Three stories: blood, guts, and hand-to-hand combat.

**Story 1: 40 AD.** Four decades after the birth of Christ, the Vietnamese Tru’ng Sisters rise to lead their people after successfully thwarting a Chinese attempt to dominate their country.² Coming from a society where both sexes work, practice law, and serve as judges, they are encouraged by their families to study the principles of the martial arts. As resistance and freedom fighters, they capture and decapitate their Chinese prisoners and reclaim 65 city fortifications. Both sisters are experts in knife fighting and ride into the fray atop two white elephants in full battle armor, their ornately carved breastplates signaling their status as nobility. The sight of the monolithic beasts and the two women wielding handheld weapons instills fear.

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(U.S. Army Reserve/Michel Sauret)
in their enemies and breaks their ranks. While in command, Trư’ng Tac and Trư’ng Nhi school and place in positional authority many generals, 36 of whom are women. Numbers differ, but their troops, composed of peasants and aristocracy, range in size of from 20,000 to 80,000 combatants. The Trư’ng Sisters are regarded as national heroines of Vietnam, with many temples, schools, and streets dedicated to them, and there is a yearly holiday that commemorates their deaths.

**Story 2: 60 AD.** In 54 AD, after Emperor Nero comes to power, he begins to energize the flagging effort of his predecessor, Claudius, to control Briton by sending troops to the Welsh border country to subdue one of the last strongholds against Roman rule. Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, pens in his *Annals*, Book XIV, all the known details of the campaign under the subheading “Romans and the Druids at Mona Island.” He portrays the fear of his soldiers when they set sight upon a Celtic Iceni female leader, “causing their limbs to be paralyzed.” Statesman and historian Cassius Dio also writes about the invasion with the Druids: “a terrible disaster occurred in Britain. Two cities were sacked, eighty thousand of the Romans and their allies perished, and the island was lost to Rome. Moreover, all this ruin was brought upon the Romans by a woman, a fact which caused them the greatest shame.”

The point that a female commander is at the helm of the defense of Mona is not peculiar to Britons at the time; there is no division between a person’s sex and his or her rise to the role of military commander. Celtic women hold high status in the ancient world for the liberties and social positions they claim. Compared to their counterparts in Greek, Roman, and other ancient societies, they are allowed many freedoms and protections under the law.

Boudicca, the female ruler of the Iceni tribes to which these ancient documents refer, fights the Romans after she is captured, flogged, and beaten. The invaders tie her two daughters to wooden stakes, and she is forced to watch as the legion of heavy infantry gang-rape them. Cassius Dio, in his description of her, stated, “she is tall with flaming red hair, terrifying to look at with a fierce gaze and a harsh, powerful voice . . . grasp[ing] a long spear to strike dead all those who set eyes on her.” With an arrogant tone, he added, “this woman possessed greater intelligence than is usually found in the female sex.” Boudicca is excellent with a sword and gifted in hand to hand combat, but her trademark is her ability to maneuver a two-horse chariot. In acknowledgment of the brutal treatment of her daughters by the invaders, she
...posterity shall sway."6

work, “Regions Caesar never knew, thy

Boadicea, An

line from William Cowper’s

Parliament in downtown London. This

to Westminster Bridge and the House of

ners was commissioned and cast in bronze

by the royal family and Parliament’s

engineer and sculptor, Thomas

Thornycroft. The statue sits on a plinth

beside the Victoria Embankment next
to Westminster Bridge and the House of

Parliament in downtown London. This

line from William Cowper’s Boadicea, An

Ode, is inscribed on the side of the art-

work, “Regions Caesar never knew, thy

posterity shall sway.”6

Story 3: 17th Century. The troops

are a ferocious sight, advancing silently

from the African bush, barefoot, wield-
ing clubs and knives. They walk through

acacia, a low-growing dense plant with

white, spiny hooked razor-sharp thorns.

