



**A Second Message to Frank O. Strailman,
Wherever You Are**

JENNIFER JEFFERY

I can't remember if it was me or my friend Shirley who came bursting onto the mess deck with a newspaper in hand. "Did you see this bullshit?!" It was a letter to the editor from a man describing "the kind of women who serve in the military" and the direction that our proud fighting forces were headed by allowing women in. He was arguing to keep the tough men in, the ones who were protecting "mom and the kids," and to keep the tattooed, lesbian feminists out (his words, not mine). What infuriated us was that he was repeating talking points that had been trotted out many times to demean and deny women's contributions to the military. It was evident that he—if he had served—had never served with women. We decided that this could not stand. So, we responded with a biting letter, saying that he didn't know what the hell he was talking about, and that he should keep his thoughts to himself until he had served alongside women in the military. Our letter didn't get published, but several other letters with similar sentiments did.

The words we use to talk about each other are important. They tell a story about the world. This man's story was that women in the military are "unnatural." I'm not sure who appointed him the police of social norms, but there are so many different lived realities of women that trying to fit us all into a single "norm" is impossible. Shirley and I were single mothers serving in the Coast Guard at search and rescue small boat stations. We were focused on our kids, and we were part of a team of professionals who guard the coasts and inland waterways of the United States.

Women serving in the military, whether officially or not, is not something new. There are many examples of brave women, stories we don't know because those narratives often die with the women who lived them. One story from the Coast Guard that I like to tell is that of Ida Lewis. In 1872, she was officially appointed as the keeper of the Lime Rock Lighthouse in Newport, Rhode Island when her father died. She was just sixteen. A year earlier, while she was taking care of her ailing father and maintaining the lighthouse, she had made her first rescue. She single-handedly saved four young men who had overturned their sailboat in rough water. She went on to serve in what was then the U.S. Life Saving Service for thirty-nine years and saved eighteen lives.

Dear Frank O. Strailman, I hope that over the years you have gotten to know some of the women who have served. I hope you have become more tolerant of other people's lived realities, whether they be military women, lesbians, feminists—with or without tattoos—or any combination. I hope that you see that the narratives we tell impact the world we create together. On a large scale, they translate to the policies and laws that shape society. On a small scale, listening to and acknowledging only dominant or distorted narratives can silence important parts of our collective history. And perversely, I hope that someday you are stranded on the inland waterway and an amazing, strong, tattooed, lesbian feminist from the U.S. Coast Guard is part of the crew that comes to rescue your marooned ass, and I hope she doesn't recognize you for the limited man you are.