Petticoat in the Navy: My Mother's War

Sheila A. Murphy

Abstract

In 1918 Julia Lehan, age nineteen, lives in Roxbury
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“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