

# Royal New Zealand Navy celebrates 30 years of women at sea

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CHRIS SKELTON/FAIRFAX NZ

Louisa Thyne, Corina Bruce, Maxine Lawes and Alexis Gray recount their entry into the Royal New Zealand Navy.

A career dedicated to the sea, but forbidden to board a ship. Such was life for women in the navy until 1986.

As 2016 marks the Royal New Zealand Navy's 30th Anniversary of women at sea, four women give an insight into life in the navy.

## **MAXINE LAWES:**

Shortly after joining the navy in 1986, captain Maxine Lawes had the choice of applying to go to Antarctica, or participating in the women at sea trial. She chose the trial, thinking women at sea would not be permanent, and it would be her only opportunity. This is her story:



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It didn't make sense to Maxine Lawes that women could not go to sea, but she was going to join anyway.

Originally I wanted to join the police force but I couldn't because I started wearing glasses at 15, the navy was my second choice.

My dad was in the navy, but that wasn't really an influence in me joining. I just wanted to do something a bit different.

Prior to joining, I worked in a bank for a year and a lot of my friends were going to university, or into the bank and insurance, or becoming secretaries, but that never interested me. I wanted an adventure.

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I joined as an administrator, but I always wanted to go to sea.

I remember having discussions with people about joining the navy and they said, "well, you know you can't go to sea", and my reaction was, well, that's

just stupid, why can't we go to sea?

"It didn't make any sense to me. But I was going to join anyway.

As society changed and women started to become more accepted in non-traditional roles, slowly those barriers broke down.

It was the end of 1986, I hadn't long been out of training and the call was put out for women interested in participating in a study to see if women could actually serve at sea. The big thing at the time was ablutions, where we were going to shower and sleep and those kind of things.

The ship that was chosen, Monowai, was a white boat, which meant she was not considered a warship. She was an ex-merchant ship so her accommodation facilities meant women could have their own separate cabins.

Prior to that, except for the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), women were shore-based, in branches which didn't go to sea – working as accountants, communicators, those sorts of positions.

Monowai used to be called "The Ghost of The Coast", and when women went on board it was known as "The Love Boat", just because it was a way of slinging off at those who served on that boat.

The attitudes of the men were quite positive I think, they had to be positive. I know there were men that didn't agree with it. I can remember one of my colleagues saying to me that if women went to sea that he was going to leave the navy because we were taking their jobs.

Many went out of their way to show us how to be at sea. To suddenly have their environment changed by women being there ... I think they handled it pretty well.

I appreciate the fact that there were women before me who pushed for it, the WRNS in the war and prior to me joining, they are the ones that in many ways set up for us to be able to go to sea.

I think young women now are joining at a great time. The opportunities that are offered today are fantastic. They don't have to think about "can I go and do that job or posting because I'm a woman?". It's there for them and I think that's great.

## LOUISA THYNE

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Louisa Thyne: "I was a chef on board for about three years, but after my first physical training session, I knew that was where I wanted to be."

Louisa Thyne is a Petty Officer Physical Training Instructor (PTI) who became Sailor of the Year in 2013. Her job is not all about "drop and give me 20" – she plays a key role in keeping people sane while at sea. This is her story:

I would have been around 19 or 20 when I joined the navy in 2008. Prior to that I was working in Christchurch as a waitress.

The idea came from my mum, who asked what I was going to do with my life and suggested I think about joining the navy. I've always been around the ocean, my grandparents live in Kaikoura and I liked travel, so I thought I may as well give it a go.

I was a chef on board for about three years, but after my first physical training session, I knew that was where I wanted to be.

There's a certain navy stereotype that you see in movies. Yes, we do operations overseas, but we also do a lot of disaster relief and looking after

our waters and conservation work.

One of the most rewarding things about being in the navy is the sense of achievement, like when we were helping people and providing service for the police and army after the Christchurch earthquake. We were on our way to an exercise and we stopped in Christchurch to resupply and refuel so we were there by chance, but it's a good thing we were there.

My main role is to make sure the crew are fit for operational service, but it's about morale-building too, which is an integral part of keeping everybody sane.

There are three female PTIs out of 17 in our trade, and you get asked the question a lot "what's it like working in a male-dominated environment?".

But I've never really thought of it as gender-based, because you just come into the environment thinking, I want to be the best I can be.

I've found that whether respect is earned or not isn't about what gender you are or what colour you are.

But if it wasn't for things that women in the past did, we wouldn't be where we are now, and I think you'd be naive to think women haven't had a hard time sometimes, not just in the navy, but across New Zealand organisations as a whole.

It's about parking that thought now and moving forward. I know I'm not going to stop achieving things because of my gender.

