WOMEN IN COMBAT

BY PROFESSOR ANTHONY KING B.A., M.A., PH.D
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Introduction

On 20 August 2015, the media announced that two U.S. Army officers, Captain Kristen Griest and First Lieutenant Shaye Haver had become the first two women to pass the notorious U.S. Army Rangers’ course. Their achievement sets a precedent for the full integration of women into the ground combat arms instituted by Leon Panetta, the former Defense Secretary, in January 2013. In fact, Griest and Haver will not be allowed to serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment or in any other infantry unit at this time, but their achievement marks an important step. By 2016, when Panetta’s policy has to be implemented, there will certainly be women in the U.S. infantry and armoured units. Indeed, female candidates have already been allowed to enter the United States Marine Corps Infantry Officers’ Course, although, as yet, none have passed out.

The accession of women in American combat units is the culmination of a long process, which goes back to the Second World War. However, it is more specifically a recognition of recent operational realities. Across NATO, female personnel performed the important duties on the frontline in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many women are full combat veterans; some have engaged and killed enemy fighters at close quarters. By any standards, these women have served in combat and have, in effect, acted as combat soldiers.

The accession of women in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps means that only one NATO member, the United Kingdom, still formally excludes women from the combat arms. However, under Alliance pressure and precisely because a significant number of British female service personnel served with combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems certain that this policy will be changed next year when it is up for formal reconsideration. Indeed, the British Army is currently engaging in an intense process of research and consultation on the presumption that women will be allowed to serve in the combat arms from next year.

This is a radical transformation. Until after 2000, Canada was the only NATO Nation, which accepted women into the combat arms and even there the process of accession was deeply compromised. NATO countries began to change their policies only after 2000 and it is only in the last decade that a new gender norm has become established in the Alliance. The question which confronts NATO member states and NATO itself is how to institutionalize the accession of women into the combat arms successfully in order to the benefit not only of female service personnel but also of western armies. Since female integration has been opposed on two basic grounds—the physical capability of women and the problem of sexual relations between male and female service personnel that may result with unacceptable behaviours of sexual nature—it is necessary to address these two crucial issues.

— Physical standards

It is very easy to underestimate the special rigours of military operations. In their understandable alacrity to promote general equality, some feminist scholars have consistently questioned the physical standards, which are enforced for those serving in the combat arms and especially in the infantry and which im-
This page: U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Whitney Houston. Opposite: The first photo by Peder Torp Mathisen/Forsvaret; the second photo by ISAF PAO; the third photo by Torgeir Haugaard/Forsvaret.
pede women’s entry into these units. Other scholars and commentators have suggested that as a result of digital technology, war is becoming less physical than the past.

Some of this analysis is well-taken but it cannot detract from a basic reality. No matter how sophisticated western technology becomes, combat operations are uniquely demanding; physically, emotionally and mentally. War remains a brutal struggle of wills, as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine demonstrate. No matter how good their equipment, the combat effectiveness of NATO ground forces will finally rely on the fortitude and raw physical endurance of its troops. Successful female integration cannot compromise that combat effectiveness. Accordingly, in order to maintain combat effectiveness, while the validity of certain selection tests should certainly be reviewed periodically, it is imperative that physical standards are sustained as an entry requirement into the combat arms.

Indeed, successful female integration is actually predicated on the maintenance of these standards. In a professionalized military, soldiers trust each other and form themselves into cohesive units on the basis of proven competence; individuals are accepted on the basis of their ability to perform their roles. Unit cohesion is no longer based so much on general appeals to masculinity, nationalism or racial or ethnic homogeneity as it was in the twentieth century, but the more impersonal standard of professionalism. Soldiers are accepted into the armed forces on the basis of their competence. Like ethnic minorities or gay service personnel before them, women can be accepted fully as comrades so long as they have proven their competence. In Iraq and Afghanistan, as long as a woman could perform her role in the frontline, she was accepted as an equal. It was very noticeable that Griest and Haver were explicitly accepted by their fellow students at Ranger School, once they had shown that they
were physically capable. Precisely because performance has been the unifying factor in socially diverse professional units, it is imperative that entry standards, a symbolic marker of proven competence and ability, have to be maintained for women. To demand the lowering of physical standards to allow for the accession of women is to destroy the very basis by which any genuine integration could take place.

The maintenance of physical standards presents a potential obstacle to the integration of women into the combat arms. In general, women tend to be smaller than men, with less bone and muscle density. Although an advantage in some physical activities, female morphology is a disadvantage for soldiering which primarily involves carrying and lifting heavy weights. Indeed, with the introduction of body armour, the average weight which infantry soldiers now has to carry in combat significantly exceeds that of the twentieth century: 40-50 kilograms is normal. As a result of the physical demands of combat—and therefore the standards which armies must enforce on their infantries—it is inevitable that the number of women who will be physically capable of serving in the combat arms will be small. Canada is one of the most integrated of all western militaries, but only 18 percent of its force is women, and approximately 1 percent of its infantry is female. Similarly, in a test conducted by the UK’s Ministry of Defence, it was assessed that only 1 percent of currently serving females could pass the mandatory tests for serving in the infantry. In terms of planning for the female integration, it is important to recognize this point.

