

Request Permission to Come Aboard: Lieutenant Commander Liz Galloway (ret.) Reporting for Duty

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“Sir, request permission to go ashore.”

“Permission granted,” said the Captain.

The boatswain announced, “Standby to pipe the side. Shipmate going ashore,” and blew his pipe.

The sideboys lining the plank saluted as Lieutenant Commander Mary E. Galloway (Liz) left the “ship.” Long ago, sideboys were the young sailors who were expected to hoist ships’ visitors either up or down the side of the ship to or from a smaller boat. The seaman in charge of calling them for the job, the boatswain, used his whistle, or pipe, to bring them together. Today, this “piping the side” is the final part of the traditional Navy retirement ceremony during which the retiree leaves the ship for the last time. In Montgomery, Alabama (200 miles from the ocean), where LCDR Galloway retired, this ceremony was held in a high-rise building, not a ship. However, the ceremony was just as moving as the distinguished 24-year veteran ended one career and set her eyes on her next life goal: becoming an elementary school teacher.

Many teachers start out in different careers and then eventually find their way into education. A few even retire from one profession before beginning teaching careers. These teachers enter the field with a wealth of background knowledge and prior experiences to share with their students. Few teachers, however, enter the field with a prior life as interesting or as ground-breaking as LCDR Liz Galloway.

I first met Liz when she was a graduate student in my reading education class. It didn’t take long to see

that she was smart, motivated, and hard working—qualities that are imperative for being a good teacher. It was the fall of 2006, and she was winding down her Navy career. Liz had been stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base since 2004, where as an instructor teaching Joint Education, as well as distance learning courses, she was teaching over 600 military officers including international officers from over 70 different countries. During her time at Maxwell, she taught in seminar and developed two correspondence courses that supported over 12 thousand military officers around the world. She also helped design and develop an online master’s degree course for Joint Forces, the first of its kind. As a student in our alternative master’s program in childhood education, Liz was not new to education, just new to teaching children. Her desire to become an elementary teacher began in 1994, but she knew she would finish her Navy career before pursuing it.

Liz was born in Montgomery, Alabama, but grew up in the small town of Skipperville, Alabama. She joined the Navy shortly after finishing high school. Certainly when she joined she could not foresee the role she would eventually play for women in the Navy. Indeed, the first few years of her career were typical. As she moved her way up the Navy ladder and was stationed in various places, she took college courses. Liz earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Old Dominion University in 1987, at which time she was commissioned an Ensign in the United States Navy. Liz was then stationed in the Philippines where she was later promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and

was selected to attend Surface Warfare Officer School, which prepares officers to serve at sea. During this training, Liz was promoted to Lieutenant.

At the time, in 1991, women were excluded from combat positions in the military so could only serve on support ships in the Navy. But that was about to change. In 1992, just after Liz completed Surface Warfare Officer training, Congress passed the Defense Authorization Act which repealed the long-standing combat exclusion law for women. A new door was open to women, and Liz jumped at the opportunity, requesting to be sent to a combatant ship. "It was meant to be. It was our time, and I wanted to be a part of it," Liz remembers.

Liz was sent to duty on the USS Bowen FF 1079 as the Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer and the coordinator of the Women at Sea Program. With this assignment, Liz became the first female officer to be assigned to a combatant ship. She and the 12 enlisted women who were stationed with her on the USS Bowen were not greeted with enthusiasm. Most of the crew was bitter about having women on board. The Navy provided sensitivity training to the men, and their perception of the training was that they were all seen as potential rapists, making them hesitant to interact with the new female crew members. The commanding officer, however, was determined to see women successfully integrated on to his ship. The crew eventually warmed up to the idea and as Liz puts it, "We grew, and we learned from each other." Liz was on the USS Bowen for three years and during this time women crew members were coming and going. When Liz left, there were five female officers serving on the ship.

In her next assignment, Liz made history as the first female to report to the USS Tortuga, an amphibious assault ship, where she was the Second Division Deck Division Officer and also continued as the Women at Sea Coordinator. In this assignment, Liz was the only woman on a ship with 600 men (350 Marines and 250 ship's company)! However, her experiences on the USS Bowen had helped prepare her for the new adventure. She knew the men would not want her there, and she also knew that the men's wives would not be happy about having a woman

onboard. The only scenario she could imagine was that she would spend months at sea with no one speaking to her, so she decided to be proactive. Before meeting the Tortuga in Turkey, Liz arranged a dinner with the commanding officer's wife and the ombudsman. She introduced herself and let them know she would be serving on the Tortuga (they had not been informed of this fact before hand). She talked to the wives of the crew and let them know that she would only be there to do her job. She asked them to put themselves in her husband's place as she spent months at sea with 600 men and helped them to understand the importance of women transitioning into these traditionally male roles.

