



# ISSUE BRIEF

## Women, Special Operations Forces, and Selective Service Inclusion

*Rob Schwarzwald*

In the First World War, trench lines extended hundreds of miles throughout Europe. Enemy armies faced one another in fixed positions, with networks of tunnels and exit pathways clearly distinguishing the front lines from the rear areas.

Those days are long past. Today's combat is fluid, without fixed battle lines. Modern warfare is a matter of stealth and firefights, not battles of tens of thousands opposing one another from static positions.

That's why the term "women in combat" is misleading. Women *are* in combat. They serve in myriad roles that take them directly into the fighting against the enemy. They fly warplanes and carry weapons – and use them. Some have served with great heroism. Sergeant First Class (SFC) Leigh Ann Hester of the Kentucky National Guard won a Silver Star for her actions in combat in Iraq in 2005. As reported in the U.S. Army's online account:

Hester's squad was shadowing a supply convoy March 20 when anti-Iraqi fighters ambushed the convoy. The squad moved to the side of the road, flanking the insurgents and cutting off their escape route. Hester led her team through the "kill zone" and into a flanking position, where she assaulted a trench line with grenades and M203 grenade-launcher rounds. She and Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein, her squad leader, then cleared two trenches, at which time she killed three insurgents with her rifle. When the fight was over, 27 insurgents were dead, six were wounded, and one was captured.<sup>1</sup>

SFC Hester deserves tremendous respect and appreciation for her extraordinary bravery and service to our country, as do the many other women whose patriotism, dedication, and sacrifice help ensure our liberty and security.

### **Women in Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Infantry Units**

However, the real debate is not about women in combat but about women in units of the Infantry and Special Operations Forces (SOF). It's about women serving in units with men in primal conditions where privacy and personal hygiene are inherently indiscreet, and where many young men and women, forced together in close proximity for long periods, invariably will engage in sexually intimate conduct.

Jude Eden "served in the Marines from 2004-2008 as an 0651, Data Communications, and was stationed at Camp Lejeune with 8th Comm Bn. She deployed for 8 months over 2005-6 to support Camp Fallujah's communications network and was also assigned entry checkpoint duty working with the Marine Infantry and frisking women for explosives on Fallujah's outskirts."<sup>2</sup> Of sexual tension in the military, she writes:

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Whether it's a consensual relationship, unwanted advances, or sexual assault, they all destroy unit cohesion. No one is talking about the physical and emotional stuff that goes along with men and women together. A good relationship can foment jealousy and the perception of favoritism. A relationship goes sour, and suddenly one loses faith in the very person who may need to drag one off the field of battle. A sexual assault happens, and a woman not only loses faith in her fellows, but may fear them. A vindictive man paints a woman as easy, and she loses the respect of her peers. A vindictive woman wants to destroy a man's career with a false accusation (yes, folks, this happens too); and it's poison to the unit. All this happens before the fighting even begins.<sup>3</sup>

It is very clear that Special Operations Forces oppose adding women to their units. In a major study published in May 2015 by the RAND Corporation, it was found that:

Opposition to opening SOF specialties to women is both deep and wide, with high levels of opposition across all SOF elements. This opposition is also deep-seated and intensely felt. The principal sources of this opposition are: the belief among SOF that women do not have the physical and other capabilities to meet the demands of their SOF specialties; the belief that the current, high levels of cohesion and trust in their units will suffer if women are allowed in; and the importance SOF personnel attach to maintaining high standards, coupled with deep concern that performance standards may nonetheless be lowered to enable women to qualify for their specialties. These survey results are supported and complemented by the results of our focus group discussions with SOF personnel.<sup>4</sup>

These foundational concerns cannot be discounted. They are not matters for re-educating America's elite warriors but respecting their beliefs and experiences. Adding another source of stress and contention to their already tension-filled lives would be a disservice to America's finest front-line troops.

One of the key concerns of SOF personnel is intimate contact with women in combat situations. Here are two such comments from the RAND study:

There is a lot of discussion about sharing tents and things of that nature, but that isn't applicable. We might be in a foxhole for a long period of time with 2-3 other people. How is that going to work with a female (E-7, SEAL)?

My last deployment was just me and one other guy ... I would not have done my two-man mission with a female. I just won't do it (E-7, SF).<sup>5</sup>

### **Pregnancy and Sexual Assault: Women, the Military, and Combat Zones**

Sexual trauma is common among American servicewomen: "About 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men respond yes, that they experienced MST [Military Sexual Trauma], when screened by their VA provider. Although rates of MST are higher among women, because there are so many more men than women in the military, there are actually significant numbers of women and men seen in VA who have experienced MST. It's important to keep in mind that these data speak only to the rate of MST among Veterans who have chosen to seek VA health care; they cannot be used to make an estimate of the actual rates of sexual assault and harassment experiences among all individuals serving in the U.S. Military."<sup>6</sup>

Service women in combat zones report high incidences of rape: "Deployed women who underwent 'combat-like' experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan are much more likely to report sexual harassment and sexual assault compared with other deployed women, according to a new study. Published in the

August [2013] edition of *Women's Health Issues Journal*, the study used data from more than 13,000 military women who have been tracked in the Millennium Cohort Study, which began in 2001. Participants filled out an extensive 'baseline' questionnaire and repeat the Defense Department research survey at three-year intervals."<sup>7</sup>

