

G.I. Jane

Women are still officially barred from combat, but realities on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq mean they're fighting—and dying—alongside men
By Lizette Alvarez

As the convoy rumbled up the road in Iraq, Army Specialist Veronica Alfaro was struck by the beauty of fireflies dancing in the night. Then she heard the unmistakable pinging of tracer rounds and realized the "fireflies" were actually illuminated bullets.

She jumped from behind the wheel of her gun truck, grabbed her medical bag, and sprinted 50 yards to a stalled civilian truck as bullets kicked up dust near her feet. She pulled the badly wounded driver to the ground and got to work. Despite her best efforts, the driver died, but her heroism last January earned Alfaro a Bronze Star for valor.

"I did everything there," Alfaro, 25, says of her time in Iraq. "I gunned. I drove. I ran as a truck commander. And underneath it all, I was a medic."

Before 2001, America's military women had rarely seen ground combat. Their jobs kept them mostly away from enemy lines, as military policy dictates. But the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, with no clear battle lines, have changed that. In both countries, women have repeatedly proved themselves in combat.



"Iraq has advanced the cause of full integration for women in the Army by leaps and bounds," says Peter R. Mansoor, who served as executive officer to General David H. Petraeus, formerly the top American commander in Iraq. "They have earned the confidence and respect of male colleagues."

Women have long played a role in the American military, officially or unofficially, with some going so far as to disguise themselves as men to fight in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. In the early 1900s, both the Army and the Navy formed all-female Nurse Corps, and during World War I, thousands of these nurses served overseas.

During World War II, the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines all created women's divisions in what was intended to be a temporary wartime measure: To free men for combat duty, women would fill jobs as typists, clerks, drivers, and mechanics.

The 2 Percent Rule

In 1948, President Harry Truman signed bills that ended racial segregation in the military and made all women's branches a permanent part of the armed services. But the number of women could not exceed 2 percent of any one branch of the military, and women were barred from combat. The 2 percent cap remained in place until 1967.

Today, women make up 16 percent of the U.S. military, including the Reserves and the National Guard. They are still officially barred from direct combat. Yet over and over, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army commanders have resorted to bureaucratic trickery when they needed more soldiers for jobs like bomb disposal and intelligence.

Women's success in these two wars—widely known in the military—remains largely hidden from public view. In part, this is because their most challenging work is often the result of quietly getting around military policy.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, women have patrolled streets with machine guns, served as gunners on vehicles, and driven trucks down bomb-ridden roads. They are indispensable when it comes to searching Iraqi and Afghan women for weapons, a job men cannot do for cultural reasons. A small number of women have even conducted raids, engaging the enemy directly in total disregard of existing policies.

Many experts say it's only a matter of time before regulations that have restricted women's participation in combat will be adjusted.

More than a dozen countries already allow women in some or all ground-combat operations. Among those pushing boundaries most aggressively is Canada, which has recruited women for the infantry and sent them to Afghanistan.

But there are those who vigorously object to women being sent into combat. Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, a group that opposes fully integrating women into the Army, says women are doing these jobs without congressional approval.

"I fault the Pentagon for not being straight with uniformed women," says Donnelly. "It's an 'anything goes' situation."

But polls show that a majority of the public supports allowing women to do more on the battlefield. Fifty-three percent of respondents in a recent New York Times/CBS News poll said they favor permitting women to join ground-combat units.

No one envisioned that Afghanistan and Iraq would boost the status of women in the armed forces. But the Iraq insurgency obliterated conventional battle lines. The fight was on every base and street corner, and commanders were forced to stretch gender boundaries.

"We literally could not have fought this war without women," says John Nagl, a retired lieutenant colonel.

Of the 2 million Americans who have fought in these wars since 2001, more than 220,000 of them, or 11 percent, have been women.

Changing Military Culture



Like men, some of these women have come home bearing the mental and physical scars of war. Men still make up the vast majority of the 5,000 war deaths since 2001; nearly 4,000 have been killed by enemy action. But 121 women have also died, 66 killed in combat. The rest died in non-hostile action, which includes accidents, illness, suicide, and friendly fire. And 620 women have been wounded.

Despite long-standing fears about how the public would react to women coming home in coffins, Americans have responded to women's deaths and injuries no differently than to those of male casualties, analysts say.

In many ways, the presence of women has altered military culture on the battlefield. For example, women need separate bunks and bathrooms.

Sexual harassment in a still predominately male institution remains a problem, as does sexual assault. The military is working to address these threats. But both are under-reported, soldiers and officers say, because the rigid military chain of command can make accusations uncomfortable and even risky for victims living in close quarters with the men they accuse.

Overall, however, women say the gains they have made in Iraq and Afghanistan have overshadowed the challenges.

"As horrible as this war has been, I fully believe it has given women so many opportunities in the military," says Linsay Rousseau Burnett, who served as a communication specialist in Iraq. "Before, they didn't have the option."

By 2008, 57 women were serving as generals and admirals in the active-duty military—more than double the number a decade earlier. And last year, Ann E. Dunwoody was the first woman to become a four-star Army general—the highest rank in today's military.

But the rules governing what jobs military women can hold often seem muddled. Women can walk Iraq's dangerous streets as military police but not as members of the infantry. And they can lead men into war zones as officers, but can't serve among them. This was the case for Major Kellie McCoy, 34, who led a platoon of combat engineers in Iraq.

On Sept. 14, 2003, McCoy's convoy was attacked and she ran through enemy fire to rescue a wounded soldier. She received a Bronze Star for valor and, most important for her, the admiration of her troops. "I think my actions cemented their respect for me," she says.

McCoy's assignment as an officer followed the regulations. But in other cases, the rules were bent to get women into combat positions..

In 2004 and 2005, Michael A. Baumann, now a retired lieutenant colonel, commanded 36 women in the Rashid district of Baghdad, an extremely dangerous area at the time. On paper, he followed military policy: The women were technically assigned to a separate chemical company of the division. In reality, they were part of his field-artillery battalion, fighting alongside men.

'We have crossed that line'

Baumann had seriously doubted women could handle infantry duties, heavy gear, and the harshness of combat. "I found out differently," he says. "Not only could they handle it, but in the same way as males. . . . I had full trust and confidence in their abilities."

Some experts believe that women should be allowed to join combat units in phases (so long as job-specific physical exams are created to test the abilities of men and women). But this would require congressional approval, which lawmakers say is unlikely in the middle of two wars.

In Baumann's view, however, the reality on the ground has already outpaced the debate.

"We have crossed that line in Iraq," he says. "Debate it all you want, folks, but the military is going to do what the military needs to do. And they are needing to put women in combat."