



# Women

## The Combat Multiplier of Asymmetric Warfare

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**A**T FIRST, THE obvious question concerning the role women will play in the U.S. Army in the next 20 years is, “When will we gender integrate the combat arms—Infantry, Armor and Field Artillery?” Surely all soldiers should have the widest possible opportunities to pursue the most demanding and critical jobs in the U.S. Army. These jobs exist to manage and apply violence upon the nation’s enemies, “to kill people and break things,” as an infantryman might put it. Haven’t nearly 40 years of experience, and particularly the last decade of enduring combat operations, validated the fact that women have served successfully in every branch and military occupational specialty (MOS) open to them?

Considering the problem of gender integration from this perspective, one sees there is no substantive difference in performing required tasks to their standards between equally trained and duty-qualified male and female soldiers. If the vast majority of MOSs are equivalent, why should the combat arms be different?

But what if the obvious question and its obvious solution are just a little too simple? Considered further, a deeper and more complex question emerges: Are there specific benefits to fully integrating women into the combat arms? Does integrating women into the combat arms serve as a combat multiplier, (achieving a measurable and predictable increase in combat power)?<sup>1</sup> Does the war fighting capability of each branch of the combat arms become greater than the sum of their individual parts? And as we ask these questions, we must acknowledge that valid reasons exist for maintaining the existing ban against women in the combat arms. The justification for maintaining the ban is that male soldiers provide a predictable measure of superiority in their roles. Using the same logic, if female soldiers are demonstrably more effective in specific roles and missions, if their employment serves as a combat multiplier, would not it make sense to increase their use in such roles?

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SGT Francis I. Fonseca, a combat medic with Charlie Company, 703d Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3d Infantry Division, fires an M4 carbine weapon, during an advanced marksmanship course at Fort Stewart, GA, 21 February 2012. (U.S. Army, SSG Tanya Thomas)

As members of the profession of arms, we must objectively and dispassionately consider how best to improve the practice of our profession. Romantic or emotional attachment to tradition must not prevent us from doing what is best to prepare the force to achieve victory at the lowest cost in blood. If female and male soldiers are equivalent in all aspects, then the Army will be improved by opening the combat arms to women. So, too, if there are substantive differences between men and women as groups, then those differences ought to be recognized and exploited.

This essay proposes the hypothesis that women as a group tend to have abilities and capacities that make them more effective than men in certain tactical situations. If so, the profession of arms must take full advantage of such capabilities as a combat multiplier.

## Context

This hypothesis relies on three sets of assumptions regarding the—

- Threat environment the U.S. Army will face in the next 20 years.
- Nature and character of the All Volunteer Force (AVF).
- Unique differences between women and men as groups.

The assumptions frame the question and provide a “common operating picture” for discussion.

**Assumption one.** The global threat environment will be complex and multi-polar, characterized by low- and medium-intensity conflict (L/MIC) asymmetric warfare waged by conventional and irregular forces. The center of gravity in such conflict consists of communities and population centers. The mission is to control them over time (measured in years), instead of engaging in high-intensity battles with other conventional forces for short periods (weeks or months).

A war of sequential battles and campaigns, culminating in victory or unambiguous defeat, may well still occur in the near future, but it is unlikely. Few adversaries have the means to pursue such a conventional war-fighting capability. Those that do—China and perhaps India—do not share our cultural concept of warfare. They are not enthusiastic about expeditionary power-projection beyond their traditional homeland frontiers.<sup>2</sup> A host of

regional-level players, like Russia, Turkey, and Iran represent significant conventional threats in their neighborhoods, but lack the natural and economic resources or population to project power globally. The influence such states can exert also depends on their relationship with international organizations (such as the African Union or the Arab League). In addition, significant transnational and nonstate actors (Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Peru’s Shining Path are good examples) lack any significant conventional military capability but are nonetheless able to wage effective military and informational campaigns.

Such nonstate actors demonstrate that the techniques and tactics of asymmetric warfare can transcend any particular nation, ethnic group, or cultural tradition.<sup>3</sup> The poorest of peoples can wage war using such methods, making creative use of materials and resources at hand and taking advantage of the passage of time to wear down an opponent seeking a quick, clean, and decisive victory.

