

Resisting Boundaries at Home, on the “Battlefields” of Iraq, and in Literature: The 21st Century Woman Paying the Ultimate Sacrifice

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Abstract

Prior to World War II, women shrouded in disguise faced great risk in order to fight for a cause, joined a select few to tend to the sick and wounded, or maintained the homestead while their father and/or husband went off to war. Even with the legal and societal changes of the times with the 1940s era, and the advent of women joining virtually every branch of the military, they remained banned from combat duty. However, as U.S. troops come to the middle of their seventh year of their invasion of Iraq, gender roles have shifted, lines have been blurred. For any soldier it is nearly impossible to differentiate enemy from Iraqi citizen, ally from terrorist. No clear battlelines exist; there are no protocols for rules of engagement in the war in Iraq. Thus, female nurses, doctors, radiological technicians, cooks, drivers, all soldiers are in the line of fire; they are serving combat duty, for better or worse. Sadly, when it comes to women in combat, public policy slowly lags behind the brave soldiers who serve, regardless of the price they must pay, and at whatever capacity duty requires them to serve.

According to the Department of Defense, 206,000 women have served in the Middle East (mostly in Iraq) since March of 2003, over 600 have been wounded, and 104 have died in Iraq alone (Benedict para. 8). Constituting 1/10 of the ground forces, women are serving active duty, side-by-side with their male counterparts. However, unlike any other war or conflict, beyond what any statistic can demonstrate, they are suffering from severe cases of posttraumatic distress disorder/syndrome, emotional trauma brought about by numerous experiences male soldiers do not encounter (i.e.—rape, sexual harassment, etc.), and discrimination. To compound the situation, as their sacrifice in the field typically goes unrewarded, they sacrifice even more at home: loss of center, as matriarch and mother. In several interviews with mothers ranking from Sergeant to Brigadier General, they agree: alone, many do not command respect from the troops, nor do they command respect from their families for their service to their country. In fact, some families wonder why their sisters, mothers, or girl friends would even want to pursue a “man’s career.” Despite all of these mitigating factors, for many female warriors joining the military was, and still is, the honorable choice.

Mimesis: Aristotle theorized that “Life imitates art imitates life.” Despite the fact women are proving themselves every day in the Great Sandbox of Iraq and other areas of the world, they are noticeably absent from the canon of American literature. The canon seems to mirror society, or is it society seems to mirror the canon? At any rate, there are numerous noteworthy American texts about courage, bravery, sacrifice, and honor about men in war: Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*, Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” to name a few. There are even great novels written by female authors (such as Bobbie Ann Mason) about families struggling through and with the aftermath of war. However, what about works written by women writers about women soldiers in war? Where are their voices about daily strife, such as never knowing if around the next pass they will face an IED, or what it is like to be passed over for rank because the Lieutenant thinks Iraq is no place for a woman, or

returning home to two children who no longer recognize or “need” their mother anymore? Why isn’t society ready to see or accept a woman in such a role? Why is she merely cast as a nurturing stock character (ex.—a nurse)?

Composed of humor, valor, tenacity, and a nurturing nature many mothers enter the war zone every day, but their voices are virtually silenced, ironically in a culture that seems to be more forward thinking now more than ever about the roles of women. Unfortunately, until their sacrifices and contributions to the American society are recognized in society and in literature, their work at home and abroad will continue to be as disregarded as their predecessors’.

