

Recovering from a Tailspin

By Jack Kammer

Criticism of the Navy's "male culture" masks the facts of Tailhook and complex issues about integrating women into the military.

SECRETARY OF THE NAVY JOHN DALTON was right—although for the wrong reasons—when he alleged in October that Admiral Frank Kelso was culpable for a “failure of leadership” in the Tailhook mess. Defense Secretary Les Aspin was right—also for the wrong reasons—to reject Dalton’s recommendation that the chief of naval operations be fired for his shortcomings. Kelso’s main failure was not in allowing Tailhook to happen, as Dalton charged, but in allowing it—and the entire future of the Navy—to be spun out of his control.

The scandal surrounding Navy pilots’ Tailhook Association convention in 1991, particularly the sexual abuse charges made by Lt. Paula Coughlin, is typically reported as a clear-cut example of what’s wrong with the military regarding the expanding role of women: The old-boy network just doesn’t get it and sanctions misogyny as a semi-official policy.

But when the events are examined from a perspective less distorted by feminist aims and ideology, that black-and-white view fades to battleship gray. The picture that emerges is one of people whose commitment to military preparedness is dubious but whose fixation on sexual politics is unquestionable. Criticism of “male culture” and calls for male sensitivity training mask more complex issues about integrating women fully into the military and instituting universal standards of performance and behavior.

Tailhook wasn’t the first time a complicated military issue was reduced to a



simple morality play of bad men oppressing virtuous women. On May 28, 1990, the National Organization for Women picketed in Annapolis to register its unhappiness over reports that upperclassmen at the Naval Academy had chained a female first-year student named Gwen Dreyer to a urinal. But the protesters were countered by a group of *female* midshipmen, one of whom said that the incident was “not a matter of gender, it’s a part of life here.”

This woman told the *Baltimore Sun*, in reports published the next day, that she had participated in the hazing of females and that before the 1989 Army-Navy football game, she had “helped to strip, tar and feather a West Point cadet.” She also said that female midshipmen were involved in handcuffing Dreyer to the urinal. Another female midshipman told the picketers, “There is no way you have of knowing the truth.... you don’t know what the norm is.... you are doing a lot of damage.” A third academy woman, possibly referring to the Annapolis newspaper’s banner headline (“Tormented female mid resigns”) and subhead (“Woman hand-

cuffed to toilet, taunted”), told the demonstrators that misunderstandings fueled by “yellow journalism” were “hurting a lot of good people here.”

All of this context notwithstanding, the NOW members continued to demand that the men—but not the women—involved in Dreyer’s handcuffing “be forced to go through sensitivity training and their graduation should be deferred until they understand what they have done.”

On May 30, 1990, the *Washington Post* also reported the Dreyer incident with perspective: “In interviews, several midshipmen said that although what happened to Dreyer was unusual because the men who handcuffed her were of a higher rank, it was not extremely different from common occurrences. For example, they said that upperclassmen are often tied to chairs and put outside or have their heads put in toilets as retaliation by plebes they command. They also doubt Dreyer was targeted because she is a woman, but instead think the episode, while wrong, grew out of Dreyer’s involvement in a spirited snowball fight.”

But less than two months later, the

Dreyer story was spinning like a gyroscope pointing to some feminists' idea of true north. By July 19, 1990, the *Post* had honed the story to its male-shaming essence: "Dreyer was chained to a urinal in a men's room before a jeering crowd of her male classmates." Columnist Mary McGrory took that sentiment to sarcastic new lows when she made gratuitous reference to an Iraqi missile that killed American Navy men in the Persian Gulf. "The trouble at Annapolis," she wrote, "goes deep: insecure men, feeling threatened by bright women excused from combat; a service-wide identity crisis caused by the fact that its ships have become little more than targets for Exocet missiles."

Reeling from the bad press and political pressure, the academy cooperated with the formation of a congressional Committee on Women's Issues. Committee member Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) soon declared, "What we need to work on at the United States Naval Academy is an attitude change." Another committee member, Rep. Helen Bentley (R-Md.), announced, "We cannot guarantee there will not be incidents in the future, but what we must guarantee is that there will be zero tolerance for such incidents." The committee made far-reaching demands, one of which smacked of Orwellian thought crime: "the immediate dismissal of senior officers who question the role of women in the military." The superintendent of the academy pledged speedy adoption of the committee's "recommendations."

TAILHOOK FOLLOWED A SIMILAR PATTERN, both in how it was reported and in how the Navy responded. As the Defense Department inspector general's Tailhook report makes clear, the convention was a spirited bacchanalia in which both women and men willingly participated.

