

Lieutenant Commander Elaine Frances Londak, U.S. Navy (Ret.), died on December 28, 2020 in Escondido, California. She was 81 years old. The cause was cancer. Elaine lived a life marked by service to her nation and to her community. Because of Elaine's years in the United States Navy, she can be seen as a trailblazer for women in the military. Growing up in Chicago, Elaine's early years furnished her with examples of such service.

She was born on June 3, 1939 in Evergreen Park, Illinois. Elaine was the first of Samuel Kent Londak and Bernadette (Hoeschen) Londak's four children. A sister, Kathleen, predeceased Elaine. Another sister, Bernadette Harris, PhD, wife of John Harris, PhD, of Victoria, Canada, and a brother, Eugene Edward Londak of Elkhart, Indiana, survive her. Two nieces, Theresa Harris of Ottawa, Canada and Lieutenant Colonel Maryjane F. Harris, DO MPH, Air National Guard of Redmond, Oregon also survive Elaine.



Early Influences

From her first breath, members of the Catholic Church surrounded Elaine. Although the family lived in Chicago, she was born in the Little Company of Mary Hospital in the suburb of Evergreen Park. The Little Company of Mary Sisters ran the hospital. Elaine grew up in a Catholic home with her religious education overseen by her devout mother, Bernadette. Elaine, as did her sister Bernadette and brother Gene, attended Catholic elementary and high schools. Unlike today where lay teachers often dominate the faculty, in the 1940s and 1950s, nuns taught in the classroom.

Elaine attended St. Clare Catholic School, a co-educational grammar school, after which she went to Mercy High School, an all-girls' school. At every level of Elaine's formal education, nuns would have emphasized the church's social teachings, including ones that stressed the value of the community and the importance of helping others. One can argue that such a doctrine greatly influenced Elaine in her formative years.



Elaine at Mercy High School

The home, however, was also her classroom. Elaine witnessed daily the loving care her parents bestowed on her younger sister Kathleen who had Down Syndrome. She was the third of four children. The first three made their appearance in the world only a year apart--Elaine in June 1939, Bernadette in December 1940, and Kathleen in December 1941. (Eugene was not born until January 1948.) This close birth order meant that Elaine's mother had three young children to raise, one of whom was what we call today "a special needs child."

Elaine's sister Bernadette points out that in those years, "Down Syndrome children were often thrown into an institution, but Kathleen grew up with us." Their mother's life certainly could have been easier by relegating Kathleen to such a place; but no, she would raise her third daughter with her other children, at home. Bernadette remembers how, when Kathleen was old enough for kindergarten, public school could not accept her because, back then, there were no special education classes or staff. This frustrated their mother. "I recall," Bernadette explains, "my mother talking on the phone to a Chicago school" about enrolling Kathleen in kindergarten. Their mother asked pointedly, "But why can't she go to school?"

Bernadette believes "Kathleen was the most important part of the family. Our parents kept her with us." Their parents joined a group in Chicago to provide a school for children with special needs. Eventually, they were successful, with classes that took place first in Tinley Park field house and later at the building identified with Jane Addams' settlement work, Hull House. Bernadette stresses, "Our parents were for inclusion." The compassion Elaine, Bernadette, and Eugene saw daily at the Londak home would not have been lost on any of them. For Elaine, that compassion could still be seen in a volunteer activity she became involved in during her later years. The nuns and her family would have given Elaine many examples of community service.



Elaine and cousins in a 1947 photo; Elaine, with curls, is to the left of the tall girl with sunglasses. Bernadette is directly to the left of Elaine, with Kathleen standing below Bernadette. Photo courtesy of cousin Leslie Waters

Born the very year that World War II broke out in Europe, at an early age Elaine was also exposed to examples of military service. She grew up when images of men and women in uniform appeared in newspapers and magazines. Perhaps she saw them in person on the streets of Chicago. Two members of Elaine's family served in the war. Her father was in the Navy, as was Elaine's cousin Marybeth Long Doss. In 1944, Marybeth enlisted in the Navy Women's Reserve, or as it was popularly known, the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). Elaine's father and cousin served only for a few years at the end of the war, yet the example of military service was there for Elaine, especially from Marybeth.

