

The Female Soldier

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1970s, women have been increasingly integrated into the military; in Iraq and Afghanistan many women served on the frontline in combat. This article argues women's integration has been facilitated by the all-volunteer professional forces in which individuals are judged purely by competence. Female soldiers have been accepted in all military roles if they perform competently. There are serious limitations in the infantry, however, as only a small number of women pass the selection tests and it is likely no more than one percent of the infantry could be female at present. Moreover, masculine prejudices abound and women are still the victims of discrimination, harassment, and abuse.

The accession of women into the United States combat arms, announced on 24 January 2013 by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta following a unanimous decision by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has been welcomed by many. The decision, however, remains controversial and there are some who oppose it. Indeed, Martin van Creveld, a long-standing opponent of female integration, has anticipated some arguments that opponents of integration may use. Van Creveld claims that not only are male soldiers “often obliged to undertake additional hardship in order to compensate for women’s physical weakness” but because women are weaker, “for them [men] to undergo military training and serve alongside women represents a humiliation.”¹ For van Creveld, the inclusion of women into the armed forces corrodes the bonds among male soldiers, vitiating the honor of service. Indeed, David Frum, a contributing editor of *Newsweek* recently rejected Panetta’s ruling on similar grounds. Citing Kingsley Browne’s work *Co-ed Combat: The New Evidence That Women Shouldn’t Fight the Nation’s Wars*, Frum argues that women are too weak physically to perform as combat soldiers and they undermine the cohesiveness of all-male groups. Even women who are strong enough to serve in combat present a problem because the armed forces, focused on war-winning (not employment equality), are unable to apply gender-blind standards to women; they cannot treat them equally and tend to be too lenient. If van Creveld, Browne, and Frum are right, Leon Panetta and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have made a serious mistake.

It is pertinent and perhaps necessary to assess the issue of female accession. Drawing on archival research, and interview and fieldwork research in Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and the United States,² this article attempts to identify the conditions most likely to expedite the successful integration of women into the combat arms following Panetta’s announcement—and to highlight likely obstacles and

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1 Martin van Creveld, “Less Than We Can Be: Men, Women and the Modern Military” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 4 (2000): 12, 13.

2 Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

problems.³ Precisely because it represents the most complex example, the question of the possibility of female accession to the infantry, the most demanding military occupation, is the focus of my examination.

The Possibility of Integration

Van Creveld's objections and the general opposition to women in combat are based on a presumption that a traditional form of masculinity remains essential to the armed forces as an organization. There is little doubt that masculinity has been central to the performance of armies in the past. Indeed, the social sciences have explored the connection between manhood and combat performance. In their famous article on the *Wehrmacht*, Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils ascribed the extraordinary performance of this doomed army to the intense personal male bonds within the primary military group: "spatial proximity, capacity for intimate communication, the provision of paternal protectiveness by NCOs and junior officers, and the gratification of certain personality needs, e.g., manliness, by the military organization and its activities" were critical to performance.⁴ Indeed, Sam Stouffer in his study of US soldiers in the Second World War concurred, concluding that "combat posed a challenge for a man to prove himself to himself and others."⁵ Masculinity was a key motivating factor used to encourage solidarity on the line and "the man who lived up to the code of the combat soldier had proved his manhood."⁶

Masculinity has been an important factor in cohesion and combat motivation, yet it would be a mistake to be insensitive to historic transformations. The classical studies of cohesion from the 1940s to 1970s were not necessarily flawed but it is critical to remember they analyzed mass citizen armies in existence at the time. Such forces are now rare in the west. Canada and the United Kingdom abolished conscription in early 1945 and 1960 respectively. The United States abolished national service in 1973 following the debacle in Vietnam, as did the Australians. Conscription was retained in most of Europe until the end of the Cold War, but in an increasingly attenuated form.⁷ Since then, all major European powers have abolished national service including, finally, Germany in 2011. Many scholars have observed the profound reformation of civil-military relations implied by the move to all-volunteer forces but the development of professionalism has great significance for military culture itself and especially for cohesion even down to the

3 This article is based on a wider comparative research project. See Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Chapter 11; Economic and Social Research Council, "Combat, Cohesion and Gender," ESRC Grant ES/J006645/1.

