



Women's Role in Combat: Is Ground Combat the Next Front?

Sylvia Wan

Women in the United States have not been traditionally thought of as combat soldiers. However, they have recently been allowed to serve in more combat positions than in any other time in our nation's history. The only restriction that prevents women from being equal in the military is the ban on women serving in ground combat positions. Is putting women in ground combat units merely the next step? When asked about women in ground combat, President Bush summed up his policy in four words "No women in combat."¹ President Bush's stand is adamant against women serving in any combat role, especially ground combat positions. In every war since WWII, presidents have had to tackle the issue of women's role in the military.

Women's role in combat has been consistently changing from the founding of our country. The first role that women played in the military was the role of volunteer nurses. By the time of the Civil War, the presence of female nurses was an accepted part of the military. In 1901, the Army established the Army Nurses Corp, allowing women an official position in the military.² During WWII, the military actively recruited women to fill manpower shortages, especially in clerical and secretarial work. As is usually the case for women participating in war efforts, when the war ended, they were demilitarized and returned to traditional civilian roles.³

Since then, the major changes for women in the military came from the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act PL 80-625. This act opened up many more positions for women in the military.

In 1948 Public Law 80-625 gave women a permanent place, both active and reserves, within all four military services. However the law placed restrictions women as well, such as a two percent limit on the proportion of women to men allowed to enlist, and only ten percent of the female enlisted

could become officers. The highest officer position a woman could hold was that of the director of the women's division of her particular service. This position would be temporary, lasting only four years. After her term was up, she would be either demoted, or forced to retire. Women were banned from serving on combat ships and planes. Though it was not specifically stated within the law, legislators intended to ban women from being placed near ground combat zones as well. Separate divisions (WAC, WAVES, and WAF) were also created to manage the female recruits. The restrictions created by this law might have integrated women into the military, but women were also placed within a separate class, without the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

Most of these restrictions might sound absurd now, but they were the reality for women up until the mid-seventies. In 1978, the separate women's divisions of the services were abolished. The end of these divisions signified a higher level of equality for women in the services. By this time, the only restriction left from Public Law 80-625 was the restriction barring women from serving on combat ships and planes, as well as the unstated ban from ground combat positions. Due in part to women's participation in Desert Storm, Congress repealed the last shred of Public Law 80-625 by allowing women to serve in combat positions for the Air Force and Navy. This removed the last legal barrier for placing women in combat.⁴

As a result of the danger women encountered while in support positions during Desert Storm, President Bush (Sr.) called for the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces (PCAWAF) in order to determine whether women should be placed in more combat positions. According to the study, women did not meet the physical requirements of ground combat positions, and their presence could also be detrimental to unit cohesion for a number of reasons. The commission also determined that if women were allowed into combat positions, there would no longer be any legal standing to prevent women from being included in the next draft. With a 10 against and 2 abstentions, the commission voted against allowing women to serve in ground combat positions.⁵

The largest portion of the PCAWAF was dedicated to testimony and tests that showed that women, as a whole, did not meet the requirements for various ground combat positions. These studies tested both

men and women who were given the same training and requirements to meet. Within these studies, the women's physical performances were about 70% that of the men's performance. In response to the evidence that some women did reach the physical standard, the PCAWAF stated, "There is little doubt that some women could meet the physical standards for ground combat, but the evidence shows that few women possess the necessary physical requirements."⁶ Those for lifting the ban on combat exclusion say that with extra training more women would be able to meet the same physical requirements. In a study by the Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, 78% of the participating women were able to lift 150 pounds off the ground to a height of fifty-two inches and could jog with 75 pound packs after six months of physical training.⁷ The study showed that with extra training, a large portion of women entering the military could be brought up to the same physical standards as men.

Despite the testimony and tests displaying that women (with the current levels of basic training) could not physically handle ground combat positions, the damage to unit cohesion was the main reason the commission voted for the ground combat exclusion. The commission outlined five different areas in which the presence of women could cause cohesion problems. One, of women being unable to meet and endure the physical burdens required of each unit member. Two, awkward situations may arise due to lack of privacy and forced intimacy. Three, the presence of traditional western values that would make the men feel it was their duty to protect the female sex. Four, the forced working environment could lead to possible dysfunctional relationships including, but not limited to, incidents of sexual harassment. Five, fear of pregnancies that could arise from sexual relationships within the unit.

