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Commentary

Barbie selected for QM1 as role models change

By Mark J. Eitelberg

Something important happened in April. It was a major event in American history that no one seemed to notice.

Barbie joined the Navy.

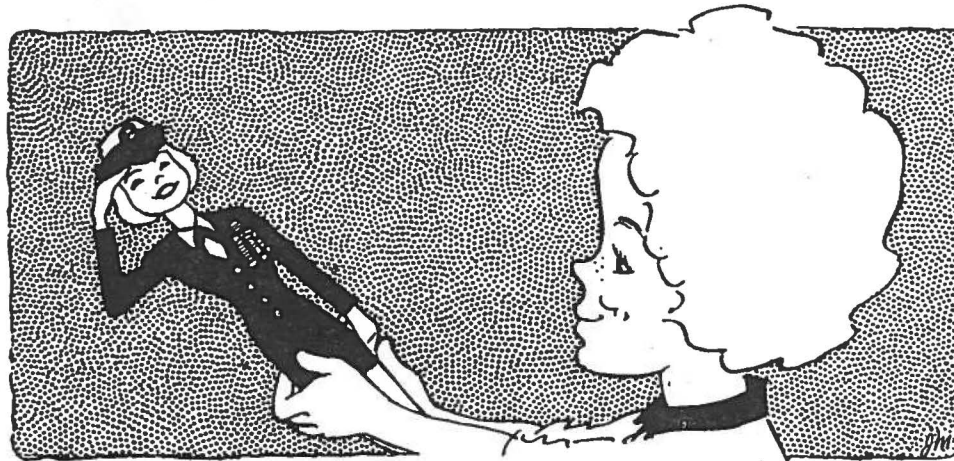
She must have been wearing an exceptionally clever disguise, because she slipped right by the paparazzi, the Pentagon and the people in personnel.

The story actually begins in 1988 when the Mattel Toy Company announced that it would release a series of military Barbies, with the Army first, followed by the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. Those of us who study the military expected to see Army Barbie dressed in some variation of olive drab. But certain concessions to fantasy were obviously required. Thus, Army Barbie made her social debut in 1989, "dressed with elegance" in a officer's evening gown with form-fitting jacket, long graceful skirt, high heels, "pearl" earrings and a lovely ring. The box containing the doll pictured her descending a majestic stairway. "Pretty and proud," we learned, "Barbie attends official military dinners, embassy parties and many other formal affairs around the world with the men and women who serve their country."

How is *that* for a realistic portrayal of Army life?

July 1989 found Barbie in the Air Force. This time, though, she wasn't headed for another party on Embassy Row. "The sky's the limit," reads the box containing Air Force Barbie, because "Captain Barbie epitomizes everything that women can do today. She's a pilot in the Air Force, where only the best are chosen to fly." Dressed in a flight suit, A-2 jacket, blue flight cap, "dashing aviator scarf," and boots, she "wears her uniform with style." A thoroughly dapper Barbie can be seen on the box standing beside a fighter jet.

Air Force Barbie doesn't come with high



heels and she stands in sharp contrast to her Army counterpart. Still, for some reason, I expected Navy Barbie to look like Mitzi Gaynor in *South Pacific* — wearing an oversized crackerjack outfit and white patent leather tap shoes.

But Barbie has become something of a trend setter over the past three decades, and Army Barbie, that high-fashion party animal, is as much an exception as a rule.

Last month, Mattel unveiled Navy Barbie. On the back of the box, we discover that she is a petty officer first class and a quartermaster, she has been in the Navy a full eight years and she "knows everything about her ship from stem to stern." There she is, America's little sweetheart, pictured in front of what could be an Aegis Cruiser (with an all-male crew manning the rail), holding her charts and sextant, posed for action. According to Mattel, she has "earned many honors" — which apparently include the ESWAS pin, the Navy Achievement Medal, the Good Conduct Medal (twice), the Meritorious Unit Citation, the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, the Expert Pistol Ribbon and a still-unidentified award.

Welcome aboard, Navy Barbie. No one can call you a fantasy. And no one can call you stereotypical. But you are somewhat unconventional. Indeed, a check of Navy personnel records reveals that 96 percent of all quartermasters are men — and just 21 women in today's Navy share Barbie's occupation and paygrade.

The fact is that the military Barbie dolls really do mark a noteworthy point in our history. The generic Barbie doll is not just a toy. It's an American institution, more familiar to most people than Mount Rushmore or the Washington Monument — so much a part of our culture that it was routinely buried as "social memorabilia" during the American bicentennial. Close to 600 million Barbie dolls (and family members) have been sold since 1959 when she first appeared as a teenage fashion model. It can be purchased in any one of 80 countries — and a Barbie doll is sold somewhere every two seconds. In the United States alone, it is estimated that 95 percent of all girls between the ages of 3 and 11 own at least one Barbie.

The military Barbie dolls are important because they say that having women in the

military is as acceptable to the manufacturers of toys as it is to the children who play with those toys. The message is, being an Air Force pilot or a Navy quartermaster or even an Army debutante is OK. The military is a legitimate career choice, and young women today can aspire to be valued members of their nation's armed forces.

In 1961, Barbie was a ballerina, a registered nurse and an airline stewardess. In 1985, she was a business executive, veterinarian and teacher, a few years later, a doctor, a UNICEF ambassador and a summit diplomat. According to the manufacturer, Barbie has become a "role model," reflecting "the dreams, hopes, and future realities of an entire generation of little girls," opening "new dreams for girls that were not as accessible in 1959."

The narrative on Navy Barbie's box tells us that she is "proud to serve her country while enjoying an exciting and challenging career." This is the message for a new generation of women in the Navy, reflected in the unlikely "person" of America's most popular doll.

Then, again, Mattel's line of more than 40 theme dolls includes Beach Blast Barbie, Cool-Times Barbie, Superstar Barbie, California Dreamin' Barbie, and Animal Lovin' Barbie. And in the past two years, Barbie has worked as a dancer on TV, a rock star and a member of Ice Capades. When I purchased Navy Barbie at a local toystore, I wondered aloud what the Marine Corps version would look like. The clerk said she'd probably have a tattoo and swear a lot. As I walked out the door, I thought to myself: Old stereotypes (like old soldiers) never really die; they just fade away and get replaced by new ones.

Dr. Eitelberg is a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., and proud owner of Army Barbie, Air Force Barbie and Navy Barbie.