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WOMEN IN COMBAT:
THE OPERATIONAL IMPACT OF MEETING
A NATIONAL SECURITY NECESSITY

by

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Signature: *Linda J. Fraser-Andrews*

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WOMEN IN COMBAT:

THE OPERATIONAL IMPACT OF MEETING A NATIONAL SECURITY NECESSITY

There are three stages in the revelation of any truth:
In the first, it is ridiculed;
In the second, resisted;
In the third, it is considered self-evident...

Schopenhauer

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women's roles in the military have expanded throughout history until today they are almost completely integrated. The only restriction that remains to effect their full utilization is combat exclusion defined in legal statute and internal service policy.

The combat exclusion policy no longer fits the realities of manpower shortages and the changing battlefield. Demographic forecasts of a shrinking youthful manpower pool mandate that the military freely use 100% of the qualified work force. Today's expanding battlefield places both combatants and noncombatants in jeopardy and makes "combat" difficult to define. As a result, ambiguities concerning the proper use of women in noncombatant roles have arisen that negatively affect operational readiness.

Specific concerns most often voiced in opposition to placing women in combat include women's perceived lesser physical and emotional strength, possible diminished combat unit integrity due to impaired male-bonding, U.S. public opinion, and cultural perceptions of U.S. allies and adversaries. This paper will review these areas and provide support for optimism that lifting the combat exclusion policy is a can-do proposition when based on objective qualifications and unemotional reflection.

CHAPTER II

U.S. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

WOMEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD: PRE-TWENTIETH CENTURY. While the American Revolution was underway, women followed their menfolk into battle and often took their places on the artillery line when men fell wounded or exhausted. Dissatisfied with a support role, some women masqueraded as men and joined regiments but were quickly "mustered out" when discovered.

During the Civil War, both the Union and the Confederacy officially used women as spies and couriers. In addition, women again donned men's clothing and fought surreptitiously on the front lines. A number of sources agree that almost 400 women were known to have participated in combat while in disguise.¹

At the end of the 1800's, although no female combatant activity is recorded, the outstanding service provided by women serving as nurses in the Spanish-American War led Congress to establish the Army and Navy Nurse corps. "Although full military status, rank, and privileges would not come for years, the way was paved for increased use of women with the military."²

WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II: FREEING MEN TO FIGHT. World War I saw the increased use of women as nurses in the military serving both in the U.S. and overseas. In 1916 the Navy, in an effort to free more stateside shore based sailors for ship duty, expanded women's military opportunities by enlisting women in the Naval Reserve as yeomen where they served as clerical support, translators, draftsmen, munitions workers, fingerprint experts,

camouflage designers, and recruiters. The Marine Corps followed suit the following year and enlisted 300 women 'Marinettes.'

At the conclusion of the war, women were transferred to inactive status and discharged. Women's involvement in World War I dramatically enlightened public opinion as to women's capabilities forming the framework for profound changes in the societal status of women.³

During World War II, manpower shortages led to a surge of women's recruitment.⁴ In 1942, the Navy established the WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) where women filled numerous nontraditional billets such as Air Traffic Controller and Aviation Gunnery Instructor. Also in 1942, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was introduced which in 1943 became Women's Army Corps (WAC) whose members would serve directly in and not merely with the Army.⁵ The Army Air Force in 1943 formed the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) whose stateside non-combat jobs included ferrying planes, pilot training, target towing and test pilot.

