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Women and Combat: Why They Serve

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Women and Combat: Why They Serve

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research article

Women and Combat: Why They Serve

—Holly Zenor–Lafond (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

Barbara Wilson, a retired Air Force captain, maintains the Web site Military Women Veterans which is dedicated to female veterans from American history. She has meticulously recorded recent information and photos of female soldiers killed in the Middle East. A high percentage of these women—some so young their high school photos were displayed—joined the Armed Forces after September 11. They had to know they would probably go to war.

Women make up 15 percent of this nation’s armed forces and face extreme cold, intense heat, primitive conditions, and post-traumatic stress disorder just as their male counterparts do. Women are doing many dangerous jobs and sometimes being killed as a result. As of November 2007, ninety women soldiers had died in the Gulf, most of combat–related causes. Female soldiers have also lost limbs and suffered head injuries. At this moment Pentagon regulations allow women soldiers to serve in any capacity except “direct ground combat” which actively engages the enemy (Donnelly, 2007).



Female combat medics in Afghanistan: Staff Sgt. Jo Turner (left) and Spc. Cheryl Ivanov of the Oregon Army National Guard. Photo by 1st Lt. Amanda Straub, January 29, 2007 (Courtesy of the United States Army)

I found myself wondering what motivated these women to go to war. They lived in a country that has historically believed women are not suited to the rigors of war, and faced little societal pressure to join up. What was it about war that drew these women to it? Were there internal motivations urging them on? One woman dressed as a man to fight in the Civil War, explaining she had “the passion to do something exciting” (Cook, 2002, 38). And were there external motivations? Nurse Diane Carlson signed up for a MASH unit in order to join her “two brothers serving in Vietnam” (Lewis, 1999, 118). Once women decided to go to war, were there barriers in themselves, in our culture, or even in the military itself that had to be overcome? Perhaps the answers rest with earlier women who went to war.

It is well known that throughout American history women have served bravely as nurses. What is less known is that they also functioned near the front lines as camp workers, scouts, spies, soldiers, and telephone operators. When examining the words and actions of women soldiers—from the cross–dressers of early America to the women active in the Gulf—I have found the motives they expressed deeply compelling. Private Christina Carde, serving in Afghanistan, stated one motive in the *US Air Force Press Releases* of June 10, 2003: “Mothers can return home with a sense of pride and accomplishment and be able to tell their children that they had a part in defending their country.”

Consistently over time patriotism, along with compassion, adventure, financial independence, historical significance, courage and recognition have motivated women to take action. They have faced restrictive societal norms and strict, often discriminatory military policies. Through strength of will, coupled sometimes with deception, they have attempted to prove their worth as patriots and soldiers.

When Women Could Fight

It is estimated that 20,000 women risked their lives as battlefield helpers during the American Revolution. Mostly relatives of soldiers, they did the cooking, washing, sewing, cleaning and nursing duties, often perilously close to the front lines.

Social and political norms did not allow women to be soldiers during the Revolutionary War. However, the lack of baths and physical exams allowed women such as Deborah Gannet and Sally St. Clair to cut their hair, dress in men's clothes and join the Continental Army. Gannet, alias Robert Shurtleff, later said, "I became an actor in that important drama." She wanted to see more than she could in her small Massachusetts town, and described herself as a "warrior" (Nathan, 2004, 9–11). St. Claire's sex was only discovered when she died at the Battle of Savannah. A group of women in Pepperell, Massachusetts, dressed as men and went on patrol to protect their town (Lewis, 16). The desire to be near male family members, the thrill of adventure and the need to protect themselves drove these women to face war head on.

By the early 1800s women's roles were still primarily domestic, but some jobs, such as school teacher, writer and governess, had become acceptable for middle and upper-class women. However, society still restricted the vocations open to women, especially those of the lower class. Most female Americans were financially dependent on their fathers or husbands. Women did not have the right to vote or full citizenship by the time America went to war again in 1812 (Nathan, 13).

The roles of women in the War of 1812 were similar to those of the Revolution. In 1812 many women accompanied their husbands to camp and wrote of the need to be near loved ones. Women who wanted to play an even bigger part in the war dressed as men and enlisted (Lewis, 20).

By the time the Civil War broke out, women's rights had changed little in America. Women were not encouraged to be fighters, but many again served as camp workers. Most supported the war from home while some wished they could join the fight. Sarah Morgan of Louisiana lamented in her journal, "O! If I was only a man! Then I could...slay them [Yankees] with a will." Another Southerner, Lucy Breckenridge, wrote in her journal, "I wish that women could fight. I would gladly shoulder my pistol and shoot some Yankees" (Cook, 25).

