

Female Ensign Paved the Way During Early 70s

As the only woman among more than 400 male sailors on a ship in San Diego harbor in 1974, Raquel Roybal cleared a path for the women who would later be stationed aboard the USS Dixon

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Raquel Roybal always knew she would join the military when she was of age. Her father had served in the Army Air Corps during WWII and later in the New Mexico Army National Guard. Roybal's grandfather also served in the Army. Since Army recruiters were all that Roybal saw at her high school, it seemed like a natural fit.

"When I told my dad I was going to join the Army, he said, 'Oh no!'" Roybal recalled with laughter.

A family friend talked to Roybal about joining the Navy Reserve in college, which is what she did. After graduating from the University of Arizona in 1973, Roybal headed to Newport, R.I., to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS).

"I was a member of only the fourth coed OCS class to graduate," Roybal said. "We took the same classes with the men, with the exception of celestial navigation. I wish I could say it was fun, but it was an exhausting 19 weeks of training, with strict military discipline."

In April 1974, Ensign Roybal reported to Submarine Development Group Five, which was embarked on the USS Dixon (AS-37) in San Diego, Calif. Aboard the submarine tender, she was the lone female among more than 400 men.

"I was excited that I would get to apply the shipboard training I had previously learned," Roybal said. "I was the staff reserve coordinator for 22 reserve units that did their training with units under Submarine Development Group Five."

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Roybal said she was well-received by most of the crew and that her fellow officers just ignored her for the most part.

She said she has always wondered if her presence was some sort of an experiment to see how women would fare on a ship. Roybal was on the Dixon, but she is not considered the first woman to have served on the ship since she was not a part of the command.

That distinction goes to two others — Ensigns Roberta McIntyre and Macushla McCormick — who served aboard the submarine tender in 1978.

To this day, Roybal believes her time on the ship was deliberately kept under wraps.

‘KEEP A LOW PROFILE’

Once a quarter, the USS Dixon would go to sea, typically a local area off San Diego or up into Socal Bay near Monterey. Roybal claims that during one such excursion, Adm. Carlisle Trost called Roybal to his stateroom and said, “Now Raquel, I don’t want to see your picture all over the local newspapers, so I want you to keep a low profile.”

When the ship pulled into Socal Bay to anchor, dozens of sailboats circled the ship. Someone from one of the sailboats yelled out asking if there were any women on board. A sailor on the Dixon yelled down that there was “only one.” Everyone had a good laugh since they believed there was no way a woman would be on the ship.

Roybal said she felt respected on the Dixon. She asked her shipmates early on to not whistle at her, and they did not. On one occasion, she was called to a floating dry dock and had to walk past the USS Sperry (AS-11). Someone from the Sperry whistled at her. When she turned around, there were about 50 sailors smiling down at her, so she continued on.

Another time walking down the pier, someone again whistled at Roybal. She could tell it came from one of three sailors close to the waterline.

“I approached them and said, ‘If I ever catch you doing that again, I will write you up so fast, it will make your head spin,’” Roybal said. “No one from the Sperry ever whistled at me again.”

Roybal left the Dixon in September 1976 to be a leadership management training instructor at the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, Calif.

Just before her departure from the ship, Roybal was married to a man she had met at OCS.

The couple would go on to have three children, while both were on active duty. Roybal said her mom would come stay to help out with the children when needed.

In 1993, Roybal retired as a lieutenant commander after serving at a multitude of duty stations. This included a stint as the first woman to be the executive officer of the Naval (Retirement) Home in Gulfport, Miss.

“I believe my time aboard the Dixon paved the way for the other female sailors who would eventually follow,” Roybal said.

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.