



Ensign Stuurman: the golden eagle and lapel seals identify her as a SPAR.

I'm an Officer —But a Lady

And, sometimes, it's difficult to be both

By **KATHERINE A. STURMAN**

Ensign, United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve

We know what the suffragettes went through when they first broke out in their black bloomers. We know because we're going through the same thing, all of us women in uniform.

Some people seem to think that the minute a girl dons the khaki or navy blue she can be asked any question under the sun, about anything. We are subjected to the most grueling inquisitions of a personal nature that ever poor women endured.

One sharp-faced housewife studied my stockings as I sat in a railway station. Finally she asked suspiciously, "Are those nylons?"

I assured her they were rayon.

"Well, they certainly *look* like nylons," she sniffed, eyeing me and them as if planning to draft a letter of protest to her favorite senator.

Until a short time ago I was the proud owner of a pair of, suntan nylons, with no seams and no heel reinforcements. When I wore them, however, horrified spectators would bend low over my pagan limbs and ask, "Are your legs bare?"

One dowager tapped me on the shoulder and popped that question with no apparent embarrassment. If I hadn't felt the responsibility of being an officer and a lady, I would have countered, "Are yours, madam?"

And, speaking of ladies, I was

mildly disconcerted the other day on the streetcar when a little boy pointed at me and asked loudly, "Mother, what's that?"

Mother had the delicacy to whisper, "Hush, dear, that's a lady."

"Why?" he asked simply.

Perhaps the most annoying question of all is, "Are you a WAVE or a WAC?" It makes me want to grip the floor with my toes and scream. But I control myself. I merely grip the floor and reply with great restraint, "I am a SPAR." Then I carefully explain that I may be identified by the Coast Guard shields on my sleeves, gold seals on my lapels and gold Coast Guard eagle on my hat.

If the questioner sighs, "I never can tell the WACs and WAVES apart," I continue smoothly: "Perhaps the easiest way to remember is that the Army usually wears khaki—a kind of tan color—and the Navy wears navy blue."

Our commander, Lt. Cmdr. Dorothy C. Stratton, was asked this question in its ultimate form by a woman on a train.

"Tell me," she said, "I never can tell uniforms apart... are you a WAVE, a WAC or a SPAM?"

Long ago I became callous about answering one certain intimate question. It is broached like this:

Question (in a hushed voice): I

What people don't know they invent

know this is a personal question, but I'm just dying to ask—

Answer (with a shrug): Go ahead. My soul belongs to the taxpayer.

Question (breathlessly): What kind of underclothes do you wear?

Answer (with malice): Well, I'll tell you. I wear navy-blue bloomers—special Coast Guard G. I. Here to port is embroidered the golden shield; to starboard, the golden Coast Guard eagle. Aft is embossed the horizontal silver anchor...

Question (catching on): Oh, you're just making that up! But, now, what do you wear—your own?

Answer: Yes, usually, my own.

Running Second to a Dead Horse

The public evidently thinks the girl in uniform cannot see or hear. Or, if she is given credit for those senses, few seem to understand that she has feelings, too, like other people.

I was sitting in an information booth one day in a department store, allowing myself to be scrutinized. A middle-aged woman bustled up and examined my hat. (She was wearing a Kelly-green number with a veil and a wimple and a bow.)

"My, they certainly had a grudge against you girls when they put you in those hats. They're awfully unbecoming, aren't they?" she asked in a matter-of-fact way, then smiled and walked off, her green bow bouncing.

Clubwomen can be very thoughtless. They call up the recruiting office and request a speaker for a certain meeting. That is all well and good. We appreciate the opportunity to speak for our particular service.

But I'll never forget one little town. I had crept from my downy sack at 5:30 that morning to catch the train. I had gone without lunch to address a luncheon club. That afternoon I was called on to write a script for the local radio station and two news releases within a period of two hours. Then I addressed a dinner group.

Finally I proceeded to the women's club meeting. But, before I could speak, the business meeting dragged on, officers were elected, a ceremony was performed with flags and Bible

on a blue-fringed cloth. A two-reel movie was shown: *History of the Horse in North America*—beginning with the bones and ending at midnight with the live animal.

At last I was introduced—as "Ensign Spearmint, a SPAR who is releasing a Marine for active duty."

I spoke for five minutes, then went to my hotel room and sat staring at the wall for some time, twitching.

Perhaps it's information people lack. And then again perhaps they just don't listen. We answer questions while we eat lunch, we answer questions while we shop, we choke the air and the press with information. We sit interminably in booths answering questions. And yet sometimes we despair.

One day I was at my recruiting post when a girl came up and asked me a few questions, to which I gave lengthy and encouraging answers.

"Oh, I wish you could come up and talk to my grandmother," she said.

"Your grandmother?" I gulped, thinking that the SPARS would have to draw the line somewhere.

"Yes, Grandmother has fixed ideas about women in the services, and nothing anyone can say will change them. You might be able to."

"What is her particular obsession?" I asked in a professional tone.

"She thinks you're all nothing but concubines."

I gasped. "It's an original thought... but how could she think that, with the newspapers and radio giving constant information about us?"

"That's just it! Everything she hears confirms her opinion. She sits in her rocking chair listening to the radio and says, 'Those girls are provided by the government to stop the men taking up with native women.'"

I assured her rather weakly that we weren't even allowed to go overseas, and promised to call and disillusion her grandmother.

I never did get around to visiting the dear old lady, but I like to think of her rocking away and muttering, "Nothing but government concubines." It's something to smile over when a long day of answering questions has reduced my soul to SPAM.



Even at lunch, Ensign Sturman is bombarded with questions about her uniform.