

A New Zealand warship is currently undergoing a refit to install facilities for women. The catch is, the Navy has no real intention of letting women use them. Rob Greenaway went boat-hopping to find out why.



“I think I’d be awfully good!”

“PETER, ADAM’S SON,” said Father Christmas.

“Here, sir,” said Peter.

“These are your presents,” was the answer, “and they are tools, not toys. The time to use them is perhaps near at hand. Bear them well.” With these words, he banded to Peter a shield and a sword.

“Susan, Eve’s Daughter,” said Father Christmas. “These are for you,” and he banded her a bow and a quiver full of arrows and a little ivory horn. “You must use the bow only in great need,” he said, “for I do not mean you to fight in the battle.”

Last of all he said, “Lucy, Eve’s Daughter,” and Lucy came forward. He gave her a little bottle of what looked like glass and a small dagger. “The dagger is to defend yourself in great need. For you, also, are not to be in the battle.”

“Why sir?” said Lucy. “I think — I don’t know — but I think I could be brave enough.”

“That is not the point,” he said. “But battles are ugly when women fight.”

The New Zealand Defence Force’s attitudes towards women in combat have evolved a little since the tail end of World War II, when C. S. Lewis penned those words. The changes are perhaps best indicated by the slight adjustment made to

the modern script for the *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*, when it appeared on our television screens recently.

“Why sir?” asked Lucy enthusiastically. “I think I’d be awfully good.”

“That is not the point,” sighed a very tolerant Father Christmas. “There will be many important things for you to do after the battle.”

Just as in the fantasy world of Narnia, the words used to discuss women in combat in New Zealand’s armed forces have changed over the past 50 years, but the outcome is not that much different.

In 1988, a young woman wrote to the Prime Minister, David Lange, and asked him Lucy’s question. She was keen on training to fly a Skyhawk jet and thought she’d be awfully good at it. The Royal New Zealand Air Force, on the other hand, didn’t. In a letter to Lange, the military stated that women were not permitted to train for combat — it just wasn’t a woman’s role — and, as far as they were concerned, that was that.

Although the reply didn’t satisfy Lange (he thought it “at best, quite perverse and perverted”), the military had every legal right to exclude women from whatever activity they wished, and they still do. In a nutshell, Section 15 of the Human Rights

Commission Act of 1977 states that no employer may offer a person preferential treatment by reason of their sex, marital status, or religious or ethical beliefs. Section 16 of the same Act states that nothing in section 15 shall apply to the armed forces, the police, traffic officers or officers of penal institutions.

The New Zealand Defence Force is the only remaining institution that — at least at an official level — has not allowed women to take up any employment opportunity that, on the same or similar merit basis as applies to men, they are individually capable of doing.

In the Air Force, prior to 1990, women were not permitted to train for duty in the cockpit. In the Army, women were — and still are — unable to join men at the front line in active combat. In the Navy, women were — and still are — unable to serve aboard a frigate.

The changes brought about by a crusade led by David Lange in 1988 against the military’s employment policy were few. The Air Force began accepting female trainee pilots and navigators; the Army let women take on a range of extra trades, but none that would allow them to fight — and the military began a mutually acknowledged, long-term dislike of Lange.

Opposite: *Endeavour* refuelling Southland off Hawke's Bay.
Right: Exercising on the "helo deck" of HMNZS *Monowai*.

TO THE NAVY'S CREDIT — and it's something they like pointing out — women started going to sea in Navy research vessels in 1987, after a 50-year absence. Warships have remained a no-go area, until, perhaps, now: HMNZS *Wellington* is currently undergoing a refit, which will see facilities for women installed — but there is one catch: the Navy has no real intention of letting women use them.