Each undergoes the same exhaustive drills
to become insensitive to fighting and

impervious to pain. One methodology
to harden them to battle is to have all re-
cruits heave bound prisoners of war into

an angry crowd and watch unmoving, as

the captives are torn apart. Most lethal of

the warriors are the Reapers, armed with

3-foot-long straight razors so they can

cut the enemy in two. An artistic render-
ing of one of the troops shows a standing

fighter with a musket, club, dagger, and

an enemy’s severed head, blood dripping
to the ground. These fighting elite are

women in the service of the African King

of Dahomey. Within their realm, they are

held in high esteem and valued as war-

riors. Two accounts exist regarding their

roots. The first is that they formed some-
time in the early 1600s, as gheto, meaning

“big game hunter.” Malian society, where

the gheto live, is considered progressive

for the time due to their valuing educa-
tion and exchanging scholars with China,

Europe, and the Middle East. Other

histories describe the women as serving as

armed palace guards, later forming into

the Black Sparta combat troops of King

Gezo, in the region of modern-day Benin

in West Africa.7 Female generals oversee

their ranks, and they serve 40 continu-

ous years as a significant part of Gezo’s

military forces.

These stories are only three of thou-

sands of accounts of women combatants

that exist in historical archives of war. It

has not been until the last two decades

that such exploits are appearing as impor-
tant additions to the timeline of conflict.

One of the reasons for the missing factual

knowledge and understanding about these

women is that their experiences have been

purposely written out of the chronology

of historical records.8 A 2012 opinion

piece by Bettany Hughes, an English

historian, author, and broadcaster who

specializes in classical studies, asserts that

not only have women’s exploits been de-

leted, but also their wisdom and insights

about religion, codes, hadiths, texts, and

statecraft.9 Hughes discloses that women

may only occupy a mere 0.5 percent of

about 3,500 years of recorded history.10

At Stanford University, extensive work by

one of the world’s leading scholars and

researchers of female antiquities, Adrienne

Mayor, writes in The Amazons that there

is conclusive evidence today that many tales

of women warriors thought to be fictional

are facts.11 Support for her studies exists

in data derived from recent archeological
digs. Fifty ancient burial mounds near the
town of Pokrovska, Russia, close to the

Kazakhstan border, are yielding women’s

skeletons alongside their weapons. Such

cave excavations are adding to the credibility

of the Greek historian Herodotus’ accounts

that depict numerous instances of female

fighters. At other archeological sites from

ancient Eurasia, up to 40 percent of

military graves being upturned contain

the bones and weapons of horsewomen

who fought alongside men. Lying with

them are arrows, swords, daggers, armor,

shields, spears, and sling stones.12

Women Combatants: A Global

Review of Their Exploits

Geographically, from the North Ameri-

can continent, eastward to the nations of

Asia, and across many eras, women

show they are talented and ruthless as

combatants and leaders in war. There is

no question; they are physically and psy-

chologically able to thrive in battle situa-

tions. In the 1800s in North America,

Buffalo Calf Road Woman (also known

as Brave Woman) of the Northern

Cheyenne fights with her husband at the

Battle of Little Big Horn. In 2005,

breaking a century of silence among

tribal elders about discussing George

Armstrong Custer, she is publicly cred-

ted as the warrior who strikes the blow

that knocks the cavalry commander

off his horse.13 Running Eagle of the

Piegan Tribe of the Blackfoot Nation

participates in several successful raids

and war parties. In a battle with the

Flathead, she is explicitly targeted by the

enemy after field intelligence confirms

there is a strong woman warrior among

her people. The enemy singles her out

for killing before they enter battle, club-

bing her from behind astride her war-
horse. Dahteste, a Choconen Apache

warrior woman, is a successful raider

and compatriot to Geronimo serving as

a translator and mediator during the

U.S. Cavalry negotiation for his tribe’s

surrender. Lozen, born into the Chi-

hene Band, is considered a strategic

genius in planning and orchestrating

battles. She is so effective in her ability

to predictably determine the enemy’s

movements that her nation claims she

is born with shaman powers. Vittorio,

her brother and the Chief of the Warm

Springs band of the Tchihende division

of the central Apaches, talks about her

in respectful tones, stating, “She is my

right hand. She is a shield to her people

. . . as strong as a man, braver than

most, and cunning in strategy.”14
Students with Infantry Training Battalion—part of first ITB company to include female Marines as part of ongoing research into opening combat-related job fields to women—practice basic marksmanship techniques at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, September 26, 2013 (U.S. Marine Corps/Tyler L. Main)

