FEMALE PILOTS Women take control of some of the war planes hitting targets in Afghanistan

By DAVE HIRSCHMAN Atlanta Journal-Constitution Staff Writer

Just eight years after being allowed to fly military jets in front-line squadrons, women are so thoroughly integrated throughout the military that few Americans seem to notice they are at the controls of some of the war planes hitting targets in Afghanistan.

Women are among the most senior Navy pilots on U.S. aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf, and some have patrolled the "No Fly Zone" over southern Iraq and dropped bombs on Bosnia. Several female pilots are stationed aboard the USS Carl Vinson and have participated in air strikes against the Taliban.

Tom Draude, a retired Marine general and member of a 1992 presidential commission that studied allowing women in combat, said they are an essential part of U.S. forces.

"Women are a critical component of our war fighting capabilities -- and the American public recognizes and respects their contributions," said Draude, a Vietnam and Persian Gulf war veteran. "I remember being told before [the Persian Gulf War] that Americans would never tolerate women coming home in body bags -- and they tolerated it. I was told Americans would never tolerate women becoming prisoners of war -- and they tolerated that, too."

About 40,000 American women and 500,000 American men fought in the Persian Gulf War. Thirteen U.S. women were killed and two became prisoners.

Today, women comprise about 14 percent of all active-duty personnel, with the highest proportion, about 19 percent, found in the Air Force and the lowest, about 6 percent, in the Marines. The Navy's first female combat pilots went to sea in 1994, a year after the law was changed to allow them to fly in combat, and participated in their first air strikes in 1997 against Iraq.
Draude said female pilots flying over Afghanistan face brutal treatment if captured by the Taliban, a fundamentalist regime that prohibits Afghan women from attending schools or having jobs.

Taliban fighters routinely tortured and executed male Soviet prisoners during a 10-year war in Afghanistan.

"A woman POW is going to receive especially horrific treatment," said Draude. "But they know the risks and accept them."

Missy Cummings, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and former Navy pilot, said female fliers have overcome hostility and resentment from some of their own male shipmates. But animosity has diminished in recent years as women have proven themselves on the job.

"It's better now because women have been there longer and gained more trust," she said. "But women are still a small minority in tactical aviation. They still have a hard time gaining acceptance."

The fact that American women are flying jets and working aboard combat ships is also a source of tension for U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia, that prohibit women from driving cars or baring their shoulders. Military experts say American military personnel keep out of view as much as possible in Arab countries. And when U.S. women venture out in public, they abide by local customs.

Matthew Morris, an associate professor at Emory University and Vietnam veteran, says those kinds of restrictions seem strange to Americans accustomed to seeing women perform dangerous jobs at home.

"Women are police officers in our inner cities," he said. "Women were among the initial victims in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The idea that men can somehow keep them safe and protected is long gone."

American women serve in all U.S. military branches, but they are prohibited from ground combat units likely to play prominent roles in the fight against terrorism.
Lucas Carpenter, an Emory University professor and Vietnam veteran, says those exclusions, too, are likely to be challenged in the future. "The issues surrounding women serving in combat infantry haven't been settled yet," Carpenter said. "That discussion is still open."