Women followed their loved ones as well as their sense of duty into battle, but they were not allowed to fight openly as women. During the Civil War approximately 400 women took advantage of baggy uniforms and lax military screening to disguise themselves as soldiers (Lewis, 24). Those conditions even allowed some women to hide their pregnancies. At least six women surprised fellow soldiers by giving birth. In April 1864 in the Rock Island (military) Prison in Illinois, "a portly young fellow in Confederate grey, was . . . delivered of a fine boy" (Cook, 84). Although the number of female soldiers was small, it is worth noting the various reasons these women went to such lengths to be part of the military.

Again, some wanted to stay close to the men they loved. One such soldier-in-disguise, Martha Lindley, said in a postwar newspaper interview, "I was frightened to death, but I was so anxious to be with my husband that I resolved to see the thing through if it killed me." Another reason was passion for the cause. A nineteen-year-old Michigan woman known only as Emily was mortally wounded at Chattanooga. When her sex was

discovered by a surgeon, she dictated a note to her father asking forgiveness. “I expected to deliver my country but the fates would not have it so,” Emily wrote. In her petition for a pension Sara Edmonds, alias Michigan soldier Franklin Thompson, declared she felt called to go and “had no other motive in enlisting than love to God, and love for suffering humanity” (Cook, 31, 93, 168).

Monetary incentives were important to the female soldiers as well. In 1861 army pay could be two to three times what a civilian woman could make. Just like the men, these soldiers often sent money back home to struggling families. Sarah Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, already working as a man on a canal boat, wrote home that Union soldiers “wanted I should enlist and so I did. I got 100 and 52\$ in money” (Weiser, 2007).

Some women loved the freedom of “being” a man and the excitement of battle. Wakeman also wrote her parents, “I am as independent as a hog on the ice” (Cook, 36–38). The Illinois State Archives document that Jennie Hodgers, alias Albert Cashier, served with the 95th Illinois Regiment and then continued her disguise for almost 50 years. In 1911 she was injured and doctors discovered her secret. She explained to a reporter that she joined because the country needed soldiers and she wanted the excitement (Nathan, 20). Rebecca Peterman gave a reporter no other reasons for her ruse than a desire to “see what war was,” and to be near her brother and cousin (Cook, 33).

When Women Could Not Fight

The next time America went to war there had been changes for women. Progress had been made in education, and some colleges were admitting women. The first woman to receive a law degree graduated in 1870. However, women did not have equal protection under the law, and in 1875 the Supreme Court officially denied women the right to vote (Cushman, 2001, 2–12).

This was the climate for women at the start of the Spanish–American War in 1898. In addition to social, political and legal restrictions, there were more military barriers to women’s participation in this war. The army no longer allowed women as camp or battlefield helpers. Enlistment physicals were carefully conducted, making disguise impossible.

The military reflected society’s view of women as caretakers. Congress authorized the army to contract with certified female nurses (with no military status) at \$30 a month. Fifteen hundred women assisted the military in the states, overseas, and on a U.S. Hospital ship from 1898–1901 (Wilson, 2007). A desire to use their nursing skills, along with a genuine concern for the health of soldiers, motivated them to join the war effort. Letters home and personal memoirs written by nurses such as Rose Heaven expressed their concern: “We were caring for boys who... were stricken with disease... it was very sad to think we could do so little for them” (Nathan, 23). Nurses did die serving their country due to diseases such as yellow and typhoid fevers (Lewis, 45).



The New York nurses at Sternberg General Hospital, Camp Thomas, Chickamauga, Georgia, during the Spanish-American War. (Courtesy of the Office of the Army Surgeon General, Public Affairs, and the Directorate of Information Management)

Some women wanted to participate closer to the battlefield in the Spanish–American War. Writer Ellen Hayes wrote a *Woman’s Journal* article in 1899 expressing her belief in an American women’s corps that would operate on the front lines. Other countries, she wrote, had formed them in order to aid the “struggles for justice, independence, and liberty.” The National Archives has a letter from Annie Oakley, the sharpshooter, to President McKinley. She wrote that she was ready to place a company of fifty lady sharpshooters at his disposal. He declined her offer. It seems obvious that women would have done much more if they had been allowed to actively serve.

Only sixteen years after the end of the Spanish–American War, America entered World War I. It was still a time when most married women did not have paying jobs, although it was acceptable for single and poor women to do “female jobs,” such as nursing and teaching, and to work in shops and mills. America still had not granted women the national right to vote (Cushman, 15). The armed services had made little advance in its thinking about women. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, permanent nursing units had been created, but nurses were not yet allowed any military ranks or military benefits.

