

Breaking the Kevlar Ceiling



A National Security Case for Full Gender Integration in the U.S. Army

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Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifted the military's ban on women serving in combat roles on 24 January 2013.

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Soldiers reload their M16 rifles while conducting marksmanship training during the Cultural Support Assessment and Selection program hosted by the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Camp Mackall, N.C., 8 June 2011. The program prepares all-female teams to support special operations forces in combat zones. (U.S. Army, SSG Russell Klika)

IN JUNE OF 1975, a young West Point cadet, along with a cohort of classmates, was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army. After four years of running to “Airborne Ranger” cadences and receiving mentorship from officers wearing Ranger tabs, this cadet chose to branch infantry. He went on to complete Infantry Officer Basic Course and Ranger School and successfully led troops at the tactical and operational levels. He spent a few years mentoring cadets at his alma mater before commanding an airborne battalion and a brigade at Fort Bragg, and he eventually became the commander for all U.S. forces in Iraq. This member of the class of ’75 is General Lloyd Austin, the current vice chief of staff of the Army.¹

Five short years after Austin graduated, another young cadet graduated from West Point. This cadet ran to the same cadences, was mentored by many of the same infantry officers, and also wanted to join the ranks of the infantry. While at the academy, this cadet actively sought infantry training experience, attending the Jungle Operations Training Course in Panama and Airborne School at Fort Benning. However, joining the infantry was not an option for Lillian Pfluke. Barred from her first branch choice because of her gender, she chose to commission in the Ordnance Corps. Although maintenance was not her first career choice, she thrived on the challenge of leading soldiers. Much like General Austin, Pfluke’s competence and leadership ability moved her up the ranks of the officer corps, and she excelled in every leadership position she held. Although she was a maintenance officer, she still maintained her personal goal of commanding combat troops. However, as she attained higher rank, she realized that because she was a woman, that dream was not going to come true. Reflecting on this realization, Pfluke said, “The Army was content to choose less qualified men over more qualified women for its key leadership positions because of politics and a deeply entrenched and dated attitude. In fact, it [the Army] was fighting desperately for the ability to do so...I wanted to play on the varsity team and be a contributing member of the first string.”² So, Major Pfluke made the agonizing decision to retire

from the Army in 1995. The lack of women serving at the highest levels of leadership is less an issue of unfairness, and more an issue of effectiveness. The Army loses when it relegates the Lillian Pflukes of the country to serving as water boys when they could be calling the plays as quarterbacks.

The impetus for this article came from two leadership classes I took during graduate school at Columbia University. Throughout both courses, I examined how diversity in decision-making bodies leads to better decisions, and how the organizations with the highest percentage of women on their executive boards consistently perform better than organizations with the fewest women. One of the course readings was the White House Project’s report on benchmarking women’s leadership. The report examined various professions within the United States and evaluated each profession on its incorporation of women’s leadership. None of the sectors studied did particularly well, but I was dismayed (though not surprised) to find that the military fared the worst out of all professions examined in the study.³ This raised a critical question—if diverse leadership is so good for organizations, how can a profession as important as the military afford to be at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to any kind of leadership benchmark?

In 1948, Congress passed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, which allowed women to serve as regular members of the U.S. Armed Forces. At that time, the highest permanent rank a woman could attain was lieutenant colonel, and women could not make up more than two percent of the force. About 20 years later, the two percent cap and promotion limitations were lifted. Just over two decades after that, in 1988, the Defense Department adopted the “risk rule” to exempt women from assignments near combat units, but it abandoned that rule six years later.⁵ Now, the Army has its first female four-star general, and women comprise just over 13 percent of the active duty Army.⁶

The Army has made great strides incorporating the talent of women, but there is still far to go. The U.S. military cannot reach its maximum potential until our personnel system fully integrates women into all facets of service and all levels of leadership. Strategic military decision makers, namely general officers, shape the future of America’s armed forces and direct the use of the nation’s military power in support of national security. Current policy dictating where people can serve and what jobs they can do based on gender creates a “Kevlar ceiling” that prevents a disproportionate number of women from reaching

