

Soldiering Ahead

Since women began advancing into its upper ranks, the U.S. military has become both a more humane workplace and a more lethal fighting force. What role has female leadership played?

BY HOLLY YEAGER

WHEN DYMETRA BASS WAS A DRILL SERGEANT, she had no trouble proving her mettle to the fresh Army recruits she pushed through basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. “Every private would tell me, the meanest drill sergeants were the women drill sergeants,” she says with a touch of pride. “We had to be so tough because people come from all walks of life. Some people, women have never told them what to do before.”

Bass enlisted in 1989, right after high school, where she had been a cheerleader, and she arrived with an essential drill sergeant’s tool: a booming voice. She also knew how to keep her soldiers motivated. “I like control, so it was easy for me. I like being in the front. I like leading. I believe in leading by example.”

But things changed when Bass moved to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1999 as part of the first group of female drill sergeants assigned to train new members of field artillery units—one of the few areas still closed to women. “It was the drill sergeants who couldn’t accept us, because they were artillery, and then you bring these women in here to teach these civilians how to be soldiers, and teach them combat skills. . . . They didn’t believe it could be done, or done the right way.”

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Bass had no background in artillery, but that didn’t matter. Her job was to do basic training. But her male colleagues still worried that the women wouldn’t be able to carry their load and that to pick up the slack, men would always have to run with the fastest group and demonstrate the most demanding drills, such as scurrying under barbed wire and using a rope to maneuver across water. “We had to prove ourselves a lot more,” Bass says.

Female leaders up and down the U.S. military’s chain of command—from noncommissioned officers such as Bass, who deal most directly with troops, to two- and three-star generals and admirals—talk about having to prove themselves, again and again. But slowly, and rather quietly, more and more women have been doing just that. Women make up 14.4 percent of enlisted personnel and 15.9 percent of the officer corps in the 1.4-million-strong active-duty U.S. military, according to the most recent Defense Department figures. That is a marked increase from the 1.6 percent of the military that was female in 1973, when the draft ended and new recruitment goals for women were set.

The war in Iraq has been a major test of women’s new role in the military, and while a full assessment has yet to be completed—the RAND Corporation is at work on one—they seem to have performed well in the field. Women are now permitted to serve in more than 90 percent of military occupations, though they are still barred from jobs or units whose main mission is direct ground combat. But the fluid



The Few. The Proud. A Marine drill instructor presents sword to acknowledge a squad leader's report on her recruits at Parris Island.



Some of the first women to respond to these World War II posters were assigned repetitious communications jobs. Army leaders said men might become impatient and make careless mistakes.

lines of conflict in Iraq have put the units in which women serve, such as military police, supply, and support, in the line of fire, challenging traditional ideas about what constitutes a “combat” position. “Women are fighting, they are in the streets and on the patrols,” says Pat Foote, a retired Army brigadier general. “They are running the convoys, getting shot at and shooting back.” The war’s death toll reflects this battlefield reality: As of early June 2007, the nearly 3,500 U.S. servicemembers who had lost their lives in Operation Iraqi Freedom included more than 70 women.

“Critics speculated a lot about what would happen if we let women in these jobs,” notes Lory Manning, a retired Navy captain who directs the Women in the Military project at the

Women’s Research & Education Institute in Washington, D.C. “[They speculated that] the men couldn’t do their jobs, that everyone would be pregnant, that they’d be so busy having sex that they couldn’t do anything else.

“We now have units under fire with men and women in them,” Manning says. “We have experience of women firing weapons. They don’t fall to emotional bits.”

Nor has the American public fallen to bits. The sometimes-dramatic footage of women on the front-lines, of women returning home to military hospitals, even the too-good-to-be-true story of the capture and rescue of Jessica Lynch, have prompted little popular outcry against women’s role in the war, and little evidence that the public is somehow less willing to tolerate their suffering than that of men. And while Lynndie England drew public attention and outrage for her role in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, advocates of women in the military say critics have been on the lookout for any systemic failure of women to perform well in Iraq—and have found little to point to. Instead, just as the invasion of Panama and the Persian Gulf War led to reviews of women’s role in the military—and expansions of the positions open to them—Iraq will likely prompt another reconsideration. Any increase in their

combat role would improve women’s opportunities at the top of the command structure, where their numbers are small today in part because of their lack of combat experience.