Marybeth shares a story that may explain Elaine's interest, at an early age, in one day wearing a Navy uniform of her own. After graduation from boot camp in 1944, Marybeth headed for her duty station in San Francisco. On her way there, she stopped in Chicago to

visit family. Elaine was around five years old. As Marybeth tells it, Elaine was “fascinated by the uniform.” She wanted to march, like she imagined her cousin doing. Marybeth obliged her, parading the young Londak girls around their Chicago home. Today, Bernadette has no recollection of “the marching story.” (She was, after all, only around four years old at the time.) But Elaine shared that memory with Bernadette and Marybeth more than once over the years.

Raised in a Catholic home, educated by nuns at Catholic schools, it is not surprising that Elaine considered a life of service to her church. Bernadette shares how Elaine, after high school, considered entering a convent and becoming a nun. Elaine did not do so, but the thought had been there. Instead, Elaine worked at the telephone company for a year. More than one factor probably entered into her decision to try her way in the world. In so doing, Elaine always carried with her the values instilled by church and family in those early years. Elaine had only been seventeen when she graduated high school. As her sister Bernadette explains, St. Clare’s, Elaine’s elementary school, did not offer kindergarten classes. Elaine thus began her formal education in the first grade, a year early. She graduated high school in 1956. A year later, in the summer of 1957, Elaine decided to enlist in the WAVES. The little girl who had begged her older cousin to teach her how to march would now learn how to formally do so when she herself entered boot camp.

An Anniversary Company

Elaine enlisted in the WAVES on July 27, 1957. It was a date she observed yearly for her entire life, and not just because of her enlistment. July is the anniversary month of the WAVES. Congress passed the legislation to bring women into the Navy on July 21, 1942. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill into law days later, on July 30th. At least one of Elaine’s friends, historian Linda Dudik, received a call every year from Elaine on July 30th to remind Linda why that date was a special one.

Elaine’s enlistment coincided with the annual WAVES anniversary celebration. As such, she was part of the “Anniversary Company,” as the WAVES commander called the nine women who joined late in July 1957. An August 16, 1957 newspaper article in *The Jacksonville Daily Journal*

reported the details of festivities that accompanied Elaine's enlistment. A Homecoming Review at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center preceded the swearing-in ceremony. The ceremony itself took place at a luncheon celebrating the WAVES' 15th anniversary. Elaine's father, sister Bernadette, and nine-year-old brother Eugene attended. Bernadette remembers it as "a lovely ceremony." (Elaine's mother stayed home with Kathleen, probably because of the difficulties Kathleen would have experienced in the hours-long event.) Understandably, Elaine forever associated her enlistment with the WAVES' birthday, as she liked to phrase it.

Elaine's "Anniversary Company" left Chicago the next day, bound for the U.S. Naval Training Center in Bainbridge, Maryland. Her Navy career would span four decades, from 1957 to 1981. Barbara ("Bobbie") Hilton, an old friend from her first years in the WAVES, succinctly summarized Elaine's military career--"She enlisted, she went to college and got a degree, and she [later] retired as an officer."

Trailblazing--An Enlisted WAVE, 1957 - 1961

Elaine spent nine weeks at Bainbridge's boot camp where, like all of the recruits, she underwent testing to determine what area she would be assigned to within the Navy. After graduation, the Navy sent Elaine to aviation schools to be trained in some mechanical areas. She attended a school in Jacksonville, Florida for aviation fundamentals training. From there, the Navy sent Elaine to the Aviation Electronics Technician School in Memphis, Tennessee. Her specialty became radio. Elaine ended up working on planes.

In the late 1950s, while assigned to Maryland's Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Elaine made some lifelong friendships with other WAVES. To them, she was and remains "Lonnie," the nickname being a derivation of her surname. One such friendship is with Doris Sloat who shares how, "When we first got together, I knew she was a very intelligent girl. She was selected to go to Radio School, and that was a difficult school to go through." But the days were not all work. Elaine, Doris, and Bobbie Hilton played on WAVE softball and basketball teams. Some won championships.