Percent of Women in Top Leadership Positions

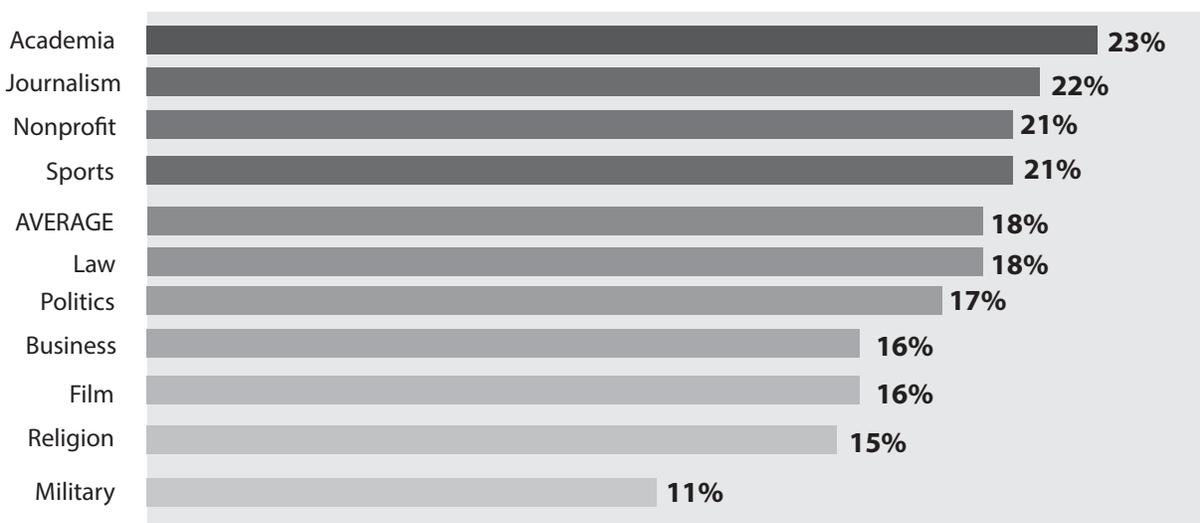


Figure 1
From the White House Project report, “Benchmarking Women’s Leadership”⁴

the very top of the military ladder. As a result, the Army and its mission lose out on valuable perspective and insight from talented officers. When an organization chooses between alternatives, the opportunity cost is the lost benefit that would have resulted from the foregone option. The Army's failure to effectively incorporate the talent of women creates an untenably high opportunity cost in regard to national security. When the United States limits its human capital, it fails to optimize its strategic decision-making ability. Thus, it is actually a matter of national security because the U.S. military fails to meet its full potential, with federal law excluding half of America's talent pool from ground-combat roles.

This article will not discuss fairness, nor will it dwell heavily on tactical-level arguments, such as physical standards or living arrangements. These levels of analysis detract from the main objective of the military, which is the strategic application of military power to support national security. The tactical level of analysis cannot be completely ignored because the military must grow its strategic leaders beginning at the tactical level. However, viewing this issue through a purely tactical analytical lens creates a myopic perspective, and frankly has been overdone.⁷ Instead, this article will begin with a current picture of women's leadership in the Army and analyze its future, using organizational behavior concepts, combined with scholarly research, to provide a clear understanding of the need to grow more women into the strategic decision makers of the future. The article will conclude with a discussion of different policies the military should explore to meet that need.

You've come a Long Way, Ma'am: The Current Status of Women in the Army

*"It's been my experience in my 33 years in the military that the doors have continued to open and the opportunities have continued to expand."*⁸

—General Ann E. Dunwoody

According to the most recent gender-specific data available from the Defense Department, women comprise about 17.5 percent of the active duty officer corps, but barely comprise six percent

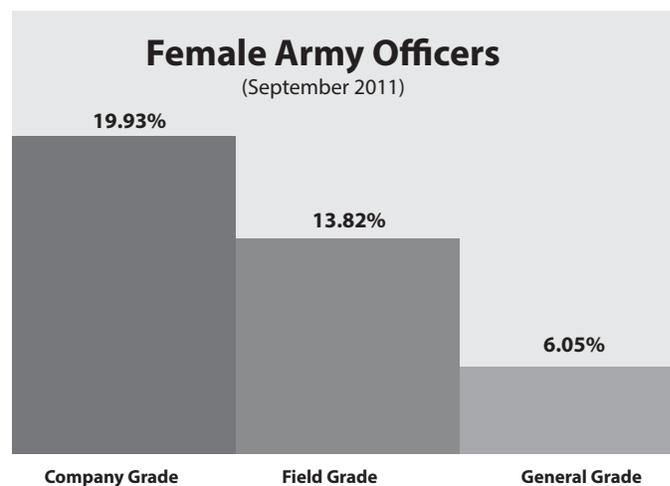


Figure 2
Proportion of female officers at each level of responsibility

of the Army's general grade officers.⁹ The military is following the same trend as much of the private sector: women are fairly well represented at lower levels of management, but vastly underrepresented at the most senior levels.¹⁰