More important than how uniformed women and the public have reacted is how America’s armed services have fared. After more than 30 years of experience with women in leadership positions and in the ranks, what may be most surprising is how little the rise of women has actually affected the American military. Make no mistake, the armed services have experienced enor-

mous changes, including the incorporation of both devastating new killing technologies and more family-friendly personnel policies. But just as women's distinctive contribution to the forging of today's highly effective fighting force is hard to identify, so is it difficult to say what part they have played in enhancing some of the military's "softer" features.

Technological advances, new thinking from outside the military, changes in the attributes of senior leaders, and the demands of the all-volunteer force have resulted in adjustments in the way the military is led. Women as well as men have had to change. "It used to be that you ordered somebody to do something," says Darlene Iskra, a retired Navy officer who runs a leadership training program for young Navy and Marine Corps officers at the University of Maryland. "Now, it's more that you ask them to do it, but they understand it's an order, or you have meetings and ask people's opinions, ask for their input, and help them to own the solution, rather than dictating."

That shift to a more collaborative approach—which some may attribute to the growing role of women—is in part explained by the fact that new technology has given junior officers more access to information, which used to be the purview of age and experience. "Women have in some measure changed the culture, but the access to information, and the horizontal nature of how information is managed and controlled . . . came at about the same time," Vice Admiral Ann Rondeau says. In addition, because of the war in Iraq, "the average junior officer in the military today has more operational experience in war than the average senior officer." As young officers bring their real-life experience and information to the table, "I think there is a move toward collaboration that would normally be seen as a feminine leadership trait," Rondeau says. She prefers to see this tendency as a democratic product of the speed with which information flows.

A 2004 study of four Army divisions that had just returned from tours in Iraq found that most leaders had strong technical and tactical skills. What set the best leaders apart was interpersonal skills. The study, headed by

Walter F. Ulmer Jr., a retired Army general and leadership specialist, identified what it called the "Big 12"—a set of behaviors exhibited by officers best able to achieve operational excellence and motivate good soldiers to stay in the Army. At the top of the list: keeps cool under pressure; clearly explains missions, standards, and priorities; sees the big picture, provides context and perspective. The ability to make "tough, sound decisions on time" was also among the most prized skills. Despite the growing value of collaboration, military leaders know better than most that, ultimately, hard choices need to be made—sometimes with

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lives hanging in the balance—and only one person can be in charge. The study did not say that the decider shouldn't be a woman.

Today's general acceptance of women on the battlefield is a far cry from the skepticism—and sometimes outright hostility—that greeted the opening of the services to women after the end of the Vietnam War. Faced with manpower shortages when the draft ended in 1973 and expecting that the Equal Rights Amendment would be enacted, Pentagon officials set aggressive goals for recruiting women and started changing the rules that governed the jobs female servicemembers were allowed to do. American women already had a long military history, but it was a history that had largely seen them confined to separate branches such as the WAVES and WAAC, which called on women to enlist during World War II in order to "free a man to fight." Now women were to be integrated into regular service units. Could they really carry heavy packs on their backs? What would happen if they got pregnant? Would military wives put up with their presence in the ranks?

A question posed in a 1976 study by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences provided a gauge of prevailing attitudes: "What percentage

of women will it take to degrade unit performance?" But the results of a three-day field exercise with units ranging from all-male to 35 percent female, and a follow-up study the next year, surprised nearly everyone. "When properly trained and led, women are proving to be good soldiers in the field, as well as in garrison," the Army concluded. A research brief titled *Military Readiness: Women Are Not a Problem*, published by RAND in 1997, showed that the tone had shifted a little in 20 years. It found that gender integration in military units "had a relatively small effect on readiness, cohesion, and morale," but that a unit's leadership, training, and workload had a much deeper influence.

In the heat of the 1970s debate, researchers' findings that women would not wreck the joint did little to cool the fury of traditionalists. Perhaps the most dramatic statement of opposition—one that still rankles some women in uniform—came from James Webb, a decorated ex-Marine who would go on to become secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration and get elected to the Senate from Virginia as a Democrat in 2006. Webb, a Naval Academy graduate, took particular offense at the decision to admit women to the service academies beginning in 1976. In an emotional 1979 screed in *The Washingtonian* titled "Women Can't Fight," Webb argued that women were unsuited to be military leaders and unfit for the trenches. "There is a place for women in our military, but not in combat," he wrote. "And their presence at institutions dedicated to the preparation of men for combat command is poisoning that preparation. By attempting to sexually sterilize the Naval Academy environment in the name of equality, this country has sterilized the whole process of combat leadership training, and our military forces are doomed to suffer the consequences."