Women served in all theaters of war often deployed in harm's way as noncombatants. Two hundred and one Army nurses were killed, five on the Anzio beach head and 16 in direct enemy action. In the Philippines and Japan, 82 women were taken prisoner and in the United States 38 of the more than 1,000 WASPs were killed while performing flight duties.⁶

In 1948, due to their proven competence and the need to combat continued manpower shortages, Congress passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act (Public Law 625). It gave women permanent

status in the regular Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps with a number of restrictions including a 2% enlistment cap.⁷ This act also enabled each service secretary to define acceptable military duties for women but specified Air Force women 'may not be assigned to duty in aircraft while such aircraft are engaged in combat missions' and that Naval women may not be 'assigned to duty on vessels of the Navy except hospital ships and naval transports.'⁸

RECENT CONFLICTS AND RESULTING CHANGES: KOREA TO IRAQ. After World War II personnel strengths shrank considerably. With the onset of the Korean War in the 1950's, the military scrambled to recruit both men and women but efforts were only partially successful.⁹ America's involvement in Vietnam in the 1960's again renewed the recruitment effort. Of the 260,000 women in uniform during the Vietnam years, an estimated 10,000 served in-country with thousands more in neighboring countries. More than 92% of the servicewomen in Vietnam served as nurses while the remainder provided administrative, personnel, and communications support.¹⁰

The backlash of public opinion after Vietnam brought many changes to the U.S. military with the most significant being the termination of the draft and institution of the All Volunteer Force (AVF). The Women's Movement, severe manpower shortages, the lifting of the 2% ceiling, and the AVF all contributed to increased female end strengths.

As it became apparent that women were serious about long term career progression, new opportunities gradually opened. In 1978 as a prelude to the Navy's Women in Ships program, Congress modified

Public Law 625 to allow women to serve on noncombatant vessels and on combat ships for periods not to exceed 180 days.11

As depicted in the following summary, servicewomen's utilization in military operations increased dramatically and in such a way as to put a strain on the definition of 'noncombatant':

1983 Grenada Invasion

- C-141 Starlifter transports with female crew members were used to airlift troops and supplies into Grenada while U.S. forces were engaged in combat.12

- 200 U.S. Army women were deployed to Grenada with many serving as military police and helicopter crew chiefs.13

1986 Air Strike on Libya

- 7 Air Force women served as aircraft commanders, co-pilots, navigators, and fuel-boom operators aboard KC-10 and KC-135 aircraft refueling Air Force bombers in flight during operations.14

- Female Navy pilots flew COD (carrier on-board delivery) missions during the strike.15

1987 Persian Gulf Tanker Conflict

- Mixed-gender crew of the destroyer tender USS ACADIA deployed to the Gulf to begin repairing the damaged USS STARK.16

1989 Operation JUST CAUSE, Panama

- 174 Army women in military police and combat support units fought snipers and provided security in Panama.17

- Air Force women, active and reserve, piloted and crewed Military Airlift Command (MAC) transports carrying troops and supplies and Strategic Airlift Command (SAC) tankers refueling tactical aircraft throughout the operation.18

1990 Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM

- As of September 1990, more than 625 Navy women were deployed on 10 support vessels committed to the operation.19

- Reports claim the percentage of women participating service wide in theater is about 7% with expected increases to equal their overall proportion in the services, roughly 11%.20

CHAPTER III

RESCINDING COMBAT EXCLUSION: MAKING POLICY FIT REALITY

THE REALITY OF AVAILABLE MANPOWER: FUTURE DEMOGRAPHICS. The Census Bureau stated that of 30 possible population growth patterns, the most likely is a significant decline in the 21st century creating a marked shortage in the labor pool.¹ Complicating the labor problem is a severe educational deficit. The fastest growing group in the new labor force are Hispanics who have a 40% drop-out rate, triple the national average. Additionally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that jobs requiring a college degree will rise to 38% from 22% by the end of the century increasing the demand for educated manpower resources.³

Personnel recruitment is heavily swayed by economic factors. According to one study, the proportion of those qualified and available men who volunteer for military service depends primarily upon alternative employment and pay opportunities.⁴ Generally, civilian employers can afford to be more flexible with salary and benefit offers than the military. As the unemployment rates decline, competition for resources will become keen. This competition could place the All Voluntary Force at risk. In short, the military will not be able to afford underutilization of more than half of the nation's work force.

THE REALITY OF THE CHANGING BATTLEFIELD: NONCOMBATANTS IN COMBAT?

