

## A CAREER AS A WOMAN WITH THE CANADIAN HYDROGRAPHIC SERVICE

By J. Cormier,  
Retired Director, Canadian Hydrographic Service (CHS),  
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia Office, Canada  
Email : [jacinthecormier17@gmail.com](mailto:jacinthecormier17@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This note was written in the context of the new "Empowering Women in Hydrography" initiative. It is encouraging and remarkable to see the commendable commitment of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) to foster and empower women in prominent and increasingly senior positions at the strategic and managerial level in IHO Member State Hydrographic Offices and within the IHO.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Approached by a former colleague asking me to share my 33-year "experience as a woman" with the CHS, the following is intended as a review of my career from my personal perspective, having enabled me to reach the position of Director of Hydrography for CHS in a major region of Canada. Many women have encountered and still encounter systemic and cultural obstacles making similar progressions. The situations, environment and experiences encountered in my career were positive and fostered the development and recognition of my leadership skills with the CHS. I appreciate the opportunity to share my professional experience with you, hoping that this can inspire and inform you.

### 2. YOUTH AND EDUCATION CHOICE

When I was young, I liked to play softball, soccer; I really enjoyed the outdoors. At the end of high school, it seemed normal to me to choose a profession that would allow me to work outside. In high school, the cohort in which I was a student benefited from a pilot project to explore different occupations. I had the chance to do some technical drafting, as well as a few hours of survey levelling. Levelling an instrument on a yellow tripod, learning this new term "surveying," it occurred to me that I suddenly knew what I wanted to do. At the age of 17, I enrolled in a three-year Geodetic Technical Program (now called Geomatics Technology).

When I look back at those years (1980-1983) it was a really rewarding experience for me. We were five female students in a class of twenty-four. The female students naturally teamed up together for the field projects. After a few projects, the instructors required us to have one female student per team in order to represent the reality of the workplace we were preparing to enter. In the second year of school, a Hydrographer-in-Charge from the Canadian Hydrographic Service came to explain the work of a hydrographer and to recruit students for the summer. It was the first time the class had learned about the need to apply geodesy in the marine environment. I was hired as a student in the summer of 1983.

### 3. HIRED BY THE CANADIAN HYDROGRAPHIC SERVICE

That first summer I worked at the CHS office, more specifically at the Hydrographic Data Center. I familiarized myself with all types of documents produced by the CHS, such as sounding rolls and other documents created during field data collection.

Following that work term, I went back to school to complete a minor in archaeology at university just in time to join the CHS for another summer season. However, that summer I was assigned to a project on the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, an archipelago in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in Canada. For duration of four months, a field party composed of about 20 people were on site for the season. With only four women, the Hydrographer-in-Charge did not show discrimination to any of us.

As GPS technology was not yet part of field operations, we were installing microwave positioning system towers in the field as well as using traditional land surveying methods to position lighthouses and conspicuous objects. One of the first days of work after the mobilization, I was assigned to position a launch using a range-bearing technique in the busy Port of Cap-aux-Meules. A hydrographer dropped me at the foot of a 28 metre high hill and said: *“The geodetic point is on the very top of the hill, go up and call me once the instrument is on station and you are ready to start.”* My equipment included: two tripods, two 12-volt car batteries, cables, a microwave transmitter (transponder), a theodolite, a large two-way radio, and my personal backpack. After several trips up and down that steep slope, finally, with the help of the launch coxswain, I began my career as a young apprentice-hydrographer.



**Figure 1.** Student, summer 1984. Angle and distance measurements of a hydrographic launch from the bridge at Havre-aux-Maisons, Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec, Canada.

That summer, I mainly worked onboard a hydrographic launch running sounding lines and carefully examining identified shoals. We started each day on the wharf in the morning and spent 9-10 hours at sea, six days a week. All data processing was done from a satellite field office organised for the entire duration of the survey. I learned a great deal and I really enjoyed working in the marine environment. Born and raised in an agricultural region of Quebec, Canada, I knew nothing of the sea or even the Saint Lawrence River, the main waterway in Quebec. During that time I could not have predicted that the wind and the sea would become part of me for the rest of my life.

Just a few months later I obtained a permanent position with CHS. The CHS career plan at that time included a continuous training program with on-the-job experience and an in-class curriculum completed over a 5-year period, to become a qualified hydrographer.



**Figure 2.** 1984 - On board a hydrographic launch in the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec, Canada.