Such public declarations against women in the military are rare today. During his Senate campaign, Webb apologized for any "hardship" his article had caused and said he was "completely comfortable" with the role women play in the military. But on-the-record comfort does not mean the question is settled. The day I met Bass, she said that one of the officers in her command had told her in casual conversation earlier in the day that he did not think women belonged anywhere near combat, because he would be so concerned about protecting them that he would be distracted from his own duties.

International comparisons don't offer much useful guid-

ance about how to integrate women into the armed services. The United States has more women in the military than any other country. Those with the fewest barriers to women in combat, such as Sweden and Norway, also have small forces with fundamentally different missions. In Israel, women are automatically conscripted into the armed forces, but many receive exemptions for religious or family reasons. Some ground combat units include women, and an army commission is currently studying whether infantry, armor, and special forces should be opened to women. The Israeli military's highest echelons still include no female officers.

In the United States, one of the main complaints of critics is differing physical standards for men and women. (To get a perfect score on the Army fitness test, a 22-year-old man must do 75 pushups, 80 situps, and run two miles in 13 minutes. Women soldiers must do 46 pushups, 80 situps, and run two miles in 15:38.) The promotion system is another sore spot. Boards that meet each year to consider which officers from each service will be promoted make their decisions based on the information they find in a file about each candidate, including work history, training, honors, performance evaluations, any disciplinary action—often a photograph. They are also given equal opportunity goals, designed to ensure that the number of women and minorities promoted in each group of officers reflects that group's representation in the promotable pool. Such guidelines urge board members not to penalize candidates because they lack certain job experiences, such as combat assignments, if they were barred from such positions. But race and gender are not the only concerns. The promotion boards are pulled in many other directions as well, needing to keep a balance between, say, helicopter and fixed-wing pilots. Most analyses find the promotion system to be widely accepted by men and women within the military.

For many of the women who entered the military in the 1970s and are senior officers today, it is simply the access to that merit system, the chance to succeed or fail based on their own performance without first being discounted by others and denied opportunities because of their gender, that may be the biggest change they have seen.

Despite that opportunity, and their larger numbers, women face a "brass ceiling," with only the thinnest representation at the highest ranks. The limited range of combat-related jobs open to women until the 1990s meant that many lack the experience that is highly valued in promotion



Members of a construction battalion in Iraq attend the Lioness Program, which trains them in self-defense and the proper way to search female Iraqis.

decisions. At the same time, the arc of a military career is long, and because the service academies only opened their doors to women in 1976, the cohort of female officers with both those top credentials are only now in position to use them to help push their careers to the highest levels.

In the face of such institutional limits to advancement, it can be difficult to understand why so many women entered the military in the 1970s and '80s. Many say they did so because they wanted the chance to serve their country, just like men, and to explore interesting career paths. But there was something else. Vice Admiral Rondeau, one of just five female officers with three stars currently serving in the U.S. military and frequently mentioned as a candidate to become the first four-star woman in the country's history, explains: "There were glass ceilings. There were prejudices. There were barriers. But . . . there was equal pay for equal work."

Even as they prove themselves and parry occasional resistance to their presence, some women have brought their personal—and sometimes decidedly feminine—approaches to this most masculine of institutions. While none would

argue that they are fundamentally changing the culture around them, they are finding different ways to lead.

Barbara Bell, a Navy captain who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1983, says it took many years in uniform before she came to a simple realization: "I recognize that I'm different. I recognize that I stick out, and I'm not going to fight it," she says with a smile. Bell, a pilot who now works in acquisitions, recently told an audience that included young servicewomen that she tries hard to establish a respectful office environment and to pay attention to the work-life balance for her staff and herself. Most days she leaves work by 4:30 to pick up her 7-year-old son.

While many senior women in uniform say they had few female role models and mentors, their ascendance is beginning to change that, too. The mere presence of more women in the senior officer grades has made a difference. "It just helps everyone to know what the art of the possible is, and that they can continue to move up the ranks," says Lieutenant General Ann E. Dunwoody, deputy chief of staff of the Army.