Introduction

Despite her small stature, Brigadier General (Retired) Wilma Vaught commands any room she enters, regardless of the size of the audience. Perhaps her confidence and vigor come from the long lists of “firsts” she has achieved in her illustrious twenty-eight year career in the United States Air Force. Just to name a few: in 1966, she was the first woman to deploy with a Strategic Air Command bombardment wing on an operational deployment; in 1980, she became the first woman promoted to Brigadier General in the comptroller field; in 1982, she was appointed Commander, U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command, North Chicago, Illinois, the largest command, geographically, in the military; she served as Chairperson of the NATO Women in the Allied Forces Committee; and Vaught was the senior military representative to the prestigious Secretary of Defense’s Advisory Committee on Women in the Service (“BG Vaught” par. 2). When she retired in 1985, she was only one of seven women generals in the United States military, and only one of three in the Air Force (par. 2). A living legacy to many young women warriors of today, BG Vaught is one of the most decorated female officers in this nation’s history; however, when asked to recall her proudest moment, she does not hesitate in responding, “Establishing the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation,” the first national educational center commemorating the nearly two and a half million women who have served and defended their country. In the early planning stages, in order to pay homage to all women in uniform, BG Vaught and the Memorial Foundation Board held a design competition for artists and architects alike to offer their vision for the memorial. Recalling the submissions, Gen. Vaught chuckles, “You should have seen how ridiculous some of those things were: a woman’s hand coming out of the ground to comfort a fallen soldier, a chopper with wounded soldiers inside crashing into the ground as a nurse to their rescue; they went from the stereotypical role of women in uniform to just plain laughable. Immediately I knew what I had to do; I needed to not only pay tribute to my fellow sisters at arms, but also create a center to educate the public on the diverse roles women have played and now play in today’s total force. Clearly the ‘real world’ has no idea what women have done and are doing for this country” (Vaught). While much has changed since the 1960s when General Vaught recalls learning how to shoot a handgun on her uncle’s farm and then (on her tour in Vietnam), finding little comfort in the fact that her only protection was an M-1911 pistol tucked away in the bottom drawer of her desk in case the war zone should reach Military Assistance Command (MACV), South Vietnam, a general resistance to women’s presence in the military, particularly on combat

missions, is still pervasive. As this month marks America's seven year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, women warriors are making history (much like BG Vaught) by breaking the barriers and preconceived notions about who they are and what they should be, which has been imposed upon them by society and a male dominated force. Yet, as demonstrated in their spoken and written word, and actions, for many of these valiant women, the sacrifice is great—at home, in their hearts, in their minds, and on the “battlefield.” United in their patriotic pride, they nevertheless find themselves in the suffocating quicksand of memories from their Tour(s) of Duty (TDY) in Iraq.

A Long History of Women Warriors

American history tells the story of many women who volunteered to take up arms in times of conflict, not for glory or fame, but for a cause. For example, Deborah Sampson disguised herself among the 4th Massachusetts Regiment during the Revolutionary War: “I fight alongside my husband in battle. When he falls in battle, I carry on. I defy custom and fight to enjoy freedom” (“Called to Serve”). In nearly every war in which the U.S. has been engaged, willingly women have risked their lives to serve as spies, gathering intelligence from across the battlefield line. During World War I, 30,000 women provided critical care and medical support to thousands of wounded veterans. Usually recognized for their roles as clerks or nurses in all conflicts, females significantly changed the course of history and warfare as approximately 200,000 participated in World War II from the makeshift triages (Army Nurse Corps), from the air (Women Air Force Service Pilots—WASP), from ground maintenance, to security, on the battlefields. Their service did not come without a price; in three years, eighty-seven female veterans (nearly all Army and Navy nurses) became Prisoners of War (POW's) when the Phillipines fell to the Japanese in May of 1942, and only sixty-seven women were ever released (“Called to Serve”). Despite their meritorious service, once the War ended, by law, their duty ended also.

Public Policy Follows Slowly

Their sacrifice did not come without change, however. In 1948, President Harry Truman signed the Women Armed Forces Integration Act, which permitted women to serve in all branches of the military, with limitations, and not just in times of war. Under this landmark piece of legislation, women were entitled to the same benefits, and were considered permanent regular members of the Armed Forces (“Women's Armed Forces Integration Act”). When it comes to women in the military, it seems the pattern for new legislation is success and sacrifice through war brings about change, but often that change comes too slowly.