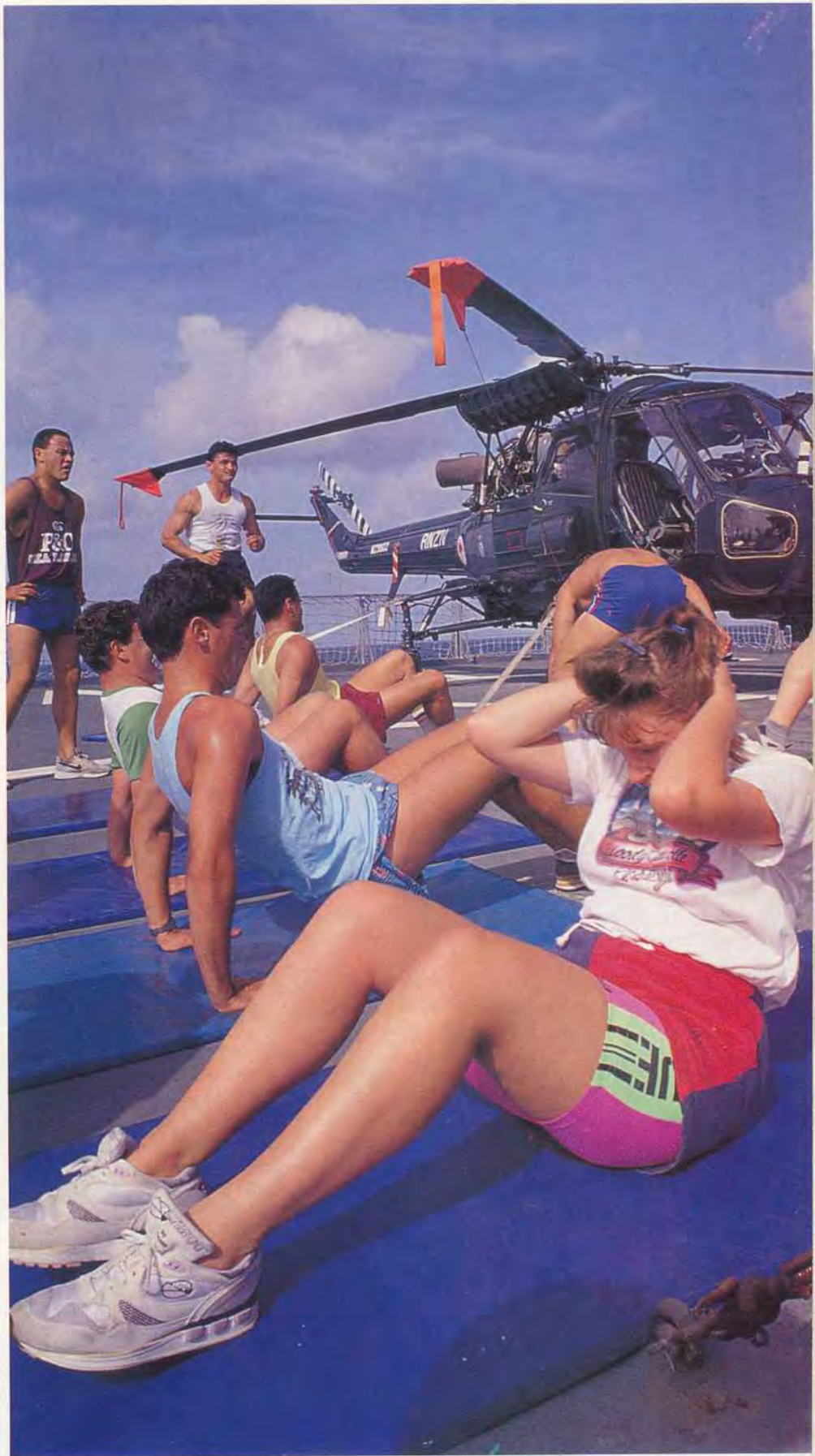
I sailed aboard two Navy ships and visited a third to try and find out why.

The first vessel was HMNZS *Monowai*, on a passage to Raoul Island, halfway between New Zealand and Tonga. The *Monowai* is a hydrographic-research ship and does ground work for the formulation of marine charts.

When I boarded the vessel in Auckland, I harboured an outdated impression that the Navy was very much a bloke's domain, and that sailors at sea were similar to the most obvious of sailors in pubs — loud, rude and, after the first jug, pretty obnoxious.

I was wrong. Life aboard the *Monowai* was pleasant and the crew was considerate and friendly.

Most crew members agreed that life on the ocean waves had improved since 22 women joined the ship's complement of



120. The women I interviewed enjoyed the work. To them, the ship had a family atmosphere, and most of the men were wholly supportive.

Even so, the words “but the sea is no place for a woman”, are not rare — at least, not among the ranks of those freshly transferred from a frigate. “Sail on one of those and you’ll see why women shouldn’t be on board,” I was told.

I took the advice.

WE DRIVE INTO THE PORT OF NAPIER, looking for a grey ship lurking amongst the darkness and drizzle of the docks. Fortunately for me, there are two: HMNZS *Southland*, an ageing frigate with an all-male crew of 270, aboard which I’ll be sailing to Bluff, and HMNZS *Endeavour*,

“The thing I noticed was that there was less tension, less argument. I think a lot of it is because we’ve got women on board.”

a new Navy tanker with a mixed crew of 32.