The substantial majority of service women are of childbearing age: "Active duty and veteran women are largely of childbearing age. Approximately 75% of new military recruits are under 22 years of age. In total, 42% of all female veterans are currently of childbearing age and over 90% of female veterans who served after 9/11/01 are between 18 and 44 years old."<sup>8</sup>

Unplanned pregnancies in the military are increasing: "Despite access to free contraceptives, unplanned pregnancies are a rising problem for women in the U.S. military, according to a new study. Nearly 11% of more than 7,000 active-duty women surveyed by the Department of Defense in 2008 reported an unplanned pregnancy during the previous year. That's 50% higher than the average rate in the United States, the study authors say. The study ... also notes that the rate has increased since 2005."<sup>9</sup>

Women in combat are often mothers: "According to an October [2009] report issued by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 30,000 single mothers have served in those two war zones as of March 2009. That is 30,000 mothers forced to choose ... between their children and their service careers."<sup>10</sup>

Impact of pregnancy: "The impact of pregnancy on U.S. Army readiness came to the forefront following the Persian Gulf War and the large-scale deployment of military servicewomen. Some deploying units reported that non-deployable rates for pregnancy among women were as much as 30% of those assigned."<sup>11</sup>

## **Women and the Selective Service**

Is America prepared to subject our daughters to mandatory military service? This is not a question of a volunteer force in which women are free to participate. Any draft is, by nature, coercive. Do American women deserve such a raw and grasping mandate from the government representing them?

The selective service exists to provide ground combat troops. While it has not been utilized since 1973, many wonder if it will be needed in the coming years with the growing threat of terrorism, as well as a host of other problems that currently plague recruitment and retention such as increasing levels of suicide, sexual assaults, and job dissatisfaction. Currently, the army requires young men ages 18-25 to register for the draft. As Jude Eden wrote recently:

The purpose of the draft should it be reinstated is to induct combat replacements during a large-scale national emergency. It is not to collect warm bodies to work desk jobs to "free a man to fight," or for support units. It is to replace the men who are dying by the thousands at the very front of the fight. Like the issue of integrating women into our combat units, this is about the needs of the military during wartime, not equal rights between the sexes.<sup>12</sup>

While women are now permitted to serve in select infantry positions, they are not currently forced into those positions, and should not be forced into the military. However, the Senate recently passed the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017* (S. 2943 "Senate NDAA"), which includes a provision that would force women to register for selective service. While the Senate NDAA would force daughters and young mothers to register for the draft, it fails to address legitimate concerns associated with drafting young ladies.

Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter recently commented on drafting young women after voting on a similar provision in the House Armed Services Committee. Hunter said,

I've talked to coffeehouse liberals in San Francisco and conservative families who pray three times a day. And neither group wants their daughter to be drafted. Neither one of them. Because, again, a draft is not to do with mode of transport, supply, or finance, a draft is there to put bodies on the frontline to take the hill... It's to get more people to close with and destroy the enemy through fire and close combat. The draft is there to get more people to rip the enemy's throats and kill them for our nation, sanctioned by the U.S. government. That's what a draft is for.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The American military is about preparing for, fighting, and winning wars and specific operations that threaten the security of the country and vital national interests. Period. Anything that distracts from the achievement of these purposes should be jettisoned. This includes allowing women into SOF or forward-based Infantry positions and including them in the Selective Service.

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt. Sara Wood, "Female Soldier receives Silver Star in Iraq," U.S. Army, February 2, 2007, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://www.army.mil/article/1645/female-soldier-receives-silver-star-in-iraq/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Jude Eden," *The Stream*, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://stream.org/author/judeeden/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jude Eden, "The Problems of Women in Combat – Part 2," *Western Journalism*, January 31, 2013, accessed June 22, 2016, <http://www.westernjournalism.com/the-problems-of-women-in-combat-part-2/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces," RAND National Defense Research Institute, May 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/wisr-studies/SOCOM%20-%20Considerations%20for%20Integrating%20Women%20into%20Closed%20Occupations%20in%20the%20US%20Special%20Operations%20Forces.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Military Sexual Trauma," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, May 2015, [http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst\\_general\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/mst_general_factsheet.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Wyatt Olson, "Sex Assault More Likely for Women in 'Combat,'" *Stars and Stripes*, September 30, 2013, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2013/09/30/sex-assault-more-likely-for-women-in-combat.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Vinita Goyal, Sonya Borrero, Eleanor Bimla Schwarz, "Unintended pregnancy and contraception among active-duty servicewomen and veterans," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 206 (June 2012): 463-469, <http://www.ajog.org/article/S0002-9378%2811%2902348-9/abstract>.

<sup>9</sup> Jacque Wilson, "Unplanned pregnancies may be on rise in military," CNN.com, January 24, 2013, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/23/health/unplanned-pregnancies-military/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Eberstadt, "Mothers in Combat Boots," *The Hoover Institution Policy Review*, February 1, 2010, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.hoover.org/research/mothers-combat-boots>.

<sup>11</sup> Merideth A. Bucher, "The Impact of Pregnancy on U.S. Army Readiness," U.S. Army Air Command and Staff College - Air University, April 1999, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/acsc/99-016.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Jude Eden, "Drafting Women Into Combat Doesn't Enhance Equality. It Courts Disaster.," *The Stream*, May 21, 2016, accessed June 23, 2016, <https://stream.org/drafting-women-combat-doesnt-enhance-equality-it-courts-disaster/>.

<sup>13</sup> Connor O'Brien, "House panel backs 'gotcha' amendment to make women eligible for draft," *Politico*, April 28, 2016, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/04/women-eligible-draft-house-222571>.