4 Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the *Wehrmacht* in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Summer 1948): 280-315.

5 Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier, Vol II: Combat and Its Aftermath*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), 131, 134.

6 *Ibid.*, 134. See also Gideon Aran, "Parachuting," *American Journal of Sociology* 80, no. 1 (July 1974): 123-52; William Arkin and Lynne R. Dobrofksy, "Military Socialization and Masculinity," *Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 151-66; Donna Winslow, *The Canadian Airborne Regiment: A Socio-Cultural Inquiry* (Ottawa, Canada: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Canada, 1997).

7 See Catherine Kelleher, "Mass Armies in the 1970s: The Debate in Western Europe," *Armed Forces & Society* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 3-30; Michel L. Martin, "Conscription and the Decline of the Mass Army in France, 1960-75," *Armed Forces & Society* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 355-406; Karl W. Haltiner, "The Definite End of the Mass Army in Western Europe?" *Armed Forces & Society* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 7-36.

primary group level. Although it is easy to presume continuity with the past, and indeed that connection is actively imagined by today's service personnel, cohesion in a professional force takes on a markedly different character to that in a mass citizen army, where opportunities for training and preparation were extremely limited.

While no one would deny the intense bonds often evident among professional soldiers today, scholars have increasingly argued that the performance of today's professional troops does not only, nor even primarily, depend upon their personal friendships (deep though these may be).⁸ On the contrary, collective combat performance—cohesion—relies more on training and professional competence. Accordingly, individuals are judged not so much on their personal characteristics but their professional ability and they are accepted into the section, platoon, or company on this basis. Reflecting this changing ethos in the armed forces, there has been increasingly heated debate among scholars about the primary basis of cohesion. Some scholars have continued to emphasize social cohesion based on the intimate bonds of friendship among soldiers.⁹ Yet, increasingly, scholars have stressed impersonal task-cohesion in which solidarity depends on the requirements of immediate goals, not friendship. The social identities of soldiers, and especially their social homogeneity, is less important than whether each fulfills his or her allotted role. Whether they can do the job is more important than *likeness*; that is, whether soldiers like each other and are like each other.¹⁰ Indeed, American soldiers increasingly understand themselves in this way. In his widely read account of US paratroopers in the Korengal Valley in 2007–08, Sebastian Junger records a peculiar kind of comradeship among 2nd Platoon, Battle Company, 173rd Airborne Brigade. In the course of a narrative ostensibly dedicated to extolling brotherly cohesion, Sergeant O'Byrne (one of the central figures in Junger's account) made a surprising admission. Rather than expatiating on his soldiers' love for each other, he observed: "There are guys in the platoon who straight up *hate* each other."¹¹ Yet O'Byrne noted a paradox: "But they would also die for each other. So you kind of have to ask, 'How much could I really hate the guy?'"¹² The paradox is interesting but can be resolved if it

8 Hew Strachan, "Training, Morale and Modern War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (April 2006): 211–27; Uli Ben-Shalom, Zeev Lehrer, and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Cohesion During Military Operations: A Field Study on Combat Units in the Al-Aqsa Intifada," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 1 (October 2005): 63–79; Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Anthony King, "The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 4 (July 2006): 493–512; Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Edward Coss, *All for the King's Shilling: The British Soldier Under Wellington, 1808–1814* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

9 Leonard Wong et al., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003); Guy Siebold, "The Essence of Military Group Cohesion," *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 2 (January 2007): 286–295; Guy Siebold and D. Kelly, *Development of the Platoon Cohesion Questionnaire* (Alexandria, VA: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Manpower and Personnel Laboratory, 1988).

10 Elizabeth Kier, "Homosexuality in the US Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness," *International Security* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 5–39; Robert J. MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat?: An Old Question with an Old Answer," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 4 (July 2006): 646–654; Robert MacCoun, "What is Known About Unit Cohesion and Military Performance," in *Sexual Orientation and US Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessments*, National Defense Research Institute (Washington, DC: RAND, 1993); D. R. Segal and M. Kestnbaum, "Professional Closure in the Military Market: A Critique of Pure Cohesion," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. D. M. Snider and G. L. Watkins (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002).