Asymmetric warfare occurs predominantly within communities and population centers, as the combatants struggle to gain the active support of



**U.S. Army CPT Katherine Redding, right, Female Engagement Team leader from 504th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, asks Haji Neda Mohammad, center, if she may speak with the women and children in southern Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 6 January 2012.** (U.S. Army, SPC Crystal Davis)

a significant portion of the uncommitted civilian population and the quiet acquiescence of the rest.<sup>4</sup> The side that best controls the civilian populace will eventually achieve victory. The key to controlling civilian communities are effective information gathering, building and maintaining operational credibility, and enhanced force protection.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. Army has more years of combat experience in asymmetric warfare in the last 12 years than in all the conventional, high-intensity battles of the last century combined.<sup>6</sup> Other than Operation Desert Storm (1991) and the initial campaign of Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003), all U.S. Army combat operations since 1953 have been (and continue to be) in low- and medium-intensity asymmetric conflicts. This reality alone argues that such conflict will continue to be the most likely (if not the most dangerous) threat the U.S. Army will face.

**Assumption two.** The All-Volunteer Force (AVF) has been thoroughly validated as being able to meet the personnel needs of the U.S. Army. No prospective return to conscription is likely in the absence of any existential military threat. The success of the AVF is dependent upon getting the best possible benefit from the civilian population base.

The All-Volunteer Force was instituted in 1973. Within five years of the end of conscription, women were fully integrated into the U.S. Army with the abolition of the Women's Army Corps.<sup>7</sup> Since that time, the Army has successfully completed four significant strategic realignment and reorganizations (the post-Vietnam era, the Reagan Cold War build-up, the post-Desert Shield/Desert Storm draw-down, and the Global War on Terrorism build-up.) More importantly, in spite of strategic failures, the Army has achieved success in low-, medium-, and high-intensity combat operations against enemy forces of various sizes and compositions. During this 40-year span, there has been no significant data to indicate that the AVF, and the women who serve as soldiers, have been less than fully capable to meet the demands expected.

The U.S. Army's first significant experience with female soldiers as a fully integrated element of the total force (the Regular Army and the Reserve Components) was during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. Research conducted after the

war revealed that soldiers had a "generally positive assessment" regarding male and female duty performance, "identifying no significant differences between the genders other than physical strength capabilities."<sup>8</sup> These data were drawn from combat support and combat service support units operating as far forward as Department of Defense policy would allow women to operate. These included medical, military police (MP), aviation, and logistics units.<sup>9</sup>

During the last 11 to 12-plus years of enduring conflict, we have further validated early data from the Persian Gulf War. For the 70 percent of Army occupational specialties open to either gender, no evidence exists that male and female soldiers are other than equivalent.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the current ban on women serving in direct combat units below the level of brigade (in place since 1994) has largely been overcome by the reality of the low- and medium-intensity conflict environment. The

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linear battlefield of conventional operations simply doesn't exist in the asymmetric battle space.<sup>11</sup> The Army has continued to achieve success in battle, affirming the strength of the AVF and integration of women throughout the force.

In sum, operational evidence suggests that the AVF has met all demands and challenges successfully, providing no operational reasons for a return to conscription. Because women have demonstrated an equivalency to men as soldiers in some 70 percent of military occupational specialties and branches, they represent a significant pool of available recruits. As the AVF gets smaller in the coming years, women will fill a critical personnel-resourcing requirement by being available to serve in the very units and forces necessary for success in asymmetric warfare.

**Assumption three.** At this time, no compelling physiological evidence exists demonstrating that



U.S. Army, SPC Crystal Davis

**Afghan children speak with members of a female engagement team during a Task Force Viper Dagger combat operation in Janak Kalay, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 4 January 2012.**

women as a group meet the physical and psychological demands of deliberate close combat conditions in sufficient numbers to justify fully ending the existing ban on assigning them to all combat arms.

