Women in the Military

Washington - Women make up about 14% of the U.S. armed forces - flying
helicopter gunships, helping propel nuclear-powered warships, collecting
intelligence, and yes, serving up grub in chow lines.
When the new, 21st-century war rages, it's a safe bet that women will have key
roles in the retaliation that President George W. Bush has promised.
That's due, in part, to changes enacted in the early '90s in the aftermath of the
Persian Gulf War - new rules ushering women aboard combat ships and combat
planes.
Women still are prohibited from a handful of military specialties, including Special
Forces, and as such are sidelined from U.S. operations already under way in
Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden, suspected mastermind of the Sept. 11
attacks on New York and Washington, is thought to be hiding.
How Afghanistan's religious Taliban leaders subjugate women stands in stark
contrast to how the United States and its military regard them.
There, women must be covered from head to toe in a burqa, a gown covering
their entire bodies except for small mesh panels over their eyes. Women may not
work. Schools for girls are illegal, and teachers in underground classrooms risk
being jailed, whipped or hanged.
Women are not to leave their homes without a male escort; they're not allowed to
wear lipstick or nail polish. Those who lacquer their nails are said to risk having
them ripped out.

Different worlds

Here, of course, women work, and in the military their tasks range from navigating
all-weather, two-seater attack planes to hauling ammunition to staffing field
hospitals to pounding away at laptops.
"Women have demonstrated that they can perform in a variety of missions in a
variety of circumstances. Our military depends on this vital part of our force," Lt.
Col. Catherine Abbott said from the Pentagon, one of the targets of the suicide-terror
attacks.
Although there's been no formal discussion of re-enacting the draft - which ended
in 1973 - the complex, long-term fight against terrorism that Bush has pledged
has people wondering, just as it has critics of women's integration in the armed
forces arguing that they have strayed too far into combat zones.
Women's service in U.S. armed forces dates to the Revolutionary War, when, unofficially, they either dressed as men to join or accompanied husbands onto battlefields, according to a report, "Women in the Military: Where They Stand." The Washington-based Women's Research & Education Institute, which promotes equity for women, published the report last year.

Long military history

In World War I, 33,000 women wore the uniform; in World War II, 400,000 did, according to the report, which said these numbers take into account all females in the armed forces then. In Vietnam, the count of women serving in-theater was 7,000; in the Persian Gulf War, it was 41,000.

Lory Manning, a retired Navy captain who spent more than 25 years in the service, was one of the report's authors. "The military couldn't operate without women today," Manning says, pointing out that their gender is hardly new news anymore.

Women were aboard when a Navy surveillance plane made an emergency landing in April on China's Hainan Island; they were aboard the USS Cole, struck by a terrorist blast last October and among the casualties.

Altogether, 194,820 women were on active-duty as of October 2000.

Stansfield Turner, 77, a retired three-star admiral who led the CIA under President Jimmy Carter, recalled a seminar he gave a year ago at the Naval War College. The topic: women in the Navy. "I had 18 students, and 17 of them said, 'Why are we talking about this? We're not having any problems accommodating women in the military. We've got that behind us.'"

In the Navy, women are barred from submarines and coastal patrol crafts for crew privacy reasons. They also are forbidden in the SEALS, or special warfare teams.

Limits, attitudes persist

In Turner's mind, women need not push to get into every military role - submarines are small and cramped, after all, and there are privacy and accommodation issues. Still, he confesses: "Submariners are probably being a little more obdurate, too."

Robert L. McGinnis, a retired Army lieutenant colonel with the Family Research Council, says it's more than privacy that's at issue. Were subs to welcome women, installing separate bunks and lavatories for them would compromise effectiveness.
To make way for the new facilities, "some operational equipment would have to go out, some communications equipment, perhaps even some torpedoes," he said.

McGinnis, 50, is vice president for policy at the council, which advocates policies from a Judeo-Christian perspective. His take on women in the service? Overall, he favors women in the military; "They have served for the last couple of centuries." But he thinks that the post-Gulf War changes affecting women were "back-door approaches" to integrate women "where I don't think they belong." Namely, in combat.

He'd take women off combat ships and aircraft while maintaining exclusions from special forces and from direct-combat functions. In the Army, that means infantry, armor, cannon field artillery and short-range air-defense artillery.

Some resist advances

McGinnis cites a variety of reasons, beginning with physiological differences. Women on average have only 70% of the cardiovascular fitness of men and 50% of their upper body strength, he said.

"We're talking about readiness, not equal opportunity," he said. "If an F-14 or and F-16 (fighter jet) is shot down, guess what, a woman becomes an infantryman and has to conduct herself accordingly."

According to McGinnis, if women were in combat settings - "intimate, primitive situations for extended periods" - sexual tensions inevitably would arise.

He pointed, too, to studies showing women in the military are more likely to suffer injuries such as pulled muscles or broken bones and said the Gulf War indicated that women needed medical attention more often than men did.

"Their frequency of lower-back problems, foot problems, menstrual problems, other types of problems, far surpasses that of men," McGinnis said.

"You don't have an equal opportunity to survive in combat," he concluded, "if you aren't as strong as the enemy."

Countered Manning, at the women's institute:

"Women are tougher than most people think, and they can shoot as well as any man, that's not sex-linked."

Advocates push for more

Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the National Women's Law Center, takes a different view from McGinnis. She would have every position in the military open to women providing they qualified for the specialty. "By excluding women
wholesale, you're saying even if the best person for a job is a woman, you're excluding her."
The center works to broaden women's opportunities.
James M. Lindsay, a foreign policy expert at The Brookings Institution, agreed that
women in the military have moved from the sidelines closer to central battlefields.
If the war the U.S. is preparing to fight relies largely on commando-style
operations, women are less likely to be involved, even in logistical support roles,
he said.
It's his view that women haven't been completely integrated into every aspect of
the armed services because a fair number of Americans remain ambivalent about
their roles.
"There's a discomfort with the reality that women can be killed because of
traditional notions that men fight wars," he said. "What happens if a female
American service person is dragged through the streets of an Afghan city, the
way we saw Americans dragged through the streets of Mogadishu? How is the
American public going to react to that?"
For his part, he doesn't buy the notion that women are psychologically weaker -
"I've watched my wife go through childbirth four times" - or that men are
tougher.
From Lindsay: "I know men who would wet their pants at the first incoming round,
and I'm probably one of them."
Both sides of the debate agree on one thing: Should the U.S. Supreme Court
revisit its 1981 ruling that adult men - not women - must register with the U.S.
Selective Service, it might decide differently today.
The court said then that because women were excluded from combat service,
Congress could require only men to register.
Today, "there's a lot more women in the armed services . . . serving in a far
greater range of specialties, and most significantly, they are serving in combat,
while still excluded from ground combat," said Campbell, of the women's law
center.

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