"Our investigation revealed that many women freely and knowingly participated in gauntlet activities," the report stated. "A significant number of witnesses reported that women went through the gauntlet and seemed to enjoy the attention and interaction with the aviators. Those witnesses, both men and women, gener-

ally stated they could tell the women were enjoying themselves because, despite being grabbed and pushed along through the crowd, they were smiling and giggling. Some of the women were observed going repeatedly through the gauntlet. Many women who went through the gauntlet told us they did so willingly and were not offended by the men touching them. A civilian woman employed by the Navy told us of a conversation she had with another young woman whom she met while on a commercial flight into Las Vegas to attend Tailhook 91. The young woman described the gauntlet and said that, at about 3:00 a.m., things get 'real rough' and wild on the third floor. According to the Navy employee, the young woman implied that she enjoyed this type of activity and that was the reason she was going to Tailhook 91."

By the I.G.'s own admission, at least five of the 83 female "victims" insisted they were nothing of the sort: "The victim told us that she did not consider herself a victim of any criminal activity.... The victim told us that, in her opinion, she was not a 'victim' of an assault.... The victim felt that she handled the incident and objected to being labeled as a 'victim'.... The victim felt she resolved the situation and does not consider herself to be the victim of an assault.... The victim stated that she did not get upset at the incident and did not feel that she was assaulted."

One of these "victims" of "sexual abuse" wrote in a widely distributed letter to the editor (which no editor published), "This Tailhook investigation has been blown severely out of proportion.... I thought nothing of the incident and never considered it an assault of any kind."

Certainly some unsuspecting women were caught in activities they understandably found offensive. But after Coughlin captured the media with her unquestioned claim that she was among the unsuspecting and offended ones, activists began to spin Tailhook like a top. They insisted that the drunken aviators in Las Vegas represented a widespread culture of oppression and hostility toward military women. Such claims ignored female officers' will-

ing participation in such Tailhook traditions as "belly shots" (drinking liquor out of a person's navel) and "leg shaving" (in which a male officer shaves a woman's legs).

The Navy defended itself by hoisting a white flag. "I need to emphasize a very, very important message—we get it," Acting Navy Secretary Sean C. O'Keefe told a September 1992 news conference. "We know that the larger issue is a cultural problem which has allowed demeaning behavior and attitudes toward women to exist within the Navy Department."

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A few weeks later O'Keefe announced an 80-step plan to "enhance professional opportunities for women" in the Navy and to "deal with the culture, environment and attitudes that contribute to sexual harassment and gender bias." His response ignored the General Accounting Office's finding that the most commonly reported "sexual harassment" of women at the service academies consists of remarks from other cadets that standards have been lowered to admit women. Such "sexual harassment" is devoid of sexual content and suggests that the best way to ensure that women achieve equality in the military is to reduce rather than increase special treatment for them.

Admiral Kelso, with his crippled ship commandeered by activists, succumbed to the Stockholm syndrome. To ensure his own survival, he began to identify with his captors. He ordered, among other steps, a one-day stand-down for all hands to be trained about sexual harassment. A female

commander in the Navy Reserve says the training included three videotapes that "cast the typical male service member as a brutish predator who at all times would stare at, look at, and suggest sex to any female in his vicinity. The man looked like a prowling tomcat. No woman ever did anything wrong." The men forced to attend this supposed sensitivity session, she says, were resentful and offended. "They just went blank. There's no avenue for the men to counter this."

INTEGRATING WOMEN INTO THE MILITARY will require both sexes to examine their attitudes and behaviors toward each other. The leadership challenge facing the Pentagon is to take control of sexual harassment and other "women's issues" from those energized by opportunism and ideology more than by a commitment to the military. This should be especially clear to Aspin, who acknowledged in June that the quality of recruits has declined since 1991 and that questions surrounding women in combat and sexual harassment might be a cause.

The military must find the courage to say, "Yes, Tailhook was a mess. It demonstrates that sex is a powerful force and that both men and women are sexual beings. Questions of gender fairness are complex; men and women both think they deserve special treatment. We will deal with these issues. But we will not be bullied. We will not be pushed. Nor will we allow our sailors and soldiers to be shamed."

If Kelso can line up the support of his superiors to take such a stand and pursue such a policy, he can get the Navy underway proudly again on a course that is fair and respectful of all personnel—women and men alike—at a prudent speed into turbulent and uncharted waters. That would be a triumph of leadership that Aspin and Dalton should both approve. **R**

Jack Kammer's first book, Good Will Toward Men: Women Talk Candidly About the Balance of Power Between the Sexes, will be published in February by St. Martin's Press.