Decades later, in her retirement years, Elaine became friends with Dawn Elders who had served in the Army as a nurse. Another woman who knew Elaine in her retirement years, Barbara Ziegler, concludes that “As far as Elaine was concerned, there was only one branch of service, the Navy.” As such, Elaine never tired of ribbing Dawn about the Army-Navy rivalry, especially when it came to football games.

Dawn also shares some insightful conclusions about Elaine’s years in the Navy. “When I think of Elaine in [respect to] her military career,” Dawn tells us, “She definitely was a trailblazer.” Dawn explains that what “Elaine did in the Navy might not seem unusual today, but it was in her era. She chose a career path that was predominantly male.” This can be seen in her second duty station. In 1960 the Navy sent her to Naval Air Station Corpus Christi in Texas where she worked on aircraft. Years later, Elaine gave an interview to a Navy newspaper on her career.

With what must have been pride, she told the reporter in 1974 that she was the first woman attached to the Corpus Christi training squadron VT-31. “Since I was smaller than most of the men in my shop, I always got ‘stuck’ wiggling into tight places to do wiring jobs on the aircraft.” Elaine achieved the rank of Petty Officer Second Class. She undoubtedly could have risen even further, but, as Elaine shared with the reporter, she decided to “finish her tour and enroll in college.” Elaine planned to pursue a degree in, as she put it to the reporter, “health, physical education, and recreation,” with the intention of becoming a teacher.

Texas Woman’s University, 1961-1965 and the Navy Reserves, 1963 – 1965

Elaine, as noted earlier, had attended an all-girls' high school. She chose an all-women's university after her first enlistment in the Navy. Academic studies argue that those who attend such institutions come away with strong feelings of self-confidence. Elaine had that. Carol Van Houten, a neighbor in Elaine's retirement years, characterizes her friend as "independent and self-reliant." Maria Nielsen, another neighbor from that same time period, echoes those traits in describing Elaine--"I really admire how independent she was."

The type of schools Elaine attended may also have influenced her role as a trailblazer. Women who graduate from girls-only schools tend to achieve more than females who attend coeducation institutions. Certainly Elaine's life is testimony to that. Most women do not join the military, and of those who do, only a small number achieve the rank Elaine did. Perhaps her last duty station in Corpus Christi influenced Elaine to select a Texas school for her college education. It could also be that Elaine's years at Mercy High School influenced her decision to consider an all women's institution. In any event, after she left the Navy in 1961, Texas Woman's University in Denton became her home for the next four years.

While on campus one day in 1963, Elaine saw a Navy recruiter. As she told the reporter in 1974, she "missed" the Navy. Elaine thus reenlisted, this time in the reserves. In her senior year, she changed her mind about a teaching career. Elaine shared her thoughts at that time with the reporter in the 1974 interview--"I wanted to be back in the Navy. It's what I really wanted to do." After her 1965 graduation, Elaine thus reenlisted in the regular Navy, this time as a commissioned officer.

Trailblazing Once Again--A Navy Officer, 1965 - 1981

The Navy sent Elaine to its Women Officer School in Newport, Rhode Island for sixteen weeks. When she formally received her commission at a ceremony, Elaine's cousin who had been a WAVE in WW II, Marybeth Long Doss, attended the event with her husband. Elaine's first duty station as an officer was at the Pentagon. There she worked in Fleet Operations and Readiness. Elaine held another position that she identified for the Navy reporter who interviewed her in 1974--"I was also the public affairs officer for the WAVE's chorus." Composed of

volunteers from the enlisted ranks, the chorus rehearsed during their off-duty hours and performed before various organizations.

The Pentagon has five inner rings. Elaine's office, as she explained to her Army friend Dawn Elders, was in "the outer ring" of the Pentagon. She could look out upon Arlington National Cemetery. On September 11, 2001, Elaine's office was on the side of the Pentagon destroyed that day in the terrorist attack. She shared this fact with Dawn as well as with other friends. 9-11 was a dark day for all Americans, but Elaine must have taken it especially hard.

