



Women On Board

The female suspect Sally Peel was based on the girls and women who sailed on 18th century ships as nurses.

The vast majority of sailors were young boys and men, although some women did sail on board exploratory ships, merchant ships, war ships and whaling ships. Women were normally employed as nurses, particularly on war ships where injuries and illness were regular and horrific occurrences.

Some women also fought as soldiers and warriors in different cultures. There are accounts of more than twenty women who dressed as men and served in the British Royal Navy or Marines from the late 17th to early 19th century. Some of them managed to survive a few years and fight courageously in battles before their true identity was discovered or they were killed. Women were prosecuted if they were caught disguised as men on the naval ships. Some of the convicted women were sent to Australia. In 1731 the first 'Regulations and Instructions' were printed and they stated that women were not allowed to be at sea without the orders of the Admiralty. Many women did sail on the ships without permission and this was unnoticed unless it was officially reported. This meant that if they died their deaths were seldom recorded.

Many of the women on the ships were the wives of the warrant officers and seamen. They went to sea so they were not separated from their husbands who were often at sea for long periods of time. Life on the ships was tough for women because they were expected to share the hammock and food rations of their husbands. The only personal possessions they could have on board were the few that could fit into their husband's sea chest.

The wives on ships were expected to keep out of the way of all the work being done and find ways to occupy themselves. During a storm the women would remain below deck with the children. Occasionally the women would do the washing for their husband and earn a small amount of money if other seamen wanted their washing done too. Some sailors did not like the women to be on the ships and believed they used the precious fresh drinking water for washing instead of the seawater. There was also a superstition that women were bad luck at sea and brought storms to the area. Sometimes the sailors would throw the women overboard in an attempt to make the storms subside.