Army MOSs that remain closed are those whose primary functions involve direct application of violence and lethal force upon enemy forces. The U.S. Army's cultural foundations, traditions, and self-image are within combat arms. This 30 percent carries the heaviest burdens of conventional warfare, which the other 70 percent sustain and support. Ground combat—closing with, capturing and destroying the enemy—is tough, hard, physically and mentally punishing work. In the years following the Persian Gulf War, the Army spent considerable time studying the physical differences between women and men with an eye to fully integrating women into the combat arms.<sup>12</sup> The research substantiated that there are significant physical differences between the sexes:

- On average, women are five inches shorter,

have 55 to 60 percent less upper body strength, a higher fat-to-muscle ratio, lower bone density, and 20 percent less aerobic capacity.

- A 1997 study to determine the effectiveness of adding an extra 8 hours per week of physical training for female soldiers demonstrated that after 14 weeks, 78 percent of participants could successfully achieve male-level standards but only to the minimum passing level.

- Women suffer twice the incidence rate of stress fractures during initial entry training.

- Female soldiers sustained injuries requiring hospitalization at a rate 10-times higher than male peers during advanced individual training.

Unlike other branches where the physical demands of tasks and work practices can be modified through team effort, the physical demands of sustained combat simply cannot be engineered or modified away. The inherent nature of close ground combat legitimately trumps the principal of equivalence. Introducing women into the combat arms as a general practice would do nothing to

improve the accomplishment of mission, and would increase risks to individual soldiers.

Furthermore, males are generally recognized to have a psychological predisposition to aggressive behavior—a predisposition that can be an advantage in tactical combat operations. Witness the common pattern of behavior demonstrated by boys and young men who tend to favor sports and recreations that have a high occurrence of violence and physical risk (e.g., football or boxing.) Even though such sports are open and available to girls and young women, relatively few avail themselves of the opportunity, most preferring to participate in sports and activities that encourage and emphasize athleticism and teamwork (e.g., soccer or volleyball).

### **Positive Indicators—Abilities and Capacities**

Forty years of experience (including the last ten of persistent combat) have more than answered the question that women are fully equivalent as soldiers in the majority of Army operations. But based on physiological differences, it does not appear that integrating women into the combat arms would be a combat multiplier—that is, that a specific increase in combat power or effect would be achieved (to balance out the demonstrated increased risk of injury and resulting loss of manpower).

If the U.S. Army were only required to prepare for a conventional high-intensity conflict, the dis-

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cussion might end there; however, as addressed above, the most likely threat the U.S. Army will face in the coming decades will not be the type of fight we configured combat arms to fight. Low- and medium-intensity asymmetric warfare is com-

munity- and population-based, requires effective information gathering, building and maintaining operational credibility, and enhanced force protection. Recent scholarship has suggested that the deliberate, purposeful use of female soldiers in these types of security environments may improve operational effectiveness.<sup>13</sup>

Studies conducted in support of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (the legal framework within recognized international law for addressing issues affecting women's peace and security) draw on stabilization and peacekeeping operational experience from Cambodia, Kosovo, Timor Leste, Afghanistan, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These studies found that 80 percent of internally displaced persons and affected civilians are women, children, and the elderly.<sup>14</sup> Female soldiers are able to gather information from sources (women and children) not otherwise available to men due to cultural restrictions.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, information gathering across the population spectrum improved the overall intelligence picture.<sup>16</sup> Since 2010, smaller ad hoc or provisional assets, such as the U.S. Marine Corps "Lionesses" and Female Engagement Teams have validated that deliberate female engagement with civilian populations yields positive results, including reduced tensions and enhanced credibility with civilians.

We may achieve enhanced force protection because improved tactical intelligence and improved credibility within the civilian populace can lead to better identification and elimination of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) before they are employed.<sup>17</sup>

If substantiated, this research strongly suggests that the use of female soldiers in the low- to mid-intensity conflict asymmetric operational environment can improve tactical intelligence, thus actively reducing soldiers' exposure to ambush and IED attack, resulting in fewer casualties and an increase in mission success. By improving trust and credibility with the civilian population, host nation civil-military interaction becomes more effective, reducing the amount of time needed to achieve success. This can have a tremendous impact on units tasked with providing area security in this unique environment—MPs, Civil Affairs, and Engineers—as well as other combat support and combat service support troops who operate within the asymmetric battle space.