As Liz joined the crew and began supervising men who did not want to work for her, she made sure that she let them know that she was a seaman, just like them, and that they could act naturally around her. She was given special quarters—a stateroom that another officer had to relinquish in order for her to have a private room (he was, of course, not happy about that). A lock was placed on the bathroom door, and the men did not like that. They worried that Liz would take 30-minute showers, keeping them locked out of the bathroom. But as it turned out, she was always waiting for them to come out! The men were always fussing about the perceived injustices that her presence presented. However, the crew eventually learned that she was not as primpy as they expected her to be and that small issues could be easily addressed. Liz worked with the ship's supply officer to stock the ship's store with appropriate personal items. At first he would order things without asking her, ending up with items that clearly were not necessary. As more women joined the crew, Liz suggested he take a survey to see what items would be most beneficial to have available. The transition on the Tortuga turned out to be amazingly smooth. Liz was onboard the ship for a year and a half, and by the time she left, 50% of the officers were female. In fact, a woman has now even served as the executive officer on the Tortuga. Liz marvels at how seamless it now is for women to be at sea. "It is really nothing for a woman to be on a ship now, all natural, no fuss. It is wonderful to know that I was the one that started

it and that it is now working out well. People don't realize what went into that."

During her years at sea, Liz was also raising a family. At that time, it was uncommon to be married with children and be on a ship. Liz's oldest son, Blake, was 10 and her youngest son, Bryce, was 2 when she first went to sea. This was not easy for Liz to do, and she met with differing opinions about her decision to do so. While some women said they were inspired by her courage and the sacrifice that must be necessary in leaving her children behind, others questioned how she could be away from her children and accused her of being a horrible mother. Liz believes it is harder for women to be away from their children, but understands that men will often disagree with this. Certainly most men are not questioned about their decision to be away from their children as they serve their country. Today we hear stories of mothers serving in active duty away from their children all the time. Liz was a forerunner in this respect.

While serving on the USS Tortuga, Liz earned a master's degree in Human Resources from Troy State University. After leaving the Tortuga, she served out the rest of her career on dry land, first in Indianapolis and finally at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, AL. She was promoted to Lieutenant Commander in August 1998 and in 1999 earned a masters degree in Military Science and Operational Art from the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base. Liz received numerous decorations during her 24-year career. However, she considers her greatest accomplishment in the Navy to be the trailblazing she did in helping to remove the barriers between men and women. Women no longer have a choice of being at sea—everyone does a tour on a ship. Women are expected to do everything men do. They now have both the right and the responsibility to go to sea and defend their country, fact that eases resentment that was felt by both men and women.

At her retirement ceremony, Liz stated that she had served her country and was now ready to serve her community. She felt she had come full circle, being born in and finally returning to Montgomery.

The semester after retiring from the Navy, Liz completed her student teaching in a second grade classroom and then in a sixth grade classroom where she received high marks. Liz loved teaching children and also found it challenging. She once stated, "I have been on a ship with 600 men, but nothing is more intimidating that walking a group of sixth graders to the bathroom!" She learned that young students are much different than sailors who know how to follow orders. "You have to tell them everything. On a ship, you just tell them and they get in a line and do it. In the school, you have to say, 'no hitting,' 'walk in a straight line,' and keep telling them over and over."

Following her graduation, I caught up with Liz as she was completing a semester-long substitute job in a fourth grade classroom. She was thoroughly enjoying teaching children, and felt she was learning so much. However, she was also discovering things she could not have anticipated. Although she felt academically prepared and confident in her classroom management and teaching skills, things that she credits to her course work and field experiences in her education program, she still worried about whether she was doing things correctly and if she was covering the curriculum satisfactorily. She was teaching in virtual isolation, and the camaraderie she had always enjoyed in the Navy didn't exist in the school. On a ship, crew members are forced to get to know and depend upon each other (really to stay alive), but in the classroom there was little interaction with colleagues and very little time to ask for help or advice when problems arose. Most of the teachers left quickly after school, but Liz was staying until 7:00 p.m. several nights a week trying to keep up. She had moved from a male-dominated field to a female-dominated field and discovered that the rules were quite different in this new setting. She liked being around women for a change, but felt she needed to learn to be less direct and aggressive in dealing with fellow teachers. Although these skills were vital in her previous work, she worried that they were not appreciated in a school environment.

She did break through some of these barriers and felt as if the teachers with whom she worked with

liked and respected her. They were amazed to learn out about her background and told her that her life was very inspiring to them. She knew she was an oddity in the teaching community but also knew she had a lot to offer because of her past experiences. Her firsthand knowledge was especially useful in dealing with the many students in the school who came from military families because she could really understand what they went through.

