



Two women sailors on the bridge of HNLMS Zuiderkruis

CAREERS

the first to allow their soldiers, sailors and airmen to sport long hair, way back in the 1970s.

American and British sailors have close cropped hair, though some of them jazz up their crew-cut and look like punkers. But many Dutch sailors wear their hair long and sport rings on their ears. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Dutch Navy was the first to induct women into their warships.

Says Cdr L. ver Haar, executive officer of the Zuiderkruis: "The aim of our Navy is to have at least five per cent of our total force on ships as women." A veteran, who has been



Lt Cdr Tineke Hundling

commander.

Among the three women officers on board the Zuiderkruis is Lt Cdr Tineke Hundling, a mother of two, who acts as counsellor on the vessel. She is one of the very few women who have reached the rank of Lt Commander. "I am not a commander in the true sense," she says hesitantly in English. "I am not in operations or in combat."

Tineke joined the Navy about two years ago and knew that her job would take her away from home for long. Though she misses her two sons—one works in an Amsterdam bank and the other is in college—and her husband, she is philosophic about it all. "Of course, I'd love to be with them for Christmas. But I volunteered for the Navy, knowing I'd be thousands of miles away from home."

Interestingly, not all of the women sailors were willing to make a career in

No more at bay

IN ENGLAND there is a raging controversy about their being assigned duties on warships. Wives of Naval officers and sailors are at the forefront of a campaign to prevent the Royal Navy from sending Wrens (Women's Royal Naval Service) on board its fighter ships.

But the women ratings and officers of the Dutch Navy view the controversy with a sense of déjà vu: similar protest marches had been organised by wives of Dutch Naval men and the same arguments against sending them on ships had been voiced in the mid-80s, when they were being assigned duties on warships.

Says Lt Manuela Wibier, who has been with the Netherlands Navy for over six years: "What is happening in the UK today, is what we saw in Holland in 1985. But it's just a passing phase." Manuela, a graduate of the Naval academy in the

Netherlands, was first assigned duties on the HNLMS Zuiderkruis, a supply ship.

After some months of shore duty, she was back on the huge vessel, this time as it chugged its way to the Arabian Gulf, as part of the Netherlands Middle East Task Group. Last week, a complement of three vessels—the supply ship and two frigates—called in at Dubai.

Manuela was one of the three women officers aboard the Zuiderkruis. There were 32 other women, working as ratings and in other categories. Neither of the two frigates had women on board, but a previous set of two frigates had some women sailors as well.

The Netherlands defence forces are known for their remarkable liberalism, especially in connection with personnel matters. While virtually every other defence force enjoins on its members to keep their hair short, the Dutch were

with the Navy for about 25 years, Cdr Haar points out that younger sailors found it easier to accept women on ships. But surprisingly, there have been no problems or complications, as feared.

"In fact, there is a special atmosphere in the ship, with women on board," he smiles. "We share jokes, shake hands and everybody respects one another," adds the

A group of four Dutch women sailors, posing near the bridge



There have been protests in England over assigning women sailors duties on warships. But in the Dutch Navy, women are at ease aboard the huge vessels, taking the rigours of the rough sea in their stride, says NITHIN BELLE

the Navy. "I don't want to be with the Navy after I get married," remarks blonde and long-haired Bianca Blezer. A radar operator, she's been with the Navy for four years and has just signed an extension to continue with it for some more time.

"I love travelling and I've been to several places now," explains Bianca, justifying her joining the Navy. She admits it was strange in the beginning to be on a ship with male colleagues. "But they got used to women being on board," she adds.

When in the Naval college, she had to undergo a nine-week strenuous military training—which both men and women have to do—that included drills, marches, shooting, martial arts etc.

One day when her ship was in the Netherlands, Bianca's younger sister came aboard to see her at work. She was fascinated; a couple of months later, she too joined the Navy. Bianca

admits that her parents are proud that both their daughters are serving the Navy.

But Lilian de Koning's parents were not very happy when their only child joined the Navy. "I am enjoying life on the sea," says Koning, just 18 months in the force. Is she scared over the possibility of war? "No, I opted this profession and I knew the consequences," she notes.

Lilian, however, does not have ambitions of rising to the rank of a captain and above. "After a few years, I'd like to return home; and of course, after marriage, I wouldn't like to continue," adds Lilian.

Manuela, who works as a supplies officer, together with sub Lt Chantal Willems, explains that it would be difficult to raise children while being an active seawoman. The alternative: after about four years on the sea, the Navy assigns them shore duty for about six years. "That is the time to get married and have children," adds Manuela.

The Netherlands defence ministry has also set up creches in Naval bases, to enable women to leave their children while working. The women in uniform assert that there is no discrimination and they get the same wages as men.

Sums up Manuela: "In the beginning some of us were unsure. But now we are confident." Women are assigned to all areas—like operations, logistics, supplies—except the marines and on submarines.



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