

Alliance for National Defense (AND)

ISSUE: The submarine assignment policy for women.

AND'S POSITION:

Navy women, officer and enlisted, must be given the opportunity to compete for positions in all platforms (SSN, SSBN, SSGN) of the U.S. Navy's submarine force.

DISCUSSION:

The U.S. Navy opened all of its combat ships, except submarines, to women in 1994. At the time, the reason for the closure was that the modifications needed to accommodate women on attack submarines (SSN), was deemed to be cost prohibitive. Although it was acknowledged that the larger Trident-class ballistic submarines (SSBN), could accommodate women without any major modifications, it was decided not to attempt to assign women to them for several reasons.

- 1) The submarine career path requires that sailors switch between the two classes of submarines for career growth and experience.
- 2) The larger submarines have more personal space per person, so it was feared that a dual-career track would adversely affect men's morale because the women would be getting "the better deal".
- 3) The dual career track did not work when it was implemented for women surface warfare officers in the 1980s, because it was determined they could not compete on an equal basis with men who had the greater experience of serving in a variety of vessels.

After years of resistance to the idea in both Congress and the Navy, the leadership team of Admiral Mike Mullin, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral Gary Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, decided it was time to start the process of integrating women into submarines. It took about 6 months for the policy change to be vetted through Congress, and the first women officers were selected for training in the spring of 2010. After a training pipeline of 15 months, these women are expected to report aboard 4 different submarines in late 2011.

The reason given for the desire to change the policy was that "women earn about half of all science and engineering bachelor's degrees. Maintaining the best submarine force in the world requires us to recruit from the largest possible talent pool." Additionally, it was getting harder to recruit male volunteers for submarine duty.

The change will be implemented by assigning 24 female officers, three in each of eight different crews, to guided-missile attack (SSGN) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBN). The assignments involve two submarines on the East Coast and two on the West Coast, each of which is supported by a Blue and Gold crew. More living space is available aboard these platforms, and no berthing modifications are required, permitting the Navy to move quickly on integrating female officers in submarines.

Although AND supports the plan to assign women to submarines, there remain several policy restrictions regarding the assignment that are of concern.

These are:

1) Only women officers are being assigned to submarines. There is no plan to integrate the enlisted force *in the near future*.

SSBNs have a crew allotment of 15 officers and 140 enlisted sailors. Although the Navy states it wants to ensure they can pull from the most qualified sailors, the elimination of enlisted women from this pool reduces the number of highly qualified and motivated personnel from which to draw for serving in submarines.

2) Women are only being assigned to the larger SSBN and SSGN class of submarines. There is no plan to integrate the smaller SSN class of submarines *in the near future*.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) studied this issue during their 1999 and 2000 sessions. Although they recommended starting the integration with the larger submarines, they concluded that “the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations commit to the integration of women into the submarine community and develop an implementation plan. For long term integration, DACOWITS recommends that the Secretary of the Navy direct redesign of VIRGINIA class submarines to accommodate mixed gender crews.” (Spring and Fall 2000 Issue Books).

Neither of these recommendations have been followed. The Navy still does not have plans for a fully integrated crew, nor does it have plans to modify or build new attack submarines to accommodate a mixed-gender crew. The career-track for women surface warriors was crippled until they were allowed to serve on combat ships. Prior to that, women were unable to compete for the most competitive billets in the surface force due to their unequal career paths. Additionally they were not seen as full members of the surface force because they could not “go to war.” Maintaining a dual career path in the submarine force for any length of time will have the same result: women will not be treated as fully functioning members of the submarine community and without experience in the attack submarines (SSN) will not learn how to “fight” a submarine. This could have far-reaching effects for the future careers of women submariners.

3) The number of women officers assigned to each submarine is limited to three: two junior (O-1, O-2) officers and one experienced mid-grade (O-3 or O-4) officer.

With the ratio of only 3 women to 155 men, even though the women are officers, there can be a problem with what is known as “tokenism.” As tokens, women are highly visible, and can never become “just one of the crew.” They are viewed as a group representing all women, not as individuals with individual strengths and weaknesses. They are constantly being monitored and their actions and reactions highly analyzed. While a failure of one becomes a failure of all, the success of one is only “an anomaly” and does not generalize to all.

While it is easier for the Navy to assign women officers to a crew and then plan the integration of enlisted women down the line, the experience of the surface force to this strategy was highly

mixed. Attrition is much higher when the percentage of women to men is less than 20% due to the high visibility and the added pressures that result. High attrition for women is a waste of government resources and reduces the effectiveness of the submarine force. Enlisted women should be brought into the crews at the earliest possible opportunity to help mitigate the pressures of visibility, and to fully integrate the force. Skilled leadership and policy “buy in” by the submarine’s chain of command is the key to successful integration. Treat the women as members of the crew, not as FEMALE members of the crew.

Women have made a successful transition to the surface and aviation sections of the Fleet, though not without leadership challenges. Given proper leadership and support, the submarine fleet can expect success as well. The Alliance supports the continued evolution of women’s military roles and service in a professional and rational way that best serves our nation. Significant progress will be accomplished once the Department of the Navy moves forward with plans for the full integration of officer and enlisted women onto all of the Navy’s submarine platforms.

The Alliance for National Defense provides educational material on the contributions of women in the military and related national security issues to legislators, decision makers, educators, and military members on this and other issues. For more information go to www.4militarywomen.org.