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FUBAR: A Historical Perspective on the Status of Women in the US Military

Liz Marsden

Debate rages in the military community over whether women should receive equal status. In January of 2012, Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum expressed “concerns about women in frontline combat,” explaining that their presence could create “a very compromising situation...where people naturally...may do things that may not be in the interests of the mission because of other types of emotions that are involved.”¹ Even though the military started accepting women into academies over thirty years ago, sex discrimination remains rife, leading to tensions between men and women, and, in slowly rising numbers, cases of sexual assault. Almost a third of all women currently serving in the military are estimated to have been victims of sexual assault or rape, a rate that is twice as high as in the civilian population.² These results are due in large part to the deeply entrenched misogynistic culture of the military.

¹ Alex Moe, “Gingrich says Santorum ‘Completely Misunderstands’ Modern Warfare,” MSNBC, 14 Feb. 2012, <http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/02/14/10410243-gingrich-says-santorum-completely-misunderstands-modern-warfare> (18 Feb. 2012).

² Nancy Gibbs, “Sexual Assaults on Female Soldiers: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” Time Magazine, 8 Mar. 2010, <http://articles.cnn.com/2008-07-31/us/military.sexabuse_1_sexual-assault-sexual-abuse-military-service?_s=PM:US> (19 Feb. 2012).

The traditions and cultures of United States Armed Forces have remained largely unchanged for the better part of three centuries. While the integration of African Americans into the armed forces disrupted some military traditions, racial integration was rigidly enforced and not nearly as disruptive as the integration of women. Because of its hyper-masculine, male-centered culture, the integration of women has challenged the traditions and cultures of the US military in fundamental ways.

The military claims to be in the midst of a paradigm shift from “exclusionary combat, masculine-warrior” culture, to a culture that mirrors society’s shift towards “egalitarianism and inclusiveness.”³ However, it has not made the changes necessary to accept women as truly equal members, causing women to continue to struggle to find equality in the armed forces. By their very nature, women challenge everything for which the military used to stand—because of its foundation in perceptions of manhood and masculinity.

The United States military has always been concerned with its image as a powerful, virile force. Generations of patriotic, hardworking men have protected military traditions passed down from the Revolutionary War. When the country entered the mid-20th century, most men were taking up desk jobs, leaving relatively few working with their hands—the traditional occupation of “real” men. As women entered the work force during World War II en masse, there were few careers men could enter without working side

³ Karen O. Dunivin, Military Culture: A Paradigm Shift? Maxwell Air force Base, Alabama, 1997.
<<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/maxwell/mp10.pdf>>

by side with women. This made the military an increasingly rare opportunity to perform a “man’s job.” It was seen as a beacon of masculinity and strength, a reputation the military reinforced in its propaganda posters. The young men aged eighteen to twenty-five who make up the bulk of the enlisted army personnel, are, even today, indoctrinated into this traditional masculine culture.⁴

Scholar Linda Francke notes, “The military culture is driven by a group dynamic centered around male perceptions and sensibilities, male psychology and power, male anxieties and the affirmation of masculinity.”⁵ Once recruits enter basic training, they are told that their old life is over. They are maggots, the lowest of the low in a very hierarchical structure. A group identity is created. The individual is gone; the only thing that matters are one’s fellow soldiers. This contributes to the harassment and discrimination women face in the military. Group mentality encourages behavior that an individual would not normally exhibit, and is encouraged by the over-idealization of the small percentage of men who see action. These men are considered the pinnacle of masculinity within the army, decorated with purple hearts, and ribbons. Equating masculinity with violence ignores that “only 15 percent ever fired their weapons in combat” in World War II, and “fewer than 15 percent of the hundreds of thousands of military personnel who served in

⁴ “Demographics Army G-1,” Deputy Chief of Staff, Army. 23 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.armyg1.army.mil/HR/demographics.asp>> (16 Jan. 2012).

⁵ Linda Bird Francke, Ground Zero: The Gender Wars in the Military, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 152.

Vietnam are estimated to have been in a firefight.”⁶ Despite this reality, new recruits are trained to strive for “STRAC” status—that is, “Straight, Tough and Ready for Action.”⁷

From basic training on, very close bonds are formed between soldiers. Reducing women to sex objects has been “considered essential to forming close fraternal bonds.”⁸ This brand of group mentality takes a negative turn when women come into the military. The results can be something as relatively minor as “aggressive pranks like ‘mooning’ passing cars” to violent gang rapes. “Such male-to-male displays [serve] to wean out the wimps in the male group and establish a leadership hierarchy based on daring.”⁹ One man might not do such things on his own, but as a member of a group fighting for a hierarchical position, the stakes and behaviors change.

