

1-1-2009

Rising Through the Ranks: Women in War

Rosemary L. Meszaros
WKU, rosemary.meszaros@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military and Veterans Studies Commons](#),
and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Repository Citation

Meszaros, Rosemary L., "Rising Through the Ranks: Women in War" (2009). *DLPS Faculty Publications*. Paper 29.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/29

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in DLPS Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

MOVING UP THROUGH THE RANKS: WOMEN IN WAR

by

Rosemary L. Meszaros

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade and more there has been a polarizing controversy over women in combat. This thesis will explore the origins of the question of women in combat and look back at two major social movements that women participated in during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, Women's Liberation and Women Strike for Peace, and their impact, if any, on women in the military. Further, the role that military women's experience in twentieth century wars played in precipitating their career advancement will be explored. Another issue to be treated is the conundrum of whether the military reflects societal values and norms, or whether it is the harbinger of them.

These themes have held an interest to the writer who grew up during the Vietnam Era, who witnessed the national turbulence over that war, as well as the great promise of the Women's Liberation Movement during that time. It is curious that the young women of today recoil at calling themselves "women's libbers" or feminists while profiting from the gains that were won during those tempestuous times.

The Women's Liberation Movement and the anti-Vietnam peace movement were parallel happenings during the 1960s and 1970s. The Women's Strike For Peace (WSP) organization was very active in anti-war demonstrations during this time. Were these two organizations working at cross purposes from one another? It would seem so since women's liberation usually signifies the opening of opportunities to women. In the sphere of combat, however, the Women's Liberation Movement assumed an anti-war stance. Women in the armed forces were confronted by conflicting purposes. On the one hand, opening all jobs to women was the ideal of the liberation movement, but ending war was a goal of both the libbers and the conservative

Women Strike for Peace movement. Could the radical women's libbers, usually caricatured as outrageous bra burners, embrace the ideals of the white-gloved ladies of the WSP?

Women have always undertaken a role in wartime, but what that role has been and at what level of participation has been given scant attention until recently. Currently military women have gained ground in regard to the opportunities open to them in the armed forces. How did this occur? Was this a gradual evolution paralleling society's changes, or were these gains based on the achievements of military women themselves in their wartime exploits in Vietnam, Panama, Libya, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf War? Official restrictions on women's roles during combat have been eased after the Persian Gulf War in 1991. The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces made a number of recommendations in their landmark 1992 report concerning the easing and tightening of combat restrictions for women.

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: TRADITION AND BACKGROUND

In times of war, women have served the United States in many capacities. It is only in the twentieth century that their service has been recognized officially and militarily. This paper will examine women's role in the American military, particularly the changes that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. It will also pursue possible explanations for these changes, and the significance of such changes with regard to the future roles of women in the twenty-first century military.

History of Formation of Women's Service Branches

The beginning of organized and officially sanctioned branches of military service was during the Philippine War, when an Army Nurse Corps and a Navy Nurse Corps were formed in 1901 and 1908, respectively. Before they were granted relative rank by the War Department in 1920, the nurses were hired on a civilian contract. Relative rank meant that they could not hold commissions but could be named lieutenant, captain or major and wear the insignia for such rank (Morden 4). Most of the privileges attendant to such rankings were denied them. Pensions and disability pay for injuries incurred in the line of duty were not granted to women until 1930 (Morden 4).

During World War I, women were recruited to the service to assume vital support roles as switchboard operators and clerks and allow as many servicemen as possible to be reassigned to combat. General Holm's conclusion is that American women were much

more efficient in the performance of these administrative duties than either American G.I.s, many of whom lacked the manual skills or the local people, many of whom lacked necessary facility in English and did not possess needed security clearances (Holm 16). When the war ended, all enlisted women were discharged. The War Department estimated that 34,000 women served from 1914-1918 (Holm 17). Upon the entry of the United States into World War II, women again were recruited to assume a support role and to “free a man to fight” (Holm 22; Facts.com). Approximately 350,000 women served in the U. S. armed forces during the Second World War (Holm 100). Besides the usual administrative and nursing jobs, women were assigned to more non-traditional jobs, such as mechanics, drivers, codebreakers, and pilots. The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) flight-tested and flew airplanes across the Atlantic Ocean to military bases. Jobs designated “unsuitable” for women included combat, jobs requiring considerable physical strength, or working conditions or environment “improper for women,” jobs requiring a long training period, and all supervisory positions (Holm 45). While Holm indicates that this exclusion was unreasonable, the military mirrored conditions in society, and there were gender judgments made about jobs. It was necessity and a shortage of men in the defense industry that led to “Rosie the Riveter” and the opening of traditionally-male jobs to women. It was not the military leading the way, but the demands of industry. The War Department also sought to keep women from positions in personnel classification or as a psychological assistant because in these jobs women would be called upon to classify recruits for combat duty, and the War Department determined that men would resent women making such a judgment (Holm 45). Here again Holm seems to castigate the military for not being an organization out of its times. The military needed persuading before it opened its opportunities to women.

