U.S. Marine Corps (Andrew J. Good)

Marine prepares to depart on security patrol, Helmand Province

INSIGHTS FROM THE

Women in Combat Symposium

By **ELLEN L. HARING**

When the U.S. Army invaded Iraq in 2003, Specialist Williams had a skill set that was desperately needed: Arab linguist. In 2009, Major Hegar's skills as a medical evacuation pilot were in high demand. And in 2011, combat medics Olson and Bringloe spent days on foot patrols or dropping into hot spots in Afghanistan rescuing wounded soldiers. In a particularly demanding 40-hour period, Sergeant Bringloe rescued 11 soldiers despite suffering from a fractured tibia sustained during the third rescue of the 11 evacuations.

At a recent event in Washington, DC, Specialist Williams described translating during combat foot patrols in Iraq without the benefit of Small Arms Protective Insert plates in her vest because women were not expected to be in combat, and Major Hegar calmly described being shot down by insurgents and the ground fight that ensued before

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a rescue team arrived to extract the Medevac team. All these Servicemembers share a common trait. All are women and all hold "noncombat" military occupations.

In February 2013, these women—along with members of partner militaries who have fully integrated their forces, as well as women who were among the first wave of earlier integration efforts—gathered in Washington, DC, to share their experiences. The event organizers' objective was to collect lessons for integrating combat specialties as the Services move to eliminate combat restrictions that have previously limited the military service of women.

The event was organized around several panel discussions. The first panel included testimonials provided by U.S. women whose actions in combat are documented with awards and decorations. The second panel included women from the United States and abroad who had been in the first wave of earlier integration efforts such as U.S. fighter pilots and female combat soldiers from Canada and Norway. The third panel included men and women who studied the combat exclusion policy and had important observations based on those studies. The last panel included members of the military who had challenged the exclusion of women from combat units in the United States and abroad.

A post-event survey revealed that many audience members, including members of the military, do not know the extent of female Servicemembers' participation in combat operations. There was extensive discussion about the need to document the experiences of these women to capture the lessons as the military moves forward with full integration. Panelists provided many important insights and lessons, but common themes resonated throughout the day including unique experiences that highlighted lessons across a range of involvement.

Common Themes

One of the key lessons of the first panel was that anyone, male or female, who is deployed in current operations is likely to end up in combat and must be trained and ready for that possibility. The panelists included an Arab linguist who participated with the infantry in combat foot patrols in Baghdad, a cook whose convoy was attacked in Iraq, a rescue pilot whose helicopter was shot down in Afghanistan, a medic from a Female Engagement Team who was wounded during an outreach mission, and another medic who survived numerous encounters with the enemy while hoisting wounded soldiers out of operations in the Korengal Valley in northeastern Afghanistan. Three of the women were awarded Purple Heart Medals, two the Distinguished Flying Cross, and one the Prisoner of War Medal.

The second panel included U.S., Canadian, and Norwegian women who served in the wake of the removal of previous exclusionary policies. Both the first and the second panels were asked to identify traits critical to success in combat. The most common response was teamwork. A

Marine Female Engagement Team officer provides security as Afghan residents are questioned and their vehicle searched for weapons and drug paraphernalia, Helmand Province

U.S. Marine Corps (Robert R. Carrasco)

close second was the ability to stay calm and focused in tense situations as well as the requirement for mental and physical endurance. Also mentioned was good leadership and technical competence. Physical strength was discussed at length since this is a commonly advanced reason to keep women out of combat specialties. While all of the panelists acknowledged the role of physical fitness, none believed that physical strength was a predictive factor to success. The panelists agreed that physical standards must be set and that women and men should be held to the same physical standards. None thought, however, that upper-body strength was a significant indicator of an individual's success in any combat operations.

Also discussed was the behavior of men on mixed-sex teams when that team is engaged in combat operations. Over and over, the women stated that there is always some trepidation during the first mission with any new team member, but there is nothing like a combat mission to clarify who can and cannot function when a situation becomes dangerous. They further stated that the first mission is always a test and that after a member proves himself or herself, everyone expects him or her to perform just like the rest of the team. None of the women ever experienced any men trying to protect them in any way that jeopardized mission accomplishment.

Privacy and hygiene requirements were also discussed. All the women asserted that living conditions only became problematic when they were arbitrarily separated from their male team members by socially imposed efforts to segregate men and women. In austere environments, they lived and slept in the same rooms and shared the same bathrooms with their male teammates even if the room was a bombed-out school with no roof and the bathroom was a slit trench. Any privacy requirements were easily resolved with the judicious use of a poncho or a turned back. The panelists noted that when women were separated from their teams while they were on a post or base, they lost important interactions that sometimes led to misunderstandings and the perception that they were not as committed to mission accomplishment as their male teammates. Panelists recommended that women never be separated from their teams under any circumstances because it negatively affects team cohesion.