My escort guides me to a narrow bunk in a tight cabin where as many as 27 senior ratings live for months at a time on the *Southland*. It’s no more than a library of sleeping bodies and my pack fills my allotted shelf.

With tape deck in hand, I slip across the quay and am presented to the second in command of the *Endeavour*. As it turns out, Lieutenant Commander Rex Edwards is an extremely nice guy but, initially, it’s hard to tell.

“Not another f***ing story about women in the Navy,” he snarls. It seems that every time the ship calls in to a new port, the local papers send their photographers to picture more women in non-traditional roles. They ignore the men on the *Endeavour* and, according to Rex, misrepresent life at sea while patronising the women. He parodies them in a simpering voice: “Gosh, aren’t these girls doing well!”

Midshipman Julie Wenham, an 18-

year-old officer, is assigned the task of showing me the ship. Compared with the *Southland*, the *Endeavour* is a palace, with wide corridors, huge cabins, en-suite bathrooms, stairs rather than ladders, and plenty of head-room. In a cosy tearoom, three other female sailors join Julie and me to discuss why on earth they’d want to swap a life of en-suites for playing sardines on a frigate.

They don’t — but that’s not the point. “I’d hate it,” says Julie. “But I would have to go, to get my training and qualifications.” In fact, Julie has already spent time on some of New Zealand’s warships, but only during the day and only to advance her officer’s training.

“I’ve also spent time on an Australian frigate,” she adds. “The ship I was on had



three female officers and the guys treated them well. They understand that the women don’t know as much because they haven’t been on board as long. The guys don’t have a huge attitude against women. I wish more Kiwi males were like that.”

Shades of C. S. Lewis’s Lucy come through when Able Radio Operator Sarah Hobb says, “I’d like to go on a frigate to prove to myself that I can do it, because I think I could... I think. One of the new ones, at least — these ones are old, grotty and horrible.

“I’d feel guilty about it,” Sarah adds, “because of the guys. Like, in my branch, I’m getting to sea sooner than the guys that I went through training with, purely because I’m a female and they want to get us to sea quicker.

“If I go on a frigate, then I’m taking a posting away from a guy who really wants to go to sea on a frigate — whereas I’m thinking, ‘Maybe I want to, but I’m not really sure’.

“Y’know, I’d feel a bit guilty about that. But I do have to think, ‘It’s my job as well. It’s my career.’”

Able Cook Wendy Little has a different story to tell. “This is our country as well. If a guy can go out and pull a trigger on a rifle — fair enough, if they don’t want to — but why should they be made to suffer, when it’s just as much our responsibility?”

Wendy is engaged to a sailor who serves aboard a frigate and, once they are married, she will stay on shore for the sake of preserving the relationship. “With 250 guys on a frigate and something like 18 women on board, you can’t tell me there are going to be no pressures, sexual or mental. I can see the guys saying, ‘Why bring that temptation on board?’

“My relationship is more important to me than that. And if one of us didn’t stay ashore, we’d never get to meet,” she says.

Later, in the officer’s wardroom, I have a civil chat with Rex Edwards. “Maybe I’m biased, because I know what these women can do,” he states. “I don’t consider their tasks to be abnormal, in terms of what we do on board. I know what I can rely on these women for and what I can’t. And what I can’t is minimal.

“The other thing I find, with women on board, is that it is natural. You can’t tell me that being cooped up with 250 other fellas for weeks at a time is natural or normal. It’s not.

“The thing I noticed, when I first came on board here, was that there was less tension, less argument, less competitiveness, less pressure. Maybe that’s because of the ship itself — the fact that we’ve got pretty good accommodation. I think a lot of it is because we’ve got women on board.

“Blokes together can be as bitchy as women together.”

BACK WITHIN THE SPAGHETTI INNARDS

of the *Southland*, I settle in for four days at sea. The first leg is rough and the bathrooms are awash with post-consumer waste food. Even the captain wears an anti-sickness tab behind his ear.

My preconceived notions take another hammering, as the sailors prove to be considerate, informative, friendly, helpful, kind and easy-going. They have to be — the ship is tiny.

But are women welcome? It depends on who you ask. As a rule of thumb, officers, like Rex Edwards, will say yes, and ratings will tend to say no.