## **CORINA BRUCE**



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Corina Bruce, on the time before women in the navy were permitted at sea: "The easiest way to describe what it was like back then was being a guest at a gentlemen's club."

Captain Corina Bruce joined the navy in 1983, becoming a specialist officer in weapons systems. Bruce was permitted to go to sea before the women at sea trial so she gained first-hand experience of men-only ships. This is her story:

I did a software engineering degree at Canterbury University and the navy was starting to do what they termed as "operational software" – getting the digital age onto the ships.

It looked like a good opportunity and I've never regretted it. Because I was a specialist officer, I used to go to sea before women were allowed.

My specialty was weapons systems and in order to do the job, we'd need to go out to a firing practicing area and they would take me off the ship at night.

Sometimes the ship would take me back if it was close to shore, other times I'd be flown by helicopter. If you know a way to get off a ship, I've probably done it.

So there was an extra burden that was placed on the ship and its crew.

But one of the great things in those days, when I was a guest in some ways, was that I got to see what it was like before other women went to sea.

I felt like a visitor on their turf, a welcomed one, but definitely a visitor.

The easiest way to describe what it was like back then was being a guest at a gentlemen's club. They were all very polite, very accommodating, and careful about making sure that I was comfortable and they were behaving appropriately around me. But I could tell that wasn't really the way they were used to behaving.

If I was working in a corner and there might have been a watch change, so other people came in and didn't know I was there, then you'd have the type of things that I'd imagine in an engineering workshop: pin-ups on the wall, colourful language, and the younger ones trying to out-testosterone the older ones.

A lot of the guys actually describe it to me as being a more pleasant environment now because there is a certain level of respect for individuals, for privacy, and more congenial types of relationships and conversation.

After the trial and into the 90s I used to write to the Minister of Defence to get dispensation to stay on board a warship each time. It meant I was less of a burden and just there to do my job.

I left to have my children and rejoined in 1996 with a two-year-old and a six-year-old. I was the first woman to work part time in the navy.

We lived in the Waikato and I would commute to Auckland for about three days per week.

My husband had to become the primary caregiver at the time, and it was hard, because he was running his own business. Full credit to him, he did an excellent job, quite frankly.

I think it's not easy for the person going away, but in a lot of ways, it's the person that stays at home to fill in the gaps who bears the brunt in terms of family.

The reason I have stayed on in The Navy is because it has exceeded my expectations for opportunities. They've given me a second to none investment in my development that I would never have seen had I stayed in the software industry.

Women are now seen as professionals in their own right as opposed to adjunct in the navy. Now we are the real navy.

## **ALEXIS GRAY**



CHRIS SKELTON/FAIRFAX NZ

Alexis Gray: "The biggest challenge for a 25-year-old female in the navy would be stability."

Leading Chef, Alexis Gray, joined in 2009. She was one of the HMNZS Te Kaha crew who last year made the \$235 million drug bust off the African Coast, and was announced Sailor of the Year 2015.

I grew up living on the water in the Marlborough Sounds so I thought, there's no better option than to join the navy.

Last year, I was at sea for nearly the whole year. I came home for about four weeks. In nautical miles it would have been the equivalent of going around the world three times.

But you learn to sort of isolate yourself from the world.

While I'm young and don't have kids it's easier, I can just shut off the world, send an email once a month or Skype my family when I get to a port.

We get 30 minutes of wifi per day, but it's literally dial-up wifi.

I prefer to spend my downtime doing physical training on the flight decks.

You don't have to, but it makes the day go quicker and it's good for your wellbeing because you're stuck in a ship and there's no daylight and no windows. It's sort of like your one hour of daylight a day. So unless you go to that, you forget to go outside.

The biggest challenge for a 25-year-old female in the navy would be stability.

When you go away, life no longer applies to you, so you forget when you come home that, all of a sudden, you have nothing to come back to.

It's quite a common theme that when you go to sea, you move out of your flat and put your stuff in storage to save on rent.

If I could live at sea for the rest of my life, I would. It's the excitement of it.

One night you'll go to sleep and you'll get woken up to a fire exercise, or boarding stations, or all of a sudden you're in a brand new country .

If we have a few days off at a port we'll go stay at a hotel or resort. You've just been at sea for the last six weeks so you've got a couple of pay packages since then. We do the tourist stuff, only we feel 10 times as rich because we haven't had to pay to fly there.

It was a huge opportunity to be part of the 16 selected for the boarding team in the drug bust – I was the only female.

It is male-dominated, but I love it.



You hear about how it used to be for women in the past and how far we've actually come, which is incredible.

I get asked a lot what it's like to be a female in the navy, but it's something I never think about.

For me it's about proving yourself and proving that, maybe I can't lift as much or run as fast as males, but I can make up for it in other areas.