

## 13 Nov 2008 Veterans Day

This morning I would like to talk about how the roles active duty, Guard and reserve women are playing in Iraq and Afghanistan differ from the roles they've played in earlier wars. Understanding this difference is critical to designing effective transition services for our women veterans.

I'm sure it surprises no one here, but over the past six years, military women, of necessity, have found themselves involved in ground operations including ground combat. This is a change that is truly radical. Some history is in order to convey just how radical.

Officially, women have been serving on active duty in the U.S. military since 1901. Unofficially, they have been serving since the American Revolution during which some women, like Deborah Samson, dressed as men to enter the Continental Army, while others, like Margaret Corbin, accompanied their husbands to camp and then onto the battlefield. Margaret Corbin became one of our first woman ground combat veterans and was the first woman awarded a disability pension by Congress for wounds she received after taking over her fallen husband's cannon during the Battle of Fort Washington.

During the Civil War, the U.S. government first recruited women to serve with the armed forces as nurses, although without military status. About 4,200 served with the Army of the North. During the Spanish-American War, the Army again recruited female nurses, and again these women kept their civilian status. About 1,500 served. They were so successful that the War Department requested Congress to authorize establishment of an Army Nurse Corps; this was done as part of the Army Reorganization Act of 1901. The Navy Nurse Corps was established in 1908 by the FY 1909 Naval Appropriations Act, (P.L. 115).

During World War One, the Navy became the first service to recruit women for other than nursing roles. These women—about 12,500 of them—who were designated “Yeomen (f)” and nicknamed “Yeomanettes,” served principally in secretarial and communications assignments. The Marine Corps also enlisted about 300 women

during this war and a few also served with the Coast Guard. The Army did not recruit women other than nurses but it did hire about 200 bilingual civilian women as telephone operators to serve with the American Expeditionary Force in France. These women, nicknamed "Hello Girls," were given veteran status in 1977.

World War Two saw recruitment of women by all services for a wide variety of noncombat assignments, about 400,000 women served. 543 American service women died overall including 200 military nurses who died while serving in overseas theaters—16 of these deaths were from hostile fire. Eighty-two women were prisoners of war, all but one in the Pacific theater.

During the Korean War, about 120,000 women served overall—most remained in the US during the course of the war. Of those who served in Korea itself most were military nurses. Seventeen women were killed mostly from aircraft accidents.

In the Vietnam War, about 7,000 women—90% of whom were Nurses—served in theatre. Eight of these women died including one from hostile fire.

The Gulf War was the first US war in which large numbers of women who were not nurses were deployed. About 41,000 served in-theater. Although they were all in non-combat roles and were mostly kept well back, they were not safe from enemy attack. Fifteen were killed over all—including three from hostile fire when their barracks was hit by a Scud missile. Two were taken as prisoners of war.

So in the US wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most military women—less nurses—remained well behind the front lines or at least to the back; Even when overseas they tended to be in combat free areas. Of those who did serve in combat zones, most—until the Gulf War—were nurses. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, US military woman simply weren't trained and equipped to handle themselves in ground combat operations.

The success of women's service in the Gulf War led to the opening, in the mid-90's, of air and sea combat roles to them as well as combat support roles with the Army and Marine Corps. Ground combat occupations and units—infantry, armor, short-range field artillery and special forces remain off limits to women to this day. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, are breaching these policy

limitations on women's ground combat roles. In fact when I'm asked by the media what the biggest differences are between women's service now and in earlier wars, I tell them women on the ground are not only coming under fire, they are shooting back. They are now trained, equipped and expected to handle themselves under fire. It's this routine participation of women in ground combat operations that's the radical change I mentioned earlier.

Here are some of the statistics. Women have served over 200,000 tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan—this includes multiple tours of duty for many women who have been there not once, not twice, but three or even four times. More than 110 women have died—including 65 from enemy fire—more hostile fire deaths than in all our 20<sup>th</sup> century wars combined. Over 600 have received Purple Hearts for wounds incurred from enemy fire—including a number who have suffered single, double and even triple amputations. In short, in today's wars, military women are routinely exposed to the hazards of ground operations including ground combat in ways military women of the past were mostly spared. The availability and effectiveness of the veterans' services we provide for these women must take this new reality into account. I know VA is commissioning a number of studies to capture the experiences of women vets and these studies should help us provide more effective services for them. Just as important, these services must be as readily available and accessible for our women veterans as they are for our men.

If you're interested in learning more about some of the kinds of missions our military women are involved in in Iraq and Afghanistan, I highly recommend the documentary film "Lioness" which I understand will be shown for the Women's Congressional Caucus in February. If you'd like an earlier look, it's being shown on the PBS program Independent Lens on many PBS affiliates around the country tonight—unfortunately not on any of the three that serve this area. But you can catch it on the DC station WHUT this either Saturday 15 Nov and next Saturday 22 Nov at 8:00pm. And for you night owls, WETA will air it at 12:30 am 24 Nov. and it can also be seen on WETA and WMPT's HD TV stations at various times.