

In the words of Rear-Admiral Jennifer Bennett

The 30,000 Foot View:

“It is not what you are known as, but what you are known for.”

I had the incredible opportunity to have seen and been able to influence and effect some incredible change for women in leadership roles in the Canadian Armed Forces, but I certainly didn't set out to be a trailblazer and I joined a long and proud line of women who served before me and opened doors.

You never know the influence you have or what people are taking note of through what I like to call “silent mentoring” or “seeing is believing”. If others can see themselves through you, then they have a role model even though you don't have a formal relationship and may never have met.

Women who entered new fields or broke new ground in various career paths or leadership roles in the CAF have become known as “firsts”. This was not easy, and the pressure was on to not only do a good job, but prove that women could do the work, and do it well. Success for the “first” women meant that from the very beginning we had to work hard, be exception leaders, and have great personal drive. There were often no other women to show us the way and the pressure was on to break down barriers and open doors for those who would follow. Being in the spotlight quickly lost its appeal as women didn't want to be centred out, we just want to be treated as equals and know that we were selected for opportunities based on our qualifications and experience, not our chromosomes or because it was “time for a first”.

However, being a trendsetter and showing the way is an important role that comes with unique pressures, focus and opportunities and there continue to be some anomalies about being one of a small group of “firsts” and that focus is slowly changing but there were also advantages – When I attended meetings with my peers in the CAF or NATO, there was never a line up for the Women's Washroom at break time!

In my military career, my leadership role and being a woman in uniform who was successful in challenging roles has had a far greater reach than expected and it was quite humbling and intimidating to know that through

what I was doing, and who I was, others were finding their way and wanted to follow, knowing they could find their way towards success.

It was not just what I had accomplished and achieved, but who I was and how I remained true to my own unique style of leadership and not just “getting to the table” but “having a voice” when I got there and being a Champion for others. Good advice to leaders who think that titles and ranks are what makes them leaders is that “It is not what you are known as, but what you are known for” that is most critical and resonates with followers and inspires others.

The Challenges and Changes:

“When I was promoted to Commodore, I was not able to wear the new rank immediately because the Supply System didn’t have female versions of the rank insignia.”

I joined a very different military in the mid seventies and saw firsthand the challenges and barriers to women integrating into a deeply rooted male culture, career, and workplace but I’ve also had the unique opportunity to be part of the evolution that has opened doors and opportunities for today’s generation of service women. My experiences now seem strange to those who join today’s RCN and Naval Reserve.

Canadian women serving on operations serve as not only wonderful role models for our own members, but the citizens of the nations in which we serve and for the service members of other nations.

When I joined the Naval Reserve in 1975, women were restricted to “support trades” only and I was assigned to be trained as Radio Teletype operator - one of the occupations that was common to the WRCNS of WWII. Even though this was an “operational trade” in the Navy, I could only work in a Dockyard Message Centre or shore-based Communications Centre that had accommodations for women.

Women did not march in platoons with men because our uniform skirt was too tapered and did not allow us to step out with the same length of pace as men. Our tri-service dress uniforms in the seventies were considered very stylish for the day but very impractical for military duty, other than working in an office setting.

Ranks were also differentiated for male and females indicating in the case of the Navy that I was a “Wren” (Able Wren, Ordinary Wren, Leading Wren, etc.) As an officer we also carried a “bracket” (W) and Reservists were distinguished by a (R) so that when I was a Naval Lieutenant I was Lt(N)(R)(W).

Women were also not allowed at sea on board HMC Ships, but we could “day sail”. When we did train on Gate Vessel Weekends or officer training, we day sailed on an auxiliary vessel, came into port in the late afternoon, left the ship, got on a bus, or walked to our accommodation ashore where we had to stay overnight while the male members of the Ships Company stayed onboard the ship and sailed overnight. While in Victoria on officer training, we repeated the pattern of returning to Victoria every evening and catching a bus the next day to join the ship again so we could only do ports that were within a reasonable bus trip back to Victoria.

When I transferred to the Officer Corps, there were limitations for female officers who could only be in Nursing, Personnel Administration or Logistics. I was assigned to Logistics and men who failed MARS training were reclassified to one of the two support trades – PAdm or Log. I was trained in Sea Logistics but there were no billets for us at sea until I was a Lieutenant-Commander.

