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English 29- section 5

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Unit 5 paper: the biography

Captain Nellie Katharine Maugans

When my Great Aunt Katharine was promoted to captain in 1978, she became the highest-ranking woman in the US Navy. A female officer in the navy is a rare thing today; there are six male officers to every female officer, and in 1952 it was almost unheard of. The navy that Aunt Katharine joined in 1952 was an institution that had been open to women for only ten years. Following World War Two, women had been given slightly larger roles in the navy- they were no longer confined to the reserves, but could perform active duty. They were only allowed to perform clerical or medical tasks, but were allowed to advance in rank and serve for extended periods of time. During the thirty-three years that Aunt Katharine served in the US Navy, it evolved greatly in its treatment of women. By interviewing Aunt Katharine I hoped to learn how the navy changed her life, and also how she, and women like her, changed the navy.

My great-grandfather, Aunt Katharine's stepfather, was an eccentric and authoritarian figure. Many of his children had bitter memories of him, including my grandfather, who was so angry about his childhood that he would not talk about his father for years. Before his death in 1942, Aunt Katharine wouldn't

have dared to join the navy- she wasn't even able to go to college until he died. Since her father was dead, her three older brothers, Noel, Paul, and Simeon Lee (my grandfather) helped her pay for college. Aunt Katharine told me that they were the main reason that she joined the Navy- all three had served in the armed forces. Soon after she graduated from Longwood College (after only 33 months) she enlisted in the US Navy reserves, planning to stay in the service for two years. She was assigned to work as a naval librarian. At the end of her two-year tour of duty she was enjoying the navy so much that she decided to apply for a transfer from the reserves to active duty. She was accepted, and was transferred to Norfolk. In Norfolk Aunt Katharine was in charge of the transfer of household goods for servicemen who were moving from one base to another. I asked Aunt Katharine if she enjoyed this task as much as the cataloging work, and she told me that this position required infinite patience- when luggage and personal belongings were lost, servicemen would get "very emotional" with her. The work Aunt Katharine was doing at this point was important, and befitting a person with a college education, but it would have been very different if she had been a man. A man with a college degree who entered the navy in 1952 would have been put in a command situation where he would be given every opportunity to advance in rank, while Aunt Katharine had to struggle to earn opportunities for advancement.

During her time in Norfolk Aunt Katharine posed for photographs in uniform for recruiting pamphlets. The navy also flew her up to New York City to

model in television commercials. I commented to Aunt Katharine that this sounded like fun, and she said that she had been very nervous, and a little indignant- she had entered the navy "to serve, not to model for television cameras!" She didn't elaborate any further on her feelings about this, but I wonder if this treatment was typical of the bias she encountered throughout her career. As a woman in the navy, Aunt Katharine was struggling to prove that she could have a greater function than being a second-class "advertisement".

Aunt Katharine was then transferred to Washington, D.C., where she worked in naval communications and intelligence. It was in Washington that she married Frank Maugans, also a Naval officer. He had entered the service as a seaman (an enlisted man- he had no college education) and eventually worked his way up to commander. He died last year. I felt uncomfortable asking Aunt Katharine very many questions about Uncle Frank because his death was so recent, but she was very complementary every time she mentioned him. It was sad to listen to- she sounded very wistful whenever she spoke about him. I'm not sure how he really felt about her career, but she made him sound very supportive.

When she married Uncle Frank, her commanding officer advised her to divorce or resign her commission. The navy was no place for a married woman. Aunt Katharine, a second lieutenant, chose to do neither. I asked her how she was able to stay in the navy and she told me that it was through her sheer determination and the support of her husband. She frequently worked fourteen-

hour days, and when she got off work she would be too tired to shop for groceries or cook. After especially long days they ate heated-up canned soup for dinner. Since she outranked Uncle Frank he had to move and change positions every time the navy transferred her to a different base. Aunt Katharine told me that her naval career was why she never had children. She was allowed to have them, but she felt she wouldn't have had enough time for them. One can reflect on the sacrifices that Aunt Katharine made at home as a terrible price to pay for success in her career, but when she told me about what she had given up to become a captain, it didn't seem very sad- I have heard several people say that when you are in the armed forces, your fellow soldiers become your family. Aunt Katharine gave up the opportunity to have biological children, but I could hear in her voice the attachment she had to the officers and enlisted men she had served with and commanded.

They moved to New Jersey next. In New Jersey Aunt Katharine was promoted to a full Lieutenant. She was put in charge of the science office's fiscal department, where she supervised a staff of 180 civilians. Every week Aunt Katharine made payments to the civilian contractors, servicemen, and various naval departments. These subsidiaries of the navy were paid over a million dollars a week, and Aunt Katharine was in charge of all of those payments. Her next posting was in Washington in the early 1970s, where she worked in naval intelligence again. Aunt Katharine was in charge of communications with and about prisoners of war. She had to try to get mail to and from the prisoners of

war in Vietnam. I think that the responsibility that came with these postings is what Aunt Katharine was referring to when she told me that as a woman she “got opportunities in the navy that didn't exist in the outside world”.

When the war ended Aunt Katharine was put in charge of accounting and supplies: paying for and recording purchases made by the US Navy. It was during this time that Aunt Katharine was promoted to Captain- making her the highest-ranking woman in the US Navy! From 1978 until 1985, when she retired, Aunt Katharine was in charge of a personnel office. She approved the navy's recruits, and distributed scholarships. She also performed discharge review, where she reviewed cases “usually of drug abuse or sexual perversion.” She had to decide which officers and enlisted men could be “redeemed”, and which had to be discharged. The duty of deciding who belonged in the navy seemed like an ironic conclusion to the career of a woman who struggled for thirty-three years to make the navy understand that *she* belonged.

At the end of our conversation I asked Aunt Katharine how she thought she was able to advance so far in the navy, against all odds. She said she succeeded by “working her head off”. She said the hardest part of her job was supervising the large numbers of personnel on her staff, keeping them in line and productive while demanding the most from herself. It was through her ability to manage large numbers of people efficiently and productively that she was able to advance in rank. As a bureaucracy, the navy functions best when it has competent leaders. Aunt Katharine succeeded by proving that she was a

competent leader. I asked how much discrimination she had encountered because of her gender, and she told me there had been “scads of problems”, but when I asked for specific examples, she didn’t give me any, but told me that there were “too many to list” and that sometimes people had been “very disrespectful” (I remember that at the Naval Academy one of the most important principles that had been emphasized was respect- respect for others, and respect for the institution). While the navy was “no easy street” for Aunt Katharine, she said that the opportunities she was given in the US military were far superior to what she would have had as a civilian.

I was not very surprised by what Aunt Katharine told me about the US navy, about its bureaucratic nature and the way she advanced through the ranks. I learned a lot about the navy by spending a week at the US Naval Academy the summer after my junior year in high school. At the time I was seriously considering attending the US Naval Academy, but I decided against it. I think I could have dealt with the strict training, the hazing, and the commitment to give several years of my life to the navy, but I disagreed with many of the navy’s actions in the world. There are many aspects of the US navy that I admire- including the way women are treated in the navy. I didn’t sense any discrimination while I was at the Naval Academy. My interview with Aunt Katharine gave me insight into how the navy could have evolved from an all-male force in 1942 to the integrated institution it is today. When Aunt Katharine joined the Navy in 1952 she was looking for a good job and wanted to defend

her country, but by the time she left in 1985 she and women like her had changed the face of the US military entirely. While I admire Aunt Katharine for her personal courage in the face of extraordinary odds, I admire her even more for the opportunities she has helped give women of my generation.