As Captain Griest and First Lieutenant Haver demonstrate, a small number of women are eminently capable of meeting the physical standards required. Indeed, some of these women will be physically superior to many male soldiers. In a press conference following their successful graduation from the Ranger School, a male colleague of Griest and Haver noted that these women together beat significant numbers of men on a 12-mile route march. Yet, the fact remains that only a small number of women will be capable of serving in the combat arms and especially in the infantry. But, their small number in no way detracts from their right to serve or from the fact that armies would want to assign female talent to the infantry. This is an important reality when developing policy.

— Unacceptable behaviours of sexual nature in the military

As described earlier, sexuality, ethnicity and race have become less relevant with the rise of professionalism. It is a fact that a very small minority of women is physically capable of serving in combat units and they might be integrated into the infantry if they are judged on their performance, not their gender. However, a second objection has been frequently raised by the opponents: the issue of sexual relations, which may lead to humiliation, sexual harassment and unwanted sexist behaviour. A number of conservative commentators have highlighted the point. Thus, in his wonderfully subtitled book, “Deadly Consequences: How Cowards Are Pushing Women into Combat”, Robert Maginnis highlights the issue of sex. He notes that sexual fraternization was endemic at Kandahar Airfield, saying that “as if consensual affairs weren’t bad enough, our armed forces also face an epidemic of sexual assaults.” (Page 71).

As a Christian and a political conservative, Robert Maginnis is perhaps extreme. Yet, in fact, a number of scholars have adopted a similar position. On the basis of her research on the Special Forces, Anna Simons claims that the inevitable sexual relations between men and women in these units will make cohesion impossible: "More than a decade ago, I described the critical ethos on teams and in squads or platoons as ‘one for all and all for one.’ Introduce something over which members are bound to compete [i.e. women], that the winner won’t
share, and you inject a dangerous dynamic. Worse, introduce the possibility of exclusivity between two individuals and you will have automatically killed cohesion.” (Simons 2014).

As Maginnis and Simon emphasise, such unwanted gender-related behaviours are unavoidable in the army as they are in the civilian organizations. However, because the army consists of a uniquely disproportionate number of unmarried young men between 18 and 25, the possibility of inappropriate sexual relations is particularly pronounced. It is impossible to ignore the fact that incidents of discrimination, sexism, harassment and abuse, including rape, continue and that sex is a problem for unit cohesion. However, some presumptions about the nefarious effect of women have to be challenged. It is particularly important to avoid any blaming individual women or female accession in general for fraternization. In many, perhaps, most cases, these relations are not initiated by females but by male soldiers, often exploiting the advantages of rank. In other cases, women have been unjustly accused of precipitating these sexual relations or, often, false sexual rumours are circulated in order to undermine a particular female soldier. A pernicious double standard is at work here. Female soldiers have repeatedly noted that if a female had any sexual relations with her comrades it instantly undermined her professional credibility. Although men are minimally equally responsible for any breach of discipline when they have sexual relations with a female comrade and they are not held to account for it. In order to eliminate this double standard, both parties in any sexual relation should be held equally accountable for their unprofessional conduct. Both need to be formally disciplined.

And, leadership is the key to this kind of cultural change. For the very reason that the armed forces are, and will remain, overwhelmingly male organizations for the foreseeable future, soldiers overwhelmingly continue to understand themselves in masculine terms. Thus, some collective education aimed at revising the organizational culture of the armed forces might be valuable. Currently, the default position of combat units is a conventional masculinity in which women are not always constructed as potential professional equals. As a result, unthinking everyday discrimination is routine in combat units, while actual sexual harassment and even assault are sadly not uncommon. The armed forces need to change their organizational cultures, which legitimate the presumptions of many of their male soldiers about women and their attitudes towards them. To this end, it may be useful to define female soldiers not primarily as women but, on the contrary, in the first instance simply as fellow professionals.

After Kristen Griest and Shaye Haver graduated from the Ranger School, a widely circulated tweet asked: “What do you call a female Ranger? A Ranger.”

Precisely.

In order to mitigate and reduce the possibility of corrosive and de-professionalizing sexual relations, an organizational reformation is required.

Conclusion

Opponents to female accession to the combat arms fear that it will undermine combat effectiveness. They fear that the units will be physically weaker and their cohesion will be undermined by sexual relations among their members. These are serious concerns but, in fact, female accession may advance the professionalism of western forces. In particular, rather than excluding individuals on the basis of what they are, every candidate must be subjected to the same rigorous tests, which assess what they can do. Gender integration demands that western militaries assess individuals and units on purely professional and performative basis. In this way, successful female accession may be able to enhance the effectiveness of the combat arms. If standards are the genuine criteria for inclusion then they must be applied universally and rigorously.

Men, who in the past might have been allowed to bypass these standards because of various arbitrary factors, must now be failed too. Other tests might be identified as irrelevant. Every single member of the combat arms must be assessed equally against an ideal of professionalism. Moreover, because we still live in a gendered culture, the presence of women in combat units seems to increase the motivation of men, who do not want to be beaten by a female. Female integration therefore, potentially improves combat performance and motivation. Against critics, if it is implemented properly, the accession of women to the combat arms is likely to enhance their combat effectiveness, rather than undermine it. ✪

ANTHONY KING is a Professor in Sociology. His main areas of research are sport, social theory and the military. His most recent book, The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries (Oxford University Press), was published in February 2013. He is currently working on a new project on the divisional headquarters (1750 to 2020). As a result of his research, he has increasingly acted as a mentor and advisor to the armed forces including a period with ISAF Regional Command South in 2009-2010.