Urban and jungle warfare such as that fought in Panama and Vietnam, longer range missiles, possible use of chemical and biological weapons all blur the line between combat and support troops and make the 'rear' lines of battle as dangerous as the

front. As evidenced by the U.S. military's own air campaign over Iraq and Kuwait, tactical battle doctrine calls for deep strikes in the enemy's rear to disrupt command and control, destroy logistics installations and interrupt transportations systems; all areas in which women play central roles.

Women currently serve on Navy oilers, repair ships, combat logistics ships, and ammunition supply ships; Air Force women fly the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft, tankers, and MAC transports. These platforms have a vital support mission and little to no self defense capability or, in other words, are low risk, high priority targets. In the Army, women serve as military police and in both the Army and Marine Corps, women are employed in combat support units that require their deployment to such hot spots as Panama and the Persian Gulf. "Just because you're not in a combat unit doesn't mean you won't be in combat. When they start lobbing SCUDS with chemical weapons, they'll be aiming at everybody."⁵

Due to the integral role women play in the military today, it is not an option to remove them from units that deploy in or close to combat. As stated by Major General William J. Mall (USAF), commander of the first wave of aircraft that attacked Grenada, "To have excluded an aircraft from the mission simply because there was a woman on board would have lessened our response and reduced our effectiveness."⁶

The lack of a clear service wide understanding of how to use noncombatants in "combat" situations while staying within the letter of the law has already caused inefficiencies in rapid

deployment. During the invasion of Grenada a contingent of female Army military police were sent back to their barracks three times before being allowed to deploy. Once in Grenada, they were recalled to Fort Bragg then once again returned to Grenada three days later. This type of confusion could be magnified in a larger campaign hindering operational flexibility and maneuverability.⁷

This lack of understanding has caused a number of ambiguities and operational mismatches to develop between the services. For example, the USAF Air Weather Service, a unit that employs women, is tasked with providing all weather support to the Army in all operational arenas. The Air Weather Service follows Army policy in deciding which supported unit or location is permissible for deploying women. This not only complicates the assignment process but fails to maximize the use of all available trained personnel.⁸

Another much debated problem involves the Navy-Coast Guard interface in wartime. As a member of the Department of Transportation in peacetime, the Coast Guard is not affected by the combat exclusion policy and therefore allows women to serve aboard USCG vessels in all capacities. As a part of the Navy during time of war, the exclusion policy would mandate Coast Guard women to disembark severely hampering mission readiness. As former Coast Guard Commandant, Admiral James Gracey stated,

If I have a woman commanding a ship in the Bering Sea, I am not about to bring that ship home nor am I about to rely a helicopter out there to pick up its commanding officer just because she happens to wear a skirt once in a while. Forget it.⁹

CHAPTER IV
CONCERNS FOR FULL INTEGRATION

COMBAT UNIT INTEGRITY

Physical Strength and Emotional Stamina. There is no denying that women are anthropomorphically different from men. Pentagon studies have shown that due to these body composition and cardiovascular differences, women have 55% the strength, explosive power, speed and throwing/jumping abilities and 67% the physical endurance and heat tolerance of their male counterparts.¹

Opponents to women in combat claim these physical limitations could hinder the military's ability to wage war. Advocates argue that the increased use of high technology in combat, the individual differences between women (as between men) and the positive effects of training diminish the perceived impact.

Changes in technology in many areas have decreased the necessity for brute force. On board Navy ships 'heavy natural fiber mooring lines have been replaced by synthetic lines; chain falls, hoists and come-alongs do most of the lifting and carrying; weapon systems can be fired by computers.'² In the air, advances in flight controls allow women to fly jets with relative ease. On the ground, advocates claim technological advances have transformed wars into push-button conflicts where less than 10% of the jobs in combat require actual hand-to-hand fighting.³