In the past young recruits were degraded by their Staff Sergeants by the use of sexist epithets. These served to associate shame with femininity, reminding these young men to strive for masculinity. For example, the very common (until recently) chant of “this is my Rifle, this is my Gun, this is for fighting, this is for fun” was used to remind recruits that they should never refer to their rifle as a gun.¹⁰ In a hazing technique, the man who mistakenly referred to his rifle as

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard A. Burns, “‘This is my Rifle, This is my Gun...’: Gunlore in the Military,” *New Directions in Folklore*, Issue 7 2003, <<http://www.temple.edu/english/isllc/newfolk/military/rifle.html>> (19 Jan. 2012).

a gun would strip down to his underwear (or entirely) and recite this chant, clutching his crotch when referring to his gun that he was to use “for fun,” and clutching his rifle for the other lines.¹¹ This and other very male-centric chants and degrading comments about acting like “sissies” or “ladies” were forbidden for fear of lawsuits when women entered the military academies and the basic training camps.¹² Gone is yelling in soldiers’ faces or calling them names to motivate them.¹³ This new approach to training proves that the military is trying to change its image, but real change in the military with regard to female troops is slow in coming.

Women pose threats to the military culture beyond the taunts of drill sergeants however. The rhetoric in the military was to protect the weak: sisters, mothers, children—if women in the military can protect themselves, who are male soldiers protecting? World War II propaganda posters encouraged young men to “protect the nation’s honor,” represented by a young woman.¹⁴ The role of women in American society has undergone drastic changes. No longer is a woman bound to being a wife and mother exclusively. Women can choose a career or a family, or both. Women have attended prestigious universities and entered the workforce en

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rachael Tolliver, “Drill Sergeants Debunk Myths,” US Army, 8 April 2009 <<http://www.army.mil/article/19408/>> (20 Feb. 2012).

¹⁴ “It’s Up to You, Protect the Nation’s Honor,” Associated Motion Picture Advertisers, <http://www.zazzle.com/vintage_protect_the_nations_honor_poster-228695061682110582> (9 Feb. 2012).

masse. This newfound freedom threatened male dominance in family, the workplace, and the military. No longer did the term “breadwinner” apply exclusively to males. In 1979, women coming into the military were perceived as a threat by their male counterparts. Of eighty-seven men and seventy-six women beginning basic training at Fort McClellan in 1979, “twenty-two of the women had some college experience, as opposed to seven of the men. Only seven of the women had a GED...instead of a high school diploma, whereas thirty six of the men had neither.”¹⁵ These statistics of women in the military having better educational backgrounds than their male counterparts remain typical today, exacerbating gender gap tensions—creating yet another challenge to the military’s notion of male dominance and superiority.

On the one hand, men joined the military believing it to be a boys’ club, resenting the women who were “imposing.” On the other hand, dedicated female patriots who sought entry to the military as equal comrades, and were told they cannot fight for their country. Both sides of this gender rift are frustrated with the situation and no course of action has eased the tensions. The women feel unappreciated, and the men see the women as intruders.

In a male-dominated world, women’s gender roles are tricky to navigate. What has been holding women back is the male perception that they are weak and cannot do a man’s job. Women have to prove themselves as masculine in order to gain the respect of their male counterparts. If they succeed, they risk being

¹⁵ Helen Rogan, Mixed Company: Women in the Modern Army (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1981), 33.

perceived as too masculine, and are accused of being a lesbian or a bitch. Overly masculine women present a threat to their male counterparts, but there is also danger in not being masculine enough. If a female in the armed forces tries to retain her femininity she will face several challenges. If she is too “girly” she reinforces every stereotype of weakness that kept women out of the military historically, and continues to keep women out of combat. There is also the threat that if a woman appears excessively feminine, she will be perceived as “asking for it” when she is the victim of sexual assault.¹⁶ As a Naval officer said to female troops on the second day of boot camp, “Welcome to the fleet. In the Navy’s eyes you’re either dykes or whores—get used to it.”¹⁷ Trying to find middle ground between the two serves as an added stress for women in the military. Forty-nine percent of women in the military acknowledge pressures to act either masculine (33%) or feminine (26%).¹⁸ This pressure to act a certain way “can lead to decreased performance and efficiency on the part of those employees.”¹⁹ Women in the military worrying about gender roles and fitting in with their peers are likely to feel excluded and self-conscious in a group exercise or on a team.