11 Sebastian Junger, *War* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 79.

12 *Ibid.*, 79.

is recognized that among these professional soldiers cohesion was not necessarily dependent on personal affection; it was based on competence. Specifically, in combat, Junger's paratroopers united around their training, their drills, and the execution of these collective practices, whatever their personal differences. Bound by professional pride, they performed together; they did not need to like each other personally.

Professionalized Cohesion

There is some evidence that the phenomenon of professionalized cohesion has intensified in the last decade. In their work on the Israel Defense Force (IDF) in *Second Intifada*, Eyal Ben-Ari et al made an important and perhaps surprising observation. Organic Israeli combat units were reassembled and merged due to the exigencies of specific missions and troop availability; "the units were split time and time again—battalions into companies and companies into platoons and sometimes squads."¹³ In place of social familiarity, IDF soldiers relied on swift trust to generate cohesion. They were able to cooperate with each other by reference to common tactics and procedures and adduced whether their new partners were competent and trustworthy in executing these tactics by means of accelerated processes of mutual testing.¹⁴ "Instead of cohesion based on face-to-face ties and long-term, stable relations, the Israeli military created rather loose, ad-hoc coalitions for specific tasks."¹⁵ Significantly, and against the classical theory of military cohesion, swift trust seemed to be as effective as deep social cohesion: "troops do not necessarily know each other, but the variety of capabilities, equipment, and perspectives they bring to missions allows much flexibility and the use of the lethal potential of the military to its fullest potential."¹⁶ Indeed, the deepened professional solidarity which Ben-Ari et al have observed in the IDF seems to have been very evident among western troops in Afghanistan and Iraq with the emergence of "Forward Operating Base (FOB) cohesion": that is, an impersonal cohesion among individual soldiers who patrol together but who may have had very little prior social contact. Western soldiers are very aware of the changing basis of solidarity on the frontline and, in interviews, were explicit about the transformation:

There is no longer the need for section level cohesion. You go out with a platoon consisting of various elements; there is Patrol Based cohesion. There is FOB cohesion. From a psychological perspective, friendship is developed by professionalism not because someone is in your section.¹⁷

The rise of impersonal professional cohesion has been important to the armed forces but it may also be critical to the question of gender integration in the infantry. Although great care needs to be taken, the rise of an impersonal professional ethos suggests that (a very small minority of physically capable) women could be incorporated into the infantry. Women might be integrated into the infantry if they are judged like their male peers purely on their performance, not their gender, just as

13 Eyal Ben-Ari et al., *Rethinking Contemporary Warfare: A Sociological View of the Al-Aqsa Intifada* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 74.

14 Ibid, 81.

15 Ibid, 87.

16 Ibid, 87.

17 OPTAG team, interview by author, Camp Bastion Helmand, Afghanistan, June 27, 2010.

ethnic minorities and gay men have been before them. Arbitrary social criteria became less important for inclusion than competence. Indeed, there is some evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan this is precisely what has happened.

Successful Integration

There have been a number of successful instances of integration in the United States, although precisely because they remain so few in number, the evidence tends to consist of a series of individual case studies. Nevertheless, these cases are informative. Clearly, great care needs to be taken with the necessarily small sample which the armed forces and academics have at their disposal to assess female integration. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the official rule (rescinded in 2011) on women's exclusion from combat units was regularly breached by the semantic method of describing female soldiers working on the frontline as *attached* rather than *assigned* to combat units. In the close confines of a patrol base or FOB, the distinction was academic. Indeed many female soldiers noted the distinction is unsustainable and by any coherent standard women have served in combat for the last decade. These women have understood their integration as a process of professionalizing. For instance, Captain Tammy Duckworth, an army aviator who lost both legs when her Black Hawk was downed in Iraq, has noted the commandments from the Soldier's Creed that "I will always place the mission first, I will never quit, I will never accept defeat," and "I will never leave a fallen comrade" are gender-neutral statements that get to the heart of what it is to be an American soldier today.¹⁸ Significantly, Duckworth defines women's role in professional terms: "This is our job . . . we're there [on the frontline] and there to stay."¹⁹

