Changing Generational Discourse for Females in the Navy

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Research regarding military rhetoric and gender roles in the Navy has become critical to the progress of advancement toward gender equality in the armed forces. Previous research has been done to understand perceptions of gender in the military and how discourse contributes to creating these perceptions. I take a slightly different perspective on the topic by seeing how language within the US Navy has changed for women through the generations. By analyzing six interviews of female Navy veterans (three from World War II and three from the Persian Gulf War), I was able to find which factors have contributed to these changes in language and what it means for future women in the Navy.

Historical Setting

Women have served in the military during every American conflict; however, it was not until after World War I that an official Navy reserve was established for females (Myers). The WAVES, standing for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, began in July of 1942 when the need for labor during World War II was crucial. WAVES were restricted to service on the US mainland and were not allowed to serve on combat ships or aircrafts. Toward the end of the war, the WAVES were given approval to serve in Hawaii and in certain US territories. When World War II ended and male soldiers came home, additional proposals to extend females' opportunities and services were halted. At the close of the war, the WAVES included 80,000 enlisted women and 8,000 female officers. Eventually in 1948, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act was passed to allow women permanent status in the military, and the WAVES was dissolved ("WWII and WAVES").

As a result of this act, over 66,000 women currently serve in the US Navy, including thirty-eight flag officers, two female fleet master chiefs, and one female force master chief (Myers). Women have served with men at sea, in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1991. Today, women can serve in any position of the US Navy, including on ships, aircraft, and submarines ("Navy Celebrates"). Through all of these milestones, women

have overcome numerous obstacles, especially when it comes to breaking traditional gender roles. Rhetoric contributes greatly to the formation of gender roles in the military. It is important to understand the connections between language and gender roles in order to see how rhetoric can improve the future of gender equality in the armed forces. Numerous rhetorical scholars have researched and analyzed the connection between these two areas. This opens up discussion for further research on the past of military rhetoric.

Literature Review

Society's Perceptions of Women in the Military

Gender stereotypes have caused society to view women differently from men when it comes to performance in the military. Some scholars argue that these stereotypes contribute to lower expectations for women in military positions and less opportunities for career advancement (Boldry, Wood, Kashy; Prividera and Howard). Prividera and Howard specifically talk about the media's perception of women in the military in an analysis of US news reports after the attack of thirty-three US soldiers in Iraq on March 23, 2003. When describing the three females suffering casualties, Prividera and Howard argued that the media "consistently highlighted their femininity" and "in many cases their more masculine elements (e.g., soldier identity, rank, and job duties) were excluded to make room for discussions on their feminine/civilian duties." Boldry, Wood, and Kashy make a similar argument using a different method. They conducted a survey of the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets (315 males and 27 females). Questions were asked about their perceptions of fellow classmates' qualities and skills. The results showed that many believed women cadets to be lacking in military qualities such as leadership, masculinity, and motivation. Although Boldry, Wood, and Kashy veer from media analysis and look purely at a class of cadets, all of the scholars discuss the specific qualities that define people's conceptions of male and female soldiers.

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Formation of Perceptions through Discourse

This fragile stereotype of women can have a negative impact on female soldiers because it creates obstacles as they advance their careers and prove themselves to fellow soldiers. Many of these stereotypes can be introduced through discourse. Lindal Buchanan, Anita Taylor, and MJ Hardman emphasize the role that discourse has in creating change. Buchanan argues that policy and rhetoric in the discourse community of the US Navy had a significant impact on integrating the force with women. For example, discussion on integrating the US Submarine Force began in 1995 with a series of plans and policies. However, the proposal of women joining the force was consistently put down, "predicting that it would demoralize male crew members and jeopardize mission effectiveness" (Buchanan 40). From 1995 to 2010, ideas were created, then suppressed, then re-emerged to find their place in the discourse community and finally created change. Although Hardman and Taylor do not specifically look at Navy policy, they do look at past historical narratives to research which stories have not been told. Many of the women heroines of our past have been forgotten. Men seem to come out as leaders in history while women are seen as supporting roles. Language's part in all of this, Taylor and Hardman argue, is crucial to forming the foundation of new perceptions on gender roles.

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rhetoric and creation of gender roles through discourse. I will take a slightly different look at these roles and perceptions by seeing how they have changed through several generations. This unique point of view will allow greater insight on changes in the military over time. Additionally, this perspective is more valuable because it comes from the military women themselves rather than other people. These female veterans experienced the events firsthand; therefore, there will be no distortion in the portrayal of their thoughts and feelings. Hearing their stories is crucial because many of the stories from past women in the military have gone untold, despite the valuable information they encompass. These accounts will let readers appreciate the sacrifices that previous generations of female veterans have made for the progress of the Navy. Their language creates change, and by understanding this language, future women in the military can point themselves in a direction toward continued progress.

