



50 YEARS OF WOMEN AT USNA

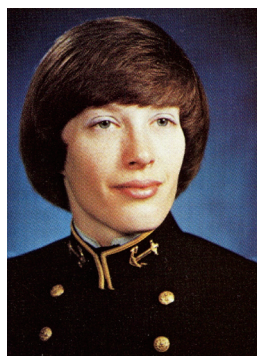
Editor's Note: This year, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of women entering the U.S. Naval Academy, Shipmate will share alumnae stories from across the decades. This is the first in a series of stories that will be featured throughout 2026.



ANSWERING THE CALL

CLASS OF '80 ALUMNAE FACED FRANTIC RACE TO GAIN ADMISSION

By Jimmy DeButts



Kathy Shanebrook's fortunes flipped thanks to one supportive senior chief petty officer and a newspaper article.

Shanebrook enlisted in the Navy as an 18-year-old. In October 1975, she was serving as a hospital corpsman 3rd class

at Naval Medical Center in San Diego, CA, and taking classes at San Diego Evening College when the unexpected opportunity of a lifetime surfaced.

While seeking career advice with her senior chief petty officer, he asked if she'd seen the story of the first enlisted women going to the Naval Academy Preparatory School (NAPS). She hadn't.

On 7 October 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106 allowing women to attend service academies. The senior chief petty officer challenged Shanebrook to apply to the Naval Academy.

"He said, 'Kathy, why don't you apply? If you don't get in, you don't have anything to lose,'" Shanebrook said.

That resonated with Shanebrook. With help from her mother, Shanebrook received recommendation letters from her high school math and English teachers. She completed her application and received an appointment nomination from Illinois Representative Tim Hall.

Shanebrook was worried she would be over the age limit when she applied to the Academy. She slipped under the age limit, turning 21 during Plebe Summer. She joined the Class of 1980 on I-Day (6 July 1976) as the only female coming from the fleet.

Receiving her acceptance notice was a life-changing experience. Shanebrook retired as a captain after 32 years in the Navy.

"It was the combination of absolute euphoria and disbelief," she said. "I was thrilled

Katharine Shanebrook appointed to Annapolis

Miss Katharine J. Shanebrook, 20, of Pontiac will be one of about 80 young women from throughout the United States who will enter the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis in July.

The Class of 1980 at the Academy will be the first to have women members.

Miss Shanebrook is at present a hospital corpsman in the Navy, stationed in San Diego, Calif. She entered the Navy in March 1974, having graduated from Pontiac Township High School in 1973. She was salutatorian of her high school class.

During her service at San Diego, she has taken college courses at San Diego City College.

April 7 Miss Shanebrook was informed by Rear Admiral Robert W. McNitt, dean of admissions at Annapolis, that she had successfully met all the requirements for appointment to the Naval Academy, except



Katharine J. Shanebrook for passing the medical examination.

On April 23 Rear Admiral Kinnaird R. McKee, superintendent of the academy, wrote

her "It is my pleasure now to inform you that you have been found medically qualified and to offer you an appointment to the United States Naval Academy as a member of the Class of 1980. You may take justifiable pride in having successfully competed with many outstanding young people in the United States for admission to this unique undergraduate institution. I congratulate you on your fine record of achievement to date and wish you continuing success."

She will be sworn in as a member of the Class of 1980 on July 6 at Annapolis.

Her appointment was announced by Congressman Tim Hall, who had submitted her application. She is the first woman to be appointed to a service academy from the 15th Congressional District.

Miss Shanebrook is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Mervyn Shanebrook, 833 S. Manlove St.

CAPT Kathy Shanebrook '80, USN (Ret.), arrived on I-Day 1976 as the only female plebe from the fleet. She was serving as a hospital corpsman 3rd class when she applied to the Naval Academy.

and there was no doubt that I was leaving San Diego to go to Annapolis."

For many of the women of the Class of 1980, the Naval Academy application process occurred in an accelerated window thanks to the new law being signed in the fall of their senior year in high school. While their male peers had months, even years to solicit recommendations and nominations, the women had weeks.

The race to meet admissions requirements forced the women of the Class of 1980 to be resourceful and persistent.



'INSIDE THE HOUSE'

Spite might have initially driven Janice Buxbaum '80 toward the Navy but persistence got her to the Naval Academy. As a high school student in 1973 and 1974, Buxbaum applied to the Academy.

On 6 July 1976, 81 women joined the Class of 1980 for I-Day at the Naval Academy. The first class of co-ed midshipmen had 55 female graduates.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPT KATHY SHANEBROOK '80 USN (RET.)

She was told she was qualified but women were not permitted at service academies. The Long Island, NY, native said her parents wanted her to attend college close to home but she was determined to be a midshipman.

