

The Ethical Issues of Combat Related Employment of Women

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"We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

(From the Declaration of Independence dated 04 July 1776)

The intent of the above passage seems clear. It proposes that all men are equal and free to pursue their own goals. Not surprisingly, there is only the mention of "men." It would be a mistake to assume that the authors used the word "men" in a generic sense like "mankind" to mean both men and women because at the time of *The Declaration of Independence*, women were still regarded as being subservient to men. Regardless, most reasonable people today support the idea of equality for women. One only needs to look as far as our efforts in the Middle East where for years we have been trying to convince the Muslim people that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men. As well, over the past few decades, more and more armies have allowed and encouraged women to enter into military service. Nevertheless, if we really accept the idea that women and men are equal, why do many armies, including the United States Army, still restrict women's employment to non-combat roles?

Over the years, there have been many arguments against the employment of women in combat roles. Their lack of size, strength, and aggressiveness; the potential adverse effect they might have on cohesion; and their potential mistreatment by the enemy are among the many issues that have been cited as good reasons for restricting their employment. In this paper I will argue that these reasons are predominantly based on biased opinions that reflect traditional male values and preconceived notions that no longer have significant relevance to the combat related employment of women in today's Army. As Franklin Pinch stated when describing the

Canadian Army's experience, "once a woman enrolls in the combat arms, the barriers become primarily cultural and social" (qtd. in Davis & McKee 4). I will further argue that not all, but some women can be successfully integrated into combat roles so long as they receive the right training and units have sound leadership at all levels. I will illustrate this by providing documentary evidence and by using my own experiences and the Canadian Army as a case study.

At the outset, I would like to point out that the vast majority women have no desire to serve in a combat role; however, by restricting women to non-combat roles, we indirectly reinforce the notion that somehow women are inferior to men. In a just society, fitness for military service should be determined by the needs of the military, aptitude testing, academic performance and work history, medical and physical fitness testing, and by the desire of the individual to serve the nation in a given occupation. The other point to note here is that I am not advocating the conscription of women for combat roles. Their service in these roles should be strictly voluntary.

Probably the main argument for prohibiting women from serving in combat roles is a belief that women are weaker than men in terms of physical strength, endurance and aggressiveness. While it is true that on average women are physically weaker than men, some men are also weaker than other men. As well, this delta can be closed by physical training that focuses on key areas of fitness. In a study by the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, only 25% of the 41 woman volunteers could carry out military tasks normally performed by men, but with 24 weeks of training the proportion increased to 75% (Wilson 2000:1). In another case, when the New York City Fire Department wanted to recruit female firefighters, they found that only 3%, or 11 of 354 female applicants who passed the written test,

were able to pass a physical exercise based on common firefighting tasks. In this case, even though the results were poor, they were acceptable because the Fire Department was unwilling to lower its standard, and the fact remains that 11 female applicants did pass the test and were able to enroll in the firefighter training program (Davis & McKee 7). The point here is that it is unrealistic to expect all women to be physically capable of coping with the rigors of combat, just as it would be for all men, but those who are capable and have the desire should be free to serve in combat roles.

As can be seen by the above examples, another important aspect of the physical capabilities of women is the issue of fitness testing. If there is a bona fide requirement for a certain level of fitness, strength or endurance for certain occupations, for example in the combat arms, testing criteria should be developed to screen candidates prior to graduation and throughout their career to ensure they meet the minimum standard. To be equitable, the standard must be the same for men and women, and age should not be a factor. For example, using the Army Physical Fitness Test, the combat arms branches might decide that all soldiers must achieve a minimum score of 70 percent for a 25-year-old male regardless of their age or sex. Using this model, the most likely outcome would be that most of the women, and the weaker of the men, would score towards the bottom for any given unit, but at least all the soldiers would have met the same standard. The key here is to ensure that the weaker soldiers, regardless of sex, are evenly distributed throughout the unit.

As far as aggressiveness is concerned, some women can be just as aggressive as their male counterparts, but in general it is also true that most women, at least to a certain degree, lack the "warrior" spirit. Once again, this should not be a big issue as there are also men who lack aggressiveness. Some might also argue that women in combat roles have never been tested in

battle, but this is not true. Women have been successfully employed in combat roles by many different armies around the World, particularly during and since the Second World War. During my experience of training female infantry soldiers, I found that like their male counterparts, some are very good, aggressive soldiers, and others are not. The key is not to force them to be something they are not. If they are unsuitable for employment as infantry soldiers they might do just fine in other combat related occupations. This has generally been the case in the Canadian Army where females have been much more successfully integrated into the armored, artillery, and engineer regiments than into the infantry battalions. It can not be emphasized enough, however, that it is also clear the vast majority of women are much better suited for non-combat roles. Nevertheless, those women that have the ability and desire to serve in combat roles should be given the same opportunity to serve as their male counterparts.