Throughout her semester in the fourth grade classroom, Liz worked hard to continue to become a better teacher. She stated,

I do want to do a good job. I make a lot of mistakes in there, but I learn from them. There are so many times when I realize that I am reflecting back on the day and what has happened. I realize I shouldn't have done that, I should have done this...or I am thinking about what can I do to motivate this student or reflecting on a conversation I had with a child that day. I put a lot into my teaching and sometimes I obsess over it. I worry about burning out if I don't control that aspect of my personality.

Liz excitedly applied for teaching jobs for the following fall, including the position in which she was substituting. She thought that she had a good shot at the job. The principal was very positive, and she felt she got along well with her colleagues. But, amazingly, not only was she not offered the fourth grade position; she also did not get a job in any of the systems in which she applied. For Liz, the most disheartening news was that the fourth grade position she had hoped to get was filled by a man who was completing a bachelor's degree. In fact, that year, most of the positions in the upper grades of the school were filled by men. Ironically, after 24 years of endeavoring to get positions normally filled by men, she lost a position, normally filled by a woman, to a man.

When Liz emailed me to let me know she did not get a job, it was obvious that she was devastated by the turn of events. She had returned to her old job at Maxwell Air Force Base (now as a civilian) where

she was making more money than she would have made in the public schools. She wrote,

To lose a job to a man is just about more than I can take at this time in my life. I struggled with a male-dominated career field for 24 years only to have it thrown in my face as I venture out on my chosen second career. As a single mother and provider, I picked myself up and sought employment elsewhere. I am very qualified for the position I am working in and like my job very much, but I must admit that my heart is broken because I so wanted to teach [children]. I am not closing the door entirely; I will keep up my certification, and maybe one day in the future I will look for another [public school] teaching job. If it is meant for me to be a teacher, I am sure doors will open for me, but for now I will sit in my corner, lick my wounds, and heal from this tragic disappointment of my dreams to mold young minds. I truly feel the public school system has lost a valuable asset in me. I do not mean to sound full of myself, but I have the confidence in myself to know this to be true.

In March of 2009, I wrote to Liz to see if she would pursue a public school job for the fall. She wrote,

To answer your question: No, I am not going to seek out a teaching job. I am not sure I will ever pursue a teaching job. I really like my current job and I have decided to stay with it as long as I can. My contract is good until September, 2011, and hopefully the overall contract will be renewed at that time. With that said, it has all worked out well for me. I would [most likely] be without a job at the end of the school year if I would have been teaching [due to the economic problems in the state at the present time]. It is not a good time for teachers right now. I am still in education, just military and adult education. I am teaching a seminar now, and it has been good. I have no background knowledge for this course, so it is challenging. I am doing pretty well so far though.

I am disheartened to realize that Liz may not use her elementary teaching degree and that perhaps childhood education has lost another great teacher. If I were a principal, I would grab her up in a heartbeat because she is exactly the type of teacher I would want on my faculty. But my perspective is that of a teacher educator. Liz is strong academically and has so much life experience to bring into the classroom. She is a life-long learner, and she continually strives to improve herself. She works hard and knows her strengths and weaknesses. Liz is also independent, confident, and straight forward. I see all of these characteristics as the epitome of what a teacher should possess. However, I wonder if those particular qualities might be intimidating for principals, especially male principals, who may feel more comfortable hiring young, inexperienced teachers straight from an undergraduate program who would be less likely to question or assert themselves. I also wonder whether Liz lost out on her fourth grade position because the principal felt it more important to hire a man than to choose someone who could bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the position. I don't know the reason Liz was not chosen for that particular position. Maybe the young man hired had incredible life experiences, amazing teaching skills, and an uncanny ability to relate to fourth graders. I will never know, of course. But what I do know is that they missed out on a great female teacher.

Postscript: In May, another note came from Liz. She was applying to the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS) for the 2010-2011 school year and needed a reference letter. It seems that Liz just couldn't suppress the urge to teach children after all! After sending her a draft of this article, I received another note from her. She said, "As I read this article, I became inspired to seek employment again in the public school system. Although it may be too late to pursue employment for this school year, I am going to keep my online application updated and keep an eye out for teaching opportunities."

When I met with Liz recently she continued, "Although I have a really great job that pays extremely well, and I am very happy doing it, I know that something deep inside me wants to make a contribution by teaching children. What I said at my retirement is true, I want to serve my community and my present job does not allow me to do that. I need to be teaching children."

Liz plans to finish up her commitment to Maxwell Air Force Base this next school year and then reapply for public school jobs in her community for the following year. I will keep my fingers crossed that a principal recognizes her potential. Someone great is waiting to come aboard. I surely hope that permission will be granted.