Another key discussion centered on comments made by General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a Pentagon press briefing on January 25, 2013, where he announced the lifting of the combat exclusion policy. General Dempsey stated:

In order to account for [women's] *safety and their success in those kinds of units we need to have enough of them so that they have mentors and leaders above them. You wouldn't want to take one woman who can meet a standard and put her in a unit where she is one of one. We have to work the standards and the "critical mass," if you will, to make this work.*[1]

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The "one of one" and the "critical mass" comments generated great consternation for many participants at the symposium. Universally, the panelists stated that many times in their careers they were "one of one." However, they did not believe that this situation should be a barrier to any woman who meets the standards from being accepted into jobs for which they are qualified. Panelists stated that a woman does not have to be in a unit to act as a mentor for other women; men make good mentors, too.

While all the women objected to the requirement for a "critical mass" and believed it is an undefinable and therefore unattainable concept, Colonel Ingrid Gjerde, a Norwegian infantry officer on the panel, noted that she had had better experiences in units where she was not the only woman. Thus, while women have succeeded on teams when they were one of one, the inclusion of more women improves their experiences on those teams.

Unique Experiences

Specialist Shoshana Johnson, USA (Ret.), presented the first testimonial. She was wounded, captured, and held as a prisoner of war during the invasion of Iraq. Ms. Johnson revealed an unintended effect of the Geneva Convention rules on her captivity.[2] Because she was the only woman captured, she was isolated from the rest of her team. This segregation had a significant psychological effect on her ability to withstand captivity. While she understands the reason for the rule, she believes it should be exercised judiciously and on a case-by-case basis.

Specialist Heidi Olson, USA, a combat medic, provided a personal experience that is perhaps not uncommon for many young women in the military. Because of the combat exclusion policy and notions of what women should or should not do in combat, she often had to petition her unit leaders for permission to leave her operating base and go out on missions.

Recommendations

The role leadership plays in any successful integration was a recurring theme that could not be overemphasized. Time after time, participants provided examples of leaders and peers who tried to sabotage the integration and careers of women. The panelists then juxtaposed those experiences with leaders who set examples simply by showing respect for the women and by demanding of them the same high performance they did of men. Ultimately and unsurprisingly, successful units are led by people who are demanding, fair, and respectful of *all* subordinates.

Many mixed-sex combat support units have missions that are inherently predisposed to engage in combat. Since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, military police units have over 10 years of experience with women who have engaged in combat operations. The dust-off community has extensive experience dropping in and out of kinetic operations. Moreover, women have been flying combat aircraft in all of the Services for almost 20 years. These successful units reveal that high standards have remained in place and that there is no adverse effect on the teams attributable to the presence of women. Morale does not suffer and mission success is not threatened. These units have already dealt with many of the challenges associated with including women in combat operations, and they should be studied

U.S. Marine Corps (Holly A. Williams)

Marine participates in obstacle course during physical training, Camp Johnson, North Carolina

since they represent communities of successful integration.

Representatives from Canada, Norway, and Sweden talked about their militaries' move to full integration. All three countries noted that full integration took more than 10 years, and that today few women serve in the combat specialties. Robert Egnell from Sweden provided perspectives that get to the heart of fully integrated military organizations. He asserted that integration is not achieved by making it an equality issue. Rather, it is more likely achieved by focusing on the enhanced capabilities that women bring to the operational success of the force. He further stated that these enhanced capabilities cannot be based solely on socially constructed gender roles. He questioned the notion that the military has figured out what "right" looks like. He stated that "right" is currently based on notions of hyper-masculinity that require superior brute strength and the willingness to use violence but that the reality of current operations does not depend on those traits.

One recommendation concerned how to move the integration forward quickly and successfully. Panelists advocated letting midgrade women voluntarily reclassify into combat arms. Many women now have combat experience in a multitude of deployments. Allowing those who are qualified to move laterally into combat units would smooth the transition for entry-level soldiers—male and female—as they are assessed into combat specialties.

The following recommendations should be used as the Services move forward with full integration:

- Study units with combat missions in which women are currently serving. Take a hard look at military police, fighter pilots, and the medical evacuation dust-off community. Look closely at what the sapper[3] school and fighter pilot communities have done to maintain standards while admitting women into their training pipelines.
- Examine how partner militaries have admitted women: Canada, Norway, Sweden, and others have already made this change and can provide important lessons.
- Allow currently serving women to reclassify to fill all positions. Do not only assess women at the entry level into combat specialties.
- Interview men and women who have fought together to find out what worked and what did not.
- Interview returning combat arms soldiers to determine what physical requirements they had to meet to accomplish their missions.
- Provide the same kind of training and awareness that was provided in preparation for the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."
- Develop a narrative that educates soldiers about what women add to the dynamics and capabilities of combat units.
- Remove leaders who attempt to undermine integration efforts.

Conclusion

Integration is not new to the U.S. military. We have done it well in the past and we can do it well now. What it requires is an honest commitment from leaders who, even if they do not agree with a decision, are duty-bound to carry out the policy to the best of their abilities. Successful integration is wholly dependent on the committed support of leaders throughout the Services. Servicemembers will follow the example set by their leaders. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] "Panetta, Dempsey on the Women in Service Implementation Plan," Pentagon press briefing, January 25, 2013, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Acq7GfiEUSY>.

[2] Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, August 12, 1949, available at <www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/FULL/375?OpenDocument>.

[3] *Sappers* are combat engineers or other personnel who support frontline infantry.