For in the years' long conflict known as the Vietnam War, as casualties grew and a need for support personnel reached a critical point, President Lyndon B. Johnson removed the caps on promotions and numbers of women serving so as to entice more women to go abroad. "I volunteered because there was a war going on and as a career officer, I felt I should be a part of it," reflects BG Vaught (Vaught). Like Vaught, 10,000 other women (mostly nurses) were drawn to duty. This time, one key difference was the combat mission. Heretofore, discerning enemy from comrade at arms was easy for the American soldier; however, in Vietnam, very similar to Iraq today, amid guerilla warfare, the battlefield is blurred and such distinctions are sometimes impossible to make. Despite the controversy that still exists over America's actions in Vietnam, with the advent of Civil Rights coupled with the proof that women were able and willing to serve, President Lyndon Johnson was prompted to sign Bill PL 90-130 into law in 1967. The legislation "lifted the ceiling on promotions for military women that had been set by law at two percent of the forces" (Katzenstein 48). By 1973, (in part due to the increasing number of women joining all branches of the military) the United States established an All-Volunteer Force (AVF), thereby ending the draft. Clearly the women's movement forced the military to open more predominantly "male" jobs, offer more opportunities among the rank and file, and give females equal benefits. "Women have always met with hostility when they first tried to enter male domains, whether it be as voters or police officers, firefighters or politicians, and the answer has been to never give up, but to stay and fight for reform until the culture changes and accepts them" (Benedict 224). As women raise their right hands and swear an oath to this country, they continue to prove themselves trailblazers in the military.

Every U.S. soldier (regardless of gender) carries or memorizes the Code of Conduct:

"I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my life in their defense. I will never surrender of my own free will...If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners...I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America" (Williams 77).

However, Title 106.5, Code 3013 dilutes the power of solidarity intended in these words as authority is given to the Secretary of the Army to "exclude women from routine engagement in direct combat" (Skaine 27). For instance, under the Combat Exclusion Laws that exist in each branch of the military, women are prohibited from engaging in direct combat in wartime, thus not recognized as fully integrated into the military. In 1988, the Secretary of Defense drafted the Risk Rule in an attempt to standardize the positions closed to women across the services, as it was declared, "Non-combat units *can* be closed to women on grounds of risks or exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture provided the type, degree, and duration of such risks are *equal to or greater than* that experienced by combat units in the same theater of operations" (Skaine 27). It was not until the 1990's (ironically seventy years after women fought and successfully won the right to vote), when 40,000 women answered the call to serve in the Gulf War, it became clear "this issue of equality was not a routine matter of everyday discrimination

on the job. It was now evident that women were risking, indeed sacrificing, their lives in combat situations, while their 'right' to serve in combat and to be recognized for their military accomplishments was being officially denied" (Katzenstein 48). For example, in Desert Storm, Brigadier General (Dr.) Rhonda Cornum was performing what she perceived as a routine rescue mission when her Black Hawk was shot down. Captured as a Prisoner of War (POW), for seven days, she was abused and received multiple injuries; her only freedom was her thoughts ("Women in the Military"). Even today, some women warriors wonder why they must endure some of the same training as their male counterparts if they will never be able to "see action"; yet, as demonstrated through the bravery of Cornum and others like her, in war where the enemy does not discriminate and any moment could be life changing, every soldier must be prepared and properly trained. "Are we equal to men?" questions Major Mary Bigelow Kreuger, who made her way on her own to the Persian Gulf because her unit was already deployed. She continues, "We are not the same, but we are equivalent, I guess. Each gender has its own strengths and weaknesses...I never try to be a male soldier because I am not! And I would stink at it. I am proud of being a female soldier, because there are unique things I bring to the table. When I hear things like, 'You could get hurt.' I answer, 'Well, men could get hurt too, or are you saying that men's lives are not as valuable as women's lives?'" (Wise and Boran 71). Time and again, women have demonstrated they are ready for the challenge, and will find a way to serve, regardless of the obstacles placed in their path. One step at a time, they are changing the system from within the rank and file.

