



Our Gender is Soldier

[While the question of allowing women to serve in combat was still under discussion at the Pentagon, Rod Norland explored whether the question had already been answered on the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan.]

Women in the U.S. military are still officially barred from combat. But in practice, they're fighting—and dying—alongside the men in Afghanistan.

When Specialist Devin Snyder, a 20-year-old from western New York State, was killed last June by a bomb planted on a highway, she became the 28th female American soldier to die in Afghanistan

Servicewomen have died in all of America's wars, but usually they were support personnel such as nurses and clerks. In Afghanistan, where the front lines can be anywhere a soldier is on patrol or interacting with villagers, most women who have died were killed in combat situations, like Snyder was, despite the military's official prohibition on women in combat roles.

The same was true in Iraq, where, according to the Department of Defense, 110 female soldiers died between 2003 and December 2011, when U.S. combat forces completed their withdrawal. In both wars, roadside bombs, grenades, gunshots, or other hostile acts by the enemy accounted for 60 percent of the fatalities among female soldiers.

The nature of fighting an enemy like the Taliban ... that can blend in with civilians or attack from remote hideaways in the mountains has obscured the boundaries between combat roles that are officially off-limits to women and support jobs that are often as dangerous and in some cases even more so. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Snyder's death was that it wasn't considered out of the ordinary.

"Out here, there is no male gender and no female gender," says Staff Sgt. Vincent Vetterkind, one of Snyder's fellow platoon members. "Our gender is soldier."

New Rules

The Pentagon announced in February that it will allow women to serve in dangerous jobs closer to the front lines, like medics and radio operators, but it stopped short of saying officially that they could serve in combat. That disappointed advocates for female soldiers who serve on dangerous missions in Afghanistan.

"It's a really, really tiny step forward," says AnuBhagwati, a former Marine Corps captain and director of an advocacy group for women in the military. "We were hoping for more."

The pressure on the military to change comes principally from the fact that women are being excluded from the top ranks, where those without combat ribbons generally need not apply. The hesitancy stems from fears that women might prove physically or mentally unfit for combat, or that their presence on the front lines might undermine morale.

While there is still a debate back home about the role of women in the military, here on the ground, that battle seems to have been largely, if quietly, settled during 10 years of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan in which female soldiers have increasingly shared the same risks as their male counterparts.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t even think about that issue,” says the commander of Snyder’s platoon, First Lt. RiannonBlaisdell-Black, 24, of Virginia Beach, Virginia. “Out here we don’t see gender, we don’t see race.”

Snyder was a high school track star who came from a military family in Cohocton, N.Y. She enlisted after graduation, choosing the military police because, as one of her platoonmates put it, “We had the best and biggest guns.” Her physical fitness scores often exceeded the Army’s perfect 300.

The military police is a common choice for women who want to get into combat. Women can also become medics or combat logistics specialists attached to infantry or armor units.

“To the average soldier who’s out there on a mission, it doesn’t make a difference,” says battalion commander Lt. Col. Steven Kremer, whose infantry battalion has 40 women among its 600-plus soldiers. “Can that person on my left or right shoot is what matters. I got to tell you, the females in my battalion are absolutely amazing.”

All-Women Marine Teams

The role of women in the military has continued to evolve from the time they served primarily as nurses – and some masqueraded as men to fight – in the Civil War. Since 2001, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drastically changed the military’s needs. Today, women make up 15 percent of the active-duty U.S. military; about 20,000 women are currently deployed to Afghanistan, according to the Department of Defense.

In 2010, the Marine Corps created its first full-time “female engagement teams” to do a job no male Marine could: win over rural Afghan women, who for religious and cultural reasons can’t interact with male troops. Afghan women exert great influence in their communities, so gaining their goodwill can go a long way toward making Afghan villagers less suspicious of U.S. troops.

But in a place like Afghanistan, even drinking tea with women, helping to open schools and clinics, and gathering intelligence, puts the female Marines in the line of fire –shooting back during ambushes, dodging homemade bombs, and living on bases attacked by mortars.

Opponents of allowing women in combat object to the changes that have taken place in recent years. Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, says women are doing these jobs without congressional approval.

“I fault the Pentagon for not being straight with uniformed women,” says Donnell. “It’s an ‘anything goes’ situation.”

Polls show that most Americans support allowing women to do more on the battlefield. Nearly 75 percent of respondents in a Washington Post/ABC News poll last year said they favor permitting women to join ground-combat units.

No one envisioned that Afghanistan and Iraq would boost the status of women in the armed forces. Of the 2.4 million Americans who have fought in both wars since 2001, more than 280,000 of them, or about 12 percent, have been women.

Like men, some of these women have come home bearing the mental and physical scars of war. Men still make up the vast majority of the 6,400 war deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq. But 144 women have also died. And more than 850 women have been wounded.

Changing Military Culture

Despite long-standing fears about how the public would react to military women coming home in coffins, Americans have generally responded to women's deaths and injuries no differently than to male casualties.

In many ways, the presence of women has altered military culture, but sexual harassment remains a problem, as does sexual assault. The military says it is working to address these threats. Both are underreported, soldiers and officers say, because the rigid military chain of command can make accusations uncomfortable and even risky for victims living in close quarters with the men they accuse.

Overall, however, women say the gains they have made in Iraq and Afghanistan have overshadowed the challenges.

"As horrible as this war has been, I fully believe it has given women so many opportunities in the military," says Linsay Rousseau Burnett, who served as a communication specialist in Iraq.

In 2004 and 2005 Michael Baumann, now a retired lieutenant colonel, commanded 36 women in Iraq. Baumann had seriously doubted women could handle infantry duties, heavy gear, and the harshness of combat.

"I found out differently," he says. "Not only could they handle it, but in the same way as males... I had full trust and confidence in their abilities."

Changing official policy to allow women in combat requires congressional approval. In Baumann's view, however, the reality on the ground has already outpaced the debate back in Washington.

"Debate it all you want, folks, but the military is going to do what the military needs to do," he says. "And they are needing to put women in combat."

TIMELINE Women in the U.S. Military

1861-65

Civil War

Hundreds of women, like Jennie Hodgers of Illinois, disguise themselves as men to fight for the Union or the Confederacy. Thousands serve as nurses in military hospitals.

1901

Nurse Corps

The Army becomes the first military branch to admit women, creating an all-female Army Nurse Corps.

1917-18

World War I

Female telephone operators serve overseas with the Army and 10,000 Army nurses are stationed near the front in Europe.

1941-45

World War II

More than 150,000 women enlist as "WACs" (Women's Army Corps) to work temporarily in noncombat jobs. The other services also create women's divisions.

1948

2 Percent Rule

The women's division became a permanent part of the armed forces, but the number of women cannot exceed 2 percent of any one branch. The cap is lifted in 1967.

1975

End of the Draft

The shift from a draft to an all-volunteer force opens the door for more recruitment of women and an expansion of their roles. In 1978, women are allowed into all U.S. service academies.

1988

The Risk Rule

The Defense Department adopts the Risk Rule, which excludes women from assignments in areas where they risk exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture.

1990-91

Persian Gulf War

The 40,000 women deployed to the Gulf are integrated into every type of military unit except direct-combat operations; 15 women die in the conflict.

1994

A Broader Role

The Risk Rule is lifted, allowing women to be assigned to all positions for which they qualify, but excluding them from units whose primary mission is combat.

2001-12

Afghanistan & Iraq

The two post-9/11 wars are the first in which tens of thousands of American military women live and fight alongside men for prolonged periods.