As Duckworth suggests, there have been a number of successful cases of mixed gender cohesion in combat operations, facilitated by the professional ethos of the US military where attached women are judged on the basis of their competence, not their sex. In the last ten years, a growing body of evidence provided by journalistic accounts and personal memoirs attests to this professionalized accession. These resources must be treated with some care as it is not always easy to corroborate the evidence presented in them. However, the best sources are at least as reliable as interviews or survey techniques and they have become a useful, if not definitive, archive of the experiences of American women in combat, especially when negotiating access into the US military is difficult. The journalist and former servicewoman Erin Solaro has provided some insightful material here. She noted that military police-women were successfully attached to a special operations forces (SOF) unit in the Parwan in Afghanistan. These women found the SOF teams highly professional in their orientation and were willing to accept female soldiers on a professional basis.²⁰ In addition, she observed the women of the First Engineers, 101st Forward Support Battalion, known as the "lionesses." They were regularly posted to combat units as attachments and were an interesting example of gender integration in combat. The

18 Kirsten Holmstedt, *Band of Sisters: American Women in Iraq* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2007), vii.

19 *Ibid.*, xxiii.

20 *Ibid.*, 115-121.

commanding officer of a battalion to which “lionesses” were attached observed the appearance of women in the combat zone with striking phlegmatism: “I don’t think this is a door-opening experiment, what we’ve done here. It can’t be used as the only case study for women in combat, but it is an interesting chapter.”²¹

Similarly, in her unvarnished memoir, Kayla Williams, a military intelligence linguist specialist, was attached to the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. She had a number of difficult experiences due to her sex but she also provides clear evidence of the possibility of competent women integrating with combat units. She stressed how she had tried to meet the male standards for physical training and avoided any fraternizing while on operations, believing that both were crucial to her being accepted as a professional.²² Indeed, on an operation with a fire support team observing the Syrian border from a high point, she won the respect of that all-male team by driving her vehicle to the observation post up a dangerously steep and rocky incline while her male colleagues, afraid for their safety, had dismounted and walked.²³ In Baghdad, she worked closely with Delta Company 1/187th Airborne Infantry. At the end of the tour, members of this unit who had worked with her went to great lengths to find her before she left to personally award her an Army Commendation Medal. The sergeant who presented the award observed: “In recognition of your work with us back in the spring . . . for service above and beyond . . . you really deserve it.” Williams was gratified by the acknowledgement of the infantry who almost never recognize support elements.²⁴ These male soldiers respected her and the work she did for them; she was not discriminated against because of her sex. Reflecting this sense of integration, it is interesting to note her final dedication: “I want to thank the wonderful men and women with whom I served—and who serve today.”²⁵ Williams experienced some of the most intense problems of a mixed-gender force in combat and yet, at the end of her work, she recalls only the comradeship—male and female—she experienced in Iraq.

Similar processes of de facto integration have been evident in the US Marine Corps (USMC). A Marine major, serving in Regional Command Southwest Afghanistan in 2010, noted that the US Marines had developed a female engagement program with a platoon of specially trained female Marines. These female Marines were embedded in combat units and had gone on patrols and operations with Marine infantry units.²⁶ He emphasized, however, that the USMC is pretty tight overall: men and women unite. He had some scepticism whether female integration in the infantry would work but he provided clear evidence of females operating with the infantry on the frontline. While maintaining the ban on women in the infantry, senior United States Marine officers have explicitly emphasized the importance of training and professionalism in integrating women into the Corps. For instance, discussing integrated

21 *Ibid.*, 100.

22 Kayla Williams and Michael Schaub, *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006), 44, 20.

23 *Ibid.*, 161.

24 *Ibid.*, 227-8.

25 *Ibid.*, 289.