Making Strides

As a result of their unyielding resolve, women who ardently wanted to fight beside men pressed President Clinton to take one presidential stride in the right direction; he signed a resolution to bend combat exclusion for women on combatant ships. Consequently, in 1993, Defense Secretary Les Aspin ordered "all armed services to open combat aviation to women (Holmstedt xix). A year later, the Department of Defense Risk Rule was repealed. Units supporting ground combat operations were open to women, and combat jobs were given to women as the situation warranted. In addition, in 1994, the USS Eisenhower Naval aircraft carrier took sixty women (xix); others joined the ranks as female gunners with the Marine Corps. As a result of the DOD's decision, "some 260,000 additional military positions, many of which involve combat, were opened to women" (xix). The face of the American military changed drastically. "Until the end of the 1990s, U.S. servicewomen were generally considered tolerable peculiarities. It was often believed that, with the exception of nurses, women who entered the service were trying to get away from a man, looking to marry one, hoping to become one, or looking for love among each other. Women had to confront being labeled as whores, lesbians, or both, and they were sometimes viciously abused" (Solaro 197). Yet many of these limitations placed on women are imposed by American culture and society, rather than facts and statistics. With each new barrier of resistance, women warriors continually prove themselves up for the task, particularly

in the Gulf and now in Iraq, where the combat/non-combat lines are blurred, not only by the nebulous language interpreted in different ways by all branches of the military (combat zone, combat mission, combat operation, close combat, combat support, direct combat, and combat service support), but also by the daily attacks from insurgents (sometimes camouflaging themselves among the everyday Iraqi citizens). “There are no front lines out there,” remarks 28 year-old Marine Major Tracy McGrath, combat aviator stationed at Al Jabar Airbase in Kuwait. In fact 20% of the personnel support and service units are comprised of women (Holmstedt xvii). In the words of Master Gunny Sergeant Rosemarie Weber, United States Marine Corps:

“My service in Iraq (2003) meant a lot to me. First of all, I was never looked at as being a woman. I was simply a Marine in Iraq. And that was very special because there were very few Marines in Baghdad when I was there in the very beginning...But as a woman, looking back on it now, I feel that it was an opportunity to prove ourselves right. For years we have been hearing the question, ‘Can women go into combat?’ Oh, absolutely not according to the many naysayers and the moms of America who would never allow that to happen. Women will break under pressure. The men wouldn’t respond accordingly. Well, we proved them wrong. We are there! We’re doing it alongside the men with very few male-female kind of issues going on. So to all the naysayers, we’re doing it and doing it with courage and dedication! It’s very important for the American public to know and understand that there’s no going back. Women are now an integrated part of our country’s armed forces” (Wise and Baron 64-5).

While the media may feed the American public a microscopic view as to the role women are playing in Operation Iraqi Freedom and other deployments, the warriors remain driven and bound to their mission, regardless of the danger involved. The statistics tell the tale. “Of the two million Americans who have fought in these wars [Iraq and Afghanistan] since 2001, more than 220,000 of them, 11% have been women” (“GI Jane Breaks the Combat Barrier” par. 24). In all, 126 have died (66 in combat and the rest in non-hostile action—accidents, illness, suicide, and friendly fire) and 620 have been wounded (par. 25). 1st Lieutenant Lindsay Mathwick of the 9th Communications Battalion Motor Transport wrote in an e-mail from Fallujah, “Women in the military today are in combat operations. We get blown up and shot at just like the guys—the terrorists and insurgents don’t differentiate. [America] needs to stop pretending we’re not out there risking and sacrificing our lives just like our male counterparts” (Holmstedt 312-3). As they continue to push the boundaries once set for them, women are paying the ultimate sacrifice yet they know the risks before them in this “equal opportunity war”. “When you go outside the wire, the enemy doesn’t care what gender you are; everyone runs the same risk of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) ambush or small arms ambush. Everyone in my company wondered whether they should be there because every unit is losing people. That’s the way of Iraq,” confessed Major Kate Guttormsen, Company Commander, 1st Engineer Battalion, US Army (“Lioness”). (Of worthy note, Guttormsen was the only company commander in her battalion, the only one in her brigade on her TDY in Iraq in 2004). Surprisingly, despite the risks many women voluntarily sign for a second tour to Iraq; many feel as though they owe it to their

