

NATION

Navy upholds decision to ban female pilot from carriers

By Rowan Scarborough
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The Navy has sustained a decision to end the carrier aviation career of Navy Lt. Carey Dunai Lohrenz but overruled a number of senior officers who decided she also should be banned from all Navy flying.

Lt. Lohrenz, one of the Navy's first female combat pilots, is being given a second chance, this time to qualify for shore-based planes such as the C-9 jet transport.

Vice Adm. Daniel T. Oliver, chief of naval personnel, made the decision on June 20, approving the recommendation of a special Naval Air Evaluation Board (NAEB) assembled here to reassess Lt. Lohrenz's case.

On another front, Lt. Lohrenz is suing the Navy in federal court, claiming she was the victim of sexual discrimination when she lost her carrier job.

In 1995, Lt. Lohrenz was disqualified as an F-14 pilot on the

USS Abraham Lincoln because of what her commanders said was unsafe flying in landing the twin-engine fighter at sea.

Lt. Lohrenz protested the decision, prompting an extraordinary series of reviews by admirals and special panels. Their findings backed the decision of Capt. Dennis Gillespie, the commander of Carrier Air Wing 11 on the Abraham Lincoln, and his supervisors, who made the no-fly decision in a process known as a Field Naval Aviation Evaluation Board (FNAEB).

The FNAEB at the squadron level recommended she be allowed to fly land-based planes. But reviewing commanders, including Capt. Gillespie, barred Lt. Lohrenz from piloting any Navy plane as part of the FNEAB process. Four subsequent reviews outside the ship upheld that ruling.

In 1996, then-Navy Undersecretary Richard Danzig ordered a "fresh look" by the Navy inspector general. The inspector general

convened a board of aviators and non-aviators, who heard sworn testimony from Lt. Lohrenz and the Lincoln's personnel. Their report has been completed but not released to the public.

This spring, Adm. Oliver created the NAEB to review her case. The board was made up of senior officers, none of whom had flown with her or watched her fly. The board interviewed Lt. Lohrenz but didn't speak with Capt. Gillespie. It had access to transcripts of testimony from the inspector general's panel, which questioned senior Air Wing 11 members, including Capt. Gillespie.

An important factor in the NAEB's decision occurred after Lt. Lohrenz was denied flight status in 1995.

At that time, there was an unwritten rule that pilots dismissed from a carrier were rarely permitted to transfer to non-carrier aircraft. But in April 1996, the then-vice chief of naval operations, Adm. Jay L. Johnson, sent a mes-

sage to his admirals reversing the rule.

Adm. Johnson, a carrier pilot who is now the chief of naval operations, stated, "The 'unofficial policy' ... is hereby rescinded. Look at each aviator's abilities and, if appropriate, use them where they are best suited."

Since the message went out, six pilots, Lt. Lohrenz and five male pilots, have been allowed to enter shore-based aviation after failing as carrier pilots.

A Navy spokesman said there is concern about shortages of aviators for some shore-based planes.

Lt. Lohrenz's attorney, Susan Barnes, declined to comment on the NAEB decision.

Lt. Lohrenz is now suing the Navy in U.S. District Court, alleging sex discrimination in the 1995 decision to end her flying career. She also says the Navy failed to protect the confidentiality of her flying records.

The Navy spokesman said he isn't aware of any connection be-

tween Adm. Oliver's decision and the lawsuit.

The spokesman, who declined to be identified, characterized the Lohrenz decision this way: "They supported Gillespie and his feeling. They felt she did not have the ability to land on a carrier."

But Capt. Gillespie, now a teacher at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island, didn't agree.

"It's sad that mediocrity has become the benchmark of excellence in naval aviation, that when commanders truly care about their people and the safety of their people and take decisive action, that's just not enough anymore," said Capt. Gillespie, who has logged over 6,000 flying hours on attack and fighter planes. "A perpetuation of a double standard hurts everyone, the great men and women of the fleet."

Lt. Lohrenz has filed suit for libel and invasion of privacy against Elaine Donnelly, who heads the Center for Military Readiness; The

Washington Times; and the San Diego Union-Tribune. The civil suit concerns Mrs. Donnelly's release of Lt. Lohrenz's training records in 1995 while the pilot was assigned to the Abraham Lincoln, and newspaper articles based on Mrs. Donnelly's report about Lt. Lohrenz.

Mrs. Donnelly alleged that Lt. Lohrenz, whom she described as "pilot B," was given favorable treatment during F-14 training and that the Navy should have not have qualified her for carrier aviation.

Mrs. Donnelly last week praised the part of the decision that denied Lt. Lohrenz the right to fly on carriers, but criticized the Navy for letting her re-enter aviation.

"If you look at the timeline from the beginning, from the very first FNAEB, four times the decision that she was not suitable for carrier aviation was upheld at every step of the way," she said.