26 Interview with Major, USMC, June 27, 2010.

training including the US Marines training exercise, the Crucible, Lieutenant General Van Riper observed: “The key to building effective, cohesive, gender integrated operational units is in creating a training environment that builds progressively to that end.”²⁷ The result of this has been “Marines [male and female] see themselves as members of the same team committed to performing the same tough duties in the same dirty, mentally and physically demanding environment, and from that experience develop an appreciation of each other as professionals.”²⁸

Indeed, there have been a number of examples of female and male Marines not simply serving together on operations but fighting together in combat. Marine Corporals Carrie Blaise and Priscilla Kispetik were attached to 3/25 Lima Company US Marines in 2005 in Haditha where they were assigned to patrols on house-clearing missions; as females they were able to interact with women and facilitate unforced entries at various points. Although Blaise and Kispetik believed that “they were Marines and every Marine (male or female) was a rifleman,” their initial reception was hostile; male Marines were “disappointed” to be serving with women in Haditha.²⁹ However, later in the tour, the observation that all Marines whether male or female were riflemen became a reality. On 26 May 2005, the platoon to which Blaise and Kispetik were assigned was ambushed by insurgents as it cleared Haqlaniya; two Marines were killed by a rocket propelled grenade in the initial contact and the rest eventually trapped in a school. The platoon had to fight hard merely to survive with almost all its members involved in this firefight. Blaise was on the second floor, with a good field of vision, and was, therefore, able to identify a male Iraqi with a weapon approximately 400 meters away. Blaise was ordered to engage by her staff sergeant. She shot two rounds, killing the Iraqi:

Nice job he [the staff sergeant] yelled. . . . The staff sergeant must have known it was the lance corporal’s first kill because he grabbed her Kevlar, turned her head so she was facing him, looked into her eyes, and said, Think of all the lives you just saved.³⁰

Although troubled by the experience, Blaise recognized her status in the Marines was significantly advanced by having a confirmed kill. In training and on operations, gender barriers appear to be breaking down in the United States and women are increasingly accepted by the infantry (if not in the infantry) on the grounds of their performance.

In the United Kingdom, a similar reform in attitudes toward women seems to be occurring, even among elite infantry such as the Royal Marines and Parachute Regiment. Thus, a color sergeant believed that women could serve in the Parachute Regiment, despite its selection process and reputation, “as long as she passes the same course.” For this soldier, it would be inappropriate to drop entry standards but “if a woman had the same capability, why not?”³¹ Across western forces,

²⁷ Paul K. Van Riper, “Gender Integrated/Segregated Training,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 81 (November 1997): 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹ Holmstedt, *Band of Sisters*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ Interview by author, June 27, 2010.

there is evidence that professional competence is becoming more important than gender to status and role in the military.

Obstacles to Female Integration

Van Creveld et al may be assertive about the effect of women on military performance and cohesion but, despite the changes documented above, the obstacles to female integration in the infantry are manifest and it would be irresponsible not to recognize them. There is considerable evidence many soldiers have been and are still opposed to the presence of females. Masculine self-conceptions remain central to the motivation of male soldiers. Despite extensive attempts to integrate women since the 1970s, women constitute only 15 percent of the US armed forces and it seems unlikely this figure will increase in the future significantly—even after total female accession. The armed forces are and will remain overwhelmingly male organizations. As a result, in her work on female integration, Judith Stiehm appositely asked: “How can one distinguish between male culture and military culture?”³² The problem of creating gender equality in organizations where women are a small minority has exercised a number of feminist scholars and Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s research on female corporate employment is one of the most insightful in this regard. Kanter is highly sensitive to the different dynamics which alternate gender proportions generate and she highlights the special problems which arise when women are badly outnumbered. Indeed, for Kanter, a female workforce of 15 percent or less constitutes not even a genuine minority but merely a token. As a token, it would seem plausible to predict women would find it difficult to integrate into the overwhelmingly male and very masculine military. This token status is compounded by cultural factors. Kanter suggests that the putatively rational modern western organizations have, in fact, always involved and presumed a “masculine ethic.”³³ In modern western culture, men have been conceived as cognitively superior in problem-solving and decisionmaking while women have been represented as emotional, sensitive, and caring, in line with their maternal role.³⁴ Consequently, women have been impeded from participation at the higher levels of management; the masculine ethic has been invoked as an exclusionary principle. For Kanter, male managers engage in “homo-social reproduction.”³⁵ In the face of organizational uncertainty and “the need for smooth communication,”³⁶ male managers prioritize trust and mutual understanding which is primarily presumed on the basis of similarity of social background and similarity of organizational experience: “People [i.e. women] who do not ‘fit in’ by *social* characteristics to the homogenous management group tend to be clustered in those parts of management with the least uncertainty.”³⁷

The processes which Kanter identified in the corporate sector have often taken a more extreme form in the armed forces. In her important

32 Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Bring Me Men & Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 65.

