

Supplementary Letter from Judy Young

Jobs and Uniforms

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In my 20 years of active duty, I served roughly 10 as an enlisted woman and 10 as an officer. My enlisted rate (job specialty) was PR, which originally stood for Parachute Rigger. But as the rate accrued more responsibilities involving work on all the various equipment devoted to survival of aircrews as well as training aviators in survival skills, “PR” came to mean “Aircrew Survival Equipmentman.” (No, I did not care for the “-man” suffix, and I always introduced myself as an Aircrew Survival Equipment *technician*: my little gesture of resistance.)

When I became a commissioned officer, I was a General Unrestricted Line Officer, meaning that I had no warfare specialty but was qualified for a wide range of other sorts of jobs. I mainly worked in aviation administration in two training squadrons.

PRs work in shops called “Parachute Lofts,” another nod to the traditions of the rate, when parachutes were hung up to dry. And while the loft is generally a fairly clean environment, it is definitely a hands-on shop, so PRs in my time (1970s to 1990s) wore the old-style sailors’ dungarees, denim bell-bottomed pants and blue chambray shirt, and this was my daily uniform, as shown in the attached photos. This was the traditional working uniform. There was another enlisted working uniform at the time, but it was relatively nondescript—just blue cotton pants and a blue cotton pullover shirt. It didn’t have that distinctive sailor’s look of the traditional uniform that I preferred. I also felt that the traditional uniform better accommodated my curvier shape, since it had a shirt that tucked into the pants—not the case with the newer working uniform, in which the shirt had a fairly straight-up-and-down shape and was not tucked into the pants. For that shirt to fit me right, the shoulders had to be too large if my hips were to be accommodated. The chambray shirt, in contrast, came in a well-designed women’s version, so I could get it to fit me properly.

I also liked my dress blue uniform, which was more like a business suit, with a dark blue (wool serge in the ‘70s) skirt and jacket worn over a white cotton shirt, with a black bow tie. It looked very professional and attractive on almost everybody. The dress white uniform was much the same, but with a white skirt and jacket. And when I enlisted in 1974, women’s dress uniforms were tailored to fit when we went through basic training (“boot camp”). I don’t know whether that still happens, or even whether the enlisted women’s dress blues are still of the same design, but it was a nice perk then to start out with dress uniforms nicely tailored, and while we paid for our own uniforms, the tailoring was done at no extra cost.

When I was commissioned, some of my uniforms changed. The dress blues and dress whites remained pretty much the same, except in more modern fabrics and, of course, different insignia, but the daily working uniforms were different. Most of us wore a daily uniform consisting of khaki shirt and skirt or pants, or a seasonally changing working uniform—summer khaki or winter blue—but still a shirt and pants/skirt combination. Since most of my commissioned service was in warm climates, I’ve been fortunate to be able to stick with khakis all year round.

I'm sure not every Navy woman has been happy with her uniforms, but in my experience, Navy uniform boards generally did a reasonable job of coming up with women's uniform designs, and I never felt like any denial of my gender was required or implied by any of my uniforms, including the jumpsuit and flight suit, which were available in long, medium, and short lengths and had the advantage of infinitely adjustable Velcro waistbands.

I did have a couple of sets of khaki uniforms custom made for me during my first tour as an officer, at Training Squadron 86, Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida. The uniforms available for purchase at the Navy Exchange (retail store on base) never fit me quite right, so if I was going to pay for alterations anyway, I decided it was better to get my uniforms tailor-made. They fit great and looked great, and they were the most comfortable uniforms I've ever worn, aside from the flight suit, which is like wearing one-piece pajamas.

Of course I can only speak for myself, but again, I didn't have much of a problem with any of my uniforms. They were mostly fairly basic and similar to professional wear in civilian life: a shirt and pants, whether dungarees, khakis, winter blue, or summer white; or a fairly basic suit—jacket, pants/skirt, and button-down shirt—in dark blue, or in white for special occasions.

The hats, though, the hats were another matter. The working uniform hats were not so bad—a fore-and-aft cap that looks something like the old lunch counter paper hats, only curved. You can see it in my photos from PR School. There was also a khaki version. These hats had the advantage of accommodating all sorts of hairstyles, from short and flat to long and pinned up in a bun. The dress cover (in the Navy, the uniform hat was officially called a “cover”), however, often caused problems for women like me who preferred to keep their hair long and pin it up when in uniform. This was perfectly regulation, according to uniform standards, but that hat disagreed—it was only barely compatible with a bun at the back of the head.

Fortunately, I didn't usually find myself in a situation when I had to wear the dress hat. Also, there was at that time a blue beret for women of all ranks. A beret sounds great, doesn't it? The problem is that it was pre-formed, so you couldn't shape it to your head. It sat one way and one way only, just a big black bubble on top of the head. So again, there could be issues with hairstyle. And hairstyles themselves? The attitudes and issues surrounding Navy women's hairstyles would fill up another book. Don't even get me started!