While transition to full integration based purely on relative differences in physical strength may be easier at sea and in the air, it is intuitively obvious that in the ground war many tasks critical to successful combat operations - digging foxholes,

lifting and loading heavy ammunition, changing tank treads, conducting rapid runway repair tasks - require a large measure of strength. This does not mandate, however, a blanket exclusion of women from jobs requiring these tasks. A Navy commissioned study in 1978 concluded that although women generally

tend to be smaller and weaker, and to have less endurance...there are many females who are larger and stronger than some males...It is impossible to generalize and say 'On this physical task we expect all males to be better than all females'.'4

Increased emphasis on sports and fitness training is changing the general condition of young women. More girls and women are competing in more physical jobs, athletics, aerobic exercise and the Olympics. Additionally, Army studies indicate that 'proper physical conditioning enables women to assume duties even where military effectiveness requires physical strength.'5

The crux of the physical limitation issue is to divorce it from cultural resistance (all men can..., no woman can...) and determine realistically gender-neutral physical qualifications required to get the job done. 'Job demands should be emphasized to find out what human [emphasis added] capacities are required to perform a given job.'6

Pregnancy is often listed as a physical limitation that can constrain operations. Personnel losses due to pregnant servicewomen, most commonly very junior women, can debilitate a unit. The issue of teenage pregnancy is unfortunately a national one. As a reflection of society, the military is forced to deal with a perplexing problem that limits military flexibility and preparedness. To limit all women based on the immaturity of the

few, however, is neither logical nor sound organizational practice. Pregnancy in so far as it impedes operational readiness is a problem that needs to be addressed through preventive education, specifically birth control, personal and military responsibilities, the realities of single parenthood; administrative action and, as appropriate, disciplinary sanctions.

Insufficient emotional stamina has also been cited as a detractor for women in combat. Generally, in American society women are encouraged to openly display their emotions; men to be stoic and/or aggressive. Passive reactions to stress, i.e. tears, are considered a feminine or 'weak' trait. This author contends, however, that how an individual reacts to stress is not necessarily indicative of how well one copes with stress. Studies of the American nurses who were prisoners of war during World War II and women survivors of German concentration camps demonstrate women are no less capable of handling rigorous stress than are men.⁷

Unit Cohesion and Male-Bonding. Male-bonding is considered a critical ingredient of combat unit integrity. One military writer states, "The key variable in the effectiveness of a military unit is not the technical abilities of its troops, ...but the ability of troops to maintain cohesive bonding under fire."⁸ Some argue that the presence of women in combat units will detract from the cohesion process negatively affecting unit readiness.

Bonding, or group cohesion, is an important element in the continuity and success of any group. The misconception, however, is the belief that military unit bonding is only possible among males. Two mixed-gender Army field deployments studied in 1982 and

1984 indicated similar noteworthy trends related to the issue of cohesion. The observational studies included a two week exercise in a hostile combat simulated environment with approximately 20 women and 180 men and a 179 day deployment to Honduras with 50 women and 650 men. Men and women lived under the same conditions during both studies.

In both cases, many non-romantic male-female 'buddy relationships' developed in the field that strongly resembled the male-bonding process. One researcher surmised that male-bonding may not have been a result of gender commonalty but 'may in fact have resulted from commonalty of experience in what have historically happened to be gender-exclusive groups.'⁹

An alternative hypothesis would reject these findings due to the lack of a real time hostile environment. In matters pertaining to organized aggression it is believed that women would be rejected by both sexes as leaders and that males would further reject females as colleagues. If accurate, this attitude would disallow combat unit cohesion. In light of women's involvement in the equal opportunity employer of terrorism and insurgency fighting; the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany (Meinhof is a woman), America's Weathermen, and the female guerillas of Vietnam to name but a few; groups in which strong patterns of male bonding would be expected, this hypothesis is difficult to reconcile.¹⁰

UNITED STATES PUBLIC OPINION. Throughout American history women have been viewed as the gentler sex, the non-aggressive nurturer worthy of protection from the dangers of war and the world. As recent events involving military women come to the forefront, many

of these beliefs are being challenged. Following the very visible actions of Army Captain Linda Bray and her fellow female military police in Panama, less recent stories appeared in the press marking Air Force and Navy women's participation in Grenada, Libya and the Persian Gulf. The recent mobilization of male and female troops to Saudi Arabia has also afforded the press an opportunity to examine and present to the public the role of women in the military.

