



Quartermaster aboard *USS Cimarron* taking a reading during RimPac '90.

U.S. Navy (Lisa Petrillo)

# A SOLDIER IS A SOLDIER

By ROSEMARY BRYANT MARINER

## Summary

From Desert Storm to Tailhook, prevailing attitudes about military women are being reformulated and tested in myriad ways. How smoothly or quickly a shift in attitudes occurs is chiefly a matter of leadership. Commanders must give women equal access to a level playing field on which each competitor either succeeds or fails based on individual merit. If you put points on the scoreboard, you play. Tough standards outlawing fraternization, shunning paternalism, and minimizing segregation must be accompanied by realistic assessments of pregnancy, privacy, and harassment. As the result of recent statutory and policy changes, the hard fact is that women will fight as well as die in our next war. While a gender-neutral meritocracy may be difficult to achieve, an initial step is to promote a shared common identity and purpose: man or woman, a soldier is a soldier *first*.

This article is based on the winning entry in the 1992 LtCol Richard Higgins, USMC, memorial essay contest sponsored by the National War College class of 1985.

Three years ago hundreds of thousands of men and women were preparing for combat. Faced with the potential of chemical and biological weapons, Scud missiles, and Iraq's large army, these service members left their families for an unknown fate in a distant place. Fortunately, their fate was victory over the enemy and the vast majority of them returned home safely. In the greatest display of military prowess since World War II, the Gulf War was a resounding affirmation of the All Volunteer Force as well as national leadership which allowed the Armed Forces to fight to win. It also impressed on America that more than 41,000 women in the military went to war alongside men. Desert Storm fundamentally altered the debate over women in combat by demonstrating—under any accepted meaning of the phrase—that women *had been in combat*.

In a televised war, the Nation watched women serve on ships in the Gulf, fly troops deep into Iraq, and cross occupied Kuwait with ground forces. They also learned that combat exclusion laws and policies did not protect women from becoming prisoners of war or coming home in body bags. Yet instead of the predicted hue and cry, Americans accepted with both remorse and respect the sacrifices of its sons and daughters. The few female prisoners and fatalities perhaps provided a tougher test than if many women had been captured or killed. Unlike the high, impersonal casualty statistics of the protracted conflict in Vietnam, the small number of losses made it difficult for the public to be indifferent to the perilous effects of war on any man or woman.

After that experience, and prior to the infamous Tailhook convention, Congress repealed all restrictions barring women aviators from combat thereby demonstrating the popular support which the measure enjoyed.

Now the debate has shifted to the exclusion of women from ground combat. Despite the fact that women serve in combat ships and aircraft, it is still common to hear senior people in uniform openly express opinions—even in front of subordinates—that women do not belong in combat units. After Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced his decision regarding women in combat aviation, the hard reality is that women will fight and die in the next war.

The same principles that military leaders have used for centuries to forge effective fighting forces, namely, discipline and accountability, underpin gender integration. Successful integration is dependent on a common identity and purpose: *a soldier is a soldier*. The initial step, both for those doing the integration and those undergoing integration, is to regard themselves and each other first and foremost as officers or as soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen.

### Mythology

Many commonly held axiomatic beliefs, often accepted uncritically, fall into the category of myth. According to one political scientist the sure sign of a myth “is the acceptance of the logically and empirically dubious.”<sup>1</sup> Judith Stiehm identifies three prevalent myths about women and war which she reduces to: war is manly, soldiers are substitutable, and warriors protect. These myths are the rationale for arguments against women in combat. The best way for skeptical male soldiers to accept that women can fight is by observing competent women performing successfully and being integrated into military operations—they must see with their own eyes to believe. There is also a generation gap between senior military men who have not served with women in an operational environment and younger men who have competed with women in civil and military professional settings. Desert Storm demonstrated dramatically that, contrary to myth, the domain of war is shared by men and women.