As of 2011, women comprised nearly 20 percent of company grade officers, a significantly larger portion than in the overall force, which was about 13.5 percent female. However, women's descriptive representation drops off sharply at the field grade level, and the drop is even steeper between the field grade and the general grade levels, where just over six percent of the Army's most senior leaders are women. Further study is needed to determine the root causes of these drops, especially the gap between company grade and field grade women.

When analyzing promotion data, it is important to take into account the branches where officers serve. For instance, according to a 2005 Government Accountability Office report on service member demographics, 37 percent of female military officers belong to the health care community, as opposed to tactical operations and other fields. Only 11 percent of women officers are tactical operators.¹¹ On the other hand, 43 percent of men work in tactical operations, and

only 12 percent work in health care.¹² The vast majority of generals come from branches that conduct tactical operations, with only 16 of the Army's 403 generals belonging to the health care branches.¹³ Therefore, more than a third of Army women must compete for less than four percent of senior leadership positions. This means that the Army loses out on a significant amount of human capital in its senior ranks.

While women are not explicitly excluded from promotion to the highest ranks, they are at a decided promotion disadvantage because of the prohibition against serving in the combat roles necessary to build the experience needed to fill 80 percent of four-star general billets. Although the entire military is male dominant, for the purposes of this article, "male-only branches" are those that explicitly exclude women: Infantry, Armor, and Special Forces. "Mixed but male-dominant branches" are branches that allow women but limit the positions in which they can serve: Field Artillery, Air Defense, and Engineers. The term "mixed branches" refers to all other branches and functional areas within the Army.

Interestingly, this dominance of the male-only branches within the general ranks does not happen until the three-star level. Generals from the male-only branches make up less than half of all the officers at the one- and two-star levels, but between the ranks of major general and lieutenant general, there is considerable attrition of noncombat arms officers. Given the Army's mission to fight and win wars, it is not surprising that people who serve in branches traditionally involved in direct ground combat are the ones promoted to the four-star level. This cleavage affects both men and women in noncombat arms branches; however the discrepancy is compounded when gender is taken into account. Of the 179 current combat arms general officers, only one is a woman—air defender Major General Heidi Brown.¹⁴ Women do not have the option to serve in most combat arms branches, and those branches that do allow women severely limit the jobs women are allowed to perform. This limits women's ability to gain the experience that the Army values in its strategic leaders at the three- and four-star level.

Women's Military Service over the Years

- **1948:** The Women's Armed Services Integration Act enables women to serve in the military, but they may only comprise 2% of the total force and may not serve aboard Naval vessels or in combat missions, and may not have command authority over men.
- **1967:** The 2% cap on women in the service and limits on women's promotions is lifted.
- **1976:** Women are admitted into the service academies at West Point, Annapolis, and Colorado Springs.
- **1988:** DOD adopts the "risk rule," exempting women from assignments that would expose them to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture.
- **1990:** About 41,000 women deploy to Operation Desert Storm, making up 7% of troops.
- **1991:** Congress repeals ban on women serving on combat aircraft.
- **1994:** The secretary of defense abandons the risk rule, allowing women to serve in all positions for which they qualify, but still prohibits their assignment to direct combat units.
- **2001-present day:** more than 220,000 (about 11%) of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans are women.
- **2008:** The Army promotes its first woman selected, Ann E. Dunwoody, to the rank of four-star general.
- **2012:** Army opens more military occupational specialties to women and moves 200 women to maneuver battalions; the chief of staff calls for a study on sending women to Ranger School.
- **2013:** Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifts the ban on women serving in combat.

Critical Mass in Organizational Behavior and Success

*"We need a critical mass of women—not just within organizations, but in senior levels of leadership and on boards—to make a difference."*¹⁵

—White House Project report, Benchmarking Women's Leadership.

