

Breaking Waves: Coast Guard surfmen drive to close gender gap

October 1, 2020



While for decades the Coast Guard has permitted women to serve in every job – from aviator to captain of a ship to boarding officer, there are roles in the service that have remained predominately filled by men. That tide is turning, especially among the Coast Guard's most highly trained and courageous boatswain's mates.

Today, the Coast Guard's select group of surfmen, who skillfully drive rescue boats in up to 30-foot seas, includes more women than ever.

In fact, more women have earned the revered heavy weather boat handling certification in the last five years than in the Coast Guard's entire lifesaving history. But don't call these 10 expert coxswains 'female surfmen.'

"We need to encourage people to stop saying 'female' in front of titles where they would not label male," said Lt. Jessica Shafer, Surfman #390 and commanding officer of Coast Guard Station Cape Disappointment

in Ilwaco, Washington. “While I believe this [qualifier] is often well intended, it highlights difference rather than acknowledges commonality.”

Shafer believes a lack of women in the surf community, as well as in the active duty workforce, is not limited to the Coast Guard. Shafer sees the issue gradually improving due to a changing society. Cultural shifts are rejecting outdated biases toward women and men, and increasing availability to resources is enabling women to pursue and thrive in careers not previously as accessible.

Recent studies to discover why the service recruits and retains women at a lower rate than men have indicated that berthing restrictions on board ships or at stations create barriers to advancement. Decades ago, legacy cutters and facilities were designed to only house men. The 21st century Coast Guard is building and designing ships mindful that women may comprise 50 percent of the crew. Going forward, more facility improvements like these will promote gender parity.

As we reduce physical barriers to enable success, we must also normalize it. Mission success achieved by a woman should be normalized rather than highlighted as exceptional. Shafer added that for the Coast Guard to continue to improve retention rates, the service needs to be a true meritocracy, because any person who gets a job for reasons other than competence is set up to fail.

Failure on a rescue boat is not an option. Petty Officer 2nd Class Kelsi Dozier, Surfman #561 from Coast Guard Station Yaquina Bay in Oregon, agrees - gender is arbitrary in a lifesaving situation.

“I became a surfman because I want to help people on their worst days in the worst conditions,” Dozier said.

Dozier acknowledges that while women and men are different in many aspects, skill and determination are gender-neutral. Dozier said when she is driving a boat for training or during a lifesaving rescue, it is irrelevant she is a woman. Every surfman endures the same training where they are exposed to extreme weather conditions and expected to maintain composure to lead a boatcrew on a mission to save lives.

Yet, less than two decades ago a surfman’s gender was considered highly relevant to mission success.

In 2002, when Chief Warrant Officer Beth Slade, Surfman #321 and commanding officer of Coast Guard Station Coos Bay in Oregon, certified as the first woman to qualify as a surfman on the 47-foot Motor Lifeboat, she faced a lot of pushback for trying to push forward the Coast Guard’s value of women boat operators.

“My male shipmates would doubt me and ask what kind of favors I did to get my certification. Some would refuse to be my engineer simply because I was a woman,” Slade said.

Rising up the ranks as one of the only women in her field, Slade endured some ridicule by senior boatswain’s mates. She had some shipmates who, when they were not demeaning her for being a woman, expected her to act like one of the men.

Slade initially wanted to escape the surf community, but that same perseverance that pushed her to earn her surfman qualification, drove her not to give up. Even though she had the same skills and passion for driving

rescue boats and saving lives as her male counterparts, she didn't fit the traditional boatswain's mate mold.

She learned she didn't need to.

Slade said she wants other women to know not fitting into a mold is what makes our Coast Guard great and rich with new ideas and diversity.

Slade credits an uptick of women earning the prestigious surfman designation to an overall shift in mindset by Coast Guard women and men that is dismantling the "old guard" mentality.

It was with support of forward-thinking, supportive women and men, including her husband, Slade was able to build confidence and stay focused on completing Coast Guard missions and achieving her personal goals.

Surfmen like Slade and Shafer have paved a path for not only surfmen but women and men in all Coast Guard ratings.

"Women are the majority in our country but make up less than a quarter of the Coast Guard," said Dozier. "Every woman who enlists, regardless of which job she pursues, has already taken a bold step toward progress."

Fortunately, increasing service inclusivity is not just limited to the Coast Guard's surf community.

Petty Officer 1st Class Victoria Hansen, Surfman #484 and an instructor at the National Motor Life Boat School in Washington, said it isn't just the surf community seeing a change. Many operational jobs traditionally filled by men are now performed by women who trickle into the ranks and advance into leadership roles.

"There are more women in aviation, law enforcement, the tactical community and other specialty jobs. Women are proving they can succeed," Hansen said. "The more diverse our ranks become, the more anyone can feel welcome in any position."

As an instructor, Hansen stressed that being a surfman requires willingness, brains and skill - not a specific physique. She argues it's a job that levels the playing field.

Shafer and Slade both acknowledge the barriers they once faced coming up through the ranks are continuing to be broken down by waves of newer surfmen like Dozier and Hansen, as well as Coast Guard members throughout the service who are socially aware and passionate about justice.

"What I find refreshing in our new generation of recruits and junior personnel is they have been raised to be more aware of their rights," said Shafer. "They join [the Coast Guard] to serve like those before them but stand up against biases that used to be perceived as acceptable – although, they never truly were."

As senior surfmen and commanding officers of surf stations, Shafer and Slade take pride in and revere their roles as leaders in the surf community. Charged to mentor and relish in the successes of their crews, they both understand the driving force to be a surfman is ultimately a passion for the mission.

The mission of saving lives is no longer considered a “man’s job” or a “woman’s job.” The Coast Guard needs people who have a bias for action vice a bias toward gender. In the Coast Guard of 2020, saving lives is everyone’s job.