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## METOC, Information Systems - Julia Simpson In the WRNS from 1963 to 1996

I wanted to go to sea but when I applied to do a Radio Officer's course in 1960 at the Merchant Navy Training Centre at Conwy, North Wales I was strongly advised by the Officer-in-Charge not to do this as there was not a navy in the world that would accept a woman at sea! Instead I went to university, gained a Physics degree and in 1963 followed my other interest, meteorology.

I joined the WRNS on a Special Entry scheme for Met Officers and this gave me four weeks at *Dauntless* to learn how to salute and march, followed by the Officers' Training course at Greenwich. My first real experience of the Royal Navy was at RNAS Culdrose (*Seahawk*) on the six-month Met course run then by Lieutenant Commander Ken Cropper and Commander Jock Evans. My fellow students were Brian Beel, Dai Morgan, David Brooks and an Australian officer. After qualifying as a forecaster I served at Lee-on-Solent (*Daedalus*), Brawdy (*Goldcrest*), NAVSOUTH when it was in Malta and finally at Portland (*Osprey*), where I was the only female apart from Commander Air's civilian assistant! During my time at Portland I did manage some sea time, in RFA *Engadine*, embarking with 737 Squadron for their deck landing training.

Towards the end of my Short Service Commission, the Instructor Branch was looking for candidates to work in the Information Technology field and in particular with the development of the command systems going into ships (ADAWS and CAAIS) and their trainers; this sounded interesting and I was accepted for a Full Career Commission and invited to join Commander 'Boy' Downer and his team in the ADP (Automatic Data Processing) section at *Dryad*. It was a steep learning curve but in time I became familiar with the Ferranti FIXPAC programming language and then took up systems analysis. I worked first on upgrading the Tactical Trainer for the Maritime Warfare School in *Dryad*, from where I was appointed to the Admiralty Surface Weapons Establishment, Portsmouth as the Project Officer for the Cook Building Trainer in development also at *Dryad*. These projects will be covered later in the chapter on Information Systems.

The work in Cook Building required a close understanding and knowledge of the new ADAWS and CAAIS systems in the Type 42 destroyers, and the Type 21 and Leander class frigates as well as their radar systems and weapons. To achieve this I had to do some sea time – not easy as a woman and I was off-loaded at midnight in several ports as I was not allowed to remain on board overnight – a real green rub as the Ferranti female programmers were able to stay! I did achieve one night at sea, however, when a parachute was ingested up an engine intake and the ship could not make it to Gibraltar! Working close to the front end of technology was a challenge; we had 17 computers running the Cook building trainer, which probably could be done by my iPhone now!

In the mid-1970s the Instructor Branch now took over my appointing from the WRNS and in 1977 after doing the RN Staff course at Greenwich, I was sent to the United States to SACLANT in Norfolk, Virginia as a systems analyst working with the then innovative World Wide Military Communications System (WWMCS) used by the US Navy. I well remember an early occasion when Admiral Ike Kidd, then SACLANT, was able to dispute the conduct of an exercise because he had a view of the ships' plot through using the system.

On promotion to Chief Officer WRNS in 1982 I went to the Defence ADP Training Centre at Blandford, as Deputy Chief Instructor and later Chief Instructor. There I earned the right to be called a Schoolie, instructing on the Project Management and Advanced courses. It was a challenging time too: that was during the advent of PCs and it was difficult keeping ahead of the serious Basic programmers, who knew their machines inside out. Amongst other Schoolies who were there at that time were Captain Don Watson and Lieutenant Commanders Peter Marshall and John Gardiner.

Whilst at Blandford I did a stint as Mess President – unusual for a WRNS Officer and in a tri-service mess it was fraught with differences of etiquette. One that I remember was at my first mess dinner as President, when I proposed the loyal toast and nothing happened – the band was waiting for Mister Vice to propose the toast to 'The Queen' and Mister

Vice (RN) was waiting for the band to play!

After Blandford, I went back to Naval Procurement but based in Northwood as the OPCON Project Manager involving many projects including Naval Staff Requirement 7126, the modernisation of the RN shore communications network. This number is etched on the minds of all RN Communicators because this project automated all shore message handling in the Royal Navy. Again there are details of this in the section on Information Systems dealing with OPCON. The new system was a revolution in communications and its success led, I think, to my promotion to Superintendent in 1988.

This was followed by six wonderful months in Rome, at the NATO Defence College in preparation for my appointment to NATO Headquarters in Brussels as Deputy Secretary of the Military Committee. There I witnessed the collapse of the Warsaw Pact; it was my job to coordinate the first meeting of the NATO Military Committee with the Russian Chief of Defence, Admiral Gorshkov.

Back home I was appointed back to Naval Procurement as the Assistant Director Communications where I was closely involved with the development of communication requirements for the Future Frigate. This was initially a joint development with the French and was soon followed by the Tri-Service Frigate with the French and Italians. It helped considerably when I was rebranded into gold stripes and my rank became Captain.

My final job, as Director Naval Environment and Safety, came about as a discussion on what I would do if I took redundancy. I suggested that I would like to get involved with green issues and help save the world. Within a month I was appointed to look after the Royal Navy's environmental issues and help introduce the requirements of the Health and Safety Act into the Service. Both were testing subjects to integrate into a fighting service and I found myself embroiled in discussions about storage of waste on ships, the safety certification of ships and decontamination of armament depots.

By this time I had become the senior woman officer in the Royal Navy and held the rather unprepossessing title of Chief Naval Officer for Women (CNOW). Apparently the Queen herself rejected the title proposed by the Royal Navy of Chief Naval Woman Officer (CNWO). Altogether I served for over 30 years and am delighted to be an Honorary Instructor, having begun as WRNS (Met) then becoming WRNS (IO) and finally RN (any).



### Postscript (2017):