Claim

By conducting a rhetorical analysis of interviews from female Navy veterans in World War II and the Persian Gulf War, I argue that generational changes in language within the military have reflected the evolving roles of women in the war effort. This provides valuable insight to language’s purpose in the formation of societal roles, specifically in the United States military. It becomes apparent through this research that language and rhetoric have the unique power of conveying messages and shaping perceptions of oneself. This capacity can be specifically viewed through the analysis of terminology, language of association between men and women, and language regarding war effort roles. It is imperative that we understand how these themes relate to the responsibilities of women in the military today and the opportunities they have for advancement. If women in the military and those that surround them can communicate and portray themselves more effectively, it will contribute to future progression toward equality.

To carry out my analysis, I have selected six interviews from the online archives of the University of Central Florida’s Veteran’s History Project. Three interviews are from women who served in World War II (1939-1945) and the other three are from women who served during the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991). Below is a brief introduction of each veteran and a description of their service in the Navy:

World War II Veteran Interviews			
	Dates of Service	Highest Rank	Medals
Evelyn S. Borshay	1943-1946	Seamen First Class/ Yeomen First Class	Unknown
Jacqueline Lela Treadwell	1944-1946	Yeomen Second Class	Victory Medal (Twice)
Ima Black	1943-1947	Storekeeper First Class	American Campaign Medal, Victory Medal

Persian Gulf War Veteran Interviews			
	Dates of Service	Highest Rank	Medals
Doris McClendon	1976-1995	Legalman	National Defense Service Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Overseas Service Medal
Merewyn E. Lyons	1976-1994	Lieutenant Commander	Marksmanship Ribbon (Sharpshooter), Overseas Service Ribbon

Tracey Frost	1983-1994	Chief Petty Officer	Good Conduct Medal
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Word Choice Reflects Personal Perceptions

The terminology used by the women who served in the Navy after World War II became increasingly centered on the professional, individualistic woman. More specifically, women serving during the World War II era were referenced at a less-qualified professional level compared to the women serving in the Persian Gulf War. In this section, I will look at the terminology and word-use that contributed to these perceptions as well as how it can change in the future.

Evelyn S. Borshay of World War II refers to her friends as “girls,” but when referring to other male naval officers describes them with specific rank. She says, “My friends and I would celebrate every time we got a pay raise, and we would go down to the big hotels and just sit in the lobby and watch the world go by. We saw all the generals, the admirals, and all the big boys. It was very fascinating.” Jacqueline Treadwell also refers to the female veterans she served with as “young girls” while she refers to the male veterans as “young men.” It seems as if the women were referring to themselves at a lower rank even though their jobs were just as important as the men.

Another word that continued to surface was “volunteer.” The WAVES itself is “Women Accepted for *Volunteer* Emergency Services.” Jacqueline Treadwell (WWII) recalls, “The stress was on for women to volunteer.” She says, “The reason they took us was the shortage of manpower.” Regardless of how they were treated or revered, the women were still determined to help the country. Treadwell states, “The girls that volunteered...we were defending our country in our way.” This “volunteer effort” reflects the way that women were treated during this time in history as having a temporary job to supplement men’s work. The terminology used by these women shows a strong emphasis on men’s strength and downplays the exceptional capabilities of the women.

In contrast, Persian Gulf female veterans usually refer to themselves and their female comrades as “women” instead of “girls.” Rather than placing the men at a higher rank, the women often use the word “we” to refer to the entire Navy, both men and women collectively. Doris McClendon is particularly forthright when she states, “We’re gonna fight together, so why don’t we train together?” The word “we” signifies the inclusion of professional men *and* women.

These examples demonstrate that veterans of World War II refer to men as an essential part of the war effort while the women themselves are seen as supporting roles. This may be a result of the traditionally masculine leadership positions of the 1940s. During this time, women were not allowed to serve overseas (“WWII and WAVES”). This restriction greatly limited the positions of authority available during wartime. Over the past ten years, however, over 280,000 women have been deployed to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan (“Navy Celebrates”). Opportunities to serve in countries outside of the United States have contributed to the opening of more leadership positions for women. Because of these improvements through the decades, women in the Persian Gulf War began to refer to themselves and men as equal in their responsibilities to defend the country. Therefore, terminology in the Navy for females has progressed to include more unified terms that do not isolate male from female.