The second myth, known as substitution, is illustrated by the notion that all soldiers—from Air Force data processors in Omaha to Navy fighter pilots at sea—are equally subject to combat duty. It was also exploded in the Gulf War. Despite the old refrain that “we’re all in this together,” the reality is that the

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danger of combat can be minimized by seeking rear-area or support positions. Most hazardous duties, such as flying combat missions or serving with Special Operations Forces, involve elite specialties that are voluntary, highly selective assignments with rigorous training. But in Desert Storm universal risk was also evidenced by the Scud missile attack on Dhahran in which Reservists as well as noncombatants died. Men and women in the military *volunteer* for combat by virtue of joining the All *Volunteer* Force, something driven home to everyone by the Gulf War.

The third myth about women and war is that of the warrior-protector: men protect women, women don't protect men. This myth is perhaps the most pervasive, contradictory, and damaging. For the myth to function women are not seen as individuals who may or may not need protection, but as a group requiring protection by definition. It is commonly conveyed by what have been called the feminine images of what men fight for—peace, home, family. Men do not want women to fight because sharing the province of war makes it difficult to retain the illusion of protector. But the need for some men to see themselves as female protectors does not justify discriminating against women who neither need nor want protection. Both men and women protect: the strong protect the weak.

#### From Prejudice to Integration

The problem of gender integration in the Armed Forces is not attributable to women or men but to prejudice. For commanders to deal with this prejudice, they must understand its nature and root causes. What is someone who believes that he or she is superior, not because of individual achievement but by virtue of gender? The common term for such a person is sexist, but something other than simply not recognizing women is at work here. To feel superior a sexist must "keep" women in their place. A belief in natural superiority is the desire for unearned recognition. The military is an ideal institution in which to control conduct without changing attitudes. Because the services emphasize professionalism as well as objective and superior achievement, commanders have a perfect remedy for redressing the prejudice of hard core bigotry—disciplinary proceedings.

The history of racial integration in the Armed Forces serves as a useful road map for gender integration since it involves the same institution and value system. Also, the pernicious belief that was manifest throughout much of American history that Negroes were inherently inferior to whites is similar to the visceral belief that women are inherently inferior to men as warriors. Both beliefs resulted in professional segregation. While the myths differ for race and gender, how the military overcame institutional and individual racial prejudices to become a meritocracy is relevant to gender integration. Though at times associated with affirmative action, which is controversial because it makes race—rather than individual ability—a determining factor, the services have pursued racial integration with the noble goal of color-blindness. However, the military must still keep the ever present fact of racism in check.

Being black or female in the military has several important similarities. Both are minorities: women comprise 11 percent of the military, blacks 20 percent. Described as the visual invocation of the problem, there is no way either blacks or females can avoid stereotyping in an institution that is overwhelmingly composed of "average white guys." The stereotypes suggest some fundamental perceptions: in the case of black men it is intellectual inferiority, for women physical weakness and lack of warrior characteristics. The notion of feminine frailty is so embodied in male culture that weakness is synonymous with being female as evidenced by the frequent resort to derisive female adjectives to insult weak males.

Such prejudice influences ideas about individual ability. A white male entering a physically or mentally challenging program such as flight training is presumed qualified and likely to succeed. He must be proven unqualified by poor performance. But a black man or a woman is presumed unqualified by fact of race or gender. This is especially a problem for blacks, due to false notions about lowered selection standards based on quotas. Blacks and women thus find themselves in a no-win situation: performing poorly proves a negative stereotype, doing



U.S. Air Force (Alan Wychick)

Treating wounded marine during Gallant Eagle.

well indicates preferential or unfair treatment. Both bear the burden of proof for class and individual ability.

It was not until racial incidents occurred in Vietnam that the Armed Forces acknowledged the existence of institutional racism. Faced with large numbers of poorly educated black draftees and racial violence at home, the military had to admit that racism went beyond individual actions. A lesson of racial integration is that prejudice does not constitute grounds for discrimination. The success of the All Volunteer Force disproved the so-called tipping point theory that an Army made up of over 30 percent blacks might fail to attract white volunteers, thereby risking support from a predominant white society.<sup>2</sup> The opinions of a minority or a majority are irrelevant, but there are grounds for removing racists from the military.

