

# Women In The Line Of Fire

*A vindication of the rights of women in combat.*

by Andrea Bond

When Napoleon Bonaparte marched into battle and single-handedly conquered Europe, he stood only five feet three inches tall. When Lawrence of Arabia led forces against Turkish opposition, he weighed less than 150 pounds. So what is stopping the average five feet four inch 125 pound Jane Doe from serving in military combat? If it is not muscle or brawn, what is it?

The Combat Exclusion Act of 1948 has precluded women from combat roles. Over the years, women have reached the point where they can work in supply units and engage in support missions. Under the new Pentagon rules, they will even be permitted to fly combat planes and serve on warships at sea. However, women are still locked out of the heart of combat: infantry, armored artillery units.

Although a steady support for women's right to combat can be found in Congress, the barrier that restricts women from fully exercising their right to serve in the military still stands firm. Representative Robert Doman predicts that coming cuts in the size of the military will doom further expansion of women's roles (Kantrowitz 23). The general consensus among his peers is that women have been integrated into the military fully enough. Conservative Republicans are the most outspoken opponents of women in combat, but even the co-sponsor of the proposal to allow women to fly fighter planes, Representative Beverly Byron, doesn't think all barriers should go; she draws the line at ground combat. Moreover, recent Senate hearings showed an attitude gap between officers and enlisted men. Higher-ranking men have said women can comfortably serve as pilots or submarine captains. Infantry-level men have been more resistant, saying that the vast majority of women are not strong enough for fighting on the frontlines (Kantrowitz 23).

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## THE CALL OF DUTY

Throughout history, women have come to the aid of their country by joining the military. Despite the rampant discrimination and name-calling that have labeled them as "Wackies" and "latter-day Amazons," women have not been deterred from answering their call of duty. From the time of the Civil War, women have served not only as nurses, but also disguised themselves as men and served on the frontline. During World War II, more women were recruited by the Armed Forces than ever before.

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The nearly 350,000 who answered the call to arms helped their country to victory by working as machinists, bomber pilots within the United States. In Vietnam, 200,000 women proved their abilities as caretakers and support units and compensated for the manpower shortage. By the time the war ended, a new law tripled the number of females allowed in the service, recognizing women as valuable assets to the military (Nyary 58-59). Most recently, 32,000 female troops performed courageously in the Gulf War. They repaired tanks, piloted supplies, trucked ammunition and flew into enemy territory. Women were killed, captured, and earned medals—just as their male counterparts did.

## FACT or MYTH?

Today, women are asking for their full rights as soldiers: equal opportunity to fight in all areas of combat. Unfortunately, they are up against a myriad of obstacles such as senior Defense officials, legislators in

Washington, and deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and expectations about the roles women should play in society. However, these mores that are held by opponents to women in combat are nothing but myths that stifle the performance of the military at home and abroad.

Opponents to women in combat often say that women do not have the strength to be effective frontline fighters. But the roles that women played in Desert Storm prove that these fears are wrong. On the first day of the ground war a woman led a squadron of Chinook helicopters into Iraq. Women carried M-16s, manned M-60s, and handled equipment on the frontlines and in enemy territory. Moreover, military technology is progressing, making weapons more dependent on skill than on strength (Nelán 43). No more muscle is needed to operate a tank or truck than a jet or Chinook helicopter.

Another myth that surrounds the issue of women in combat is the delusion that sexual tensions and primitive living conditions make the combat zone an unsuitable place for a woman. Army specialist Sandy Hearn can even recall a special training exercise run by Army Rangers that she was qualified to attend but was barred from, because there were no "female facilities" (Nyary 58). These minor inconveniences, however, are pale in comparison to the hazards of war.

When Life magazine interviewed troops in Saudi Arabia, it found that problems arising between male and female soldiers were not very different from those encountered by women in the boardroom or locker room. With time and experience, they begin to disappear. During the Gulf War, men and women stationed in the Gulf lived as if they had been in combat together. They shared tents, showers, and washroom facilities without sharing beds.

Opponents to women in combat frequently say that women would interrupt male bonding among the troops. To Carolyn Becraft, a military consultant for the Women's Research and Education Institute, that claim "sounds similar to the argument used against full integration of blacks after World War II: That whites wouldn't feel 'comfortable'" (Kantrowitz 23). Not only is the notion

of male bonding archaic, but experience has proven it wrong. Involvement in the Gulf War has shown that what is important among fighters is human bonding. According to soldiers who fought in the Gulf, men appreciated women's presence because they were able to discuss their feelings, longings and anxieties when they surfaced. According to Sgt. Cindy Davis, "Men won't talk to other men about how they feel about this sort of thing, but they will talk to women. I think having women around made it a little more bearable for men" (Nyary 59).

Perhaps the most emotional aspect of excluding women from combat positions is the difficulty in seeing mothers go off to war. Twenty years ago, it was hard to see a mother go off to a full-time job. But today, women have been accepted into the workforce, and child-care has become a mutual task between husband and wife. Women are no longer confined to domestic responsibilities, and they should not be asked to give up their right to serve their country.

Finally, opponents to female fighters assert that the public isn't ready for female FOWs or women in body bags. Earlier this year, the Air Force Chiefs of Staff, General Merrill McPeak, told a group of female officers, "I have a culturally based hang-up. I can't get over this image of women coming back in body bags" (Nelán 43). Is the death of a woman more tragic because of her sex? The idea that one life is more valuable than another is insulting; it diminishes all people.

#### WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

In 1992, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, by a vote of 29-4, asked former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to work for the repeal of combat exclusion in all the services (Norden 14). However, their request was unanswered. Earlier this year, President Clinton established a commission to review the issue of women in the military. While the commission's chairman supported women's right to serve in all aspects of the opera-

tions of battle-designed ships (excepting only amphibious landing craft), the commission still voted against women in combat (Buckley 62). Although Defense Secretary Les Aspin ordered the removal of restrictions on women flying combat aircraft last May, members of Congress have still been slow to reverse the current policy. Furthermore, even after Aspin's order was implemented, women are still ineligible for about 40 percent of combat slots (Nelán 43).

Military women face a Catch-22. They need combat experience in order to get the best jobs, but the current system won't give them the jobs that allow them to gain such experience. Women complain that combat is the missing step in their career ladders. Lacking battle experience, they cannot pursue a track that could lead to any combat command, from light infantry officer to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Opponents to women in combat claim that women are being protected from danger. What they are really being protected from is opportunity. The issue of letting women fully participate in the Armed Forces is very much an issue of equal rights and opportunity.

The idea of allowing women to serve as combat soldiers is nothing new. In fact, in the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway and Canada it is a working reality. Even at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, the NATO pilot training program recently graduated a Dutch female soldier from its combat training program—a program that America's own service-women are ironically denied (Norden 14).

#### MOVING TOWARDS CHANGE

Despite the obstacles they face, women comprise a significant 11 percent of the armed forces. Until Congress and the Department of Defense take an honest initiative, women will be perpetually locked out of the heart of the military. This is not justified. In the words of Representative Schroeder, "There's never been a group studied more than women in the military," and they have proven

themselves capable—psychologically and physically (Korowitz 22).

From domestic base closures to its policy on homosexuals, the military has been constantly scrutinized during the past few months. But buried beneath these conspicuous issues is a policy of excluding women from combat that warrants immediate reevaluation. Perhaps some of the armed forces' slogans best speak for themselves: "Aim High." "Be All That You Can Be." Do these slogans apply more to males than they do to females? Currently, yes. Should they? **No.**

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