

# On “Women in Battle”

Sarah Percy

*This commentary is in response to the featured articles “The Female Soldier” by Anthony C. King; “What Women Bring to the Fight” by Ellen L. Haring; and “Gender Perspectives and Fighting” by Robert Egnell published in the Summer 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 2).*

The thought-provoking Summer 2013 issue of *Parameters* examines the integration of women in combat roles. The essays by Ellen Haring, Anthony King, and Robert Egnell make a number of valuable contributions to our understanding of the challenges of placing women in combat. As always, there are areas that could be further explored, and I would like to offer three.

First, it is worth considering that the decision to put women in combat roles came about gradually, but is still extraordinary. It differs from decisions to integrate other types of previously excluded groups. Examining how and why this revolutionary change took place at an evolutionary pace leads us to two more interest areas for further research concerning the relationship between gender and the military, and the changing nature of war.

Joshua Goldstein, in his definitive book *War and Gender* (Cambridge 2001), reveals that, across culture and across history, women have never played a significant role in combat at any stage before the twentieth century; even during the World Wars, they performed limited combat roles. In short, states have developed a tradition and history of warfare that has excluded women, and by placing women in combat roles states are reversing hundreds of years of history and cultural practice.

In this way, the integration of women into combat roles differs considerably from racial integration and the gradual acceptance of open homosexuality in the military, discussed by all three authors. Every race in the world has fought wars and been in combat. Racial integration may have caused (or been perceived to have caused) issues surrounding unit cohesion but both historical evidence and the practical experience of soldiers fighting against soldiers of other races suggested that race was not an obstacle to effective combat.

Likewise, the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in the American services differs from female combat integration. Homosexuality has never been a bar to effective combat (and famously in some cultures homosexuality is part of the warrior ethos). There have always been gay and nonwhite troops, but quite simply, until recent years there have almost never been women. King discusses how women may still challenge unit cohesion because of problems created by sexual relationships between soldiers. This, of course, has also been true of homosexuality. While women will face broader challenges because they have rarely been used as combat troops, the ways in which sexual challenges have been dealt with in the case of homosexuality may be helpful. Interestingly,

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there is some historical evidence suggesting that the prevalence of sexual relationships in mixed units has not always been problematic. The introduction of women into British anti-aircraft batteries in World War II was accompanied by moral panic about the prospect of sexual fraternization, but to the surprise of many skeptics, it was a nonissue (D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat," *The Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2).

In researching how it became possible to reverse the almost universal military practice of excluding women from combat, we can hypothesize that two things had to change: the way civilian society viewed gender and the way the military viewed gender. Clearly, the interplay between the two is essential in explaining how US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta was able to make his momentous announcement in January 2013. A promising avenue for future research is, thus, considering this question from a comparative perspective. Other inquiries along these lines include: Is it possible to maintain all-male combat forces in societies where gender equality has rapidly advanced? How has that rapid advance affected the identity of the military as well as its practices?

To an extent, gender integration in the military in Western societies has been an inevitable consequence of the onward march of gender equality. But the process has been accelerated by changes on the battlefield.

The nature of contemporary combat has rendered the divisions between frontline combat roles and rearguard roles a fiction. In reality, although designated combat positions remained closed to women, women have been engaging in combat, and have been casualties of combat, as all three authors correctly note. Another question for future research is, therefore, how the "fig leaf" of American policy was allowed to obscure reality for so long. Why make the pretense that women were somehow not engaged in combat? Feminist scholarship on international security and on the specific question of gender integration has some interesting answers to these questions, and the absence of this scholarship is one of the few faults in such an interesting collection of articles. King discusses the association between concepts of masculinity and the military. Without understanding the way the military has evolved as a masculinized institution, and the role gender politics plays in it, it is very difficult to understand the degree of resistance towards opening combat positions to women. This is especially true because the reality of physical testing means very few women will enter some combat roles.

Engel, however, makes the interesting point that perhaps these physical tests also ought to change, as physical strength is not the only useful requirement for a soldier in a world where combat, particularly counterinsurgency, requires other skills. Haring and King also point out that women will bring different skills to the table and these skills may be essential in conducting the types of war militaries now face. But are these changes entirely due to the changing nature of war, or do they reflect something we already know about the effectiveness of mixed gender groups in broader society? In other words, we know that, when confronting any problem, there may be benefits to using both men and women.

Finally, it is clear that changes on the battlefield have also facilitated the ability of states to open combat roles to women. The blurring of lines between combat and noncombat roles, and the necessity of using women in certain types of counterinsurgency operations, forced the

hands of policymakers. The idea that a woman could be a combat soldier would be unthinkable without advances in gender equality; however, the reality that women were already acting as combat troops in all but name brought the change to fruition.