After her Pentagon assignment, the Navy sent Elaine overseas. She lived in London. Elaine told the reporter in 1974 that her post was with the Naval Board of the Military Agency for Standardization, where she worked with representatives from NATO. Her specialty was mine countermeasures. Elaine shared with her friend Dawn Elders that once she was in charge of coordinating a conference in Turkey, the only woman involved in organizing the conference. While in London, Elaine spent time with her brother Eugene who also drew London as his duty station. He enlisted in the Navy in 1967. Like his sister, the Navy sent him to Radio School. In London, Eugene was attached to what he identifies as "the NAV COM Unit." Asked if he, as an enlisted man, had to salute his sister when they met in the city, Eugene quickly said no because they both wore "civvies" while off-duty.

When Elaine returned to the States, the Navy again assigned her to aviation where she worked in administration, personnel, and operations for VT-125. At one point, the Navy sent her to the U.S. Naval Training Station in Newport, Rhode Island where she became Director of Officer Candidate's School's Initial Assignment Counseling Department. While in Newport, the Navy promoted Elaine to the rank of lieutenant commander early in 1974. With her new rank came a new responsibility--she became the Naval Education and Training Center's personnel officer.



New Lt. Cmdr.

Commander Julia J. DiLorenzo, assistant director of OCS, helps recently promoted Lt. Cmdr. Elaine F. Londak with her newly striped officer's coat. Lt. Cmdr. Londak was recently promoted at NOTC and is director of Initial Assignment Counseling Division of OCS. (Photo by Thomas W. Cookinham)

A year after attaining her rank as lieutenant commander, Elaine found herself at a new duty station. It was one that, in a way, brought her home. The Navy sent her to Naval Air Station North Island, San Diego, California. In 1975, she and a retired enlisted Navy friend, Ann Marie Cunningham, moved into a home in Escondido, about thirty-four miles north of the Air Station. Their neighbor Carol Van Houten remembers the year because she herself had moved into her home a year earlier.

Elaine remained in the Navy until 1981 when she retired. Her discharge certificate credits Elaine with years of various assignments as an administrative officer, a personnel and management officer, an administrative assistant, and a training officer. In addition to this military service, Elaine had been in the Navy as an enlisted WAVE and also in the reserves while attending Texas Woman's University. Decades more of service awaited her, this time to her community.

Community Service, 1981-2020

Elaine lived thirty-nine years in retirement, if one can call those last four decades of her life by that name. Her years on Park Hill Lane in Escondido lasted longer than her childhood and young adult years with her family in Chicago. The same is true in a comparison of her retirement years with her time in the Navy. Elaine spent her retirement in San Diego's North County doing community service. Janelle Catrambone, who worked as an activities director at an Escondido senior's community Elaine visited, believes Elaine "was all about volunteerism." Janelle adds, "You have to have a special heart to volunteer."



Ann and
Elaine

Elaine brought to her community work lifelong lessons in charity and service, taught to her first by her family and Catholic schools. Neighbor Maria Nielsen concludes, "There was a depth to who she was." In more than one way, the many facets of Elaine's personality were

apparent in the community work she did. What she chose to do reflected her values and her life.



After she left the Navy, Elaine registered for classes at Palomar College, located in a city just west of Escondido. She took courses in auto repair, woodworking, and one in the roles played by women in United States history. But it was her volunteerism in the community that became her focus. A sampling of her community work involved her time with the San Diego County Sheriff's Department's Volunteer Patrol for the San Marcos Station. Elaine's lifelong respect for law enforcement is reflected in that volunteerism. According to her friend Linda Dudik, she especially saw the importance of checking in on housebound seniors.

Elaine's love for the military can also be seen in her community service. She was a member of the North County WAVES and served as its chair at one point. Yearly, she picked up other women veterans to drive them to an annual Women in the Military Luncheon held at various locations in the San Diego area. Marybeth Long Doss, her cousin who had been in the WAVES, lived in San Diego's North County, too. She attended some of the gatherings with Elaine. Regularly, Elaine also observed Veterans Day ceremonies held at Escondido's Grape Park.