Undeterred, Buxbaum enlisted in the Navy after high school. In the summer of 1975, she again began the Naval Academy application process. This time, she worked the Navy system from “inside the house.” She took the application, with carbon paper underneath, to her immediate leadership at Navy Recruiting Command in Orlando, FL.

Her senior chief, master chief and lieutenant—all women—signed off figuring it was a futile exercise since the law had not changed. At the fourth level of her chain of command was a lieutenant commander who she said tore up her application.

Buxbaum protested, noting he could disapprove it but destroying the application wasn’t an option. The next attempt resulted in shredding the document by driving his pen through the paper while writing “disapproved.” Her commanding officer, a captain, let the request linger in his ‘in box.’ While that captain refused to make a decision, a change of command occurred two weeks later.

The winds of fortune, in the form of Captain Theodore A. Fischer ’56, USN (Ret.), swept in to deliver Buxbaum to Annapolis. Fischer transferred in from the Naval Academy. When the two met in his office, Buxbaum found a powerful ally. Buxbaum remembers Fischer making a call that transformed her life.

“He said, ‘I’m taking a personal interest in this candidate,’” she said. “So just like that, I became a candidate, and I had my SECNAV nomination almost two months before it was legal.

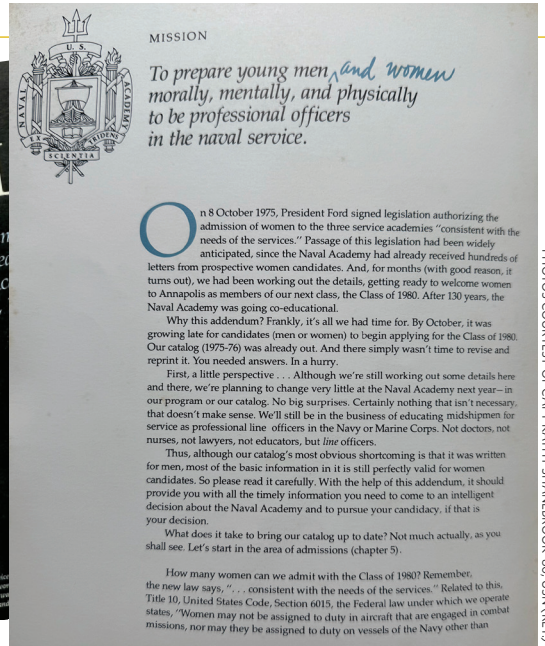
“When they passed the law, my enlisted record got stamped with congressional pull—because now my senator and my congressman were saying, ‘Please let me nominate you,’ because they wanted to have that on their record.”

Shortly thereafter, Buxbaum transferred to A School in Pensacola, FL, and was in for another shock when she was informed by her commanding officer that she’d been accepted to NAPS.

Janice Buxbaum '80 was ordered to NAPS where she graduated in the Class of 1976. From NAPS, she joined the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1980.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANICE BUxbaUM, '80



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAPT KATHY SHANERBOOK '80, USN (RET)

The Naval Academy had to add an addendum to its 1975-76 catalog after President Gerald Ford signed the law allowing women into the service academies on 7 October 1975.

“I said, ‘It must be a mistake. I don’t even know what NAPS is. I didn’t apply,’” she said. “He said, ‘Well, you’re going, and you have three days to get there.’”

Three months after the law was signed, Buxbaum was ordered to NAPS where she graduated in the Class of 1976. From NAPS, she joined the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1980.



RELENTLESS DETERMINATION

Captain Jill Hawkins Votaw '80, USN (Ret.), couldn’t be dissuaded from achieving her dream. She was ready once the law excluding women at the Naval Academy fell.

Votaw’s father was a 32-year naval aviator. She first told her parents of her intention to attend the Naval Academy when she was 3 years old. Her oldest brother, Raymond, enlisted in the Navy with plans to attend

college on the GI Bill instead of going to the Naval Academy.

“I was told I said, ‘That’s OK Daddy, if Raymie won’t go, I will,’” Votaw said. “I next told my dad I wanted to go to USNA when I was 12, because I wanted to be in the Navy like he was. My dad explained to me that girls couldn’t attend USNA because it was meant to prepare young men to go to war, and women couldn’t do that. Then he said (prophetically), ‘Maybe, with all the changes going on because of the women’s rights movement, by the time you graduate from high school, they’ll change the law.’”

The day the law was signed allowing women, Votaw researched the application process. She learned about her appointment lying in a hospital bed with 18 stitches in her back after being hit by a car while riding her bike.

“I had 30 days until I-Day, but my doctor guaranteed I’d be ready,” she said. “And I was.” 🚢