In 1948, Congress passed the Women Armed Services Integration Act (Public Law 80-449) which permanently established a place for women in the army, navy, air force, marine corps and coast guard. The law also restricted their status. The law limited the number of women allowed to be in the military. In each branch of service, the number of women was not to exceed 2% of the total force. Promotion was restricted: only one female full-colonel per service branch would be allowed and no female generals were to be commissioned. Women were excluded from combat positions. Military policies mandated their discharge upon marriage or pregnancy (Griffin 840). It would be another twenty years before these policies on recruitment, retention, and promotion would change.

Of the 22,000 women who served in Korea in the 1950s, one third of that number were health professionals (De Pauw 266). Nurses landed four days after U. S. soldiers arrived and two days later, a dozen of them went to the war zone (De Pauw 266). An additional 7,000 medical professionals ministered to the soldiers in Korea. The remaining two-thirds served in clerical and administrative duties. At the beginning of the war, all branches of the service increased the percentage of women they would allow to enlist. The 2% cap had been lifted in the 1948 act, so the army and air force stated that at least 10% of their strength could be female, while the navy's estimates were 15% as officers and 12% enlisted, and the marines proposed that 7% of their numbers be female (De Pauw 266). These numbers were impossible to meet. In 1951, Secretary of Defense, George C. Marshall, upon the advice of his Assistant Secretary for Defense Manpower, Anna Rosenberg, formed a committee to aid in the recruitment of women to the armed services. This resulted in the establishment of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS). The recruitment efforts of DACOWITS failed in the decade of the 1950s. The number of women in all branches declined. The reasons for declining

recruitments vary but they do center on the fact that women in the military were not generally acceptable to American society and the military itself did not foster careers for servicewomen (Holm 157-158). A rumor circulated in Washington at the time that Congress were soon to consider subjecting women to the draft. The Korean War ended before Congress took up the question. Ironically, the rumor of women being subject to the draft surfaced twenty-five years later during the long and ultimately unsuccessful ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

In the 1960s another Washington rumor said that Congress would consider eliminating women from peacetime forces completely (De Pauw 267). Before total expulsion could be accomplished, several major events occurred to forestall it: the termination of the draft and escalation of the Vietnamese Conflict.

In 1973, the draft was abolished and the all-volunteer service began. Women were recruited to compensate for the dwindling number of male enlistees (Blacksmith 18). There had been a high enlistment rate for minorities, both male and female, particularly African Americans. It has been suggested that two possible theories for this higher enlistment among minorities prevail, one negative and one positive: High unemployment rate among minorities in the private sector and equal opportunities with a minimum of racial discrimination in the services. Both of these factors acted as catalysts to increase enlistments (Binkin, New Face 8; Moore 127). Note that Binkin and Moore emphasize a minimum of *racial* discrimination. Gender discrimination was still acceptable and the norm.

Impact of the Women's Rights Movement

There are several reasons for the increase in enlistment among women after the 2% ceiling was lifted. The United States increased its commitment of troops to Vietnam during the 1970s. There was a decline in the number of male enlistments due to the increasing possibility

of being sent to fight there. The momentum of the Women's Liberation Movement and the job opportunities that were gradually opening for women beyond administrative and medical positions made the military a more inviting career track. The Women's Lib Movement was one part of the era of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Women were demanding equal opportunities for jobs and equal pay for equal work, among other goals. Women's potential contributions to the economy through their presence in the labor force were beginning to be discerned. But the leaders within the Civil Rights Movement were mostly male. Their concern was to empower the males in the movement, not women of any color. Stokely Carmichael, a leader in the Black Panther Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), when questioned about the role of women, responded: "The only position for women in SNCC is prone" (Standley 198). The Congress had passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1972; however, the ERA was ultimately defeated because the required number of states failed to ratify it. In the press and in the parlor there was speculation that the ERA would result in unintended consequences: Women would be drafted into the armed forces and women would be coerced into roles that were unusual and, therefore, frightening and to be avoided. Ironically, a subsequent generation of women demanded consideration for a redefined role in the military.