“If we got hit by a shell,” says one senior rating, “I’d be a damn sight more comfortable with a bloke nearby to drag me out if I was wounded than if there was

only a female to help. I mean, do you have a girlfriend?"

I call her "my partner", but reply in the affirmative.

"Could she carry you up a flight of stairs, for example?" he asks.

Anne came second in both the Coast To Coast and the Mountains To Sea multi-sport endurance events. With a smile, I say, "Yes — no trouble at all."

"OK, bad example, bad example — but you know what I mean, don't you?"

As we cruise into the Marlborough Sounds, a helicopter returns from Wellington with the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral Ian Hunter, the top executive in the naval service. Between Nelson and Bluff, I hear about what is really happening with the facilities for women on HMNZS *Wellington*.

It's not a great deal. "Part of the refit plan for the *Wellington* included modifying the senior ratings' sleeping and recreation quarters," he begins. "We incorporated changes necessary for mixed-gender manning, in case that should ever become a requirement. If so, we will never be in a position of needing to make modifications that would be more expensive and difficult to do [as a one-off job]. It was certainly not done with the idea that mixed-gender manning on combat ships would eventuate in the near future, or ever."

To Ian Hunter, there are two fundamental issues. The first is that putting women in potential combat situations relies on the making of a political decision, in which society and the government must be involved.

WHEN I RETURN TO WELLINGTON, I ask David Lange about this point. It's one of his pet topics — even though, when he attempted to kick the armed forces into shape in 1988, they bit him on the leg. He says, "There can be no political interference in the command structure or the day-to-day operations of the military." He says it several times, in fact, because it is a statement that can be used to answer a few questions about the armed forces.

However, the New Zealand Defence Force operates under very clear mandates, which are set out in the 1991 Defence Act. The military must respond to legislation passed by Parliament and must respond to the dictates of the Government, as long as the military considers any directive to be constitutional and not contrary to international law.

So what about a quiet political nod? "This government [National] won't give [the NZ Defence Force] a political nod,"

says Lange. "We gave them more than political nods — I became something of a shock-troop guerrilla in the matter of shifting the centre of gravity [in 1988]. It is one of the things that is a matter of enormous discontent within the defence establishment. It's one of the reasons they hate me."

So who will make the first step? Although I'm no political analyst, it seems very likely that any successful movement on the issue will have to come first from the military. If the Government instigates any discussion, quiet diplomacy will be a highly necessary ingredient; the NZ Defence Force does not take kindly to shock-troop guerrillas.

The second factor that Ian Hunter described is the Navy's need for staff.

founded."

But then there is that thing called male bonding — a sticky problem, indeed, and one that conflicts with Ian's last statement.

"The concept of bonding required in a combat unit," he suggests, "is quite critical and women are seen as divisive, and reducing those bonding links. It is a complex issue.

"It comes back to the reason why we don't have homosexuals in the service, because they are destructive to trust, and in that sense, a heterosexual relationship is no different. And so it is a potential problem and one that has to be managed.

"If the situation was [such that] to get enough people, I needed to get women on ships, then one would have to look at

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Recent demographic studies indicate that a forecast lack of people in the age group which traditionally joins the service — 17 to 25 — may make it necessary to have women on warships, because the Navy will eventually run low on suitably qualified men.

The ANZAC frigates due for delivery in 1998 are designed to accommodate a mixed-gender crew, so the Navy will be able to slot women into warships with no changes to infrastructure at a time when the supply of men will be at its lowest. Of course, that does not mean that it will.

Ian Hunter supports the concept of women at sea. "All our experience shows that women perform almost as well or better than men. Any suggestions that they lack stamina or an ability to cope with adverse conditions is absolute nonsense, and also any suggestion that there would be problems with personal relationships would be totally un-

it in that light. At the present time, we don't — so therefore, as far as I am concerned, it is not a priority, because I don't see any benefit from the Navy's point of view.

"[Having women on frigates would] certainly put greater stress on management. Now, if you don't have to do these things, then why create potential management difficulties for yourself?"

It is a rhetorical question, I guess.

AS WE ARRIVE IN BLUFF, the sun rises over a superbly clear sky. I stretch my legs by visiting a local gift shop.

"Are you off the *Southland*, luv?" the shop owner asks.

"Yes," I reply. "But I'm not a sailor — just doing a story on women in the Navy."

"I don't know about that one," she says. "More women taking jobs away from the men, really, isn't it?"

Another rhetorical question. ■