One significant aspect of the success of racial integration is the fact that stereotyped class characteristics are not used in recruiting and assignment policies. If individual ability was ignored, a case based on average numbers could be made that blacks should be restricted to nontechnical fields. For reasons that are unrelated to race, blacks get lower scores than whites on aptitude tests and roughly 60 percent of enlisted African Americans are found in clerical and support specialties. They have also been represented in other positions, from commanders of nuclear submarines to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

## Transgressions

The perception of women as problems is indicative of not recognizing them as individuals. Discerning people by class rather than individual attributes suggests superior and inferior classes, and leads to differential treatment. For instance, if *all women* are excluded from direct ground combat, vice *unqualified individuals*, the natural conclusion is that women are inferior to men. Women aren't good enough for *real* combat. Disparate treatment also results in perceptions of discriminatory or preferential treatment of one class over the other. Therein lies the genesis of many conflicts over gender integration within the Armed Forces. A commander who stereotypes people runs the risk of ruling by emotion instead of reason which can lead to paternalism, with its inherent discrimination, and fraternization.

*Paternalism.* An extension of the protector myth, paternalism is a common and destructive offense. It is insipid because it is often committed for a benevolent reason, such as affirmative action or concern for a woman's safety. Emotionally, it is easier for some men to view women as they would their daughters, instead of soldiers, and thus become protective. This ignores the fact that female soldiers are responsible and capable individuals who have chosen to serve their country and accept the same risks as men. Paternalism also forms a basis for segregationist policies that justify separate treatment of the sexes to protect women; for example, billeting emphasizing privacy or security for females over unit integrity or policies requiring women to deploy in pairs.

*Fraternization.* Clearly defined and rigidly enforced fraternization policies are fundamental to gender integration. Traditional mores prohibiting undue familiarity among personnel of different ranks are held as conducive to good order and discipline. The potential for undue consideration is greater when men and women, accustomed to unrestricted sexual and romantic relationships in civilian life, must live and fight together in uniform. Another reason that relationships between juniors and seniors are restricted is the possibility of personal attachments overcoming professional detachment. In organizations which require personal risk and sacrifice, seniors must give orders that may get juniors killed. The seniors must do so with

KC-135 at Moron AFB, Spain, undergoing maintenance during Restore Hope.



U.S. Air Force (Janel Schroeder)

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full objectivity and juniors must have confidence that orders issued to them are necessary and fair. For women in uniform fraternization is often associated with dating between officers and enlisted. However, fraternization is defined by junior to senior relationships, not by gender. Some commanders are confused when it comes to enforcing antifraternization standards since they assume that, as sexual and romantic relationships are natural, such conduct transcends the divisions of rank which define appropriate junior to senior relations. In this case females are not seen as soldiers or officers first, but as women. And if men and women engage in personal rather than professional relationships, commanders may adopt “an anything goes outside of work” attitude. This not only departs from the rule that military members are accountable for their actions regardless of duty status, it is an “anti-unit morale” time bomb.

The profession of arms has always emphasized controlling emotions and divisive conduct. The services are expert in taking diverse groups of young people, with their adolescent hormones and prejudices, and making

them a cohesive team. Cohesion is a function of leadership, of shared experiences and purpose, not homogeneity. Reason must overcome emotion, and gender is not an acceptable excuse for misconduct. Nonjudicial punishment is based on the need to establish a clear causal link between youthful misdeeds and their consequences, while not destroying the careers of junior soldiers who are prone to act before thinking. Seniors have no excuse for misconduct. The most natural yet dangerous emotion in our profession is fear: controlling fear under fire is courage.

#### Gender Differences

Two oft cited reasons for dissimilar treatment of men and women are physical strength and pregnancy. But like racial characteristics, these differences are negated by individual abilities that transcend class distinctions. Claims that *the average woman* is weaker, better coordinated, or shorter than *the average man* are fallacies of the undistributed middle. Some women are stronger, more clumsy, and taller than some men. Character traits that distinguish great warriors are not gender determined. The major

difference is that most women can bear children. But pregnancy, a temporary medical condition, must be distinguished from parenthood which is a class common to both men and women.