## Testing the Hypothesis

Based upon the assumptions discussed above, let us restate this article's hypothesis in a way that we evaluate and test:

Female soldiers are physiologically and psychologically better suited to specific tactical missions, and units with a higher percentage of women demonstrate superior performance to that of all-male units when required to perform the same general mission sets (in a comparable environment).

Evaluation requires rigorous and detailed investigation of qualitative and quantitative data from the available body of information and records of units having experience conducting area security missions. The available data base has two primary sources, including records from the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, and historical data from deployed units. Not less than three levels of analysis and evaluation are necessary.

- First, by examining the incidence rate of ambush and IED attacks in operational areas patrolled by mixed-gender units conducting area security missions, as opposed to single gender units—IN, AR, and FA—executing the same types of missions. Given comparable area security responsibilities, if the hypothesis has validity, the rate of attacks should be lower over time where mixed gender units have been operating.

- Second, if we find such a pattern, is the rate of incidence inversely proportional to the density of female soldiers—that is, as the number of female soldiers increases, does the rate of attacks drop proportionally?

- Third, if the data substantiates that such a relationship exists, does the data also suggest that there is a point of “diminishing returns” at which there is no further tactical benefit derived from increasing the proportion of female soldiers in such units?

If analysis and evaluation of the data substantiates all three levels—a difference in rate of incidents, inverse relationship between number of ambush and IED attacks and the percentage of female soldiers conducting area security missions, and correlation of the point at which that relationship reaches steady-state—then the hypothesis is supported. If this is so, Army leaders could reasonably conclude that the effectiveness of units conducting area security missions are improved by increasing

the number of female soldiers up to the point of maximum benefit.

After evaluation, actually testing this hypothesis in practice will require deliberate planning, programming, and resourcing of specific units whose doctrinal mission closely aligns with area security during low- to medium-intensity conflict operations. Such deliberate actions take years to complete through the institutional Army's force management systems. If started today with active duty recruits reporting to Initial Entry Training, it would take upwards of two years for these soldiers to be fully integrated into their units and perform effectively as a member of their team, squad, or platoon. These realities are reflected in the Army's Force Generation Model (ARFORGEN), in that Regular Army units are available for deployment once every three years, and RC units once every five. Appreciating these realities, the operational needs of the Army (as reflected by ARFORGEN planning) can be harnessed to thoroughly test this concept.

Specific MP units currently perform area security missions in support of deployment- and contingency expeditionary (DEF and CEF, respectively) force packages in the ARFORGEN planning. During a unit's RE-SET period (when individual personnel assignments and training are prioritized) the mix of female and male soldiers can be adjusted through regular scheduled permanent change of station (PCS) and unit reassignments to match (or get as close to) the evaluated ratio of “maximum benefit” discussed above. By doctrine, this would allow two years for Regular Army units, and five for RC to reach full readiness for mission success. No new systems other than those currently in use for the managing personnel operations would be needed. Such a deliberate program would have the best economy and lowest cost, but has the disadvantage of delaying validation of the concept three-to-six years in the future. Although least expensive, such a plan does little to address the potential benefits of this concept to units that are already inside of the ARFORGEN cycle, specifically MP units tasked to meet area security missions in support of DEF and CEF packages in ARFORGEN planning in the next two to three years. In this case, using the RC to test the concept may provide a cost-effective alternative.

Despite its many successes (or perhaps because of them), the Army is now entering a period of force reductions, as the United States returns to its historical pattern of down-sizing following times of war. How will the institutional army change in the coming decades? To start with, the Regular Army will be a lot smaller—projected force reductions will eliminate eight brigade combat teams (BCT), representing 72,000 soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Eight fewer BCTs mean that the Regular Army's immediate operational capability will be curtailed during a time when the international security environment is likely becoming more complex and uncertain. The RC will continue to serve as an operation reserve in support of Active Duty deployments and missions, particularly in the branches and capabilities necessary to conduct effective L/MIC asymmetric warfare.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the RC provides over 66 percent of the Logistics Corps, 75 percent of Engineer units, 70 percent of Medical resources, 70 percent of Military Police units and 85 percent of Civil Affairs assets. This reliance upon RC forces complicates the personnel challenges the Army faces, given that both the Regular Army and the RC are competing for volunteers in the same population base.