While women’s formal acceptance into the military was long overdue, it was a result of social and political forces demanding military change. Years earlier, racial integration was not achieved as a response to social

¹⁶ Melissa S. Herbert, Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality and Women in the Military (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

change; the military was racially integrated by an executive order from President Harry Truman that was prompted by political pressure.²⁰ Racial inequality in the United States was a detriment during the Cold War. It was an Achilles heel for the United States because communism promised equal standing for all, regardless of race. Truman made the decision to integrate the military despite, rather than because of, widespread severe social opposition.²¹ The need to create a united front during the Cold War meant that from the top down, racial slurs and discrimination were not to be tolerated. Women, on the other hand, were making social strides in the 1960s and 1970s, achieving the right to birth control and abortion, even as the Equal Rights Amendment failed.²² Despite the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948 and the 1972 mandate that "all military occupational specialties [be] opened to WAC officers and enlisted women except those that might require combat training or duty," women were only grudgingly accepted into the armed forces and to this day struggle for equality.²³ Instead of being integrated in one fell, rigorously enforced, swoop as happened with race, women have been only sluggishly integrated into the

²⁰ "President Truman's Integration of the Armed Forces," Congressional Digest, 89 no. 4 (Apr. 2010) 110-112.

²¹ Morris J. Macgregor, Jr. Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965 (Washington D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1985) x.

²² "Constitutional Amendments Not Ratified," US House of Representatives, March, 2012
<<http://www.house.gov/house/Amendnotrat.shtml>> (1 Mar. 2012).

²³ US Army, "A New Era," Women in the US Army, December 2011, <<http://www.army.mil/women/newera.html>> (20 Jan. 2012).

military in a stepping stone approach, from basic training, to being trained in weaponry, to one day, being in combat.

To give historical perspective, when the military was racially integrated resistance was not tolerated. As Morris J. Macgregor, Jr. writes, “from the beginning the military establishment rightly understood that the breakup of the all-black unit would...necessarily mean more than mere desegregation.” The military “used the terms integration and equal treatment and opportunity to describe its racial goals” instead of desegregation. Integration requires providing equal opportunity, not just ending segregation.²⁴ Women, however, are still struggling to end segregation. Until full desegregation has been carried out in the military, there can be no hope of integration. The only way for women to achieve that integration is if, in the words of Karen Dunivin, “senior US military leaders...can institutionalize a cultural paradigm embodied by an inclusive whole rather than a paradigm personified by an exclusive few.”²⁵

The double standard is revealed by comparing the case of Isaac Woodard, representing the military’s commitment to racial integration, to the Tailhook incident, representing the military’s lack of commitment to gender integration. When World War II veteran Isaac Woodard was honorably discharged from the military, he boarded a bus from Camp Gordon in Georgia to his home in South Carolina. Upon arrival in

²⁴ Macgregor, Jr. Integration of the Armed Forces United States Army Center of Military History, 1985, x.

²⁵ Dunivin, Military Culture, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1997.

South Carolina, “Sergeant Isaac Woodard [was] taken off the bus by the town sheriff, a 210-pound white man named Linwood Shull. He [was] arrested for disorderly conduct... in none of the papers is there any suggestion there was verbal or physical violence on the part of Sergeant Woodard.”²⁶ After his arrest he was beaten to the point of being blinded.²⁷ When President Truman heard about this incident and learned that the officer had not been punished, he was furious. Truman told the Attorney General, “we can’t just address these ad hoc cases of violence”—something more needed to be done.²⁸ When the police officer who brutalized Woodard was found not guilty by an all-white jury, Truman created another executive order: the Civil Rights Commission. He gave this commission the power of federal subpoena, charging it with the important task of documenting “the degree of racism in America and how we can attack it.”²⁹ Truman also addressed the NAACP on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial: “It is my deep conviction,” he said, “that we have reached a turning point in our country’s efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens. Recent events in the United States and abroad have made us realize that it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights. When I say all Americans--I mean all Ameri-

²⁶ Michael R. Gardner, “Harry Truman and the Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks,” *UVA NewsMakers*, 26 Sept. 2003, <<http://www.virginia.edu/uvanewsmakers/newsmakers/gardner.html>> (10 Mar. 2012).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

cans.”³⁰ Truman’s integration of the military and continued intolerance for racial violence and injustice left no question of what would happen to those who violated his policies.

Fast forward forty-five years to the Tailhook scandal. A total of eighty-three women and seven men were sexually assaulted during a three day naval symposium.³¹ After the Inspector General and the Naval Investigative Service issued a report in April of 1992 describing the assaults, a second investigation was launched and published in September of 1992 by the Pentagon’s Inspector General. It concluded that “senior Navy officials deliberately undermined their own investigation to avoid bad publicity, and ignored the participation of senior officers at Tailhook.”³² In April 1993, the Pentagon Inspector General’s report was released in full, revealing that “at least 140 officers were being referred to the military services for possible disciplinary action.”³³ Yet significantly, not one of these 140 cases ever went to trial.³⁴

One man’s blinding by a racist police officer resulted in indictments, follow-ups, the Civil Rights Commission and a public conference with the NAACP on the steps of the Lincoln memorial stating equality for all Americans. For over ninety victims of sexual assault because of misogynistic naval officers, there were in-house investigations leading to no trials, let

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Tailhook ’91,” [Frontline PBS](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/navy/tailhook/91.html), Feb 2012, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/navy/tailhook/91.html>> (3 Mar. 2012).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

alone criminal charges. The stark dichotomy of these two cases highlights the very different attitudes towards racial equality and gender equality in the military.