*Physical Strength.* Professional athletes do not have to take strength tests or meet special physical standards prior to being allowed to play. This is because selection for competitive teams is predicated on demonstrated performance. In those activities requiring more fitness and skill than strength women and men compete on an equal basis. There is no need for an occupational physical standard since the standard is outscoring the competition. The other critical trait that distinguishes great athletes from merely talented ones is spirit. No test exists for spirit. The only way it can be measured is on the playing field when the pressure to perform is greatest. Sports fans might cry foul because in the military physical fitness tests are *gender*-normed which means women are not required to run as fast as men. That such tests are also *age*-normed is seldom mentioned. This is because physical fitness testing does not measure combat readiness, strength, or job performance.

Fitness standards ensure an individual's health and are appropriately determined by gender and age. Physical strength is a separate issue from fitness; it is related to performing a given task, independent of gender. Standards involve two questions: what is strength and what is skill? If the concern is that women would be arbitrarily excluded, then the objective standard must be reviewed *vis-à-vis* the performance requirement. This is best done by those with operational experience and a realistic perspective on correlations among factors such as strength, skill, and motivation. Where *doing it* is the fundamental criterion, however, an individual man or woman who completes military flight training or Ranger school is strong and skilled enough by virtue of successfully completing the course. These difficult programs also provide the important *gut checks* which measure spirit and commitment.

*Pregnancy.* Perhaps the one gender difference that evokes the most emotion, paternalism, and stereotyping is pregnancy. The classic example of a seemingly benign yet

invidious policy is mandatory pregnancy testing for Navy women officers and enlisted reporting for sea duty aboard ships or aviation squadrons.<sup>3</sup> The policy reduces a commander with many years of experience and responsibility for hundreds of lives to the level of a recruit. It treats pregnancy not as a normal medical condition, but as if it was symptomatic of HIV or illegal substance abuse, for which we only conduct universal random urinalysis to prosecute identified offenders. The idea that pregnancy is a major readiness problem is not grounded in fact. The vast majority of unplanned personnel losses, which are the tie-in to readiness, result from medical causes such as sport-related injuries, disciplinary status, or dependent-related issues.

Pregnancy must be viewed in terms of individual accountability. Military women, pregnant or not, are adults and fully responsible for their actions. Current policies that allow the temporary status of pregnancy to become a reason for discharge are paternalistic and establish motherhood as a class different from fatherhood. The pregnancy rate among junior enlisted personnel is a visible barometer of morale; high rates can imply fraternization, harassment, or other disciplinary problems. Just as a high rate of drug infractions signals commanders that something is wrong, pregnancies suggest that young women are opting to escape. In a much publicized incident of high pregnancy rates aboard *USS Acadia* during Desert Storm, for example, female sailors complained of extensive sexism and hostility within their command during the eight-month deployment.<sup>4</sup>

#### Family

Unlike pregnancy, concerns over single parents and dual-service marriages are common to both sexes. The services have long emphasized the importance of family to morale by providing a large dependent support structure. It is unreasonable to expect service women to forgo marriage and family just as it is for service men. Military fathers who find themselves incapable of matching professional and parental responsibilities have traditionally received hardship discharges. Military mothers must be held to the same standard. Women in the military with children are still individual soldiers

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first. Motherhood does not override professional integrity nor does wearing the uniform equate to poor parenthood. The application of equal standards to mothers, including combat duty, will force a difficult choice for those women who desire protected status to facilitate the demands of parenthood over military service. A return to the draft need not alter this perspective since family deferments were granted to fathers during past periods of conscription. As with men, those women who cannot resolve this dilemma should be civilians.