To better illustrate some of the difficulties of integrating women into combat roles, the Canadian Army is a good case in point. In Canada, after the Canadian Human Rights Commission ordered that all military occupations be open to women in 1989, the Canadian Army was anxious to enroll as many women as possible into the combat arms, even going so far as to encourage women already serving in non-combat roles to be reassigned to combat roles. This of course created another ethical problem because many of the serving females, and the initial groups of civilian recruits, were unsuitable for combat roles but were convinced to apply for combat employment anyway. It seems ironic that in trying to protect a woman's right to serve in the combat arms, the Canadian Army actually infringed on their rights by coercing them into applying for something that most of them were not at all interested in or suited for. It took several years to resolve these issues because the Canadian Army's original concept for the integration of women was to have a critical mass of female soldiers in each occupation in order

to form squads, platoons etc. With the low numbers of women interested in serving in the combat arms, the Canadian Army soon realized that this plan was not practical and that combat arms units would never have enough women to form all female organizations. Women would have to be integrated into existing male units, which brings me to my next point: The issue of whether women in combat roles can adversely affect unit cohesion.

The Canadian Army realized very early on that it was impossible to give female soldiers special treatment because this would likely become a morale issue for the male soldiers. The approach became to treat all soldiers the same regardless of sex. This means that with the exception of garrison facilities, in most cases no special provisions are made to accommodate the unique needs of the female soldiers, particularly under field conditions. For example, if it is possible to have separate sleeping areas for female soldiers, the unit will provide them, but if not, female soldiers are expected to sleep in the same area as the other soldiers regardless of sex, and take whatever precautions they can to ensure their own privacy. In many cases, this might be as simple as asking the other soldiers to turn around while the female soldier changes etc. Obviously this policy was not meant to absolve leaders of their responsibility for the welfare of their soldiers. It was simply a means to show that women were not receiving preferential treatment.

In order to reduce the potential for the development of intimate relations, the Canadian Army also instituted a strict policy of no fraternization, regardless of rank. For example, during operations or under training conditions, a male and female soldier may not be in the same room or tent together unless another soldier is present. Even married couples are not permitted to fraternize in a theatre of operations. For this reason, if they do deploy together, they are normally sent to different operating bases. In my experience, most soldiers have willingly

accepted these limitations because the no fraternization policy prevents the morale problems that personal relationships can cause, especially in a theatre of operations.

The other issue that concerns many in the Army, is whether male soldiers might jeopardize mission success in order to protect female soldiers. In my opinion, this is a non-issue. As stated above, if leaders treat all soldiers the same regardless of sex, and enforce the policy of no fraternization during operations, soldiers will be no more likely to forgo their assigned mission for a female soldier than for a male soldier. An important aspect that many senior Army personnel neglect to consider is the rapid change in the traditional moral values of our society, especially the changing way our young people view the world. Most young men and women today do not have the same preconceived notions as their elders, a belief that women are inferior objects that need to be coddled. Young people today are much more open to the idea of equality between men and women and are therefore better able to develop a professional working relationship with members of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, Army leaders at all levels need to be aware of the preconceived notions of many Army personnel. They need to remind these personnel that it was not too long ago when women had very restricted opportunities in both the Army and in the civilian world. Times have changed and so can we.

Another issue that Army personnel have raised is the issue of captured female soldiers being mistreated by the enemy. All soldiers risk abuse at the hands of the enemy and need to be reminded of this risk. Once again, especially on the modern battlefield where the threat is asymmetrical, women should not be thought of as fragile creatures, but as trained soldiers just like their male counterparts. While female soldiers serving in combat roles, at least potentially might face more abuse by the enemy than male soldiers, the overall risk of their capture is probably no higher than for female soldiers in non-combat roles. In any case, there will likely

never be significant numbers of female soldiers in combat roles so their risk of capture should be quite low.

In summary, we live in a rapidly changing world where the difference between non-combat and combat roles has become blurred by the asymmetrical threat of modern warfare. Given this changing world, the rationale for not allowing women to voluntarily serve in combat roles is no longer valid because it is based on the biased opinions and false assumptions of those who refuse to accept that men and women are equal. Although it is clear that many women have neither the ability, nor the desire to serve in combat roles, if they have what it takes and a desire to serve, why not let them? With the right training and the support of Army leaders at all levels, there is no reason not to employ qualified female soldiers in combat roles. The Army has faced many challenges over the past few years, and the employment of women in combat roles, if ever approved, will be no different. As with previous challenges, the Army will expect its leaders to respect the Army values by being leaders, knowing what to do, and doing what is right.

Works Cited

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