Bass—now a first sergeant, the top enlisted soldier work-

ing at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C.—says that when she was in Iraq in 2005, she and her unit's commander, also a woman, "did things a little differently." Sitting in her office at Fort McNair, she pointed to a photograph of a young female soldier. When Bass and her commander got the news that the soldier had been killed on

dents are women, they must make difficult adjustments. But perhaps more important in maintaining the military's ethos than tradition and machismo, haircuts and pushups, is the fact that much of what the military does is determined by its well-defined mission to be ready, as the Army field manual puts it, "to fight and win the Nation's wars."

SOME CHANGES IN the military may be seen as a more "feminine" approach to leadership, but they reflect the demands of attracting and retaining the all-volunteer force.

Successful women in the military are well aware of that basic fact, and many say they did not arrive with a desire to change the institution. "You are joining an institution that has doctrine, that has tradition, and you either appreciate it and come to love that aspect of the institution, or at some point

duty, "we woke everyone up—it was at night—so they wouldn't wake up to it [in the morning], so they could deal with it."

After addressing them in formation, Bass stayed with her soldiers, talking to them, listening to them cry, trying to let them know that she understood their sadness and, at the same time, that their work had to continue. "I think we were more nurturing, which also motivated the troops to do well, and when they had problems, they knew they could come into our offices and talk to us, compared to the male first sergeants, who were so hard." There is growing evidence that the military is putting new emphasis on just the kind of interpersonal skills Bass displayed.

Day-to-day standards for behavior have also changed. Pinups are gone from barracks walls and dirty language has been cleaned up. "It's definitely had an impact on the social culture of the military, which used to be one of the great boys' clubs of the world," says Phillip Carter, a military analyst and former Army officer. "It's not just this Spartan legion of men. Now it's much more like society at large."

For all that, it is hard to find anyone, male or female, in or out of uniform, who would assert that the ascendance of women to leadership positions has fundamentally changed martial culture. "The military is still not just overwhelmingly male, but its ways of doing things are still very male," says Mady Segal, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland whose work focuses on women in the military. Top leaders go to the service academies, where traditional culture is reinforced. Even though about 20 percent of new stu-

you say, 'No, this really isn't where I want to be in life,' and you go back to civilian life," says Rear Admiral Michelle Howard, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1982, a member of the third class to include women.

The strength of that tradition does not mean that the organization has not changed since the 1970s. But while those changes—in management style, family-friendliness, and other areas—may be seen as a shift toward what management gurus call a more "feminine" approach to leadership, they reflect other factors at work—most important, the demands of attracting and retaining the all-volunteer force. Younger people in all walks of life are less willing to sacrifice everything for their careers, and are more concerned with preserving their lives outside work. As in the corporate world, military leaders have recognized the need for policies to protect investments in careers and training with benefits for families, as well as for soldiers themselves. But the prospect of losing skilled professionals—in an organization that wants its leadership to be as diverse as its enlisted corps—is in some ways more troubling for the military. As Howard explains, "We don't have the luxury of a corporation, of hiring in someone with this skill set. . . . So then the issue becomes, how do we retain this talent?"

Recent research indicates that the departure of female officers, largely due to such issues of work-life balance, poses a particular challenge to the Pentagon. A study published early this year of officers at several career points by the

Government Accountability Office found that “all services encountered challenges retaining female officers.” The difference was most marked in the Navy, with its increasingly long spells of duty at sea, where continuation rates among female officers with four or five years of service averaged nine percentage points lower than those of male officers.

A 2005 report from the Army Research Institute found that the gap between male and female Army officers who said they intended to stay in the service until retirement age had held relatively steady over 10 years. In a 1995 survey, 66 percent of male officers and 51 percent of female officers said they planned to stay; in 2004, the numbers were 69 and 53 percent, respectively.

Male and female officers agree that women face special challenges in pursuing military careers, but they differ over the reasons, according to a 2001 RAND report. Male officers offered researchers three main explanations: “Women are inherently less capable, physically and mentally, to perform a military job and lead troops,” in the study’s words, and the ban on women in combat jobs has kept them from occupations with the greatest opportunities for advancement. The men also said that male superiors fear that they will find themselves unable to refute an unwarranted charge of sexual harassment and therefore hold back from interactions, such as mentoring, with female subordinates.