Media coverage appears to be slowly desensitizing society on the issue of women in combat. The press has provided upbeat reporting with frequent positive comments made concerning women's professionalism and competence. The only negativity has involved the suggestion that the combat exclusion policy is 'unrealistic and unnecessarily hampers the service in the use of skilled women.'¹¹

The effect of this positive coverage is evidenced in a recent Market Opinion Research poll administered to ascertain voter attitudes toward the combat role of woman in the Panama invasion. Returns showed that 63% of the respondents approved of women's participation in combat. Further, the attitudes correlated strongly by age vice sex in that of the respondents between 18-24, both males and females, 70% approved of the women's combat role in Panama while only 48% of respondents over 65 approved. 'The rejection of the combat exemption/presumption of equal responsibility was thus strongest among the group liable for service.'¹²

Would the death of a woman while participating as a 'pseudo-soldier' in Panama have changed these reactions? The thought of deliberately sending wives, mothers and daughters to the horrors of

war to have them return in body bags is particularly repellant to American society. It seems the public is still more sensitive to women suffering the extremities of war than it is to the sufferings of men. It is difficult to gauge if this attitude is changing. Opinion polls notwithstanding, there appears to be no clear cut general consensus.

This indecision on the part of the American public is reflected in the U.S. Congress. Those in Congress who wish to give the military more flexibility apparently do not sense enough support to mount a full scale attack on the exclusion law itself.¹³

An example of this 'waffling' legislation is the bill introduced for legislation in 1987 by Senator DeConcini, D-Arizona. In response to the 1986 graduation of female Dutch pilot from F-16 training at Sheppard AFB, Texas, Senator DeConcini proposed a bill allowing U.S. Air Force women to attend fighter pilot training. At the same time, however, the senator stated, "I want it understood that I continue to believe that women should not be placed in combat situations and they should not be drafted."¹⁴

PERCEPTIONS OF FRIEND AND FOE: SIGNALLING WEAKNESS OR STRENGTH?

Two opposing points of view are espoused concerning the potential reaction of U.S. allies and adversaries to the use of American women in combat roles. One states that training and employing women in combat signals U.S. military weakness and desperation, a weakness that may prompt an adversary to strike. The other holds that using women in combat displays full dedication to a cause. Arming women for a conflict could be perceived as the ultimate commitment to 'fight to the finish'.¹⁵

Women of many nations - Soviet, French, Israeli - fought ferociously on the front lines when required by their country. The historical trend once the crisis was over, however, was a return to more traditional roles in society. On the whole, women are seen as a defensive vice offensive weapon to be employed in times of extreme emergency.

The Traditional Adversary - USSR. The Soviet Union is generally ambivalent towards women and traditionalist in their use of women in the military. Ambivalence aside, however, one author proposes that 'the Soviets do appreciate the deterrent value of peacetime preparations to mobilize society in event of war.' For this reason, a U.S. decision to train and use women in battle could be perceived by the Soviets as 'an act both of preparedness and will.'¹⁶

The Traditional Allies - NATO. All in all, NATO allies are most concerned with U.S. troop allocation to ensure the protection of Europe. Although one author allows NATO will take American female combatants seriously if they are taken seriously by their own leaders, he also adds that given the alternatives of either U.S. return to conscription or increased reliance on women, NATO would favor conscription.¹⁷

Recent developments in the use of women in the militaries of some NATO nations may alter that position. In 1987, Denmark began to test women soldiers to fill Army and Air Force combat positions. (At that time, Danish women were already serving on board Naval combatants.) According to the program supervisor, Major Ejnar Pederson.

