

Women in Ground Combat Units: Where's the Data?

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Earlier this year, I spoke with a roomful of field grade officers about the debate and controversy over women in combat. The officers knew my position. What was next to impossible for me to discern, however, was where most of them are when it comes to this topic — which is *the* challenge with trying to have an open debate about it. The topic is just too politically charged for opponents to feel they can speak openly or honestly.

Officers who balk at the idea of women serving in ground infantry units or on Special Forces Operational Detachments Alpha (ODAs) won't publicly say so, let alone publicly explain why. They worry about retaliation that could hurt their careers. In contrast, those who have no reservations — usually because they won't be the ones who have to deal with the fallout from integration at the small unit level — slough off the challenge as just another minor problem or “ankle biter.”

There is more to this dichotomy than just officers' career concerns, however. As one member of the audience put it, even if special operations forces and Marine Corps brass are prepared to go to Capitol Hill armed with irrefutable logic and unimpeachable facts *against* integrating women

into ground combat units, they will still come across as chauvinists. For any male who opposes full integration, the chauvinist charge is impossible to escape.

I am sure there is something to this; and if I were a male, the chauvinism charge might mortally wound me as well. Maybe knowing in advance that this is how I would be branded would cause me to fight only on grounds of proponents' choosing. For example, I could use standards and measurable data — as if there is some scientific way to determine what the right ratios and formulae are to prevent anything untoward happening when young men and women are put together in the field for indeterminate lengths of time.

But fortunately, since I am not a male and have already been [accused of being a reactionary](#), and thus have no need to worry about seeming to be politically correct, let me point to something else lurking in the gulf between those who don't speak up and those who are okay with the lifting of the combat exclusion ban: a reality gap. On the one hand, there is what those who don't speak up *know*. On the other, there is what those who see no problems only *assume*.

What do I mean? Those who oppose the integration of women into small ground combat units or onto ODAs have had at least one, and often multiple, bad experiences with gender dynamics when deployed. This includes women and not just men. Often these bad experiences occurred on staffs or in support positions, or in settings where the sheer number of other people helped prevent the effects from affecting the entire unit.

The public doesn't hear much about this for understandable reasons. But there have also been instances of small units being torn asunder in the field.

Already, I can hear three objections to my suggestion that we examine the record of what already occurs. The first objection will be that any unit that falls apart due to boy-girl problems must have had issues to begin with, to include poor leadership. This is an easy presumption to make when you know none of the particulars (a point to which I will return).

The second objection will be that I am introducing a red herring. Men and women need to be *trained* together; you can't just thrust them together downrange. If they train together they bond more familiarly. They become protective of rather than predatory on one another (not that protectiveness doesn't raise its own set of concerns). When men and women train together stateside, commanders and senior NCOs can also assess the unit for its professionalism before it is ever deployed.

But my response: other relevant data from training also exists. What is the evidence from boot camp on? Maybe proponents are correct, and training together does leach out all sexual or romantic interest, and cross-gender tensions or relationships never surface thereafter. For instance, maybe no couples form after men and women find themselves serving together in the same unit. What *does* the record show?

Or, to return to a topic that always comes up: what happens to familial bonds in a unit when a woman gets pregnant and can't deploy? What happens when a woman deploys and gets pregnant downrange? What good does all that prior training and gelling do then? Maybe proponents have

an answer to this. As it is, they contend that whenever anyone — man or woman — needs to be replaced, that causes the dynamic to reset. To which it is hard not to want to respond: if you want to ignore the fact that gender introduces its own unique dynamic among sexually active adults then you must similarly believe the military's sexual assault figures are fabrications as well. Proponents can't have it both ways.

Finally, the third likely objection to examining what already goes on between men and women is that I am invoking anecdotal data, which isn't really data. In many social scientists' view, people's personal experiences amount to nothing more than anecdotal data, which is their dismissive term for first-person accounts.