# On “Women in Battle”

Megan H. MacKenzie

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Three questions dominate the articles by Haring, Egnell, and King on women in combat:

- Will the inclusion of women impact military cohesion and culture?
- Can and should women be required to meet the physical standards required for combat roles?
- Do women improve or diminish troop readiness and effectiveness?

While the authors raise important points related to these questions, there is plenty of room to push the discussion further and to move beyond “can they” and “should they” questions towards a more frank discussion of women’s current and historical contributions to warfare, the drawbacks to military cohesion, signs of the need to revise military culture, as well as gender issues within the military that the removal of the combat exclusion will certainly not solve.

All three authors address what has become a central concern related to women and combat: physical standards. The authors cover the most significant arguments on both sides of this debate. King argues that women will need to prove themselves against existing standards “just as ethnic minorities and gay men have,” while Egnell and Haring point to both the gendered nature of the standards and their potential antiquatedness given the changes to modern warfare. Haring makes an often-overlooked point that *should* make this debate mute—there are, in fact, no established set of occupational standards for combat.

In terms of military cohesion and culture, it is encouraging to see Egnell and Haring question both the nature of military cohesion and the presumption that current military culture requires preservation rather than revision. King ascribes some of the most disappointing arguments relevant to this discussion. In particular, King gives credence to van Creveld and Kingsley Browne’s position that the military is an inherently masculine institution that has, and will continue to be, corrupted and weakened by the inclusion of women. It is perplexing that Martin van Creveld continues to be called on as an expert when it comes to women in combat. Van Creveld established his position on women in 2000 when he stated that war was “an assertion—the supreme assertion—of masculinity” and that women inherently diminish the core qualities of an effective military (Martin van Creveld, “Less than we can be: Men, Women and the Modern Military” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 2). Since then, van Creveld has cherry picked research to support

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this opinion. Scholarship based on the premise that women are inherently inferior to men in any other venue would be described as sexist; the hesitation to give van Creveld's work this classification continues to baffle me. In my view, when it comes to debates on women in combat van Creveld's work should be treated as editorializing at best, with much of the content trending towards sexist polemic.

There is extensive research indicating that women do not negatively impact military culture and cohesion (*Women Content in Units: Force Development Test* [MAX WAC]). Moreover, Egnell and Haring hint that current military culture may require revision rather than preservation. In doing so, they raise an important question: would it necessarily be detrimental if the current military culture were altered? Given that the last decade of US war operations has included low points such as the Abu Ghraib abuses, images of soldiers urinating on corpses, record suicide rates, and a rampant sexual violence epidemic, the negative aspects of group cohesion and the potential need for cultural evolution within the forces should be taken more seriously.

When it comes to physical standards and military culture, there is a potential to talk in circles. This stagnation is particularly surprising for three reasons: first, women were de facto serving in combat roles long before the restriction was lifted. Women have been going through combat training since 2003 and by January 2013, more than 280,000 women had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, with hundreds receiving Combat Action Badges. The US military has carved out specialized roles for women in combat in the form of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) and has recognized women's roles in combat operations by providing combat pay to some of these women. Among the women who died in Iraq, 78 percent of the deaths were categorized as "hostile," providing evidence that women are putting their lives at risk in war.

In addition to acknowledging women's existing contributions to war, it should be remembered that the United States is certainly not breaking new ground by including women in combat; as such, rather than blind speculation, important lessons can be learned about women and combat and gender integration from countries that have already opened combat positions to women. Finally, those focused on women in combat should be reminded there are other important gender issues to be addressed within the military. Opening combat positions to women will not "solve" broader gender concerns such as discrimination, hyper-masculine culture, or the sexual violence epidemic. Any discussion of gender equality or women's empowerment within the US military must include a frank discussion of sexual violence within the forces.

In addition to sexual violence, the military must address the "macho" culture of the military and its historic problem with retaining women and promoting them to leadership positions. King identifies sexual attraction, pregnancy, and fraternization as "problems" that will continue to serve as obstacles to full gender integration (it is interesting to note that these issues are only ever obstacles for women, though they tend to involve both a man and woman). Such assertions indicate we have a long way to go when it comes to defining gender equality within the forces. The argument that men and women cannot control their sexual urges in close confines is largely insulting to men and presumes that the US military is unable to maintain professional standards in its

ranks. King's vague, romanticized, and generalized remarks about West African (where in West Africa? when?) troops that forced women to swear to celibacy is confusing and inappropriate for current discussions about pregnancy in the forces. Women get pregnant and this is a fact that has been dealt with in other occupations; moreover, both sexes in the military can become parents and still do their jobs. Celibacy has yet to be considered for male troops.