I recall being interviewed back in the 1980s by a Political Science researcher from a Canadian university. She interviewed me and another woman who was also working in hydrography. This researcher was interested in knowing how we were acknowledging our feminism through the work we were doing in a male-dominated environment. We certainly disappointed her with our answers; we were both working in hydrographic surveying because we liked it. I found the expertise required for surveying stimulating and I knew deep within myself that I had my own place in hydrography, equally as did anyone else, man or woman. I was not in hydrography because I was being feminist. Especially at that time, the work brought me to new places far from home and allowed me to work outdoors for several months of the year. I always had the conviction that I had found my place, saying to myself: "I'm able to do it and I like it." If this was somehow related to being a feminist, then I was there without any specific intentions except doing what I liked to do.

#### 4. BACK TO SCHOOL

Years went by and I worked on different types of hydrographic surveys. Among other things, I was once the only woman onboard a hydrographic ship for a period of several weeks. Despite a few remarks, such as a woman bringing bad luck onboard a ship, I did not face any sexual harassment or challenges. I received good support from the hydrographic team. However, I quickly realized that the minority is more scrutinized; a man with inappropriate behaviour will be forgiven, while how a woman acts in certain situations will be remembered. I quickly realized I needed to behave in a way that kept me away from any controversy. That is the attitude I adopted throughout my career and it has served me well.



*Figure 3. Start of the day aboard a hydrographic launch from the Louis M Lauzier ship, off the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec, Canada.*

In 1987, the Government of Canada inaugurated a new marine sciences centre in Canada, which also was the first francophone facility of its kind, the Institute Maurice-Lamontagne, Mont-Joli, Quebec. This required the relocation of employees from Quebec City to Mont-Joli, Quebec, about 300 kilometres east on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River. Several senior employees chose to move to other government departments rather than leave Quebec City. Those decisions opened opportunities to younger employees who had ambitions within the organization. I was one of them and quickly obtained several acting assignments at higher levels.

Other changes occurred around the same period at the management level. Technologies evolved, and the need for broader knowledge grew. Management positions began to require candidates who graduated from university rather than the traditional advancement of hydrographers who were trained in-house and obtained experience over years of work. Those changes caused me to question and reflect on my interest to access management-level positions. It became clear that I needed to go back to school to get a university degree if I wanted to achieve my goals. I

used annual leave (vacations) to complete prerequisite courses such as mathematics and physics in preparation for university admission. Based on excellent performance reviews while working in the CHS, I prepared my case and submitted it to the management team who supported my plan. I applied successfully and began university a few months later.

In the summer of 1989, I was assigned as the first female Hydrographer-in-Charge of the first multibeam hydrographic survey in Canada, onboard the vessel CCGS Louis M. Lauzier. I believe that my assignment was mainly due to my performance at work, my commitment to advance my abilities through university studies and the interest to support my advancement within the CHS Organization. In 1993, I graduated from the University of New Brunswick in Surveying Engineering with Hydrographic Option.

## 5. MATERNITY

Once I returned to full time work, I learned that CHS had shifted chart production processes to a digital environment. I was assigned to support the geographical information system CARIS used in chart production. My position was reclassified from a technical group to a surveying engineering category, a very well paying job category in the Canadian Public Service. In 2021, the ratio for this category was 25% women and 75% men according to The Professional Institute of the Public Service (PIPS [www.pipsc.ca](http://www.pipsc.ca)). During these years, I participated in many national committees, where I developed a good network of contacts and I supervised more and more projects for the implementation of new technologies related to hydrography.

I also was working in the office rather than in the field, which was a good change for me. The call of motherhood was felt, and my partner and I welcomed our two children. Thanks to the excellent working conditions at the Government of Canada, it was possible for us to benefit from parental leave and take the time to take care of our young children.

The attraction to management was always there for me. In the early 2000s, I noticed that the women who excelled in management in the Department were often childless, while the men all had families. Was this the price to pay to go into management? For me, as a new mom, it was difficult to reconcile the two. However, I had the opportunity to accept an acting assignment at the management level and understood that if I was well organized, I could do both. In addition, my partner and I equally shared the work to maintain a home and the education of the children. Adaptation and flexibility were also keys to success as we took turns traveling for our respective jobs. The work environment in the Government of Canada increasingly valued work-family balance.

## 6. THE LEAP TO MANAGEMENT

My partner also encouraged me to apply to different types of work in the CHS, so that I could move to a management position. This is how we came to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where I started a position as Manager of Nautical Publications.