The Southern Hemisphere has the fewest recorded examples of women warriors, but there are some illustrations worth noting. During the great age of maritime exploration of the early 1500s, there are eyewitness accounts by navigators that see female warriors on the tributaries of the great rivers on the South American continent. Explorer and conquistador Francisco de Orellana relates that during his traverse of the entire length of the Amazon, he encounters warrior women skilled in the use of bordunas. Depicted as tall, with muscular physiques and well trained, the women are lethal additions to fights due to their aptitude in the use of the bow and arrow. Other European expedition histories describe women skilled in martial arts and ground combat inhabiting the Andes.15

On the continent of Africa, Dahomey women are not the only female warriors. Greek histories report seeing Libyan female troops wearing red leather armor and carrying shields. There are many warrior queens among the Hausa in the region of Niger and Nupe, who practice for and fight savage battles with their enemies. Both groups are primarily Muslim. Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother of Ejisu in the Ashanti Empire—now part of modern-day Ghana, prepares, equips, and leads the War of the Golden Stool in 1900. It is the final battle in the Anglo-Ashanti struggle with British colonialists.

Numerous illustrations of women fighters exist in the history of the geographic regions of south, eastern, and central Europe. While many of the stories depict land battles, there are also women who show excellent aptitudes for fighting at sea. A research team from Western Australia recently uncovered remnants of Viking shield-maidens, or skjaldmaer, along with their battle swords. They are believed to have accompanied male Vikings in their invasions of England. During the Greco-Persian wars, Artemisia I of Caria commands a contribution of five ships under the Persian King Xerxes at the naval battle of Artemisium. As the campaign progresses, and it becomes evident she will fall into Greek hands, she decides to raise the colors of the enemy on her vessel’s mast to confuse the Greeks into thinking she is a friend. In the writing of the second-century Macedonian author Polyaneus, Xerxes acknowledges Artemisia’s excelling in the face of death and awards her a war prize of a complete suit of Greek armor. One detractor, Thessalus, a son of Greek physician Hippocrates, calls her cunning plays those of “merely a cowardly pirate.” After the Battle of Artemisium, she receives the formal title of Grand Admiral and Commander in Chief of the Persian Navy. In honor of her heroics, her profile is imprinted on fifth-century coins.16
In the Persian Empire, during the sixth century BCE, women are valued for their contributions as rulers, they oversee legislative court and run official ministries, and they hold positions of military might. During the 30-year reign of Cyrus the Great, Pantea Artesthod stood out as commander of the Persian Immortal Army, which roles are akin to today’s special operations forces. The Immortals are referenced in Herodotus’ writings as a professional corps consisting of some heavy infantry at a size of up to 10,000 troops. Her society considers Pantea as a sensitive and caring military commander.

In Asian chronologies, there are more examples of female fighters than in any other part of the world. One of the most widely documented is the Japanese onna-bugeisha, who are part of the noble warrior caste that fights alongside the samurai. Each intensively exercises in the use of the ko-naginata, a pole weapon blade for battering, stabbing, or hooking an opponent. All are taught tanto-jutsu, a series of knife fighting systems. Instruction regimens focus on the use of the kaiken, an 8- to 10-inch-long dagger used for indoor, close quarter combat. The onna-bugeisha’s ko-naginata is purposefully formed to be slightly smaller than the o-naginata for men, to compensate for women’s differing average height and body strength.

Knowing about this history is important because it demonstrates a broad demographic and geographic representation of women in war. It shows they effectively fight and lead in jungles, deserts, steppes, at sea, and in riverine regions. They are physically and emotionally able to compete and do well across an expansive set of scenarios including hand-to-hand combat, camouflage, and tracking, and in using the lethal weapons systems of their times.