In physics, the concept of critical mass refers to the amount of fissile material needed to start an irreversible chain reaction. It also applies to making permanent change in an organization. When women (the "fissile material" in this metaphor) reach critical mass in an organization, they cease to be seen as token members. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, introduced this concept to the social sciences. Kanter delineates four group types in proportional representation: uniform groups, skewed groups, tilted groups, and balanced groups.¹⁶ A uniform group is completely homogenous, and uniformity would likely be a fair description of the American military before the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948. Today's Army falls into the category of skewed groups, where there is "a large preponderance of one type over another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15."¹⁷ Tilted groups have a larger minority—a ratio of about 65:35. When a group moves from skewed to tilted, minority members can have a greater impact on organizational culture, and their majority peers begin to see them as individuals differentiated not only from the majority, but also from one another.¹⁸ Finally, balanced groups range from a 60:40 ratio to 50:50, and it is here where majority versus minority status seems to no longer matter at all.¹⁹

A critical mass of women in the military would move the Army forward from the skewed category into the tilted category, and it would mean that instead of being viewed as "female soldiers," women would begin to simply be evaluated as "soldiers," period. Kanter explains that women who were "few in number among male peers and often had 'only-woman' status became tokens: symbols of how-women-can-do, stand-ins for all women."²⁰ Critical mass matters when looking at overall demographics, but it is especially critical at the senior-most levels of leadership. A Harvard study found that without gender balance at the highest levels in organizations, gender continues to be "a negative status indicator for women, despite balanced representation

at lower levels."²¹ Until women reach critical mass at the very top, stereotypes will continue to exist and detract from effective use of available talent in decision making. According to a 2006 Wellesley Center for Women study, critical mass occurs in companies with three or more women sitting on their boards. These companies create a "fundamental change in the boardroom and enhance corporate governance."²² The study found that critical mass at the senior executive level was good for corporate governance in three concrete ways. First, board discussions included the perspectives of a larger set of stakeholders, and this led to better decision making. Second, the women on boards with critical mass were more persistent than their male colleagues in finding answers to the most difficult questions. Finally, they tended to have a more collaborative leadership style, which improved communication among board members and between the board and management.

With an increasingly female national talent pool, the failure to develop and utilize highly talented women in senior levels of leadership is an extremely unfortunate missed opportunity for our armed forces. In the United States, women earn 57 percent of bachelor's degrees and 61 percent of master's degrees.²³ The military severely limits itself by limiting the opportunity for these educated women to serve in its most critical strategic leadership roles. Furthermore, experience and research have shown that teams with diverse backgrounds make better decisions than teams with singular expertise.²⁴ Overly homogeneous groups are unable to see beyond their particular realm of the possible to find better, alternative solutions. When new and different people are added to a group, they bring knowledge the group did not have before, and thus the entire group becomes smarter.²⁵ Female officers have a different experience set and perspective, so adding a woman (or two) into the group of top-level

Teams with diverse backgrounds make better decisions than teams with singular expertise.

decision makers provides a powerful injection of new knowledge to make better decisions.

Studies have confirmed the link between gender diversity and better decision making. Separate studies by UC-Davis's Graduate School of Management, *Catalyst*, and *Harvard Business Review* found that Fortune 500 companies with the highest female representation at the top management levels consistently and significantly outperformed companies with the lowest levels of women executives. The Harvard study found that the companies with the most female leadership performed up to 69 percent better than their competitors.²⁶ The performance gap between companies with more women at the top and companies with fewer women is too wide to ignore as a potential indicator of a way to maximize military performance. The Army should not miss out on the opportunity to make itself 69 percent better, especially when the nation's blood and treasure are at stake.

Women's Military Leadership is Crucial to National Security

*"We literally could not have fought this war without women."*²⁷—Dr. John Nagl, on the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars



SPC Monica Brown is awarded the Silver Star at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, by Vice President Dick Cheney for her actions during a combat patrol, 21 March 2008. (DOD)

The current state of conflict in the world has provided an important opportunity for the military to take advantage of the combat experience of women. Counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have had a surprisingly positive influence on the role of women as leaders within the military. More than 220,000 (11 percent) of the approximately 2 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are women, compared to the first Gulf War when women comprised seven percent of deployed troops.²⁸ The asymmetrical nature of counterinsurgent warfare obliterates the traditional delineation between the "front lines" and "the rear." With a continual threat of enemy engagement, regardless of whether soldiers are on a combat patrol or in a supply convoy, women are seeing more combat than ever before. In Iraq, 620 women have been wounded.²⁹ One hundred and ten have been killed since hostilities began.³⁰ As of June 2011, 28 American women soldiers had been killed in action.³¹ In Afghanistan, 1,788 women have earned the Combat Action Badge.³² Two women have earned the Silver Star, and many women have been awarded Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts, and other awards for valor.