A friend of mine, a director in the field of health, mentioned to me that the more you go up in an organization, the more you are isolated. So I realized that going into management separated me from the employee base. When I moved to the Atlantic region of the CHS, this split came more naturally as I did not know many of the people on the team. I was subject to some intimidation in the workplace but I could not say if it was because I was a woman or not. Sometimes I asked myself the question without giving it too much importance. On the other hand, there had always been wonderful people around me with whom it was pleasant to work with and who, without knowing it, supported me a lot. I have always intentionally put some distance between employees and me, and this has made my job easier. I also understand that this way of working was somewhat unique to me - another person would have done otherwise with different or the same results. Gaining access to management opened the door for me to other programs of the Department, and I have learned and enjoyed working together with managers from other groups outside hydrography.

An intrinsic value to me throughout my career had been fairness; I had always felt responsible for the employees under my supervision. In two situations, I had to take action on cases that could have turned into serious situations of bullying or sexual harassment. It was important to me to make sure that I did not put the women on the team in a vulnerable position. In collaboration with the management team, we made sure that there were always at least two women on a field project as well as men in whom we had full confidence. There was no question of depriving women of field experience due to behaviours that only needed to be managed. The human resources advisors provided excellent information to aid in decision-making.

## 7. FROM SENIOR MANAGEMENT TO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Accessing an Executive Director position was not in my career plan, however I felt I could do as well as my predecessors. I prepared a lot for this interview; never did I consider a position acquired before going through a selection process. Like my colleagues, I was fortunate to have access to the mentoring offered to employees wishing to advance to management and executive positions. This prepared me very well for the interview but also for the day-to-day performance of the job.



**Figure 4.** The Canadian Hydrographic Service's National Executive Committee October 2017 - From left to right: Lynn Patterson (Ottawa, ON), Serge Gosselin (Mont-Joli, QC); Stacey Verrin (Sidney, BC); Chris Hemmingway (Ottawa, ON); Denis Hains (Ottawa, ON); Rowena Orok (Ottawa, ON); Dave Prince (Sidney, BC); Jacinthe Cormier (Dartmouth, NS) and Louis Maltais (Burlington, ON) at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Over time when making a management decision, I tried to define what I wanted as the end result and what I needed to do to get there. Sometimes that meant that throughout a process, one step could be against my perspective, but in the long run I felt satisfaction with the end result, and that was important to me. Management work had always stimulated me - little room for routine and each day brought its share of new situations to deal with. Government is made up of great cycles

of growth and also reduction of resources. Managing reduction of resources is difficult while managing growth is challenging and demanding where government regulations and process deadlines are numerous and sometimes long. A Regional Director General during a roundtable with new directors told me: *“The key to success is the importance of adapting and always turning a situation to a positive aspect.”* When I faced a difficult situation, I always remembered this discussion.

## 8. RETIREMENT

I do not know if I have influenced a lot of women around me. I remember a speed mentoring exercise organized in 2018 shortly before my retirement. Each director sat at a table and people with managerial aspirations could come and sit for five minutes. I loved quickly transmitting my ways of doing things and what I thought was essential for gaining access to management: being rigorous, showing interest, being curious, asking to observe during a meeting, learn a second language, etc. Do not hesitate to volunteer for special events: organization of conferences, social activities and union tasks, sitting on committees, accepting acting work. I was surprised and happy to see all the young women who came to my table.

I retired in the spring of 2018 as I planned it. Since then, I allowed myself a lot of rest, I share my time with my partner sailing in the summer, physical training in the winter, spending time with our children, singing in a choir, visiting family and friends.



**Figure 5.** Retirement Ceremony April 2018 - Jacinthe with Alain Vézina, Regional Director of Science, Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada.

## 9. CONCLUSION

In the winter of 2020-2021, I followed the “Vendée-Globe” with passion, an around the world sailing race, solo, non-stop and without assistance. For 4 months, 33 sailors, including 6 women, allowed us to experience emotions of joy, sorrow, determination, concentration and pride. The first woman, Clarisse Cremer, to complete the lap finished in 12th position. All the journalists asked her what it was like to be the first woman and she always answered: “The Vendée-Globe is a mixed race and I finished 12th.” That resonated with me in how I have accomplished my career, Hydrography is a mixed field, I have accomplished the career I have chosen to the best of my ability, and I am proud of what I achieved.

Success in a career depends on self-commitment and also on establishing and maintaining a level of trust with the senior managers you work with. I want to thank everyone who trusted me over the years.

I commend the IHO for the initiative to showcase the involvement of women in hydrography. I am proud to see that several IHO member hydrographic offices support this program including the CHS, the organization where I worked. If my experience shared with you in this note has interested or inspired you, please do not hesitate to contact me by email, it will be my pleasure to share further or communicate with you.