The Excommunication of Women from War
Why and how women have been deleted or ostracized from taking on combat roles is believed to be linked to the rise of the patriarchal societies of Greece and Rome. English scholar and classicist Mary Beard, in her New York Times best-selling book Women and Power, argues that the strong patrilineal Roman culture is what obliterated the speech and power of women. Demeaning female populations in this period is the norm. Philosophers, politicians, and artists from the era show a common bond in their negativity toward women. Soldier and mercenary Xenophon believes that “men can better endure physically adverse conditions. Women are much more fearful, and hence more protective of possessions, while men are more courageous.”

Demosthenes, an Athenian general during the Pelo-ponnesian War, sees women as having three roles: “men keep hetaeae (mistresses) for the sake of pleasure, female slaves for daily care, and wives to give legitimate children and be guardians of households.” From Greek dramatist Meander comes the line “a man who teaches a woman to write should know that he is providing poison to an asp.” Ancient Greek Hipponax disparages women in his poetry: “There are two days on which a woman is most pleasing—when someone marries her and when he carries out her dead body.”

Euripides’ classical tragedies often have women describing themselves in a negative light. From his plays come the lines “I am only a woman, a thing which the world hates” and “we are a curse to humanity,” and “I am only a woman, a thing which the world hates” and “we are a curse to humanity.”

Not all is negative from the period. There are some who take a nontraditional line and advocate for women, but this is not a common occurrence. Student records of Plato’s teachings show he believes women should learn the crafts of musical and physical training, as well as military preparation, and that men and women should employ themselves in fighting enemies the same way. Aristotle, Plato’s student, has an entirely different viewpoint, asserting that women are naturally inferior to men, physically, spiritually, and intellectually.

Beard makes a compelling argument that there is a direct line between the silencing and invisibility of women in the cultures of the ancients to the current and continuing problems with some of the patriarchy of today. Understanding this historical deletion of women’s roles is helpful to start to see that the current gender landscape is not an accident and that today’s ideas about women are inextricably linked to what she terms “historical, cultural DNA.” Extensive research behind Women and Power shows that within the history of equality there is a basic rule of thumb: “in tracing the persistence of female disempowerment, Beard argues that we inherited a deep cultural preoccupation” with it and that the “more a culture oppresses women, or oppresses anyone, the more absorbed they become with keeping the disempowerment rather than moving beyond it.”

In 2017, the World Economic Forum (WEF) estimated that the likelihood for global gender parity in economics and civil and legislative rights would not occur any time soon, with research showing that reaching a modest level of equality is at least 170 years away. Not only is an extended timeframe involved, but reaching new stages of reduction in disparities are also taking longer to advance. Labeled by the WEF as the “creeping delay,” the excessive lapse of time for change is a result of our human nature to automatically try to find selective arguments to resist moving toward equitabilities. Loss and grievance theory from the field of social dynamics aids in explaining why the disproportionate interval plagues change for women desiring to enter a career in combat arms. Reaching a majority acceptance entails a change in sociocultural, not physical, DNA.

For a shift to occur, the current idealized and privileged spaces men and women hold in the military will need to undergo modification. In socio-science terms, such adjustment requires a reducing of holding onto what is called “severe internal grievances.” Grievances are defined as “real or imagined wrongs or other causes for complaint or protest to the status quo.” Two primary grievance groups exist in the combat exclusion issue. Those who support women’s rights to bear arms are defined as “liberalist,” meaning they are open to new behavior or opinions and are willing to discard traditional values and replace them with
new ones. Those who would prefer women not be allowed this role take on a “conservativist” approach, meaning their preference is to hold to historical attitudes and values that women should not be combatants. One excellent example of loss and grievance compounding change and an excessive period passing before a new paradigm emerges is with the near century of effort it took to achieve the women’s right to vote in the United States and United Kingdom.32

Ideas and Their Application
From 1900–2015, examples of legislatively blocking, rescinding, and reinvigorating the roles of women in the military are numerous. It is not until after World War I, when the women of the all-female medical units prove to be highly successful, that the men overseeing their activities support their formal entry into the forces. Most of the women involved in promoting their value to the military are already hardened to rejection because nearly all of them have labored as suffragists and suffragettes to gain voting rights.33

Their success in front- and rear-line hospital work leads to the passage of the Army Reorganization Act, which allows female medical professionals to attain status as officers and receive a relative rank to that of their male counterparts. However, limitations are put in place to allow only for promotion within the four lowest officer ranks of lieutenant to major without full rights and privileges, or equal pay. Women will not be considered for substantial, formal leadership responsibilities, and female enlisted Army Soldiers get capped at 2 percent of total enlisted brackets. Officer slots are limited to 10 percent, and rank restrictions exist for female participants for 50 years. The removal of these limitations does not occur until the Vietnam War in 1967.