Out of necessity, rules are bent for women to serve in combat and accomplish the mission. Women are not permitted to serve in a unit whose primary mission is direct combat, but they are allowed to serve in support units. When more soldiers are needed, military leaders often "attach" women to combat units while they remain "assigned" to support units. Given this opportunity, women have proven their mettle and earned the respect of their brothers on the battlefield, manning machine guns and driving trucks down roads pocked with IED craters. Some experts, including John Nagl, believe that this ground-level change will be the catalyst for policy-makers to adjust the regulations to reflect the reality of women's participation in modern warfare.³³

Without such policy change, the Army stymies its own potential by limiting the ability of talented women to become general officers. Yes, women are allowed to be generals, but under the current policy, there will never be a female Army chief of staff or chairwoman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Those positions are traditionally reserved (and perhaps rightfully so) for those who have served in combat arms branches, which women are forbidden



Army LTG Ann E. Dunwoody smiles during her promotion to general. She was pinned by Chief of Staff of the Army GEN George W. Casey (left) and her husband, Craig Brotchie, during the ceremony at the Pentagon, 14 November 2008. LTG Dunwoody made history as the nation's first four-star female officer. (DOD, PO2 Molly A. Burgess)

to do. Of the ten four-star positions currently held in the U.S. Army, only two are available to officers who have served in any branch other than combat arms.³⁴ This means that without action to open these branches to female service members, the Army will never achieve a critical mass of women on its board of executives. If the policy changes so that women's combat experience is fully acknowledged and capitalized upon the Army would benefit significantly.

Overcoming Barriers to Women's Leadership Roles

*"It is impossible to create a truly cohesive force without remedying the codified inequity between genders in the current system."*³⁵ Colonel (P) Kim Field and Dr. John Nagl, *Combat Roles for Women: A Modest Proposal*

Although women continue to be grossly under-represented at the highest levels of military leadership, current numbers show a marked improvement from just ten years prior. In 2002, just over four percent of the Army's generals were women, and in 1994 it was less than one percent.³⁶ Clearly there is far to go before the Army has a critical mass of women overall, let alone among its leadership, but the trend is headed in the right direction, albeit at a glacial pace.

One challenge of determining critical mass is recognizing exactly where the demographic tipping point is for a minority group to have a positive impact. Kanter says that organizations with a 65:35 ratio move from the skewed category to the tilted category. The White House Project reports that critical mass happens when one-third of an organization and its leaders are women, and the Wellesley study found that executive boards needed at least three women.³⁷ So how can this translate to the Army? The Army needs enough women in lower-level units for them not to be seen as tokens. However, given current force structure and demographics, Kanter's 35 percent goal is probably not a realistic option. Based on the Wellesley study, the Army should have at least three women on its "executive board" of ten four-star generals, so 30 percent is probably the most realistic goal that will actually allow for a positive impact and real organizational change.

Assuming the current rate of increase continues in a linear fashion, it will take 42 years to reach a critical mass of women in the Army officer corps and 82 years to achieve that within the general-officer ranks. Repealing the ground combat exclusion policy is a step in the right direction. Changing that policy could mean that we can grow significantly more women from second lieutenant to brigadier general in the next 30 years, assuming

4-Star Generals by Branch

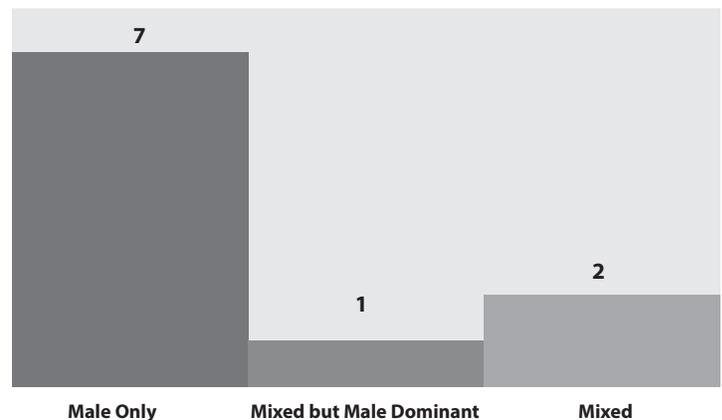


Figure 3
Number of Army 4-Star Generals from various branches

women are promoted at similar rates to the men in their branches. However, as evidenced by the diminishing representation of women at the field grade and general grade level, this is an overly optimistic assumption to make.