33 Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 22.

34 *Ibid.*, 22-25.

35 *Ibid.*, 48.

36 *Ibid.*, 55.

37 *Ibid.*, 55.

work on integration in the 1980s, Judith Hicks Stiehm recorded extreme forms of bullying, harassment, and sexual abuse (including rape) among the US armed forces.³⁸ The Tailhook and Aberdeen Proving Ground scandals in the 1990s remain infamous episodes, but routine bullying, abuse, and assault were widespread at the time. The problem is evident today. Erin Solaro, a journalist who had previously served in the armed forces, describes the actions as those of the small percentage of real criminals or others who think their manhood depends upon women's subordination.³⁹ Indeed, during her research in Iraq, Solaro felt physically threatened by certain men while staying in transit accommodation.⁴⁰ Yet, it is not perhaps the extremists who are the most damaging or important constituency here. The everyday attitudes of male soldiers are likely to be more important in undermining female integration; for Kanter, homosocial reproduction does not primarily work through dramatic and public forms of denigration but through microsocial mechanisms of quiet social marginalization from often trivial forms of communion—the cigarette or coffee break, the side chat, or playing sports together. The recognition of these discriminatory processes does not justify them nor can it be used as evidence that women should be excluded no more than the existence of racism in the US Army in the 1940s and 1950s was a legitimate reason for excluding black American soldiers from combat units. Yet these cultural realities are likely to complicate the accession of women into the infantry.

With growing professionalism and changing gender norms in civil society, it might be possible for overt and covert forms of discrimination to be reduced. It might be possible to condition even the most discriminatory men to accept women. Yet no amount of gender education—however successful—will overcome two central obstacles to female accession identified by van Creveld and Frum: the disparity in mean physical performance between men and women and the problem of sexual attraction. Physiological differences remain an enduring problem. Indeed, even Judith Stiehm, an advocate of integration, has noted the physical disparity between men and women. In the early 1980s, the highest women's score on the West Point physical fitness test would have been a man's C- and 87 percent of women would have failed.⁴¹ There is little evidence this physical disparity between the average female and average male performance has changed significantly in the last three decades. A British Ministry of Defence Report based on extensive physiological testing concluded: "approximately 1 percent of women can equal the performance of the average man . . ." The study concluded "about 0.1 per cent of the female applicants and 1 percent of trained female soldiers would reach the required standards to meet the demands of these [combat] roles."⁴² On purely physiological grounds, the exclusion of women from the infantry is still seen by many as appropriate, even necessary: "Why would you voluntarily want to make your units weaker

38 Judith Stiehm, *Arms and the Enlisted Woman* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 250.

39 Erin Solaro, *Women in the Line of Fire: What You Should Know About Women in the Military* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 38.

40 Ibid, 39-40.

41 Stiehm, *Bring Me Men & Women*, 166.

42 Ministry of Defence. *Women in the Armed Forces* (London: Directorate of Service Personnel Policy Service Conditions, 2002), 4.

when you are going into combat?”⁴³ The vast majority of women cannot be combat soldiers. Indeed, Sergeant Lizette Leblanc, one of the most successful female Canadian infantry soldiers, noted that the ratio of men to women in her regiment during some periods of her service has been one to a thousand; she was often the only woman.

The Issue of Sexuality

Sexuality is also a problem. A reservist, Jason Hartley, who served in Iraq in 2004, recorded the rise of a professionalized form of cohesion in his unit before deployment but, despite his liberal political views, he articulated a commonly held view about women in combat. For him, women cannot be in the infantry (not only because they are not strong enough) but because it undermines masculine motivations for combat: the main reason they [soldiers] fight is to be tough and therefore attract more women. The presence of women consequently corrodes the very possibility of cohesion: “As soon as there are any women within spittin’ distance, prime directive number one [sexual desire] kicks in, and all things, especially job discipline go straight to hell.”⁴⁴ James Webb, a retired US Marine officer and former secretary of the Navy, has made the same point differentiating ethnic integration from gender integration precisely because of the attraction between the sexes: “No edict will ever eliminate sexual activity when men and women are thrust together at close quarters.”⁴⁵ The problem here is that the presence of a female in the ranks undermines the unity among male soldiers. Instead of focusing on their collective mission, they compete with each other for the sexual attentions of the female(s). Egalitarian solidarity, in which all soldiers are treated the same and everyone relates to everyone else as equals, is replaced by rivalry. Many soldiers have seen precisely this process at work when females have been attached to them. Indeed, many officers opposed the general principle of female integration because they had witnessed cases of fraternization and its nefarious effects. A British captain who had served in a reconnaissance unit in Helmand confirmed the point; whenever women had been attached to his subunit, they had slept with his soldiers to the detriment of unit cohesion.⁴⁶

