

World

Coast Guard captain tells court of steamy sex at sea

ALAMEDA, Calif. (UPI) — Some veteran Coast Guard officers expected trouble when women began serving at sea, and the steamy story of sex aboard the cutter *Rush* seems to bear out their worst fears.

The captain of the *Rush* stood up in an official hearing last week and accused one of his female officers of being the "sexpot of the wardroom." From there the testimony went on to stories of illicit sex, pornography, rape, harassment and discrimination.

The Coast Guard hearing on an administrative charge of discrimination wasn't intended to launder the service's problems before the whole world.

"I think it would be fair to say that we didn't look forward to the prospect of national media," said Chief Petty Officer Fred Maldonado.

The court action was forced by a male officer and a female officer who contend their careers were crippled by superior officers who mistakenly thought they were lovers aboard the *Rush* on long patrols in remote Alaskan waters.

Lt. J.G. Christine Balboni and Chief Warrant Officer Charles Van Meter claiming they were merely friends charged harassment and sex discrimination. They demanded letters of apology and that their files be expunged of any negative job performance reports.

But Coast Guard witnesses argued the two neglected their duties to spend time together in a relationship that caused the breakup of Van Meter's marriage.

Six days of testimony focused on the sex lives of the 171 men and four women aboard the *Rush*. It was embarrassing for a branch of service accustomed only to the occasional publicity it gets for rescuing people in distress and guarding the coasts against smugglers.

Witnesses told of rape and sexual harassment at the Coast Guard Academy, passionate romances in hidden rooms aboard ship, X-rated birthday cakes, pornographic movies, and angry wives fuming ashore

about "sexpots" entertaining their husbands at sea.

Lt. Cmdr. London Steverson, the Coast Guard attorney who represented Van Meter and Lt. Balboni, said that "if nothing else good comes of it," the public will learn of the "terrible mess" the service created by the way it handled women.

He said the Coast Guard is "the last bastion of white male supremacy" in the armed forces and has set up the same type of roadblocks for women that he faced in the mid-1960s when he became one of its first black officers.

Latest Coast Guard statistics show there are 1,919 women in the service, including 134 officers, and 38,205 men.

Steverson said the government lawyer clouded the issue of discrimination by depicting Lt. Balboni as a "Jezebel" who "deserved whatever she got." He also claimed witnesses lied to support the Coast Guard's position because they feared re-

percussions from superior officers.

Steverson said other officers have told him "the wheels are already moving" to ensure that other women don't have the same problems Lt. Balboni claims she endured.

"If that happens, it will have been worth it," he said.

The government lawyer, Lt. Cmdr. Gary Heil, has a different view of the case. He notes there were four women aboard the *Rush* and three of them testified they had never been discriminated against in the Coast Guard.

They also testified Lt. Balboni's problems were caused by her indiscretions, not by a conspiracy of male officers determined to keep women off their ships, Heil said.

The Coast Guard put women aboard ships for the first time in 1977 and only a few problems have developed, said Capt. William Merlin, the Coast Guard's chief of staff in California.

A decision in the case is pending.

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