But should thinking you have captured reality simply because you quantify some aspects of what you see really be permitted to trump verifiable history? Do we really want to pretend that because the Table of Organization & Equipment (TO&E) says every ODA is structured the same, with two medics, two weapons sergeants, two engineers, etc. that each team will end up with the same inter-personal chemistry, or that the chemistry on any one team will be reproducible on others? While units may have identical structures, the military has never been able to control for inter-personal dynamics.

It is too bad that someone with the time and the technical wherewithal did not begin collecting first-person verifiable accounts when this debate resurfaced more than a decade ago. It is also a shame that no one required the services to set up a website to do so. We probably shouldn't be surprised that, between impossible budgets and political sensitivities, neither the Army nor the Marine Corps is now stepping forward to do this or to expose their dirty laundry. However, this is precisely the kind of information that needs to be aired.

For instance, what happened when all-female Combat Support Teams were sent out to Special Forces ODAs? Was the physician who told me in Afghanistan that, and I quote, "they're fucking their eyes out," exaggerating? Several former team leaders I know remain grateful they were sent females who could search and interact with Afghan women; their teams experienced no problems with American women living on their camps. It could be that firm leadership did make all the difference, and maybe no teams were torn apart.

But what are the actual facts? And if teams did unravel, why did they do so?

Where's the data is the question I want to drive home, along with the broader point that evidentiary accounts add up to data.

Plenty of evidence about the downstream costs of "workplace" romances, never mind Thanatos-meets-Eros misbehavior, exists. (For a case in point regarding just how far it is possible to go astray, I recommend Ann Scott Tyson's [American Spartan](#).) The problem is that none of this evidence has been systematically collected. It now needs to be — for two reasons. First, so that the "anecdotal" accusation can be put to rest. And second, so that retrospective real world data can be weighed against the *prospective* data being gleaned by the training experiments underway. After all, whatever is to be learned from comparing across two or three units being

trained under experimental conditions seems no better a proxy for what *might* occur downrange than what soldiers and Marines (or sailors) have already seen occur.

Meanwhile, for anyone who suspects that eyewitness reports are too easy to manipulate or manufacture, there should be paper (or email) trails for investigations into misbehavior, particularly when personnel have had to be reassigned. All of this could be made public, with personally identifiable information redacted.

At the same time, there should be a way to count “man-hours” lost to investigations, disciplinary actions, and so on when it comes to sexual assaults, fraternization, and other gender-related issues. But in addition to collecting numbers to satisfy current cravings for quantitative data, we also shouldn’t overlook the power of the particular. Rivalry, jealousy, overprotection, favoritism, disdain, and/or abuse and love or lust generate plenty of drama, particularly when the emotional trauma that results ripples well beyond the small unit to the rest of the company or to families back home. The phrase “the power of the story” has been thrown around for well over a decade. Well then, let’s hear first person accounts.

Recently, the Center for National Policy and the Truman National Security Project announced “[No Exceptions](#),” a campaign to “leverage the power of a nationwide community of post-9/11 combat veterans, allied organizations, and supporters like retired military leaders to raise public awareness, reshape the national conversation about women in combat, and influence policymakers.” Its objective is, clearly, to win the political war. But to do so, what will these advocates also do? Make it impossible for the sergeants, as well as lieutenants and captains, whose responsibility it will be to have to implement this policy on the ground, to argue back. By virtue of being in uniform, those who will be most affected and those with the most practical experience with this contentious issue *can’t* publicly push back.

I don’t mean to suggest that all sergeants, any more than all lieutenants or captains, oppose the idea of integrated units. But a lot do.

Meanwhile, because proponents like to accuse opponents of suffering from some kind of atavistic/preserve-the-boy’s-club fear, opponents need to demonstrate that *fearing* the unknown is not the issue. Instead, *knowing* what will happen is the issue because it has happened and is happening.

Of course, as I’ve said before, this entire debate should center around what would improve, or at least not jeopardize, a ground combat unit’s *combat* effectiveness. Particularly now, when none of our allies can do much of anything on the ground without us. Even a debate about equities and who is owed what when it comes to voluntary service would be preferable. But until the “data” is in, data seems to be where we are stuck. So, may the collecting of *all* the data finally begin.

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