

**I WAS SAILING
ONBOARD SHIPS
BEFORE I COULD
WALK ...**

**... AND DREAMT OF
BECOMING A SEA
CAPTAIN ...**



Celebrating women in our maritime community

At Gard, we are delighted to celebrate the success of women on board ships and working in the shore support industries.

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I was sailing onboard ship before I could walk. My father received his command the year I was born, and within six months of being born I was sailing with my parents on board a bulker carrying grain from Canada to the Philippines. All throughout the years whilst growing up I was on the ships, through school and until I went to university, dreaming of being a captain, like my dad. However, I had no role models to guide me - no women captains, no female crew, pilots, dockside workers or even women in shipping offices. Growing up in India it was not even an idea that was allowed to exist. So, I joined the shipping industry, but through the law.

Watching Capt Kate McCue on her Instagram feed delighting in shocking people with her command, recording their reactions, daring to be herself, and blowing any conceptions of the wizened old man with his beard and pipe as the master of the vessel out of the window, I am thrilled that being a captain and a woman is an idea as easy as eating avocado on toast.

Capt McCue is a glamorous and graceful captain, reminding me of Sandra Bullock. But with real live action. She is very comfortable with BOTH social and traditional media, has 83,000 followers on her Instagram account and travels with her Elf Sphynx cat who has her own Instagram account (Bug Naked).

Capt McCue received her command in 2015 and is the first American woman captain of a mega cruise ship, following in the footsteps of Swede, Karin Stahre-Janson (Royal Caribbean-2007). On her various media posts and in her interviews, she speaks about gender diversity on board and says it results in “increased productivity and creativity” and that she wants to see the gender gap decreasing. According to Capt. McCue in the Celebrity Cruises fleet the number of women on board has increased from 3% to 22%.

I like to think of Capt McCue as part of the extended “Gard family” at least by association since Celebrity Cruises is entered with Gard.

Gard has its own stories of female sailors. One of them is Marit Bjørnethun, Claims Adjuster in our Marine Claims team in Bergen, who sailed between 1983 and 1994. She talks about her time as a marine engineer with affection, reflecting on her enjoyment of being the unusual one on board, and recalls everyone being respectful to her. Pregnancy put a stop to her career at sea as maternity leave was not readily available. While she regrets that she was unable to continue, she is happy with her choice to come ashore and looks back at her time aboard as an engineer as an adventure.



Marit Bjørnethun in her sailing days and as she is today.

She may now be a landlubber (and working at Gard) but it takes only two minutes of conversation to realise her feet may be on land but her heart is still at sea.

Monika Lemajic is a dockmaster in Australia, one of the youngest and the only female dockmaster in Australia, before being moved to project management three years ago. She chose naval architecture by accident. After a period working at the docks whilst studying and getting 97% on her dockmaster practicals she was immediately hired. Many were of the view that women could not complete stability calculations nor be dock masters. Over seven years she proved herself and people got to know her and her abilities. Proving her abilities as a dock master is a never ending job, and she still feels frustrated when she tells her story to me in our interview. She confirms that the support of key individuals in her company was vital and without their support she would not have been able to continue as “Equality needs everyone’s involvement”.

Capt Jessica Tyson is the Deputy Harbour Master and pilot at the Port of Bridgewater in the UK. She spent 18 years at sea and received her Command about 14 years ago but came ashore when she became pregnant with twins. She talks of tough chief engineers, unintentional bullies on board, captains with the right idea but with wrong management skills and the general misogyny present in some cultures and crew. She now regularly speaks at maritime colleges and mentors young seafarers. Capt Tyson says that being at sea requires mental strength and great people skills as it is very similar to living on a small island with very little escape. You need to respect your fellow crew members, because in times of danger, your life may depend on them.



Capt Jessica Tyson

Talking to Capt Tyson, it's evident that she misses life on board. Men and women are different, she says, and these differences should be celebrated. They do not require a value judgement as differences are neither good nor bad. Being at sea is a great life and gives great opportunities.

In her professional life, she calls herself Captain Tyson when she wants work done promptly. She says saying I am captain often gets a better response than calling herself Miss Jessica. And why not? She earned it!

Claire Womersley, a senior associate at London law firm HFW, is a master mariner and described her journey to me during our telephone interview. Both of her sisters went to sea, one with the navy and the other with BP. She was urged to join the shipping industry by her sister when 13 – and to deflect the conversation told her sister I will only go to sea with P & O Cruises. At 19 years old, and at a point in time where she needed to make some decisions about her future career, she saw an advert for P & O on a wall. P & O was recruiting. “It was fate” she states.



Claire Womersley during her time at sea.

She did three interviews, a psychometric test, maths, logic, at a time when you just walked into jobs and rarely had to do more than send a CV. She was then sent on a two week cruise with all the other hopefuls. By the end of the interview sessions onboard she had been “seduced” by life aboard a cruise ship. Originally, she had planned to spend just a year sailing but nine years later she received her Masters certificate. She ended her sailing career to study law and is thrilled to be an admiralty lawyer where she can combine the best of both worlds.

She mentors seafarers and young trainees, and is disappointed to note that the numbers of women at sea are not increasing.

Life at sea is tough for women, and they are sometimes judged to a higher standard than their fellow crew members. “Women’s weaknesses are exaggerated and their strengths diminished” and cultural issues make it hard for some crew to take orders from a women. Claire still misses navigating a ship. She talks gleefully about sailing through the challenging Singapore Straits, watch keeping, and travelling the world. My talk with Claire taught me that seafaring is not a fairy tale and it is not for everyone but for those who chose the life on board, it is a great adventure.

We end with the story of the Indian captain Radhika Menon who won an IMO award for exceptional bravery at sea. I had the great fortune to be among the audience to see her being presented with her medal. She was humble, yet clear and confident and made me proud to be an Indian and a woman at the IMO that day.

Capt Menon received her command in 2012, as the first Indian woman captain at sea. She received the award for rescuing a fishing boat adrift in a storm following an engine failure and saving the lives of seven fisherman including a 15 year old boy. They had survived on ice alone for a week as their food supplies had been swept away. She had command of an oil tanker when she ordered the rescue of the fishermen in 25 ft waves and heavy rain. At the IMO she reiterated that it was not her alone but her crew that should receive credit for their bravery and that she did what anyone would have done in that situation.

In her various interviews she says that women venturing in “no woman’s lands” one day, become pioneers the next day. And today there is no such thing as a shadow career for women- they are just simply careers. She mentors women in shipping through an international seafarers foundation, promoting and supporting them in their sailing careers and wants to open the gates of the shipping industry to more women.

I may not have followed in my father’s footsteps to become a sea captain, but I am so happy to be living in a time where I can see Captains of all sizes, shapes, colours and genders being who they are, and glorying in breaking through all barriers. As the saying goes “If you can’t see it you can’t be it”, and no girl today will have any hesitation in going forward with her dream of sailing the high seas as the commander of a vessel.