In spite of the lack of status, 21,000 nurses went to war for some of the same reasons as before: patriotism, compassion, and the hope of adventure. World War I Army Nurse Fanny Cunningham expressed how every nurse “hurt for them [soldiers] and did what we could to help them and make them comfortable” (Lewis, 61, 68). Helen Fairchild, who probably died from heavy exposure to mustard gas, had told her family that she would have some exciting tales to tell. More than 400 women died in service during World War I, the majority from a devastating flu epidemic (Nathan, 32).

The Risks Get Bigger

By the time America entered World War II, women’s rights had made great strides. The Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920, giving all women the right to vote. Women were attending colleges in record numbers and becoming doctors, scientists, and lawyers. Women were still recruited by the armed services to do office work, nursing, and switchboard operations, but in this war women also repaired and flew planes and drove jeeps. More than 1,100 civilian female pilots contracted with the military as Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). These women flew thousands of non–combat military missions in the United States. Military regulations allowed them to deliver new planes, test repaired planes, and pull targets for gunnery training, but not to fly into battle (Nathan, 39).

Many women eager to join had a strong sense of duty. Beatrice Stroup of the Women’s Army Corps stated to archivists that the U.S. was not just men’s country, so this war wasn’t just a men’s war, “it was my war, and I needed to serve in it” (Lewis, 71). In her study of nurses on Bataan, Elizabeth Norman argues that women of this era watched their mothers struggle and wanted “something different than an early marriage, a house full of babies, and a life over the cast–iron stove.” One nurse, Ruth Straub, held prisoner in the Bataan jungle for three years, wrote of her motive in her diary: “Pearl Harbor had been bombed . . . nurses and doctors were needed badly up there. I had to volunteer.” After the death of her father, another Bataan nurse, Mary Rose Harrington, knew she would have to help support her mother, so she decided to join the navy (Norman, 15–26). These reasons echo those given by female soldiers in the Civil War.

Women in World War II, however, were taking over positions previously held by men, and that created some resentment. Rumors were spread that service women were promiscuous or lesbians. Other rumors suggested women were unimportant to the fight and only there to provide physical “comfort” for soldiers’ morale (Mitchell, 1998, 5).

Nowhere was this dismissive attitude more evident than in the case of women pilots. WASP Ann Darr described one incident in her 2006 article, *A Long Flight Home*: When a military plane crashed, the male pilot's body was sent home to be buried with honors. The Air Force stated it was not responsible for the female co-pilot. The other women pilots on the base took up a collection to send her body home.



Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs) in World War II: Frances Green, Peg Kirchner, Ann Waldner, and Blanche Osborne (Courtesy of the United States Air Force)

Although many servicemen treated military women with great respect, one cannot help but wonder why female pilots would want to serve in such a negative atmosphere. Darr explained, "It may surprise some people today, but some of us went into the service for reasons both patriotic and humane." There was also the love of flying. Another WASP pilot had the dangerous job of testing new planes. According to Darr she did not mind being a human guinea pig and said, "To fly the B-29, I'd be any kind of pig." These women had courage and would have flown into battle if allowed. As it was, thirty-eight women pilots died serving their country.

The next big military conflict, the Korean War, broke out in 1950. This time women's response to war was very different. The military considered Korea too dangerous, so it sent only 600 of the approximately 7,000 nurses already on active duty in 1950. The 14,000 women serving in other capacities were

deemed too few to support the war. While the military wanted to increase its number of women by 72,000, only 6,000 new women had joined the military by 1952 (Nathan, 49).

A possible reason for the decline in female enlistment following the end of World War II may be discriminatory policies by the military itself. Being less desperate for personnel, the armed services could discriminate, focusing on beauty and "requiring full-length photographs of potential female recruits, taking only the best-looking among them." Marksmanship was dropped from women's training, but properly applying makeup and maintaining trim figures were added (Mitchell, 7-10). Whether many women no longer saw themselves as fighters, or if military life, with its focus on femininity and beauty, offered young women little different from a civilian life, women were not motivated to go to war this time.

But things were about to change. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the Women's Liberation Movement emerged and grew stronger. In the early '70s the Equal Rights Amendment was again proposed to give women equal rights under the law. Although concern about women being drafted into combat was one obstacle to its being ratified, women's military roles were strengthened over the next fifteen years (Cushman, 84-85). The Vietnam War (1959-1975) strained the military system, particularly when the draft ended in 1973, and military leaders realized they needed to attract female recruits. Women were given many opportunities their female predecessors had longed for: pilot training, lucrative career options, better education, and service on non-combat ships (Nathan, 58-60).

In addition to those opportunities, many of the 7,500 women who served in Vietnam did so again with a sense of obligation and patriotic duty. Nurse Diane Evan was determined to help the war effort and join her "two brothers serving in Vietnam." When testifying before Congress in support of a statue to female Vietnam Veterans, Officer Karen Johnson stated simply, "I was an American soldier . . . and I am an American veteran" (Lewis, 124).