Recent comments by Lieutenant General Jack Stultz (former Chief of Army Reserve) illustrate the possibilities for such cost effectiveness. Reserve forces already make up 70 percent of the total available force for MP and 75 percent of Engineers. Furthermore, there is tremendous demand for RC support of stability and security-cooperation missions in addition to the area security responsibilities demands of current operations.<sup>20</sup> Stated another way, RC forces are already carrying a significant portion of the area security mission, and this will continue to be the case in the coming decades. Not surprisingly, meeting these responsibilities often requires overcoming significant challenges to personnel and training readiness for RC units. Ensuring that units are fully manned, equipped and trained prior to mobilization and deployment commonly demands significant cross-leveling of personnel often within months of mobilization.<sup>21</sup> Although such moves are far from the doctrinal ideal of how best to prepare units for combat, the fact is that such actions are common and necessary to get units to full manning. Since these practices are already recognized as normal and necessary, why not take advantage of the situation in order to adjust



(U.S. Army, SPC Kristina Truluck)

U.S. soldiers from the female engagement team for the 1st Infantry Division talk with Afghan women, gathering information at Mullayan, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 1 November 2011.

the balance of male-female soldiers assigned to MP units to get as close as possible to the evaluated optimum? In other words, why not make a virtue out of a vice—if a unit is to receive 10 to 30 percent cross-leveled personnel to bring it to full strength, why not take advantage of the sunk-costs already required to increase the combat effectiveness of deploying units and reduce soldiers' exposure to IED attacks and ambush?

## Conclusions

This article has set forth the hypothesis that women as a group tend to have abilities and capacities that make them more effective than men in certain tactical situations—in particular the conduct of area security, stability, and security-cooperation missions. Evaluating and testing such a hypothesis is well within the capabilities of the U.S. Army

without committing significant new resources or engaging in disruptive force modernization programs by leveraging the existing active duty personnel management systems and the demonstrated capabilities of the reserve components. The hypothesis is appropriate and worth consideration if the assumptions we set are legitimate—that the particular mission sets in which women are particularly effective are likely to continue being common, that there are substantive and significant physiological differences between men and women, and that the U.S. will continue to look to a professional all-volunteer force to meet its military requirements. If so, and if the hypothesis is found to be valid after thorough and rigorous historical and current evaluation, then the U.S. Army would be strengthened and enhanced by taking full advantage of women as a combat multiplier. **MR**

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## NOTES

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2. Eliot A. Cohen, *Conquered into Liberty* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 39 and 163.

3. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 35.

5. Sahana Dharmapuri, "Just Add Women and Stir?" *Parameters* (Spring 2011): 59.

6. Author's notes: Years of high-intensity combat in the 20th Century: 8.5-1.5 for World War I; 4.0 for World War II; 3.0 for Korea. Vietnam was a mix of low- and medium-intensity conflict. Global War on Terror has been virtually all L/MIC.

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8. *Women in the Military: Deployment in the Persian Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Government Accounting Office, 1993), 21.

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

10. Michelle Tan, "Women in Combat," *Army Times*, 7 May 2012, 18.

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12. Stephanie Gutmann, *The Kinder, Gentler Military: Can America's Gender-Neutral Fighting Force Still Win Wars?* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 247-56.

13. Dharmapuri, 56, 58.

14. *Ibid.*, 59.

15. *Ibid.*, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 59.

17. *Ibid.*, 61.

18. Julie Rudowski, "Fiscal Year 2013 Army Budget: Good-Bad-Ugly," *AUSA News*, April 2012, 2, 21.

19. FM 3-24, 169.

20. C. Todd Lopez, "Stultz: Reserve soldiers will become 'more relevant,'" *AUSA News*, April 2012, 11.

21. Author's notes: Based on author's experiences serving as RC battalion commander, 385th TC BN 2002-2006, Deputy G-3/7 at I (U.S.) Corps, 2006-2007 and Chief of Staff, 364th ESC 2009-2011.