Group cohesion within combat units is thought to be one of the most important elements in accomplishing military tasks. The disruption of this element could mean disaster for the entire unit and any operation it may be carrying out.⁸ The lack of privacy and forced intimacy is thought to disrupt cohesion by causing sexual tension, and any number of problems resulting from it. Tension may exist, but it does not have to detract from the effectiveness of the unit.

In reference to the lack of privacy during the Persian Gulf War, "... men and women serving side-by-side in the Gulf demonstrated that they were capable of working together as teams; they could be comrades without "fraternizing"; they could share tents without sharing beds; they could share common

dangers without feigning chivalry."⁹ The trained soldier is accustomed to meager accommodations and lack of privacy. In the event that women were present in the units, operations and habits did not change.

There have already been numerous reports of sexual harassment and misconduct toward women in the military. However, the levels of sexual harassment (and any other crime for that matter) in the military are far lower than levels of the same crime in the civilian sector. On a whole, women actually encounter less sexual harassment in the military than in the civilian sector. According to Miller, a sociologist, a more common way for men showing resentment of women being in the military is through gender harassment. Constant scrutiny and sabotage are examples of two forms of gender harassment women endure when entering fields that are not traditional for them.¹⁰ Both of these methods generally force the women to work harder, in order to earn the respect of their male peers.¹¹ There is no way to regulate gender harassment because its methods are so subtle. Just as within the civilian world, given enough time, gender harassment in the military will simply fade away as more women enter the military and can prove they can work just as hard as their male counterparts.

The PCAWAF named pregnancy as the last cohesion problem that could be caused by including women in ground combat units. However, birth control methods have become advanced to such a level that a woman simply needs to take a birth control shot in order to prevent her from being fertile for six months. The risk of a woman getting pregnant while on tour is very slim. According to the American Civil Liberties Union's Sara L. Mandelbaum, the average time lost due to pregnancy is actually lower than the average time lost for common male problems (alcoholism for example).¹² According to George Quester in an article for the *International Security* journal, women who chose to leave the military service would not cause any more of a logistical problem than men who only serve for four years.¹³

According to a report, which focused on the Department of Defense's (DoD) policy on women in the military, compiled by the United States Accounting Office for the Senate, "about 15 percent of all positions across the armed forces are closed to women because they (1) are in occupations that primarily engage in direct ground combat, (2) collocate and operate with direct ground combat units, (3) are located on ships where the cost of providing appropriate living arrangements is considered prohibitive, or (4) are in units that engage in special operations missions and long-range reconnaissance."¹⁴ The DOD's rationale for

not including women in such positions is as follows. First, there is no need for women in these positions due to the availability of men who can perform the same jobs. Second, there is a lack of public and congressional support for women in ground combat positions. Third, the involuntary assignment of women into ground combat units is not supported by servicewomen today.¹⁵ The PCAWAF helped to shape the DoD's perception of public opinion on women in ground combat positions.

The PCAWAF's report on a 1992 survey stated that only 12% of enlisted women and 10% of female noncommissioned officers would consider combat positions¹⁶ lead to the assumption that women do not want to serve in combat capacities. Instead, they would rather be in a more comfortable desk job over being in the field. This assumption is in not correct according to a study conducted by the RAND's National Defense Research Institute. The study found that, "the nature of the work involved in the occupations does not seem to affect the willingness of women to enter it. Neither the hard physical work of the engineering occupations nor the austere living conditions of the air support skills appear to deter women from seeking to work in the jobs. Additionally, high-technology occupations that operate in relatively more comfortable circumstances do not necessarily draw women in greater numbers."¹⁷ Women choose their line of work for the same reasons men do. Their decision is not necessarily based on the cushiness of the job, but more likely tied to the utilization of their abilities.

Women today serve in various support and supply positions that make it just as likely for them to encounter enemy fire as combat troops. According to Lt. Col. Frels, women have been routinely deployed in peace operations since Desert Storm. Peace operations, sometimes known as police functions, are not considered to be 'wars' and have no battle lines. However, military personal can become injured, even die, at the hands of insurgents and combat can become necessary.¹⁸ The justification that allows for the assignment of women to peace operations can be explained by the social theory held by Helen Hughes, "the greater the relative importance of actual war fighting (especially ground combat), the less the participation of women."¹⁹ This explains the military's willingness to put women in possibly dangerous positions, as long as the overall action is considered a peace operation.