#### Harassment and Discrimination

It is odd that a range of problems associated with military women are identified with *sexual* harassment because few everyday problems have anything to do with *sexual* attraction. This is not to minimize the issue of unwanted sexual advances which tends to receive a disproportional amount of media attention. In the military a senior's sexual exploitation of a junior amounts to professional incest. The fact that it is seldom viewed in such harsh terms bespeaks a larger problem of sexism. Like racism, sexism underscores overt, subtle discrimination that makes gender integration very difficult to achieve. Gender harassment is better understood as a form of bigotry, analogous to the maliciousness of racism. Its purpose is to drive unwanted intruders out of an institution.

Soldiers subjected to this type of bigotry also have a professional duty to confront it. They must distinguish between imagined and real slights, maintain perspective and objectivity under difficult circumstances, and attempt to deal with problems at the lowest level possible. But if faced with gross discriminatory acts by hard core bigots, one cannot turn away. Action must be taken through the chain of command for the same reason that any serious violation of the trust placed in one's rank and position cannot be ignored. While confrontation may cause an immediate backlash of resentment, victims must respond to acts of bigotry. Failing to do so means assuming some of the responsibility for future infractions. Such behavior exists not because most men are sexist, but because a majority tolerates the transgressions of a minority.

#### Leadership

For gender integration to succeed, bigotry must be seen foremost as a leadership

issue. Responsibility, accountability, and commensurate authority are traits that define command in the profession of arms. They are as essential to successful gender integration as they are to running an effective battalion, ship, or squadron. The basic lessons of Tailhook involve a difficult precept of leadership: sins of omission. Tailhook became a national scandal, instead of an embarrassing incident, because of *what didn't happen* after alleged assaults were reported.

The principle that commanders are responsible for everyone and everything under their command is central to preventing small problems from becoming mission-threatening conflicts. It is also the reason gender integration problems cannot be treated differently from other issues of military discipline. Because commanders must retain the authority to execute their responsibilities, the *Uniform Code of Military Justice* and judicial process should not be altered to create separate categories or procedures for gender harassment and discrimination complaints. A judge advocate general investigation is the traditional means to ascertain facts, establish accountability, and make recommendations for disciplinary action. Such investigations should also reveal false accusations and help to avoid paternalistic over reactions. Inspector general avenues are open if the chain of command fails. Under strict codes of individual accountability, commanders can't dismiss gender discrimination or harassment complaints as social or equal employment opportunity problems. Commanders must be held personally accountable.

Leading by example is a basic axiom of command. No one is more essential to successful gender integration than the unit commander whose example sets the tone throughout the ranks. If a commander truly wants to avoid problems brought on by gender integration, the most effective action is to tell the unit's assembled officers and enlisted personnel that women are here to stay and that their military status is not open to debate. Anyone who has a problem with that position can either get over it or get out.

Women have served in the defense establishment for almost one hundred years. Tens of thousands of women saw service in World War I, some years before they gained the right to vote, and hundreds of thousands

of women held traditional as well as previously unimaginable positions during World War II. Both conflicts were followed by brief periods of recognition for such distaff contributions, then the wartime achievements of women were forgotten. Ironically, significant institutional change for military women did not result from their participation in two world wars, but from the All Volunteer Force which required their permanent participation in the Armed Forces. Previously women had donned uniforms to free men for combat; but with the All Volunteer Force they entered the military in progressively greater numbers in the place of men who chose to remain civilians. The number of qualified female volunteers exceeded ceilings placed on their enlistment by personnel planners.

During the military buildup of the 1980s, the increased utilization of female recruits was essential to maintaining the educational and technical quality of the enlisted force. When the Gulf War ended, over 11 percent of the Total Force was female, including 21 percent of the Army Reservists who participated in Desert Shield. A significant sector of the Armed Forces that won the Gulf War had been gender-integrated for almost twenty years.

