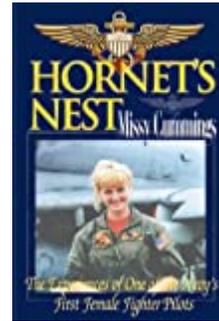




Missy Cummings. *Hornet's Nest: The Experiences of One of the Navy's First Female Fighter Pilots.* San Jose, New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Writer's Showcase, 1999. xvii + 395 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-595-00190-3.



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Women Need Not Apply

In her book, *Hornet's Nest: The Experiences of One of the Navy's First Female Fighter Pilots*, Missy Cummings provides extensive insight into her ultimately unsuccessful attempt to assimilate into the elite Navy fighter pilot community. Although a skilled flier, Cummings was not allowed to breach the insular fraternity.

Cummings recounts her fifteen year Navy career, briefly relating her time at the United States Naval Academy and then devoting immense detail to her training as a fighter pilot. According to her account, throughout her time in the military, Cummings and most of the other women who trained as pilots experienced various forms of gender bias. During her early years in the Navy, Cummings believed that the best way to deal with the harassment that she experienced was to become one of the boys. Eventually, however, she regretted this course of action: "This prostitution of one's morals, principles, and values to 'fit in' is one of the most disturbing trends I have seen in female naval aviators" (p. 71).

This adopting of a different persona in an attempt to conform is not unique. In her book *Arms and the Enlisted Woman*, Judith Hicks Stiehm quotes an Air Force

enlisted woman: "It was hard to listen when [the men] talked about women – the way they thought about them – but it was either be a tease or be one of the guys, and I figured my odds were better if I was one of the guys. So I got tough. I did it by keeping my mouth shut and biting my tongue and putting up with some really insulting behavior."

Cummings attempted to play by the rules, but frequently lacked support from her chain of command. During a training mission with her airwing, she was one of a three-plane team simulating an air-strike defense. When her two fellow pilots switched radio frequency and changed the agreed-upon game plan during the in-air scenario without informing her, she and two other planes in her airspace were endangered. When Cummings later confronted her team members, they dismissed her concern. She reported the incident to the Commanding Officer, who responded with the platitude that "boys will be boys."

After her initial assignment in the Philippines, Cummings attended the Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, and received a Master's degree in as-

tronaautical engineering. She experienced little of the discrimination that was prevalent in the fighter pilot community and subsequently enjoyed her time there.

In 1994, Cummings was assigned to Strike Fighter squadron VFA-106 in Jacksonville, Florida. Here she experienced overt discrimination and harassment. Soon after joining the squadron, she was delighted to be asked to participate in the Strike Fighter Golf Tournament –until she learned that her duty assignment for this event was “beer wench” and that her attire for this task would be a Hooter’s outfit.

Cummings had been in VFA-106 for a month “when an event occurred that changed the environment of acceptance and camaraderie for women tactical pilots all across the United States. On October 25, 1994...Lieutenant Kara Hultgren [sic] crashed her F-14 while attempting to land on the carrier USS Abraham Lincoln [sic]. She was the first female naval combat pilot to die and immediately became the lightning [sic] rod for both sides of the ‘women in combat’ issue.” (p. 158) Cummings states, “Because of Kara’s crash and the subsequent furor...all women combat pilots were under intense scrutiny. At the time, there were less [sic] than fifteen of us and we all felt the hatred and condescension of our peers. In VFA-106, Kara’s crash marked a definite change in the squadron’s atmosphere towards women.” (p. 165)

In the ensuing months, the cadre and members of VFA-106 acted with increasing hostility toward Cummings. Although she was blatantly ostracized and verbally harassed (a fact that was later admitted by some members of her unit), a Navy Inspector General (IG) team begrudgingly acknowledged only that Cummings had been “professionally distanced” by the members of her airwing.

In the past she had received superior ratings for her flying abilities, but more and more often she felt herself to be performing below par. Before she learned that her flying skills were being affected by serious medical problems, Cummings was brought on trumped-up charges before a Field Naval Aviator Evaluation Board (FNAEB) to determine her future flying status.

Cummings expected her flying skills to be the FNAEB’s primary focus. Rather, the board was concerned that her presence was disruptive to unit cohesiveness. People with whom she had no previous dealings, indeed who had never met her, were called to testify against her. When Cummings requested a copy of the proceedings, it was found not to match the record-

ings made by the two tape recorders that had been used during the hearing. Neither were her medical problems considered, although they had been disclosed to be serious. Although one instructor admitted to an IG team that officers in Cummings’ unit had signed false witness statements, those officers were not punished for their breach of honor.

Indignities continued to be perpetrated against Cummings even after her FNAEB was overturned by the head of naval air forces of the Atlantic Coast. “Instead of getting better over time, the level of abuse actually worsened.” (p. 312) Although already scheduled for a biopsy to determine the possible diagnosis of cancer, she was detailed for immediate sea duty. After attempting to use her chain of command to keep her medical appointments, as a last resort Cummings contacted her congressman. His intervention kept her from sea duty but could not resolve her medical issues. During her remaining time in service, Lieutenant Cummings underwent several surgeries and later served as an NROTC instructor at Penn State University, a position that proved to be enjoyable and rewarding and which eventually led to a civilian career as a professor of engineering.

I found Ms. Cummings’ account to be engrossing. I especially enjoyed her last chapter, which is an intelligent and dispassionate analysis of the events that occurred during her years in the Navy. The book is set in an easy-on-the-eyes typeface and reads very quickly. However, an otherwise fine account is marred throughout by grammatical and typographical errors. Incorrect words are used several times; throughout the book, the word “lightning” is incorrectly spelled “lightening.” One page 272, line 25, the incorrect word “juggler” is used, thereby altering the intended meaning. One page 340, line 16, the word “esprit” is incorrectly spelled “espirit.” Most disconcerting is that Kara Hultgreen [1], the pilot whose F-14 crashed while attempting to land on the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, is incorrectly called Kara Hultgren throughout the book. My sense is that the book was edited too quickly.

Lastly, I found it ironic that Ms. Cummings emphatically denies that she is a feminist. I fail to understand why any woman should fear this identification. According to the *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* (1991), the definition of feminist is one who advocates “social, political, and economical rights for women equal to those of men.” Simply by desiring to be a fighter pilot, a profession that previously had been closed to women in this country, Ms. Cummings acted as a feminist, and for

this she is worthy of commendation, not condemnation.

Note

[1]. See *Call Sign Revlon: The Life and Death of Navy Fighter Pilot Kara Hultgreen*, by Kara's mother, Sally Spears.)

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