On paper, equality has been achieved for women in the armed forces. However, there are mixed messages from the top leadership when it comes to enforcement. On the one hand, women are allowed to be in the military and certain policies are strictly enforced, yet superior officers ignore hundreds of rape cases. In 1995, when a US Army recruiter was raped, the Naval Criminal Investigative Services (NCIS) refused to press charges against her Marine rapist, even going so far as to say she should be “grateful that a Marine raped [her].”³⁵ Such a message makes the integration of women impossible. Soldiers follow orders, above all else. If they are ordered not to discriminate and sexual assault is not tolerated, in action as well as on paper, the number of incidents will rapidly decline. Publicly denouncing yet privately tolerating the rapist while blaming the survivor for disrupting the group dynamic reveals the persistent misogynistic attitudes of the military.

The reasons for keeping women out of combat today are very similar to the arguments that kept them out of the military in general, as well as those that were used to retain “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The charge is that both women and homosexuals disrupt individ-

³⁵ Anonymous, “United States Army Recruiter Raped,” *My Duty to Speak*, 15 Dec. 2011, <<http://mydutytospeak.com/2011/12/15/united-states-army-recruiter-raped/>> (20 Jan. 2012).

ual troops and unit cohesion.³⁶ These arguments reflect the fact that both gays and women threaten the military's traditional masculine ideals. A part of the tenacity of very conservative masculine views is that "the men and women serving in the armed forces today represent less than 1 percent of the country's total population, and come heavily from rural, conservative areas in the South and the mountain West."³⁷ In addition, white males comprise roughly 70% of the officer population, and 63% of the total active-duty soldiers. An overwhelming 70% of the people in the military are of the Christian faith, which is also patriarchy-based.³⁸

The racial demographics in active-duty personnel however, are comparable to the population demographics of the country they protect. However, while 50.8% of the US population is female, only 15% of the members of the armed services are women.³⁹ The argument that women and racial minorities disrupt group cohesion is belied by a study revealing that surface level diversity, such as race or gender, has "not been found useful in the study of predictors of work group outcomes."⁴⁰ What are more predictive of how a

³⁶ Anne Flaherty and Julie Watson, "Opponents say Military needs Culture Change, too," *The Associated Press*, 20 Oct. 2010, <<http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/10/ap-military-gay-ban-culture-change-102010/>> (10 Feb. 2012).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Demographics Army G-1," *Deputy Chief of Staff, Army*. 23 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.armyg1.army.mil/HR/demographics.asp>> (16 Jan. 2012).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mickey R. Dansby, James B. Stewart, and Schuyler C. Webb, *Managing Diversity in the Military* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 67.

group will function are “deep level” diversity variables such as values, attitudes, and personality. These diversity variables were associated with “group cohesiveness, performance, group processes, and turnover.”⁴¹ So while diversity is proven to have a negative effect on group or unit cohesion, it is the deep level diversity, not the surface diversity, which is the problem. “The closeness of a highly cohesive group reduces internal tensions and provides a supportive environment for the attainment of the group’s goals.”⁴² The military is creating a rift in group cohesion by denying women in the armed forces that supportive environment, alienating them and causing tension within groups.

Culture by its very definition is constantly changing, influenced by a variety of factors. However, military culture in the US has remained, for the most part, stubbornly constant over hundreds of years. The military’s lack of genuine commitment to the integration of women has led to a variety of present day problems. These patriarchal traditions and policies are falling by the wayside, too slowly for liberal women and too fast for conservative men, creating gaps both in military teams and in gender equality. The military needs to commit to shifting its culture in a profound way in order to prevent the backlash that continues thirty years after women first graduated from West Point.⁴³ This refusal within the military to acknowledge that change needs to happen has allowed problems to

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 71.

⁴³ US Army, “A New Era,” Women in the US Army, December 2011, < <http://www.army.mil/women/newera.html> > (20 Jan. 2012).

escalate. By mandating and enforcing full gender equality, a new generation of military personnel can quickly create a new culture of true equality. In a military whose sole purpose is to protect and defend the people of the United States, there can be no tolerance for misogyny and sexist traditions.

Liz Marsden is a junior history major and a new member of Phi Alpha Theta. She is interested in pursuing studies in United States social history and hopes to go on to get her Ph.D. so she can teach at a college level.