Any changes related to the military woman after 1967 parallel the passage of national legislation of the Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination, the evolution of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the lifting of the ban on women practicing law, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. Up until 1975, pregnancy resulted in immediate dismissal from the Armed Forces. One rare example of support from inside the military for women’s inclusion is when Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt writes and distributes Z-gram #116, “Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women in the Navy,” in August of 1972.34 Some new ideas he proposes are the opening of all enlisted rates to women, the support of the goal of assigning women to ships at sea, the opening of civil engineering and chaplaincy roles to women, and an assignment of techni- qualifed unrestricted line women to restricted line billets. In follow-on decades, women are allowed entry into the Service academies and to fly combat aircraft. Many of these modifications do not occur until both bodies of the legisla- tive branch of the U.S. Government gain additional female officials who support the changes and branches of the Armed Services approach 10 percent total female population.35

Two primary arguments continue to plague the “women as fighters” issue: that women are considered a distraction to unit cohesion, and women are less able physically and mentally to perform combat roles. As recently as September of 2018, James Mattis is quoted as stating in a presentation to cadets at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) that “the jury’s still out on women serving in combat. The United States needs to decide whether females in close-quarters combat are a military strength or weakness . . . remember our inclination is to have this open to all. But we cannot do something that militarily doesn’t make sense.”36

The defense given for these statements is that there is not enough data yet on full female inclusion.37 In an earlier interview, Mattis notes what infantrymen are like in battle: “They are cocky; they’re ram- bunctious. They’re necessarily macho. And it’s the most primitive; I would say even evil, environment. You can’t even explain it.”38 There is no awareness shown here of 3,000 years of women’s participation in events as deadly and hor- rific as the picture presented here of the culture of the 21st-century infantryman. The comments also ignore the numeric that there are over 9,000 U.S. military women who earned valor awards and combat action badges in the past two decades.39 Also disregarded is the current situation of women in the Army. At a Future of War Conference in Arizona in 2018, the Army’s Vice Chief of Staff, General James McConville, gave an overview where he stated: We have women in every single infantry, armor and artillery battalion and every single brigade combat team in the Army. . . . The Army currently has 600 women in infantry and armor jobs. . . . Ten (now 12) women have graduated from Ranger School, which is our toughest school. We have a woman commanding a company in the 82nd Airborne Division, an infantry company.40

In 2018, the first female sapper tab was awarded, and currently, 22 women are serving as infantry and armor offi- cers. Statements spoken to the cadets in Virginia, while deserving unqualified respect due to the level of highly decorated combat experience behind them, show the “conservativist” line of the women in combat argument, are an example of a deep cultural preoccupation with the status quo, and are a good representation of “loss and grievance” toward a scenario that no longer exists in the battle prepara- tion crucible. A ban on women in combat was rescinded 6 years before the declarations made at VMI and are 4 years after Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter announced the decision to open all combat jobs to women.

