Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak about my experience as a female Junior Officer in the United States Navy. It is both an honor and a pleasure to be standing here today beside LCDR Hampton and OSCS Monette, two leaders who have inspired female Sailors like me to pursue a career in the Armed Services. With role models like them, the future of women in the U.S. Navy is a bright one.

Statistics themselves speak for this bright future. In 1972, women made up just 3.8% of U.S. military officers. By 1998, the proportion of female officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines had risen to between 13 and 15% (1). These figures seem to come into direct conflict with the still-pervasive perception that the Armed Forces are still a mostly masculine realm. However, in an age in which gender is not prohibitive, the U.S. Armed Forces remain on the forefront of gender equality. In fact, women are better represented in the military than they are in the U.S. Senate (which is 9% female) and governorships (which is 6% female). In addition, while the U.S. ranks only 40th out of 179 countries in females elected to national office, it is the nation with the most women serving in the military (2).

Women in the military serve as role models for a younger generation of women. Sailors are highly visible individuals; we participate in community service, we represent our country overseas and we wear uniforms that distinguish us as members of a team. In fact, I have often been approached on the sidewalk by younger girls asking me questions
about my role in the Navy. The uniform is a clear reminder of the struggles and obstacles that must be overcome in order to succeed in a competitive military environment.

LCDR Hampton discussed the history of women in the United States military and how the women of the United States have always played a role in the shaping of our military history. Other nations around the world are also acknowledging the fact that women can serve with the same honor, courage and commitment as men. In fact, countries such as China, Eritrea, Israel, Libya, Malaysia, North Korea, Peru and Taiwan draft women into their armies. By the year 2000, women were even permitted to serve aboard submarines in Norway, Australia and Canada (3).

The military has always been on the forefront of social change and has served as an example of the successful implementation of change for the rest of society. It helped combat racism when the United States was struggling with the issue in the 1960s and raised national awareness of the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Gender equality is no different; the military was one of the first U.S. institutions to fully recognize the equality of women in the workplace (4). Even now, women face obstacles in the corporate world. Many are not able to earn the same wages as a man who is equally qualified for the job. Glass ceilings exist for many women and the promotion system in the business world is highly subjective (4). In the military, however, the pay is the same for any two people of the same rank, regardless of gender. When promotions are made within the military, the individual’s performance is evaluated, not his or her gender, and the decisions are made collectively. This process of giving equal pay for equal work does not always exist in the corporate world. In addition to this, the recourse for sexual harassment within the military
is steps ahead of the civilian equivalent. Service members who feel they have been sexually harassed have a clearly defined method to report these crimes and an assurance that the situation will be taken seriously (5). While the rules and common practice may differ in the civilian world, strict adherence to the institutional framework in the military ensures fair treatment.

The advent of the Age of Information has helped the military move toward more family-friendly policies. Young people of all backgrounds are less willing to sacrifice everything for their careers, and are more concerned with preserving their lives outside work. As in the corporate world, military leaders have recognized that benefits for Service Members and families can help protect investments in careers and training.

These changes and an increased emphasis on feedback also have placed greater importance on the role of the junior officer. As a result of the war in Iraq, the average junior officer in the military today has more operational wartime experience than the average senior officer. As young officers bring their real-life experience and information to the table, it becomes a necessity for senior leaders to utilize junior officer feedback. As LCDR Hampton mentioned, women make up one in seven of U.S. military personnel serving in Iraq. Therefore, in today’s military, many of the junior officers with operational experience are women.

As a female junior officer assigned to USS ESSEX, my time here in Sasebo, Japan will serve me well when I return to the United States for my second division officer tour. I will have the knowledge of a high operational tempo and will have been deeply involved in the mission of today’s Navy. This tour, especially since it is overseas, will
serve me well if I decide to transition into the civilian sector. As a young person fresh out of college, there is no better way to learn the foundations of leadership than in a challenging environment. With only 3 months in the Navy, I have had to quickly adjust to life both in Japan and on a warship. I have already learned a vast amount from my experiences on board and by the time my commitment is complete, I will be well-prepared to take a more advanced leadership role. Whether that role will be in the Navy or the civilian sector remains to be seen, but the skills I learn here are incomparable. And as a junior officer on a Navy ship, I have exactly the same opportunities to learn and excel as my male peers. On my ship, there are no jobs women cannot do.

However, challenges exist for all women serving in the U.S. Navy. In my case, juggling a family and a sea-going career presents a formidable obstacle. Many women are faced with the necessity of leaving their families behind to serve onboard ships that are deployed for six months at a time. However, the Navy is not blind to these issues and has made great efforts to make it easier for female Sailors to balance both their professional and personal lives. At a recent Career Management Symposium in Sasebo, Navy officials came to speak to us about the future of the Surface Warfare community. In the course of their presentation, they spent a considerable amount of time discussing the need for greater retention of female junior officers at the department head level. This means that a large majority of women are serving out their first commitment to the Navy of 4 to 5 years and choosing to re-enter the civilian world. The Navy has recognized this trend and is working to correct it. New initiatives such as extended maternity leave will offer women greater flexibility in pursuing a career in the Navy and starting a family (6).
These efforts are representative of the Navy’s commitment to keeping female leadership strong at all levels of experience.

Other challenges exist as well, but are less tangible than the black-and-white issue of family vs. career. Being a woman in the military naturally means being in the minority among my peers. This situation is unlike any I have faced in the past. I was used to being in the majority, if not part of an equally-balanced team. Suddenly I was thrown in a situation in which I was leading a mostly-male division and working with mostly-male peers. During my first few weeks onboard, the Sailors in my division tested me to see how I would react, but they would likely do this to a brand-new male division officer as well. I reported to the ship at the same time as another male Ensign and he encountered the same initial difficulties. My interactions with my division had little to do with my gender, but more to do with my new arrival. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that my leadership style may differ from that of other officers, especially males. Barbara Bell, a Navy captain who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1983, says it took many years in uniform before she came to a simple realization: “I recognize that I’m different. I recognize that I stick out, and I’m not going to fight it.” (1)

I will admit that it is at times difficult to blend in. As women we are sometimes pulled in the very different directions of work and family. But I would also argue that these considerations give female leaders a personal knowledge of sacrifice and an understanding of the demands put on our Sailors’ time. Because I am different, I am able to contribute my unique style to the wardroom, which is a fluid organization in which we
grow and learn from each other. Just as I learn from the males around me, they too are able to learn from what I have to offer.

In conclusion, my short experience as a female junior officer has already impressed upon me the vast amount of opportunity the Navy has to offer women. The military has always been on the forefront of social change in issues such as racism, drugs/alcohol and gender equality. I see those changes firsthand everyday when I go to work. As a whole, female participation in the U.S. military offers just one example of how the leadership of women is valued. Even countries with authoritarian traditions have shown that the realm of leadership is not an exclusively male one. Chile’s Michelle Bachelet and Liberia’s Ellen Johnson Sirleaf are models of women proving themselves worthy of leadership roles (2). As a junior officer in the U.S. military, this shows me that people are recognizing the distinct and often unique contribution that women can make to a team. As I continue my career in the United States Navy, I hope that I am able to make my own unique contribution and be a positive role model for the female leaders who come after me.

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