Elaine worked with seniors. She regularly visited retirement groups to play board games and, her favorite, the game rummikub. Her friend Toba Talebi recounts how Elaine came once a week, for ten years, to the Escondido Senior Center where Elaine, Toba, and others played rummikub. She also visited retirement communities such as Atria North Escondido to play games with residents. Former Activities Director Janelle Catrambone recalls Elaine coming every Thursday in the five

years Janelle worked there. As Janelle concludes, “She had so much to give all the time.”

In the last six years of her life, Elaine was a member of the Kiwanis Club of Escondido. Reverend Richard Huls remembers Elaine as one who exemplified what their organization is about, “social involvement,” as he puts it. Another member, Randy Otlieb, judges her to have been “a model Kiwanian.” He explains how she showed up for countless “work parties,” some even in Pasadena where Escondido members drove to help decorate the Kiwanis’ New Year’s Day float for the Rose Bowl Parade.

One area of Kiwanis activity held special meaning for Elaine, the Aktion Club. It worked with disabled adults. Kiwanis members helped out Aktion Club members with their service projects, such as cards for children in Rady Children’s Hospital and fundraisers for the hospital. Randy invited all Kiwanians to attend those club meetings, but he points out that “Elaine was the only club member who came regularly.” Randy asked her once about her dedication to the Aktion Club. Elaine told him about her sister Kathleen. Elaine learned compassion at an early age, at home and in school. She never forgot that lesson. It can be seen in her work not only with the Aktion Club but also in her work with seniors. Additionally, she and Ann were breast cancer survivors. They joined support groups. One imagines them boosting the spirits of other women.



Elaine & fellow members of the Kiwanis Club of Escondido; Elaine is in the bottom row, 2nd from left (pink sweater)

But her work within the community did not take up all of her time. Elaine had a personal life. She and Ann traveled to visit friends, some from their years in the Navy. Around 1983, they journeyed to Ireland, attracted, in part, by a desire to see the land from which Ann's ancestors had come. They stayed at a B&B in Ballyshannon, County Donegal owned by Mary McGee. On their second night with Mary, Elaine came downstairs to the kitchen to visit while Mary ironed. They talked for hours. That, as Mary puts it, "was our start." The three women--Elaine, Ann, and Mary--became close friends. Elaine and Ann returned every year unless health problems made that impossible. When Ann died in 2012, she wanted some of her ashes carried to Ireland. Elaine spread part of them in waters near Mary's B&B. Elaine carried the rest to the top of Sliabh Leigie, a mountain in County Donegal that stands almost 2,000 feet high. Mary's husband intended to accompany Elaine to the top, but the trek proved too taxing for him.

Elaine persevered on her own, following a walkway along the side of the mountain. She made it, as Mary puts it, "all the way to the top." Mary adds, "The wind was blowing so strong" that she was "terrified" Elaine "would get blown away." After she descended Sliabh Leigie, Elaine, Mary, and her husband stopped at a restaurant at the base of the mountain. They knew the owners from prior visits. Together, proprietors and guests toasted Ann with Irish coffee.

Mary McGee shares another telling story. One year, Elaine joined a small pilgrimage group that left from Mary's B&B for San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy. The trip focused on the life of the Catholic Saint Padre Pio, known for his charity. They spent ten days in Italy, visiting sites associated with Padre Pio. Elaine spoke for hours with Father Aodhan Cannon who led the tour. For a Catholic woman schooled by nuns, the pilgrimage must have held special meaning.

After her mother died in 1980, Elaine brought her sister Kathleen to San Diego. Elaine oversaw her care until Kathleen's death in 1992. While Kathleen lived in a care facility in San Diego, Elaine often brought her sister to her home. Mary McGee observes that Elaine "was so good to that girl." Elaine even taught Kathleen how to swim in her backyard pool.

