

In the summer of 1943, LTJG Vera Hamerschlag took command of the Chatham, Mass., loran monitoring station, which consisted of a 30- by 50-foot, one-story building and a 125-foot tower on the beach at Cape Cod. The 11 SPARs under Hamerschlag's command had responsibility for ascertaining and maintaining the accuracy of transmissions from several other loran stations on the East Coast. The duty involved monitoring and recording those transmissions every two minutes, 24 hours a day. The SPARs were told not to "even think loran," and never to give anyone in or out of the service any hint of what was happening inside the mysterious building.

The policy of denying women authority over men inevitably created practical problems, particularly when female officers were assigned to stations that had male Coast Guardsmen on staff. The Coast Guard eventually got around the difficulty by means of an opinion from the judge advocate general's office dated November 1943. The JAG concluded that the prohibition applied "only to authority which pertains to command," and that "the authority of a subordinate officer as a representative of the officer in command has full legal effect in the execution of his regulations, instructions, and policies. The fact that the subordinate is a member of the Women's Reserve does not alter the effect."

In other words, a SPAR could give orders to a male Coast Guardsman so long as her commanding officer was a man. The logic behind the new policy was rather convoluted, but it put SPAR officers a step ahead of their counterparts in the other services.