Specified units and ships were designated as “mixed gender” units to allow for a period of transition for gender integration. Unfortunately, the application of this label sometimes meant that logic as it was applied to the rest of society was lost. What could easily be solved by applying common sense and the same type of rules as a household became mounting obstacles in the military setting. There were also questions and concerns from family members about living arrangements for deployments.

The Canadian Armed Forces was faced to deal with issues that included equipment modifications to better fit women; living spaces reconfigured to provide washroom and sleeping accommodations for mixed gender crews; gender issues were now included in seminars, lectures and leadership packages and the matter of sexual harassment had to be addressed more publicly.

Progress towards full integration of women has been slow and servicewomen endured hardships and faced barriers that were deeply

rooted in military culture and tradition. Unlike other civilian career fields where women were also being integrated in greater numbers, military service had some unique challenges to overcome including not only the long established culture and traditions of a male dominated organization and male only units, but uniforms, equipment, training, accommodations and the hierarchical organization that would require a long and slow process to qualify women and give them both experience and legitimacy with their peers before they could assume leadership positions and progress through the ranks. This was not simply a case of opening opportunities and injecting women into the organization at all levels, the very nature of military work would require some major changes for the organization and its members, both male and female.

Despite how far we had come with integration, there were still some challenges with uniform items over the latter stages of my career because there had not been considerations of shoulder boards or epaulettes at higher ranks tailored for women or the configuration of a Flag Officer's bowler. When I was promoted to Commodore, I was not able to wear the new rank immediately because the Supply System didn't have female versions of the rank insignia for the slip on or boards, and my cap had to be specially made since it had been several years since there had been a previous female, Commodore. The good news is that when I was promoted to Read Admiral, the supply system was ready, and I could be promoted and wear my new rank immediately! Small victories mean a lot!

How did I overcome challenges and create change? When there weren't opportunities presented to me, I looked at how I could create my own. I also didn't see myself as "different" and we had the advantage of greater diversity and larger numbers of women in the Naval Reserve than the RCN. I also stayed true to my style of leadership and spoke up to influence and create change. I served as a mentor and champion for others and was willing to take changes when I knew change was necessary.

One of the hardest things to figure out is how to assert your authority as a leader and be "assertive" not "aggressive" or try to lead like a man to fit in. Women's innate leadership skills are the very skills that management theorists, consultants and corporate leaders say are critical and desirable leaders who value diversity, are visionary and inclusive, humanistic and

emotionally intelligent, open to new ideas and ways of doing work, are collaborative and team builders.

The military differs from the civilian sector in several ways but one that has been the most positive for women is the way that decisions are made about career advancement, courses, professional development, and postings. The tendency of the military to tell people when they are ready for advancement and where they will be working sets this career apart. The military provides progressive professional development, training and experiences that prepare members for greater responsibility and leadership through career management and annual performance appraisals and merit boards. In civilian careers, we tend to look at opportunities that might be a challenge and decide whether to pursue or apply. Occasionally, someone recommends you for a position or a course, but you have all the control to apply or turn it down. In the military, someone else says “This will be your next job” and pushes you forward. While you may be second guessing your ability, you are given the challenge because you are ready and able and need this to further develop professionally and personally.

Where Do We Go From Here:

“I look forward to the day when the CAF will no longer use labels for firsts.”

The culture challenges of the CAF are “people challenges” across the institution, not just “gender issues” and all members need to feel valued, welcomed and included and know that they can be successful.

A colleague who worked in the Directorate of Human Rights and Diversity said, “Diversity is about counting people, Inclusion is about making people count”. Diversity and inclusion recognize different talents, perspectives, experience, and background and should be a “force enabler” to allow everyone to contribute to the CAF missions.

Diversity should not be confused with legal obligations under the Charter or *Employment Equity Act*, it is complex and must be encouraged with deliberate strategies and culture change to actively promote diversity as a core CAF institutional value while also valuing and embracing members unique experiences, perspectives, and culture while enabling their competency and maximizing their potential within the CAF.

I look forward to the day when the CAF will no longer use labels for “firsts” and the successes will be celebrated for everyone. Each time a woman has filled a new role or rank, there is no longer that hurdle to overcome, but it isn’t just women who are breaking new ground. Appointing a diverse range of CAF members in senior leadership roles and integrating them across military occupations has put Canada in step with other nations and for some, we are a leader. We must assure potential members that they will be given every opportunity to succeed in a military career. We’ve certainly come a long way in the 45 years I served but there is still work to do.