Summoned

A few years ago, Elaine was again diagnosed with cancer, this time in her lungs and brain. Her neighbor Maria Nielsen's characterization of Elaine as "a take charge person" proved true in so many areas of Elaine's life, especially when it came to her health. Elaine flew to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for a plan with which she could fight the disease. UCSD implemented the recommendations. In April 2019, former neighbor Helena Lopez remembers how Elaine "walked up the hill" outside her home to attend a yearly Cocktail Hour the Park Hill Lane neighborhood observed. Elaine clearly was not well, and Helena could see that. Still, in Helena's judgment, Elaine was "one tough cookie" even on that day.

Elaine's strength could still be seen at the end of her life. Neighbor Maria Nielsen shares how, in some of her last visits with Elaine before she died, Elaine showed what "an independent person" she was as she "tried to hold up her own cup" even when it proved difficult to do so. Confined to her bed, she watched the 6:00 A.M. Catholic mass daily, until she was not able to do so, according to her friend Janet Redd. The Reverend Richard Huls visited; they discussed the Bible, at Elaine's request. (Before her illness, she attended his Bible classes at an Escondido retirement home.)

Throughout her years living on Park Hill Lane, Elaine was known in the neighborhood as a friend to cats. Maria Nielsen lived near Elaine with her husband and three children. She remembers one particular cat that her family had. Maria points out that the cat was one of three the Niensens owned. One of the cats "preferred to live with Elaine," as Maria explains, going to the Londak/Cunningham house to eat food Elaine regularly put out for stray or feral cats. The Nielsen children believed Elaine had "stolen our cat." No, Maria, explained, "The cat just preferred Elaine." One day another animal attacked it. Elaine saw what had happened and asked Maria's permission to take it to a veterinarian. The cat died, but Elaine made arrangements to have it cremated so she could keep the ashes.

According to her friend Janet Redd, Elaine told her that at one point she had fed fourteen stray cats in the neighborhood. She lined up their food bowls by the swimming pool. Elaine must have smiled as she recounted to Janet how she saw fourteen tails go up in the air as the cats

ate. Linda Dudik remembers how Elaine was especially proud of how a few feral cats allowed her to approach them.

In her last year and a half, while in care facilities, Elaine shared her room with Piagi, a cat that belonged to her niece MJ Harris. The cat and Elaine had what MJ called “a special bond.” Piagi was extremely attached to Elaine, acting very protective of her when medical aides stopped by to check on Elaine. It is not surprising that an independent woman spent her retirement years looking after a type of animal that was also known for being independent.



Elaine & Piagi

In the early 1940s, when Elaine was growing up in Chicago, residents in San Diego’s North County read their Escondido-based, local newspaper, *The Times-Advocate*. When someone died, the paper ran a headline with the person’s name and the word “summoned.” The meaning was clear--God had called the deceased to his or her heavenly reward. Elaine was so summoned on December 28, 2020. One imagines

her now reunited with her parents, Kathleen, and Ann. Elaine is probably tiring them with games of rummikub.

Military inurnment will take place on January 25, 2021 at 1:00 P.M. at Miramar National Cemetery with Navy Military Honors.

The family requests donations to a charity in lieu of flowers. Father Cannon in Ireland, who had led the Padre Pio Pilgrimage to Italy, said a mass for Elaine on Christmas Eve. Given Elaine's faith, masses could also be offered if someone wanted to do so.

Letters of condolences may be sent to the family via Elaine's niece:

Theresa Harris

2645 Colman Street

Ottawa, Ontario K1V 8J7, Canada

This obituary will be posted at the website address for California Funeral Alternatives--www.calfuneralt.com. To navigate the website to find Elaine's obituary, go to Obituaries > Dec 2020 > Elaine Londak > Obituary and Services. Shortly after January 25th, the site will also have a video of the Miramar National Cemetery service for Elaine.

Additionally, since Elaine was a child during World War II and because her life exemplified the wartime example of service, her obituary is also on the website of the World War II Experience. It is an educational nonprofit that works with North San Diego County members of the WW II Generation, preserving their stories. The website is www.wwiexperience.com. Elaine's story is at the very end of the website's Home Front section.