The military needs to look closely at the reasons behind the steep drop in proportional representation of women at the field grade level. It is likely that much of the loss is not because women are being passed over for promotion, but rather because fully capable women (such as Lillian Pfluke) are choosing to leave the military. The Army would do well to study the attrition of midcareer female officers to find ways to stanch the bleeding of talented operational leaders. The Army should also reexamine its policies regarding dual-military families and single-parent households. Dual-military families make up only nine percent of marriages in the Army, but 40 percent of married Army women are part of a dual-military couple.³⁸ The decision to stay in the military or pursue opportunities in the civilian world is a family matter, especially for families with two service members. So in the case of dual-military couples whose family needs are not being met, the Army often loses out on not one, but two talented officers, or else handicaps them both in ways that inhibit their best development, progression, and utilization. Additionally, women in the Army are

significantly more likely to be single parents than are their male counterparts, and so it would benefit the Army to develop policies that would prevent soldiers from having to choose between being a good parent and being a good soldier.³⁹ Policies ranging from flexible work hours (when mission permits), equal maternity and paternity leave, an au pair system, as well as reconsidering the rigid career map of the typical operations officer would be good options to study for possible implementation if the Army wants to retain talented men and women in its field grade ranks. It is possible that some of these policies will not be feasible in all environments, but the Army would be remiss if it did not look into the feasibility of these and other creative policies that could retain talented officers and grow them beyond operational leaders into strategic leaders.

At this point, there is nowhere to go but up. According to the White House Project's report, *Benchmarking Women's Leadership*, none of the sectors studied had reached critical mass, but the military performed the worst of all, with only 11 percent women in the top five leadership ranks—well below the average of 18 percent.⁴⁰ Also, the military is the only profession in the United States where women are explicitly prohibited from performing certain jobs. It is a travesty when the best military in the world fails to include the perspective of half the nation's talent pool in its strategic decision making. Change will take time, and even with policy change, critical mass won't be reached for years. This is all the more reason for immediate action. The military should lead the charge in organizational leadership, not come in last. Only when talented officers like Lillian Pfluke can consistently and significantly contribute to strategic decisions will the Army begin to reach its full potential.

So, did Lillian Pfluke retire because she had reached a culmination point and simply had nothing left to offer the military? Based on her achievements since retiring, that seems unlikely. Immediately after retirement, she went on to work with the American Battle Monuments Commission in Europe and helped develop leadership seminars for American Army units stationed in Europe. In 2008 she founded American War Memorials Overseas, a nonprofit organization

Percentage of Generals from Infantry, Armor, & Special Forces (Male-Only Branches)

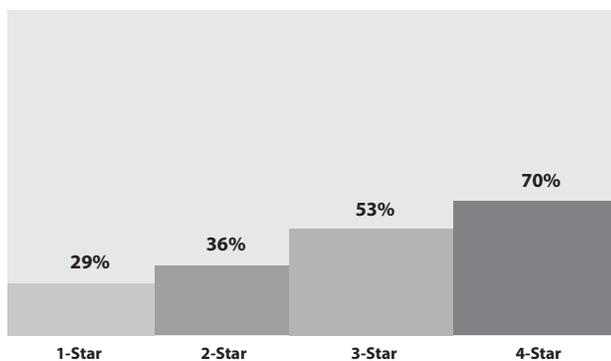


Figure 4
Proportion of Generals at Each Level from Infantry, Armor and Special Forces

that documents, promotes, and preserves war memorials and grave sites in countries beyond the U.S. scope of responsibility.⁴¹ She also became a world-class competitive cyclist, winning four medals in the World Masters Cycling Championships in Melbourne, Australia. She cycled in a relay across America as part of a team, and then decided to make the 3,300 mile journey again just so she could get a better look. She competed in the women's equivalent of the Tour de France. She still holds the world record for distance ridden in an hour by a woman 35 or older. Also,

she achieved much of this while battling breast cancer. She now continues to work with other breast cancer survivors, particularly athletes, to provide mentorship and inspiration from her experience. It would seem that Lillian's departure was the Army's loss, and she is not an outlier. Every year, talented women leave the military profession to seek opportunities where their gender is less of an impediment to success. The Army will continue to suffer this brain drain of talented women unless policy changes to remove the Kevlar ceiling. **MR**

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