Compassion carried women into the war as well. First Lieutenant Nancy Spears stated she went to Vietnam and would go again, “not because I care for war, but because I care for the people who are sent to war.” Women were proud of their service and believed it to be important (Lewis, 115–124).

Women Take Up Arms

Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s women slowly made social and political advancements. They continued receiving higher educations, creating businesses, and becoming soldiers. These social changes were reflected in expanded roles for women in the military. About the only off-limits service for women in the armed services at the time was in combat zones (Lewis, 141).

Forty thousand military women were deployed to the Persian Gulf War in 1991. In this modern warfare, entire theaters of military operation could be combat zones. In order to prepare them, women were taught the use of weapons in combat. They served in combat zones, flew and maintained aircraft, drove or protected supply vehicles, and launched missiles (Binkin, 1993, 13–19). To date an estimated 100,000 women have served in the Iraq operations theater. Military women matter in war today. “There’s no going back,” argued retired Navy Captain Lory Manning. “If you tried to pull women out of the equation, this country could not fight a war” (Martineau, 2005, A1).

Although many male soldiers accepted women in their ranks, women often faced a hostile culture. A 1990 Defense Department survey of 20,000 military women found that two out of three female soldiers had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in the previous year (Lewis, 137–138). A 1996 article in the *Duke Law Journal* reported that sexual assault and rape in the combat theater were “several times higher than civilian rates” (Morris, 1996).

For an *NBC News in Depth* report on May 4, 2007, Dawn Fratangelo interviewed three women being treated for the “other post traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) that was “caused by military sexual trauma.” According to Fratangelo this PTSD accounts for 78% of PTSD patients at the Veteran’s Affairs’ Women’s Trauma Recovery Program at Palo Alto, California. The National Center for PTSD is taking sexual trauma just as seriously as military trauma, and the military has created a new reporting system that does not require informing a higher officer of the assault. Although afraid at first to tell anyone, Tina Gerber, claiming she was raped by another soldier last year while serving in Afghanistan, was able to report the assault, get an honorable discharge, and receive counseling.

Most women soldiers would admit that there is a long way to go to establishing a fully safe and accepting atmosphere in the military. However, they do not seem likely to give up any time soon. An e-mail posted to the Washington Post Web site by 26-year-old medic Jennifer Guay emphasized this: “It is my right to defend my country...I am well aware of the danger...Let me (us) do our job.”

Whether or not women aspire to military careers in the future will probably depend on how the military handles these important issues. However, it seems very likely women will continue to volunteer during war time. From the American Revolution to the Iraq War, women have put themselves at risk for their comrades and country. Whether military leaders believed in women or not, many women have consistently believed in themselves. Motivated by patriotism, courage, ambition, compassion, pride, and sense of adventure, some women will always find a way to be warriors.

I would like to thank my mentor, Professor John Resch, for all his support. He has often given graciously of his time and patience, to instruct me in the craft of research writing. While always encouraging, he has coached me to temper my enthusiasm with practicality. I would also like to thank Professor John Cerullo for first suggesting I publish my research. He gave me the inducement I needed when I was tempted to remain safely hidden. While exploring my love for women's history, I was lucky enough to be the student of Siobhan Eaton. Her example has taught me that being a voice for women is not only a worthy endeavor but a fascinating one.

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Author Bio

*“Both my mother and sisters were veterans,” said **Holly Zenor-Lafond**. “When the Women in Military Service to America Memorial was being created, my mother was very proud and did what she could to support the project. I was surprised by the passion she felt for her part in the war (she worked in an office) and in history. Since she died in 1997, I was unable to talk more with her, so I decided to find out what other women veterans had to say.” Holly did just that in the spring of 2006 for an Advanced Women’s History course at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester, where she is completing a second bachelor’s degree in history. Born and raised in Manchester, New Hampshire, Holly received a B.A. in psychology from UNH, then worked for many years in the human services field. Holly knows why she is back in school: “The only thing I want to do with my degree is to tell the stories of common people from American history.”*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Jack Resch** is professor of history and humanities at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester, where he has taught for thirty-five years. He specializes in researching and teaching the history of the American Revolution and the Early Republic as well as team-teaching humanities courses. His publications include *Suffering Soldiers* (1999) and *War and Society in the American Revolution* (2007). A frequent mentor of students, he says about working with Holly: “Mentoring Holly was very gratifying because we worked in a collegial relationship where I could share my experience in doing research and she shared her enthusiasm for discovery and moments of sheer delight in solving historical puzzles.”*