Another endorsement for expanding the number of women military were the conclusions reached in 1966 by the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) (Holm 190). DACOWITS, formed fifteen years earlier, made inroads in the recruitment of women to the armed services. The committee was made up of fifty prominent women who were to accomplish several tasks, among them: 1) to inform the public about recruiting needs, 2) to reassure parents about the supervision of the women in the military, 3) to convey to potential

female recruits the career opportunities in the service, and 4) to raise the prestige of military women in the public mind (Holm 150-151).

After Vietnam, the next decades witnessed low intensity conflicts. Actions in Grenada and Panama were quick strikes using force of arms to accomplish an objective. In 1983 during Ronald Reagan's term of office, the United States joined a multinational effort, along with members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, to restore order to Grenada after the assassination of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. As many as two dozen women served on aircraft transporting men and equipment to Point Salines Airport in Grenada while U.S. soldiers were fighting in the area. Defense Department representatives denied that women were deployed in combat roles in violation of the directive prohibiting women in combat. The presence of women in Grenada was attributed to the haste of invasion planning which did not allow enough time to select all-male crews (Dean 6).

Women's Rights Movement in the Context of American Society

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Women's Rights Movement or, more commonly called Women's Lib, seems to have impacted American society as a subset of the civil rights movement for people of color. The rights of women were not considered "legitimate" even as part of the civil rights movement (Anderson 168). The rampant sexism and job discrimination practiced against women were not recognized as issues worthy of being addressed in society. The military reflected the views of society as a whole: women were "allowed" into the service branches to serve in restricted capacities and were in no regard considered to have the same status or potential as military men. A total state of amnesia obscured the contributions that women made during World War II in industry and the military. When the fighting men returned, women were

expected to be relieved of such masculine burdens and return home. With the publication of Betty Friedan's book, The Feminine Mystique, in 1963, and increased public demonstrations, issues of women's civil rights began to receive media attention. For many years "women's lib" was ridiculed by every sector, conservative, moderate and liberal. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed. NOW was visible, active and aggressive in representing women's demands for equality. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created in the mid-1960s but the claims that the commission investigated and prosecuted were primarily race-discrimination ones. Sexism was still considered the substance of jokes and not recognized as a denial of rights to a majority of people in the United States (Anderson 168). It was the persistence of women, sometimes working through NOW and sometimes individual efforts, pursuing their rights through the court system and legislation that brought a legitimacy to their claims of discrimination. Through more than forty years of such persistence, pay equity has still not been realized, although the gap is closing. Job opportunities have been opened in almost all areas.

In the military, the key to promotion has been to serve in combat or to be a service academy graduate, unit commander or rated officer. Women were excluded from the first two categories and disadvantaged in the latter two. This institutional-sanctioned denial of service area stifled the careers of women officers. Reviews by the Air Force Personnel Center contained assessments such as, "In spite of the fact that she is a WAF officer, I can rate her as outstanding in the best of conscience," and ". . . although she thinks like a man, she is always a lady and never too aggressive" (Holm 278). Such "praise" would not further the case of a military women seeking promotion to officer rank. The military has made tremendous strides in removing barriers to the promotion of women into officer ranks. President Lyndon Johnson

remarked in 1967 upon signing Public Law 90-130, which removed restrictions on the careers of female officers, that: “There is no reason that we should not some day have a female Chief of Staff or even a female Commander-in-Chief” (Holm 192). A civilian lady in the audience responded, “You can bet we’ll see a woman President long before we have a female Chief of Staff” (Holm 192). The contest has yet to be decided.

