

'It All Began in the Navy'

By Karen Dahut

She is a senior vice president at the international consulting and technology firm Booz Allen Hamilton. But Karen Dahut's career really began in the Navy, where she was taught that even a military brat

can learn something when she follows in her father's footsteps. Here's her story of how her Navy experience has influenced her civilian career.

For me, there never was much doubt about what I was going to do when I got out of college. I'd grown up a Navy brat. My father, who'd enlisted as a hospital corpsman at 17 and spent 45 years on active duty, retired as a captain. When my time came, the idea of joining the military seemed natural. So in 1985, when my

to invade the once-sacrosanct wardrooms of submarines. But in the mid-1980s, the only chance to go to sea was on board a supply ship. So I joined the Medical Service Corps, attended Officer Indoctrination School in Newport, Rhode Island, and arrived at my first duty station at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

If anyone thinks that doesn't sound very challenging, my next assignment was running the hospital information-systems unit at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It was a phenomenal experience, developing

civilians. To put it gently, it was a character-building experience—both for me and for the staff. I was there for two and a half years, and all of us survived.

Then I went back to Bethesda, served three years as comptroller of the Navy Medical Research Institute, got married, and left the service—just the way guys do. By then I'd spent almost seven years in uniform, and I thought it was the right time to begin a civilian career.

I was sure I was putting my Navy days behind me, but as it turned out they stayed with me—and they're still here today. Imbued with a sense of obligation for a career in public service, I took a job at the Logistics Management Institute, a non-profit organization in Washington. I was there for 11 years.

From there, I went to Booz Allen Hamilton, the Virginia-based consulting and technology firm, where I built an asset-management business. Eventually, I began handling contracts with the military. Now, as a senior vice president, I head all of our business with the Navy and Marine Corps. In so many ways, it feels like home.

But there are other ways my experience in the Navy has had an impact on my career and my life. Everything I learned about leadership I learned in the Navy, and I still use these lessons every day in my work at Booz Allen. The Navy provided me with role models—both good and bad—who still influence the way I act and approach my job.

Being in the Navy also honed my sense of public service. Oh, yes, I'd grown up with a Navy dad, so that sense of obligation was a part of my life from the start. But being on active duty made me see firsthand how much it meant to help others—and to serve my country. I keep that in mind when I'm serving our military clients today.

And I have to thank the service for giving me experience in taking on lots of responsibility and exercising authority as well. I don't know anywhere else where you're given as much of each as you get as a junior officer. At 22, I was head of information systems at a big hospital. In the civilian world, you'd be 42 before you reached that point.

The Navy also helped mold my sense of patriotism. As part of my job, I spend a lot of time at the Pentagon, and I still get unbelievably choked up when I pass



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The author is currently a senior vice president at Booz Allen Hamilton, specializing in asset management and heading all of the company's business with the Navy and Marine Corps. "In so many ways," she says, "it feels like home."

friends were going to New York to start careers in banking, I dutifully signed up with the Navy.

There weren't many opportunities for women in the Navy back then. Today, females command warships, and they're about

new approaches to hospital computerization and record-keeping.

It was also eye-opening. Try being a 22-year-old female stationed at a Marine Corps base, overseeing a roomful of retired master sergeants, chiefs, and senior



At their father's change-of-command ceremony in 1990, the author (second from left) posed with her sister, Kathleen, and their parents. He was taking over as the commanding officer of the Field Medical Service School at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, which trained corpsmen to deploy with the Marine Corps.

the 9/11 memorial there. Thanks in large part to the Navy, my love of country is firmly a part of my core.

And yes, there are the little things: I still snap to attention, thumbs touching

or on beachheads. Women had to settle for shore duty, almost always far from the action. Now that has changed. Yes, I'd love to serve on board an aircraft carrier, where I'd be able to be at the core of the mission. I'd

the seams of my slacks or my skirt, every time the national anthem is played. My shoes are always clean and shined. I make sure that any pins or jewelry I wear are properly centered on a lapel or pocket. And I ask the dry cleaner to put military creases in my clothes.

Now, at 46, I also can't help envying the women who are serving in uniform today. When I was in the Navy, men got much more out of their service because they were permitted to go to the front lines—on warships

be thrilled to qualify as an F/A-18 pilot—or a submarine officer.

There's another point I'd like to add. When I joined the Navy, there were few female executives at civilian firms or in government. Today, large percentages of our corporate executives are women—thanks partly to the example set by the military. So I count myself as having been at the head of the pack.

My dad is amazed by all of this. Although he never hesitated to encourage me in doing whatever I wanted to do in my career, I doubt if he envisioned seeing his daughter move up the line as a military officer—or as a corporate executive.

But I know he's glad that it all began in the Navy. ❄

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