Canadian female soldiers have themselves identified fraternization as extremely dangerous for the women who engage in it: “no matter how competent you are, if you sleep around, you will ruin your reputation, not only your own but of all women.”⁴⁷ American servicewomen have made precisely the same observation. Williams recorded the promiscuity of one woman in her unit whose behavior “made it easy for guys over there to treat females as if they were less reliable.”⁴⁸ Indeed, overly feminized female soldiers were seen as a threat. “When I saw a woman in uniform with too much make-up. . . . I was prejudiced. . . . As though all my fight to be seen as a competent, goal-oriented officer was denigrated by her obvious sexual appearance.”⁴⁹ Evidence suggests that female

43 Interview with Major, US Army, March 15, 2010.

44 Jason Hartley, *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* (London: New York, 2005), 93.

45 James J. Buckley, “The Unit Cohesion Factor,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 81 (November 1997): 69.

46 Interview by author, March 7, 2013.

47 Interview with Captain A, Canadian Army, October 17, 2011.

48 Williams, *Love My Rifle*, 14.

49 Melissa S. Herbert, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (New York, NYU Press), 67.

soldiers have to abjure from any sexual contact within their unit if they are to preserve their professional reputation. Indeed, even friendship with individual male soldiers had to be treated with care since it might be interpreted as a sexual relation and the reputational consequences for women equally catastrophic. The problem with fraternization for women is it inscribes civilian gender norms onto military relations, stripping the female involved of her professional status. She becomes once again just a woman; she cannot, therefore, be treated as a soldier and can no longer be the peer, still less the commander, of male troops. By contrast, and indicating a potential double standard, precisely because of the dominant masculine culture of the armed forces, male soldiers engaging in fraternization are rarely subject to this loss of credibility. They may engage in sexual relations with female soldiers (and, therefore, be equally responsible for undermining cohesion) and yet retain their reputation as professional soldiers. At the same time, although fraternization may be a problem, it is not an inevitability. Female soldiers who served on the frontline in Afghanistan reported that in patrol bases, the very fact that everyone lived so close together in arduous conditions meant neither males nor females had the time or inclination to engage in fraternization. In this situation, women became like “sisters” rather than potential sexual partners.

Indeed, the problem of sexuality far exceeds the issue of consensual fraternization and its effect on the credibility of women soldiers. The masculinized culture of the military may represent a structural impediment to female integration; because of sexualized male presumptions, it may be impossible for women to be treated as equals in the armed forces. Despite the advances which American service personnel have made in the last ten years, fraternization, harassment, and abuse have been widely recorded and these incidents do not appear as random occurrences. Kayla Williams records her attempts to conduct herself professionally in Iraq in 2005 and there is some evidence that male soldiers she served with regarded her highly. Yet, she also concluded on the basis of her service that sex is key to any woman soldier’s experience in the American military. However professional a woman might be, relationships with male soldiers were finally determined by their sexual availability. At its mildest, Williams was subject to the invasive stares of male soldiers throughout her tour, numerous lewd propositions, and an indecent assault when a soldier exposed himself to her and tried to force her to gratify him while on sentry.⁵⁰ She suggested that, because it is a primarily male organization with a strongly masculine culture, women were either classified as “sluts” (they were open to sexual advances) or “bitches” (they were not). Others have confirmed the point noting, in addition, that “bitches” were often accordingly denigrated as lesbians in the US military.⁵¹ Indeed, in her invective against the US military and its failure to accord women true professional status while putting them into combat situations, Helen Benedict cites an informant who recorded that so irredeemably masculinized are the armed forces that “there are only three things the guys let you be if you’re a girl in the military . . . a bitch, a ho or a dyke.”⁵²

50 Williams, *Love My Rifle*, 22, 72, 199, 207.

51 *Ibid.*, 212.