Women as the “Protected” Gender

In our patriarchal society, women and children have been considered those in need of male protection. Whether it be chivalry or machismo, our cultural heritage has been to emphasize the male’s role in protecting women and children. This gender role brings confusion and complexity to the military which tries to blend people of diverse backgrounds and genders into a military unit. Lucinda Peach illustrates the bias that exists against women in the military by pointing out how frequently women are the victims of violence, especially sexual violence, by their fellow soldiers but have not been allowed to participate in the state-sanctioned violence of combat (Peach 60). While Peach uses an extreme example, she makes her point that women have been pigeon-holed into performing non-combative roles. The possibility that a servicewoman could become one of the warrior class disturbs many in our society, as evidenced in the panel discussions and conclusions of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces (Commission Appendix D). Again and again, the resistance to women in combat has been ascribed to a possible lack of cohesion of a combat unit: The presence of women would disturb the male-bonding considered necessary for unit cohesiveness (Binkin 10). In the minds of some, the “band of brothers” would be blighted if women shared their battlefield experiences (Mithers 88). To acknowledge that women can serve as protectors threatens a traditional male-dominated culture of war (Mithers 89). Binkin acknowledges that

certain sacred myths against women in combat were dispelled. First, the myth that women could not handle the arduous and primitive field conditions, and second, changes in modern warfare have blurred the distinctions between combat and support functions (Binkin 19). Binkin feels, however, that women's role in the Persian Gulf War was "overdramatized" by the media and that women soldiers' performances in the field were not subject to systematic and organized evaluation but are based solely on anecdotal information. Army Captain Carol Barkalow declared that, "There was real professional respect" (Binkin 21).

It is ironic to consider the following analysis of leadership from Captain Barkalow, a soldier in the Persian Gulf War, in an interview with Regina Titunik: "[l]eaders are entrusted with the care and well-being of their soldiers--they are called upon to play the role of a 'nurturer,' women's supposed strength." (Titunik 239). Further, from a classic work on war, The Art of War, Titunik quotes Sun Tzu's admonition that "the military commander [should] 'look upon your soldiers as beloved children and they will willingly die with you' reflects an ironic appreciation of this parenting aspect of military leadership" (Titunik 239).

Madonna/Whore Dichotomy

"All military women are either whores or dykes," was the assessment of a ranking officer in the army to a young female recruit in the late 1990s (De Pauw 4). This was and, in some cases, still is, a commonly held belief that women soldiers are "morally loose" (De Pauw 99). The dichotomy of such extremes may be traced to the traditional male roles in war. Rumors questioning the morals of women who joined the services were rampant in 1942. The rumors were so vicious that congressional hearings were held in March 1943 to investigate their sources. Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, the first director of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAACS), requested the hearings. A sample of such rumors were that large numbers of pregnant WAACS were being shipped home from overseas and that it was "common

knowledge” that 90% of the WAACS were prostitutes and 40% were pregnant (De Pauw 253).

A nationally syndicated column called *Capitol Stuff* claimed that:

Contraceptives and prophylactic equipment will be furnished to members of the WAAC, according to a supersecret agreement reached by high-ranking officers of the War Department and the WAAC Chieftain, Mrs. William Petus Hobby. . . . It was a victory for the New Deal Ladies. . . . Mrs. Roosevelt wants all the young ladies to have the same overseas rights as their brothers and fathers.

(De Pauw 253)

An Army Intelligence investigation, with the cooperation and assistance of the FBI, could not substantiate such claims and reported that the rumors mostly likely originated with army personnel (Titunik 242). It was the policy of the services to dishonorably discharge any unmarried woman who became pregnant. Such an occurrence was so shameful that on the discharge the word pregnancy was not used, but rather the term cyesis, a rather archaic medical term, meaning the study of pregnancy (Holm 71). Statistics were not kept in a consistent manner for all military women but the figures reported for the Army were forty-eight pregnancies per one thousand service women (Treadwell 620). The figure was much lower at the beginning of the war, from zero to seven per thousand, but towards the end of the war, husbands were returning and many of their wives in service wished to start their families.

A half century since the passage of the Women Armed Services Integration Act, women constitute approximately 11% of the armed forces, or approximately 200,000. Of these 200,000 women, 16% are serving as officers. While ground combat exclusions are still in effect, a majority of assignments in the services have been opened to women. What brought about this evolution of women’s roles in the armed forces and what projections can be made about their future in the military? An examination of the Vietnam Conflict and subsequent military operations will chart this evolutionary progress.