There are women who meet the physical requirements, who are interested in the positions from which they are currently excluded, and are already being put in harms way. Proponents for dissolving

the combat exclusion state, if women are performing the same job and enduring the same amount of danger, they should be able to receive the same recognition. A woman's ability to receive promotions is hindered by her inability to participate in combat roles. There should be only one standard for both men and women. If women are to have equal rights, then they should have the equal responsibility to civic duty, including fighting for their country. Opponents of the current combat exclusion believe women should have the same chance of being considered for a combat position (as long as they meet the same qualifications) so that both men and women have the same opportunity for promotions.

All military personal receive basic combat training; however, some women are now being allowed training that was once reserved only for men. The counter sniper training is now available to women who are serving as security in protecting airbases and planes. According to Ben Dolan, Army Guard Sgt. First Class, a former Marine sniper and the chief instructor for the only US military sniper school that accepts women, "women can shoot better, by and large, and they're easier to train because they don't have the inflated egos that a lot of men bring to these programs. Women will ask for help if they need it, and they will tell you what they think." He also believes that women are more mentally suited for being snipers. Women are being trained as counter snipers due to the rising number of hostile countries that use women as snipers.²⁰ The counter sniper training is typically thought of as combat training; however, these women are not being put in combat positions.

With the current Iraq war, more women find themselves in combat than in any other war to date. Because the situation in Iraq is considered a peacekeeping operation, the use of Military Police (MP) to conduct searches and seizures is very common. Up until the mid-90's the combat operations that the MP took were usually short-lived, they served mainly as a support unit for infantrymen. However, the MP's in Iraq are now performing the exact same duties that all-male combat units are performing.²¹ The major difference between the infantrymen and the MP units is that the MP units tend to have a larger proportion of women. According to Captain Kellie McCoy, of the Army Airborne division, "Our doctrine [on women in combat] was suited for wars with front lines. In Iraq, the front line is everywhere. Once you leave the [base] camp, you're on the front line."²² Capt McCoy received the Bronze Star with combat "V" for valor in recognition for shooting her way out of an ambush. These women are already putting their lives

on the line every time they perform a routine patrol through Iraq. The Iraq war has seen the most service women casualties and injuries, with 35 dead and 271 wounded.²³ The women who are caught in combat, and fight with valor, should be able to receive the same awards and promotional recognition as their male unit members and fellow infantrymen whom they are supporting.

By officially prohibiting women from serving in combat roles, even if they defensively serve in a combat capacity, they are barred from promotions in which combat experience is key. According to Porter and Adside, who were graduate students from the Naval Post Graduate School, attaining a top rank position is very difficult without combat command experience. Various combat positions are the traditional paths into the military's top leadership positions.²⁴ This hindrance of promotional status puts women into a separate category from men; it ensures that women would be unable to serve as chief of staff, or any other high ranking official, even if they are otherwise qualified.

Currently there are two different standards for the physical fitness test that is given to men and women. The current physical fitness test makes women appear over-weight and more unfit in comparison to the males who have a higher standard to achieve. Having two different standards leads people to believe women are getting a break and are not as capable of performing certain jobs. According to Porter and Adside's research, the Army Physical Fitness test is often misinterpreted as being an indicator for determining combat readiness. However, the general physical fitness tests are not the same as the physical fitness performance standards needed for specific jobs. Lt. Col. Frels even stated that, "None of the Services have adequately studied or developed job-specific physical performance standards."²⁵ Proponents of allowing women into more combat positions state that the Army (as well as other services) should establish physical requirements for all combat positions, and any others closed to women currently. These requirements can be used as a non-gender specific guide to employ those who meet the physical requirements necessary for that military specialty.²⁶

The PCAWAF highlighted an important argument against placing women in combat roles, which stated that if women were allowed into combat roles, there would no longer be legal justification to prevent them from being eligible for the draft. For those who do not want women to be eligible for the draft, this is a sound argument. However, there are those that believe that if women are to receive equal rights within civilian life

then they should also have equal civic responsibility. Porter and Adside reveal the beginnings of this argument to be "at least as old as the teachings of Plato and Aristotle."²⁷ Prt. Tracie Sanchez, a mother with four children and machine gunner with the MP stated, "It was my turn to serve the country and protect our children."²⁸ The sentiment she expressed is prevalent with servicewomen currently serving in Iraq. Most would rather there not be a draft; however, if women are to be treated equally, they should also have the same civic responsibilities as their male counterparts.