Denmark's tests are of great interest to other NATO nations because they, like Denmark, are facing declining birthrates which will make it extremely difficult to keep front-line regiments up to strength if only males are allowed to serve.¹⁸

In 1986, a Dutch woman became NATO's first female combat pilot and in 1989 Sweden dropped its ban on women in combat. Although the percentages are small, Norway and Belgium also employ women in their combat forces.¹⁹

In 1987 Canada launched the five year Combat Related Employment of Women (CREW) trials to study the effect of mixed-gender combat groups on the operational effectiveness of the Army and Navy components of the Canadian Armed Forces. (Based on an earlier study, the Air Force decided to open all areas to women, including fighter pilot, eschewing the need for further trials.) After studying the initial trial results in 1988, the Canadian Human Rights Council decreed that employment of women in all combat roles excluding submarines should not be a matter of trial but should be implemented as a policy decision over a ten year implementation period.²⁰

Confronting Culture: ARAB NATIONS. The general 'Arab attitude' toward women is more traditional, with varying degrees of intensity between Arab nations due to cultural and religious differences, than the western cultures. Regarding the Arab view of confronting enemy women in battle, two differing perceptions arise from Arab-Israeli war history. One source states 'Arab reaction to enemy women fighters was reportedly demoralization. More than affronting their chauvinism, presence of Jewish women in battle clearly indicated to the Arabs that this was a war in which the Jews were prepared to use every possible force.'²¹ Alternately, another

source reported "captured Arab troops stated that they would fight to the death rather than suffer dishonor by surrendering to women."22

In regards to the latter view, similar statements were more recently espoused by Iraqi sources concerning the dishonor associated with surrendering to American/Western forces. Care has been taken to deploy Arab troops in proximity to the western forces to minimize the possible impact of this cultural problem. A like pattern of deployment would have to be considered when using women combatants in the front lines.

On the Arab allied front, as when dealing with any culture not our own, care must be exercised to avoid the perception of encouraging change in a society not yet ready.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research assembled for this paper, the following recommendations have been developed:

- Objectively quantify combat job requirements. Studies completed by the Canadian and Danish armed forces may be useful in this pursuit.

- Develop testing based on quantifiable measures to objectively assess the most qualified individual for the job.

- Develop physical conditioning programs to assist those women, and men, who are unable to meet basic standard physical requirements.

- Educate the military leadership at all levels to base expectations on actual qualifications and potential and to make judgements based on actual performance vice cultural stereotypes.

- Promote public awareness through the media to continue/encourage national desensitization to women in combat stressing the issues of national security and military manpower necessity.

- Present a united, supportive presence to allies and adversaries alike promoting the women and men of the U.S. military services as competent and capable professionals.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

An issue raised during research but not addressed in this paper is that of the draft. If/when the combat exclusion policy is lifted, will women be registered and, if conscription is ever reinstated, drafted with men? This is an area that warrants further study.

The U.S. combat exclusion policy is being strained on many fronts - demographically, historically, culturally. Many American allies are facing similar challenges to their national security and are facing them with proactive decisions concerning the use of their military women.

Many of the more quantitative concerns regarding placing women in combat roles can be remedied with training, education, strong leadership, and familiarization. More difficult are the subjective arguments based on cultural values. A precept of organizational change states that attitudes are the last bastion, the most resistant to modification. Changing behaviors, however, can facilitate and accomplish attitudinal change.

Generally, the American public appears to be accepting the expanded role of women in the military in a noncombatant role. Whether or not they understand the full implications of noncombatants providing support in an increasingly dangerous and expanding battlefield remains to be seen. The most ideal time to acclimate the American public, both civilian and military, to possible modifications in the status of military women is in times of relative peace so that gradual, 'painless' change can take

place. Unfortunately, that is no longer possible at this time. Public opinion may be sorely tested in the months to come as the war in Iraq continues.

Public acceptance is important when dealing with changes in the military forces for it shapes Congressional opinion and action and the public is the source from which the military services are 'resupplied'. Ultimately, however, the final decision must be one of national security. The military and its leaders must determine the best course of action to sustain a combat efficient and ready force and follow through.

NOTES

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