Special Ops for Women

The presence of more opportunities for female soldiers to advance in their naval careers has translated into women using language to demonstrate their competence and self-worth when associating themselves with men. It was not until 1959 that a woman was given the rank of master chief yeomen. A full forty-seven years passed until the Navy had its first female fleet master chief (“Navy Celebrates”). Jobs for Navy women in World War II were mostly clerical, but some employment opportunities were open in the medical field and in technology (“WWII and WAVES”). Since Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm (1991), employment options have greatly expanded to include working on fleet oilers and ammunition ships as well as flying helicopters and

surveillance aircrafts (“Navy Celebrates”). From these changes, the language of Navy veterans undergoes a distinct shift from language associating women as subordinates to focusing on the distinct potential for women to excel in the military.

It is easy to see this when Doris McClendon (PGW) explains her experience of going to boot camp in Orlando at one of the first bases to have an integrated company, meaning men and women could train together. Early on, McClendon had a passion for law, and was determined to pursue this particular career path in the Navy. She says, “I made it known in the beginning, because I always was fascinated with law...my very first assignment, I made it known that that is what I wanted to do after basic training...I wanted to be a paralegal.” This quote evokes assertiveness and shows that McClendon is confident in her ability to fulfill any role she sets her mind to. As a result of this attitude and assertive language, McClendon rose through the ranks and studied diligently to become a paralegal (known as legalman in the military). This same determination has translated into her current career as a civilian. She declares, “I’m going to walk in with where I want to be in that company, and you just start.”

Merewyn E. Lyons (PGW) shared a similar professional story in which she was able to take advantage of new opportunities for women. In fact, two men in her life encouraged her not to quit the Navy. She recalls, “My father sent me this wonderful letter, and said ‘Don’t quit.’ I can’t phrase it as beautifully. I kept a copy of his letter, I’ve kept it to this day. But he told me, ‘You really mustn’t quit; things get tough, but you will grow from this. Just stay the course, and you will be fine.’” At officer candidate school, Lyons failed a course and was in jeopardy of being discharged. She had to sit before the performance review board and after this spoke to a male commander. He told her, “We’re not letting you go. I see too much in you to let you go. I am not going to let you quit.” Lyons does say that there are still huge changes that need to be made for women in the military. She remembers that during her time in the service, “Expectations for women were lower...” Tracey Frost (PGW) also acknowledges that although much progress has been made for women in the military, problems still exist. She says, “I was treated very well, but there are guys who see you differently.”

Ima Black served during World War II when there were fewer opportunities available for women in the Navy. She states, “There were very few billets in the Navy at that time for women. There were no overseas billets, and it was mostly like secretarial work, yeomen, storekeeper, and there was a radio school out of the boot camp...and a few other schools that you could attend. But there were very limited ratings.” As for the reason she joined the Navy, Black states, “I knew there was a big world out there, and I wanted to see it; I wanted to be a part of it. But I didn’t know how to get there... And so when that happened, I felt like that was my ticket.” Referring to the “big world” relates to the opportunities that women were eager to experience in the 1940s. Their roles were traditionally as homemakers, and travelling around the world or even across the country was a rare opportunity for women at the time. The Navy was a way to grow as an individual and experience the workforce. Although limited positions existed, it was more than what would have been available as a civilian.

Evelyn S. Borshay (WWII) also reflected on the limited opportunities available for women in the Navy. She was very eager to join the service:

I had graduated from high school when I was sixteen, and I went over to New York City to learn about the WAVES. Much to my disappointment, I found out that I had to be twenty years old to enlist in the WAVES... Every year I kept hoping it would change, and I would call to find out if they had lowered the age requirement; they never did. The day I was twenty, I was sworn into the Navy in New York City.

Borshay wanted to advance in her career, but her commanding officer would not allow it. She says, “I wanted to go overseas. At the time, they didn’t send women overseas. But eventually women were allowed to go overseas, so I put in for a transfer to go overseas. This was before I was married, and the commanding officer wouldn’t okay it. So I stayed right where I was to begin with.” When

asked what they would have had Borshay doing overseas she replied, “I have no idea, but I sure wanted to try.”

Language from World War II to the Persian Gulf War made a clear shift to centering on the individualistic woman with phrases that reflected the women’s ability to control their own future. Whether it was McClendon’s (PGW) aspirations to be a legalman or the encouragement that Lyon’s (PGW) received when she wanted to quit, the Persian Gulf War veterans’ language was concentrated on immense self-potential. It is interesting because Borshay and Black (WWII) used the same type of ambitious language to describe their hopes and aspirations. However, the language could not break through the barriers that existed to deny women opportunities for advancement. It seems that their language may have been the start of the discussion on allowing women more opportunities in the US Navy. Because the dreams of female veterans in World War II began conversation on the topic, the women of the Persian Gulf War were able to keep the conversation moving toward future progress.