Female officers said their chances to perform and the recognition they received were “diminished by expectations that they are less capable,” according to the study. Female officers reported “difficulties forming peer and mentor relationships,” and said they “receive fewer career-enhancing assignments.” They also cited a conflict between work demands and family responsibilities, and



Major General Ann E. Dunwoody became the first woman to command Fort Lee, Virginia, in 2004. Today she's an example of the “art of the possible” as a lieutenant general and the Army’s deputy chief of staff.

a lack of consensus on the appropriate role for women in the military. The female officers said sexual harassment leads to an uncomfortable working environment for women who are harassed, and they agreed that male fears of harassment charges had inhibited interactions between men and women.

Officers of both sexes cited the amount of time they spent away from their families and the enjoyment they got from their jobs as the most important factors influencing their decision about whether to leave the Army. But family issues appear to have a special effect on women officers. In the research institute study, time away from family was listed as the most important reason by 43 percent of women planning to leave, and 27 percent of men. One reason for the difference is that female officers are much more likely than their male peers to be married to another person in the military, who can’t easily follow when a new posting comes along. Another study, conducted in 1997 by the Army Research

Institute, found that 80 percent of male officers were married, but just seven percent of them had wives in the military. Among female officers, 58 percent were married, and more than half of their spouses were also in the military.

For women in the military, there are plenty of easy reminders of how much things have changed. Female Marines in the 1940s were strongly encouraged to wear lipstick, but it had to match the red cord on their winter caps—a requirement that prompted Elizabeth Arden to make Montezuma Red for just that purpose. As recently as 1989, when Bass enlisted, it was assumed that women would remain far away from combat zones. “When I first came in the Army,” she says, “my supervisor told me, ‘If you’re firing your weapon, the war is over.’”

Of course, this sort of vision of slow, steady, and accepted progress for women is not the only way to look at the recent past. In 1990, Darlene Iskra, the now-retired naval officer who provides leadership training to recently commissioned Navy and Marine personnel, became the first woman to command a Navy vessel. She remembers the stack of congratulatory messages that awaited her when she arrived at her ship, the USS *Opportune*, and the way her male colleagues showed new respect when she wore her command pin. But 10 years later, something had changed: “The reason I got out was because I felt like an ensign again. They just did not respect me. It was awful.”

Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, a nonprofit advocacy group, complains that career-minded female officers have been behind the decades-long push to open more jobs to women, and that the changes have come at the cost of dangerous “double standards involving women.” A case in point, she said, was the treatment of Lamar Owens Jr., a former star quarterback at the Naval Academy, who was accused of rape by a female classmate. Owens and the classmate were both drinking and ended up in bed together. He said their sex was consensual; she said she was raped. Owens was acquitted of the charge but dismissed from the academy and ordered to repay the cost of his education after being found guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer. His accuser admitted to breaking academy

rules but was granted immunity as a witness and permitted to remain enrolled.

But even Donnelly, perhaps the most outspoken conservative critic of the Pentagon’s gender policies, doesn’t directly call for a rollback of women’s role in the military. As a practical matter, it is hard to see how the Army and other branches could be staffed without a significant complement of women—and some politicians in both parties are calling for an expansion of troop strength.

Does all this mean that it is only a matter of time until women are fully integrated into the armed services leadership? New technology, fresh attention to inclusive leadership styles, and societal attitudes all favor a greater role for women in the top ranks.

Deeper changes in military culture, however, are likely to be difficult. Along with the physiological fact that most women cannot develop the upper body strength thought to be needed in traditional warfare, general questions about their fitness for the most direct combat assignments remain. Lory Manning, of the Women’s Research & Education Institute, says that the issue of women in combat will still be politically sensitive, but she expects it to be re-examined after the Iraq war. She singles out the “co-location rule,” which prohibits women with noncombat jobs, such as medics and mechanics, from being based with combat units, as one that will likely be changed formally after the war. “Sheer necessity made it go away” in Iraq. But Manning does not foresee a sweeping removal of the remaining bans on direct combat.

The career of Erin Morgan, who graduated from West Point in May and is now a second lieutenant in the Army Intelligence Corps, is off to a promising start, with wide opportunities and the open doors that a degree from the academy can secure. But a few weeks before graduation, she said that women still do not have an easy time fitting in. “Soldiering is a masculine trait, something that separates the men from the women and the men from the boys,” she says. “That is something that cadets still struggle with.”

Amid the constant reminders of great warriors of the past embodied in statues and paintings at West Point, Morgan saw depictions of Douglas MacArthur, George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, and other fabled generals. But she was only able to find one woman: Joan of Arc, whose image is part of the mess hall mural. ■