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## Petticoat in the Navy: My Mother's War

Sheila A. Murphy

### Abstract

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# Petticoat in the Navy: My Mother's War

“Petticoats in the Navy! Damn'd outrage? Helluva mess! Back to sea f'r me.”  
—legal advisor to the Secretary of the Navy, 1917

by Sheila A. Murphy

In 1918 Julia Lehan, age nineteen,  
lives in Roxbury, works downtown where  
Boston streets swarm with servicemen,  
storefronts are papered with recruiting posters,  
air echoes with newsboy cries of doom:  
*Lusitania, the Somme, Ypres, Verdun.*

The Navy is building ships, enrolling women,  
*Yeomen (F)* the label for this new class.  
Navy Secretary Daniels vows  
women's pay will equal that of *Yeomen*  
who will soon be sent across the sea  
*to make the world safe for democracy.*

America enters the war and so does Julia,  
*USNR* in gold on grosgrain ribbon  
circling her broad-brimmed dark straw hat,  
brass buttons gleaming on the Norfolk jacket  
of her new navy blue uniform  
with flared skirt and high-button shoes.

She will live at home, her widowed mother  
grateful for the living allowance, the Navy  
grateful for Julia's skills—bookkeeping, typing,  
and shorthand—useful at the Custom House  
and later at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

In her official portrait, faded now,  
Julia's serenity and bashful smile  
mask whatever hopes and fears led her  
to choose to serve her country in  
*the war to end all wars.*



*Julia B. Lehan, Yeoman (F) 2c,  
1st Naval District, Boston, 1918*