Like it or not, women have been and will continue to serve in combat positions. What remains to be seen is whether the US military can learn from its international peers and accept that gender integration should challenge the core identity and culture of the institution.

## The Author Replies

Anthony C. King

It is widely acknowledged that the only people whom revolutionaries despise more than their political enemies are rival radical groups with ostensibly similar goals. Some of Lenin's most acidic vitriol was directed not at Tsar Nicholas and the Whites but at the "renegade" Karl Kautsky: as a socialist, he was insufficiently communist. Reading Megan MacKenzie's response to my article on the possibility of women's accession to combat roles, I begin to empathize with Kautsky. I seem to have been interpreted as a masculinist opponent of female integration into the combat arms because I sought to engage with the polemical works of Martin van Creveld and Kingsley Browne and then identified a series of issues which female integration over the past decade has raised. I am accused of making "vague, romanticized, and generalized remarks" and that I "ascribe [to] some of the most disappointing arguments." To confirm: my article was explicitly intended to outline the real possibility of female integration which now exists and to suggest some conditions which should be met to ensure it is successful—for the female soldiers who choose combat roles and for the armed forces. It was not intended to oppose Panetta's decision to extend full accession to women but to facilitate it.

Nevertheless, the misunderstanding is useful in that it provides an opportunity to clarify the issues which MacKenzie raises about my comments on physical standards and sexuality. She complains that my observation that women have to pass the same physical standards as men to serve in the infantry may be a surreptitious attempt to exclude them. On the contrary, both female and male soldiers who have served in combat have emphasized the requirement for equal standards; trust and professional credibility depend upon it. Crucially, although only a small minority of women are likely to meet the criteria for ground combat duties, the fact that objective standards apply to both men and women has been found liberating by female soldiers. The institution of generic professional standards ensures they are no longer prejudged as women but assessed by what they can do as soldiers.

MacKenzie is right to suggest that masculine norms can and have infected the definition of military standards. There are numerous examples when male soldiers have not been able to apply the same professional standards to men and to women. Female soldiers are regularly discriminated against so that performances, which would be judged as entirely competent if the soldier were a man, are unfairly denigrated. The additional research, which both MacKenzie and Sarah Percy call for, might identify arbitrary forms of discrimination like this with a view to eliminating it. This research, however, is unlikely to disprove the need for equal standards. On the contrary, it appears predicated on an assumption that standards should be genuinely universal and are the route to less gendered military.

MacKenzie is also critical of my discussion of sex in combat units. She raises an important point about which I seem unwittingly to have been insufficiently clear. It is easy to assume that because sex potentially undermines cohesion in combat units, women (having apparently introduced sexuality) are the problem. On the contrary, as MacKenzie rightly maintains, it is as much—if not normally more—the fault of male soldiers if fraternization occurs and it is only the masculinized culture of the armed forces which allows women, and only women, to be blamed and, indeed, vilified for any sexual misconduct which does occur. Although MacKenzie appears to have ignored it, I explicitly stated all this in my article and concluded that a divisive double standard is at work which needs to be addressed (page 23). Nevertheless, the identification of this double standard does not disprove the point, affirmed by both male and female soldiers, that heterosexual relations between serving personnel in the same combat unit tend to undermine discipline and cohesion. Sex alters the relations between the males and females involved and between them and the rest of their unit.

My article was not then an argument against integration, as MacKenzie presumes. The challenge in the coming decade is to create a sufficiently professional ethos in the armed forces to ensure these issues are addressed coherently and honestly so those women who are willing and able to serve in the combat arms are able to contribute fully to those services. The purpose of my article was to make some small contribution to that end.

## The Author Replies

Ellen L. Haring

Both MacKenzie and Percy rightly point out that there has been little empirical research in the area of women combatants. This is extraordinary given that most of the literature in the 1990s predicted that the distinction between front lines and rear echelons would largely disappear. Over the last decade, in fact, women were consistently engaged in combat operations.

While individual research efforts have been enlightening, they have only been able to scratch the surface of what should have been a series

of research studies on this topic. Presently, the military departments are conducting research relative to validating or establishing gender-free occupational standards. Yet, much more remains to be done. The commentators have highlighted a number of fruitful avenues for future research, and the US military would do well to support those avenues by increasing its funding opportunities for researchers and by permitting greater access to test populations.