Due to the high requirements of some combat positions, it is quite understandable to assume that only a few women would be able to qualify for those positions. According to Lt. Col. Charles King, the limited presence of women in combat positions may lead to the accusation that those positions not being truly "gender integrated." He fears this will lead to the establishment of a female affirmative action that would actively set up quotas for the Services to meet in order to create gender integration.²⁹

Because the presence of a certain number of women in a unit would be hard to attain, there is a justifiable fear that gender harassment will be harder and take longer to nullify. However, gender harassment alone would not be a catalyst for a gender oriented affirmative action within the Services. The opponents of the combat exclusion would not push for a gender affirmative action, because it would be contrary to the justifications they use to validate women entering ground combat roles.

Whether you are for or against allowing women into ground combat roles, the current occupation in Iraq is bringing the issue to light once more. Those who are for the combat exclusion state that women as a whole do not meet the physical requirements, and their placement in otherwise all male combat units would disrupt unit cohesion, and by allowing women in ground combat positions they would become eligible for the draft. Those who are against the combat exclusion argue that ground combat roles are essential to certain promotions, physical standards need to be specific to each specialty and they should be the same for both men and women, and with equal civic responsibility comes equal civic duty. Women have been allowed positions in various combat positions; the only restriction that prevents women from being completely equal in the military is the ban on women serving in ground combat positions. Should opening up ground combat positions be the next step? Is our society willing to do away with all gender distinctions within the military? Please think the issue through, because the answers to these questions may change the military as we know it.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Rowan Scarborough and Joseph Curl. "Despite pressure, Bush vows 'no women in combat,'" *The Washington Times*, January 12, 2005, sec. A 01.
- ² Mary C. Frels, "Women Warriors: Oxymoron or Reality." (Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 1999), 5.
- ³ Helen MacGill Hughes, "Women's Military Roles Cross nationally: Past Present and Future" *Gender and Society* 9, no. 6 (1995): 761.
- ⁴ Frels, "Women Warriors," 7.
- ⁵ Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, *Report to the President*, November 15, 1992 (DC: U.S. Government Printing Office 1992), 27.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁷ Richard Worth, *Women in Combat: The Battle for Equality*, (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1999), 68.
- ⁸ Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, *Report to the President*, 25.
- ⁹ Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: an Unfinished Revolution*, (Novato, CA: Presido Press, 1992), 463.

- ¹⁰ Laura L. Miller. "Not Just Weapons of the Weak: Gender Harassment as a Form of Protest for Army Men" *Sociology Quarterly* 60, no.1 (1997): 37-38.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 39
- ¹² Worth, "Do Women have what it takes?" 59.
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- ¹⁴ General Accounting Office National Security and International Affairs Division. *Gender Issues: Information on DOD's Assignment Policy and Direct Ground Combat Definition*, October 1998 (Washington DC, 1998), 16.
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- ¹⁶ Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, *Report to the President*, 24.
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- ¹⁹ Hughes, "Women's Military Roles Cross nationally," 762.
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- ²¹ Vernon Loeb, "Teresa Broadwell Found Herself in the Army—Under Fire, in Iraq," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2003, sec. D01.
- ²² Richard Sisk, "The women of war: In Iraq, death knows no frontline, not gender," Daily News Washington Bureau. December 14, 2004.
- ²³ Dave Moniz, "More women bear wounds of war," *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 1, 2005, sec. A 21.
- ²⁴ Laurie M. Porter and Rick V. Adside, "Women in Combat: Attitudes, and Experiences of US military Personnel," (Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, 2001), 19.
- ²⁵ Frels, "Women Warriors," 28.
- ²⁶ Porter and Adside, "Women in Combat," 17.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 17.
- ²⁸ Vernon Loeb, "Teresa Broadwell", D01.
- ²⁹ Charles King, "The Trivialization of Gender and Its Impact on Combat Effectiveness," (Strategy Research Project, U.S Army War College, 2000), 11.