52 Helen Benedict, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 6.

Moreover, in order to assign women to one or other of these categories, means false rumors about the sexual availability of women abound in the US military to the detriment of their professional reputation.

Irrespective of the question of fraternization and outright sexual discrimination, the female reproductive role and position as mothers in civilian society generates additional questions which the armed forces need to consider. In a professional army, where women may serve as career soldiers from their late teens to early forties (i.e., during the reproductive decades of adult life), the question of pregnancy and motherhood is a critical—almost inevitable—one. The only historical precedent is unhelpful. From 1727 to 1892, the Dahomey Kingdom of West Africa recruited, trained, and deployed an all-female combat unit (an “Amazon Corps”) as part of its standing army.⁵³ The women in this formation were equipped with muskets and swords, were drilled regularly and, according to western observers, physically resembled men in size, musculature, and demeanor.⁵⁴ Crucially, they were sworn to celibacy on pain of death. The Dahomey rulers obviated the problem of pregnancy for their women soldiers simply by outlawing all sexual activity. Such a policy is impossible among western forces but some strategy is likely to be necessary regarding pregnancy and childbearing. Civil society is now sufficiently mature enough to accept the combat-related deaths of female soldiers who happen to be mothers; certainly, the reporting of male and female deaths in the last ten years has been noticeably similar.⁵⁵ Yet, issues remain. Female soldiers have sometimes been accused of becoming pregnant to avoid operations and unplanned pregnancies (the result of fraternization) have meant women had to be sent home from operations. In fact, excluding females from the infantry on the basis that a small number of women may have missed operations because they got pregnant (accidentally or not) does not seem particularly defensible; many male soldiers have avoided combat for often specious medical reasons. The real issue seems to be planned pregnancies with the inevitable gaps in service and possible unavailability of women for operations. Pregnancy is not an insurmountable obstruction, but in preparing for women’s integration into the career structure of the infantry, it is an issue.

Conclusion

In the First and Second World Wars, black American soldiers were regularly declared, on apparently scientific grounds, incapable of fighting. Presumptions about their inadequacies quickly evaporated—and indeed looked very foolish—when black soldiers were fully integrated during the Korean War.⁵⁶ The case of women in the military has some parallels. In an all-volunteer force where cohesion is based on the impersonal criteria of competence rather than inherited social ascriptions, capable and proven women may serve no less effectively than black Americans before them.

53 Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 61-4.

54 *Ibid.*, 61-4.

55 Anthony King, “The Afghan War and ‘Postmodern’ Memory: Commemoration and the Dead of Helmand,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61(1) 2010: 1-25; Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier*.

56 Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1989); Sherie Mershon and Steven Schlossman, *Foxholes and Colour Lines* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

Yet, van Creveld's challenge also usefully demands that the conditions for and limitations of women's participation be recognized especially given that, unlike African-American men, women are physiologically different from men. If women, like ethnic minorities and gays before them, are to be integrated into the infantry, they have to be selected to the same standards as men. Gender-blind testing is essential but this necessarily means that a minuscule proportion of the combat arms will be female in the future. Physically, most women will be incapable of passing the selection tests for the infantry. Currently, just over 15 percent of the Canadian armed forces are women, but less than 1 percent of the infantry is female. Women's integration in the combat arms may be possible but it is likely to involve a tiny number of women. Accordingly, despite the undoubted importance of Panetta's announcement, the formal lifting of the ban on female service in the combat arms is unlikely to alter the culture or everyday reality of life in the US Army and US Marines to any great extent. Women have already been operating with the combat arms in numbers that will not drastically change after 2016. The legislation does little more than recognize in law a de facto reality. Yet this legal recognition is important for women because it is likely to be beneficial to the status of female soldiers. Of equal importance, it may advance the professionalism of the United States Army and Marines for whom objective standards of competence become finally and definitively the universal and ubiquitous reference point for all service personnel, whatever their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexuality.