The next war will also be fought with a gender-integrated force. A return to conscription would not alter this reality. With unrestricted participation by women in the civilian work force, it would be politically difficult to implement a draft that impressed marginally qualified male citizens for combat duty but excluded better qualified female volunteers. Those who oppose extending the draft to women should be among the strongest advocates of a volunteer force. Would the conduct of military affairs be easier without women? Perhaps, but it would also be easier to dispense with military justice, prohibit marriages, maintain a force of "average white guys," and do other things that occur in authoritarian societies, but this is America. Instead, we have a complicated system of rights and benefits to protect the interests and families of service members. Such considerations, however inconvenient or costly, are tolerated because they both enhance combat



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readiness and are consistent with the principles of our Nation. In the American military tradition, what we fight for and how we fight for it matters. Unlike Roman legionaries or Prussian officers, our purpose is higher than simply killing for the state. We swear allegiance not to emperor or fatherland, but to the Constitution of the United States.

Gender integration is about integrating individuals. In a certain sense every American is a minority of one. A gender-neutral meritocracy creates a level playing field where membership on the team and the position played is predicated on individual ability. A person's sex is irrelevant. If you put points on the scoreboard, you play—no quotas, ceilings, restrictions, or special treatment. Any player, man or woman, who cannot perform or get along with his or her teammates gets cut from the squad. It is the common identity of being a soldier first that transcends the differences of gender and unites highly competitive people to serve a common purpose. Participation based upon individual ability also ensures the strongest possible national defense. Not only does it increase the size of the pool from which to draw the best qualified soldiers but, as Clausewitz noted, it reminds us that the support of all the people is fundamental to victory.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Arms and the Enlisted Woman* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Morris Janowitz and Charles Moskos, "Racial Composition in the All Volunteer Force," *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 1 (Fall 1974), pp. 110-13.

<sup>3</sup> Navy Military Personnel Manuals 1820325 and 1830200.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Vistica, "Navy Women Report Good, Bad," *The San Diego Union*, January 26, 1991, p. A-1.

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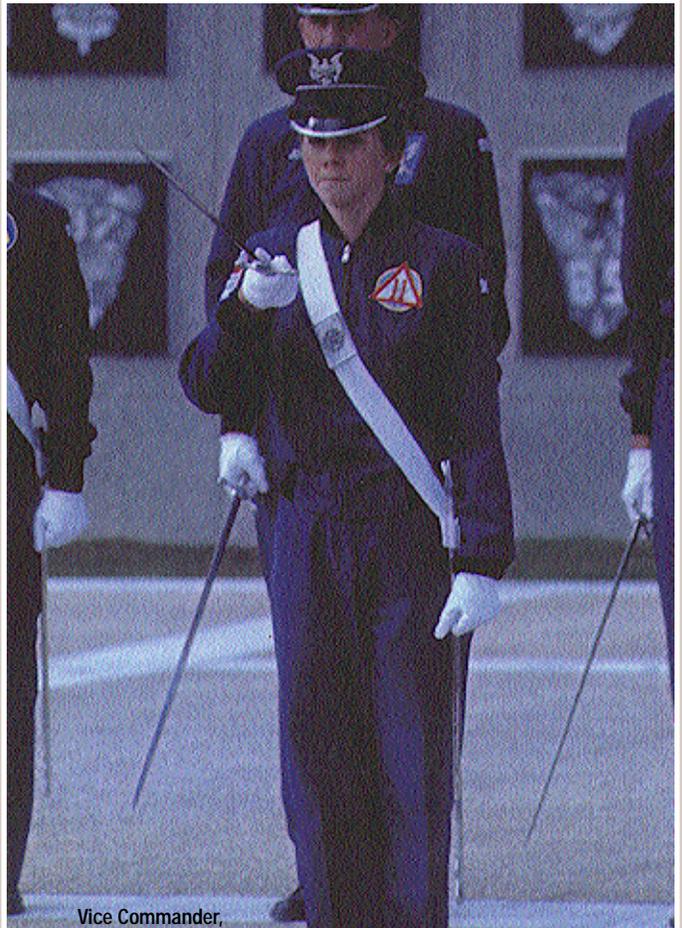
Brigade Commander,  
USNA, Annapolis.

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First Captain, USMA,  
West Point.

U.S. Military Academy



Vice Commander,  
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