Internationally, the move to delete combat exclusion policies begins almost 30 years ago. By 2018, more than a dozen industrialized nations allow women to serve in combat.41 During the late 1980s, Canada and Denmark passed total inclusion laws for women in the military. In Australia in 2011, the military began a 5-year plan that resulted in women serving as navy ordnance disposal divers; as airfield and ground defense guards; and as members of the infantry, artillery, and armored units. India’s air force is now composed of
almost 9 percent female personnel, and several are serving as helicopter and fighter pilots. In 2018, India deployed its first all-female elite SWAT team with expertise in explosives, urban warfare, and deadly martial arts. Thirty-six commands work in counterterrorism units and receive preparation by top global experts in weapons proficiencies and Krav Maga, which is a lethal martial arts program pioneered by Israeli special forces. In field maneuvers, the commands are proving to be highly proficient in ambush and counter-ambush tactics, jungle, and urban operations. They can, stated an article in The Telegraph, “spring from deep sleep to action, fully armed, within a minute of an alarm.” Israel has long had compulsory mixed gender military service and represents an extensive modern history with integrated troops. A 2000 equality amendment to the Israeli Military Service law states that “the right of women to serve in any role in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] is equal to the right of men.” The 33rd Caracal Combat Battalion, taking its name from a cat whose sexes appear the same, is now 70 percent female. Members were actively engaged in Al Aqsa Intifada, the Gaza Withdrawal, and the Israel-Lebanon War. Recruits use M16A1 and M4A1 assault rifles, grenade launchers, light antitank weapon rockets, light and heavy machine guns, and automatic grenade launchers. One female member in the battalion served as commander of a sniper platoon.

In general, earlier societies that accepted female warriors did not plague the women with negativity about their inclusion, nor did they impede their strengths. Operationally, women were positioned in situations where they could excel. Only in recent generations have women been excluded by using an excuse that they do not match, precisely, a numeric range in size, shape, and strength of a male contemporary.

Conclusion: Leading, Legislating, and Learning
There continues to be a preoccupation with keeping alive the grievance between the liberalist and conservativist sociological points of view that women cannot and should not fight. Three spheres need to be addressed to offset this problematical state of affairs: leadership understanding, legislation, and education.

Military leaders should consider learning about historical examples of female combatants to affect their own and other’s attitudes regarding the myth that women have not been in combat. Over the past 20 years, there has been a vast improvement in the availability of such information, and it should be mined. Including historical and modern stories in instructional scenarios and informal discussions with troops will aid in shifting the negative cultural DNA about women in combat that continues to exist. Those women experiencing a career in combat arms need to write or tell their stories so that the abysmal 0.5 percent of their written and oral input into the history of war can increase.

In the world of politics, legislators who support gender-related military equalities or work with lawmakers who are opposed to transformation also need to become and remain knowledgeable about why and how past societies disempower female populations. The more examples available in their repertoires of successful and failed scenarios, the abler the policymakers become in their ability to fend off the “creeping delays” that occur due to backward movement from repeating past errors. Educators in war colleges and military Service schools who develop curricula and lectures for security sector professionals would benefit their student populations through formally instigating study units that discuss social aspects and historical examples of women in war. Demographics in war college and Service school classrooms have changed markedly since 2000, and the more mixed gendered the military becomes in the field, the more it is essential for those being schooled in professional military education to develop their awareness about women and war. Pantea Arteshnbod, Artemisia, Boudicca, the Tru’ng Sisters, Yaa Asantewaa, and Lozen should be as well-known as their male counterparts. JFQ

Notes
3 Cassius Dio, Roman History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). Changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s parallel the larger, two-decades-long timeframe that has become known as “second-wave feminism.”
4 Ibid.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid. See also Phaedra, speaking in Euripides, Hippolytus, 428 BCE.


28 Ibid.


31 Ibid. See also The Global Gender Gap Report 2017.


33 These ideas are copyrighted in the working paper, Mary Raum, “Suffragism, Women in Military Nursing and Medicine,” in From Eight Hours to Four Years: Female POW’s Civil War to Vietnam, forthcoming. The suffragists believed in peaceful campaigning, whereas the suffragettes believed in direct action (violence and militancy). The suffragists were nationally organized; the suffragettes were a smaller organization with 2,000 members at its peak in 1914. The suffragists allowed men to join their efforts; the suffragettes did not.


35 J. Xie et al., “Social Consensus Through the Influence of Committed Minorities,” Physical Review E 84, no. 1 (July 2011). Data now show that once 10 percent of a population is committed to an idea, it is inevitable that it will eventually become the prevailing opinion of the entire group. The key is to remain committed.


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.


42 Saptarshi Ray, “New All-Female SWAT Team to Protect Indian Prime Minister after Intensive Training in Martial Arts,” Telegraph (London), August 11, 2018.