Mission Equality

Shifting roles for female soldiers over the generations have caused women to specify their place in the war effort as much more than a supporting act to men—they play a definitive role on the frontlines to defend our country. Historically, women who worked in the armed forces did not hold long-lasting positions. In World War I, most women serving in the Navy were sent home at the close of the war. After World War II, the directors of the WAVES began pushing for legislation to allow females permanent positions in the Navy. By 1948, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act was passed to allow women permanent status in the US Navy (The Navy’s History). Although this was a huge accomplishment, it would still take many years for women to have the ability to be employed in the same leadership positions as men. It can be observed that as additional advanced positions became available for these women, language shifted to portray more confidence in their crucial and enduring role in the military.

For Doris McClendon (PGW), the purpose of basic training was to “prepare you for the fleet, to prepare you to walk outside that gate, and be prepared to defend your country.” She reflected on the importance of camaraderie and teamwork saying, “When I got off that bus, it was all about Dee (Doris), but when I left it wasn’t that way. It was about the person that bunked next to me, who would probably have to defend my back one day.” McClendon believed in her role as contributing to a collective effort to defend our country with both men and women alike.

Evelyn Borshay’s experience in World War II was greatly different from McClendon’s. When asked a question about what her family thought of her enlisting in the Navy, she answered, “My father never said a word. They thought, ‘Well, she’s at it again.’ They never said ‘You’re crazy’ or ‘You’re not going to go’; they just thought, ‘Well, she’s not gonna go.’ They just thought it was a whim. But when it happened, they were fine...I think they were very pleased.” This lack of confidence in women at the time was conveyed through language and caused roles to be much different from men due to perceptions of competence.

Jacqueline Treadwell (WWII) showed a similar perspective on her role in the war effort. When asked, “how do you think that the WAVES was significant to the war effort and anything following after the war?” Treadwell answered, “When I went in the WAVES, we were well aware that women were never allowed to join the military. And we were told the reason they took us in was the shortage of manpower. So we felt we were being patriotic and helping the country out.” The use of words such as “shortage,” “manpower,” and “helping” create the implication of a less significant duty to the Navy even though they were contributing to the war effort just as much as men.

During World War II, women were brought in during a time of crisis. Their work was seen as an input to the larger male effort on the warfront rather than an individual contribution to the defense of our country. A societal lack of belief in the women of our country during World War II

led to the perception that their role was less important than the male's role. In reality, the contributions of women in the Navy were critical to continued success during the war. As respect and appreciation for females' roles in the military becomes more understood, language shifts to portraying their roles as an integral part of the war effort.

Conclusion

Rhetoric within the military has become a continuously significant discussion because of the ever-changing patterns in language. Scholar Lindal Buchanan proved that discourse within the US Navy has changed through policy modifications and has led to more discussion on women serving in submarines. In other research, Anita Taylor and M.J. Hardman argued that past stories in history have given power to the male hero while allowing others' extraordinary narratives to go unheard. It is my hope that this research has shed light on the women whose stories were not told and can help people understand why they are important to preserve. Just as military language through the generations has improved to hold women's roles as more valuable, this conversation should continue progressing onward. The language of these women has told us so much about the time they lived in and their roles in society. We can now go forward with understanding that language reflects generational societal roles and impacts future advancement in the military.

The service of all generations of female veterans has contributed to the Navy we know today which stands for equal opportunities for men and women. Although their roles may have been different, every woman in this research paper showed exemplary courage and diligence in their defense of our great nation. Jacqueline Treadwell (WWII) reflected on an inspirational experience she had later in her life. She said, "Recently, when I was on the Volusia Veteran's Flight Nine, we landed at the Reagan Airport, and there were crowds of people thanking us. And this one young woman grabbed me in a big hug, and she said 'Thank you, thank you.' I said now why are *you* thanking me? She said, 'Because of all you [women] who have gone into the services, you made it possible for me to just end a twenty-year career in the Navy.'"

This quote reflects on the most important lesson that language can show us. Although roles may seem small first, starting the conversation somewhere will always bring you one step closer to the final goal. In this case, the World War II female Navy veterans who began the conversation on their roles in the service made it possible for the conversation to continue. As the subject was discussed through the generations, more people paid attention and changes were made to Navy policy. I was honored to tell the stories of these wonderful six women and analyze what it meant for the future women of the United States Navy. As long as the conversation continues and these incredible veterans' stories keep getting told, women in the Navy will continue to ride the "WAVES" to success.

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