comrades to complete what they have started. Remarks one enlisted female who volunteered for a second tour in Iraq, “We all have qualities a soldier needs; they would argue—loyalty, willingness to sacrifice for the common good, readiness to obey, courage, military skills, fitness, an ability to command, stamina, strength, and intelligence—and it is our right to be soldiers if we choose” (Benedict 223). Their dedication to answer America’s call has struck a chord with the general online public. According to a *New York Times* poll in July of 2009, “53% of respondents said they would be in favor of permitting women to join combat units, where they would be directly involved in the ground fighting” (“GI Jane” par. 19). The initial fear of high percentages of “combat failures, pregnancies, and sexual assaults hasn’t occurred, which is changing people’s minds” about women serving (Solaro 240). Perhaps this is due, to the preparedness of the women warriors, the growing number of women in the military and women of rank, and, oddly enough, the increased acceptance of women in physical public arenas, such as sports.

MIA in Recognition for TDY

Despite this progress, however, the American public generally remains oblivious to the vital role women are playing in the day-to-day combat. Even in 2010, Americans listen to the nightly news that is peppered with reminders that the war continues and *men* are losing their lives daily. Yet the women’s sacrifices and “success, widely known in the military, remain largely hidden from public view. In part, this is because their most challenging work is often the result of quiet circumvention of military policy” (“GI Jane” par. 8). Most female veterans would agree; they do not want nor need the accolades or press. In fact, media coverage only puts their work under a finer microscope. When stories do air about females, it is seldom positive, which feeds into misconceptions and ignorance about what women warriors truly do. It is like anything else in American society: 10% of the population causes 90% of the problems, and the media (not having a newsworthy moment) suggests “this” is the norm rather than isolated incidents. “Soldiers know how often the media embedded among them are looking for scandal or bad news, and how little benefit they’ll derive from being ‘mentioned in the dispatches’” (Solaro 116). Clearly, today’s military women are most content fulfilling their mission, their duty to country, at all costs.

Marine Major Tracy McGrath is just one example. As she fiddles with a pendant of St. Michael, the patron saint of the Marines, Pilot McGrath (call name “Krusty”) recalls the early days of the invasion, “We fought at the speed of sound from 17,000 feet above the earth, a fast paced round-robin of missions that all run together” (Holmsteadt 87). In fact, she flew thirty-seven missions (two to three hours in length) in twenty-four days (87). The doctors were handing out Dexedrine like candy so the aviators would stay awake. Successfully completing all of her missions, she thinks it is a ludicrous notion to say a woman shouldn’t fly jets because she

may be shot down. She quips, “It’s going to be as shitty for guys as it is for women. It’s war. Horrible things happen” (89). Speaking from her own experience and training, she contends, “You don’t earn your wings through meekness, low self-esteem, and second-guessing yourself—which, by the way, are characteristics applied to the female gender. Some argue that women don’t possess the attack mentality and ego necessary to become a successful fighter aviator” (93). McGrath argues that women with such tenacity can not only be found in F18 cockpits, but also in board rooms, courtrooms, and operating rooms throughout the United States. She adds, “Women can be just as triumphant as a man at anything, including being a fighter pilot, if she has the same educational and physical background, desire, and work ethic” (93). In Iraq, it seems as each day is another test of training, will, physical strength, and endurance.

Fight Twice as Hard

In general, military personnel are perceived as “tough,” defenders of the nation, peacekeepers, heroes. For women, this reputation has to be earned. According to Brigadier General Annette Deener, Director of the Joint Staff for the Maryland National Guard, “We have to be better than good. We are always being tested” (Deener). Nodding her head in agreement, Brigadier General Allyson Solomon adds, “You have to train yourself to conceal some of your emotions, a sign of weakness. The slightest sign of vulnerability not only jeopardizes your reputation, but possibly your mission. Generally we work twice as hard to get half the recognition” (Solomon). Their words are echoed throughout the ranks, throughout the branches of the military. In *Iraq and Back: Inside the War to Win the Peace*, Colonel Kim Olsen, United States Air Force reveals:

My very first squadron commander was a short, cigar-chewing plug of a man... Within a week after I reported to my first flying assignment, he called me into his office and shut the door... It was my first lesson about power and control. “Let’s just get something straight, Lieutenant. I don’t think girls belong in the military, much less in a cockpit. So as long as we understand each other, we’ll get along fine.” He dismissed me with a wave of the hand... I learned to steel myself whenever someone felt compelled to tell me his personal feelings about how women didn’t belong in the Air Force... I learned at the ripe old age of 22 to keep my natural, female emotions in check. Caring, compassion and crying were liabilities, weaknesses. Thus began the construction of my emotional fortress” (Olson 85-6).

Olson was and is not alone in her isolation; as Solomon reminisces over her illustrious twenty-five year career, she shares, “Every rank came at a price. It is a lonely life, but it is a choice.” Sadly, these sentiments are echoed by many women in today’s military. Remarks one young enlisted female, “A woman soldier has to toughen herself up, not just for the enemy, for battle, for death... I mean toughen herself to span months awash in a sea of nervy, hyped-up guys who, when they’re not thinking about getting killed, are thinking about getting laid” (Williams 13). In America, there is a historically and culturally pervasive belief that “women’s inferiority that almost automatically includes the words *weak* and *nonaggressive*” (Solaro 242). According to

one theory, this originated with the high mortality rate among mothers in childbirth in the 18th and 19th centuries, whereas women were viewed as frail and unable to endure extreme pain. Men naturally take on the role of protector and attempted to shelter women from imminent danger or risks (242). For example, in accordance with such perceptions, the military has different standards based on height and body mass for physical fitness tests of men and women. While not required to do so, many females such as Kayla Williams, formerly a sergeant in the military intelligence company of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), met the same standards as the men. She remarked, “Females got twenty minutes to run two miles compared to fifteen for males. Push-ups: we needed a much lower minimum to qualify; the guys had to do more than twice as many. But guys couldn’t bitch if we passed the male tests. That was my response. I was eventually able to surpass the male minimum standard for push-ups for my age group. I also worked hard to get my run to where I’d meet the male standards” (45). While women biologically carry more body mass because of reproduction, achieving the same standards is not impossible. For many women, it is yet another way to demonstrate to their unit and to themselves that they are a force with which to be reckoned.

Changes in Attitude

As women continue to fight, they continue to change attitudes. For instance, in 2005, Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Michael A. Baumann “commanded 30 enlisted women and 6 female officers as part of a unit patrolling in the Rashid district of Baghdad, an extremely dangerous area” (“GI Jane” par. 39). Like many officers in his position, he attempted to follow protocol that was articulated on paper, but the ever unpredictable Iraq War dictated the mission and the women “trained and fought beside [his] male soldiers” (par. 41). According to Baumann, “Nobody could be spared to do something like support” (par. 42). Similar to many of his contemporaries, Baumann was an “old-school Army warrior”, who “seriously doubted that women could handle infantry duties, citing the weight of the armor and the gear, the heat of Baghdad [which often topped 135 degrees], and the harshness of combat” (par. 43). Nevertheless, like many of the other naysayers, Baumann was proven wrong. He willfully admits, “I found out differently. Not only could they handle it, but in the same way as males. I would go out on patrols every single day with my battalion. I was with them. I was next to them...I had full trust and confidence in their abilities” (par. 44). For many officers, watching women perform “under fire” has slowly changed attitudes.

One group of women who certainly have distinguished themselves in the Sandbox (known as Iraq), in the military, in film, and in literature is an attachment unit known as “the Lionesses.” The 101st Forward Support Battalion joined with the 1st Engineer Battalion, the U.S. Army’s oldest and most decorated Engineer Battalion. At the inception of the War, one unit sent its own women (the Lionesses) to other units, including combat. Their official duty assignment was to promote “civilized warfare” by interacting with Iraqi women and children during combat missions. The primary logic was with the presence of American women would deescalate

tension within the small factions the U.S. military was infiltrating. There was a pervading fear of “enemy (not soldier) but *Jihadi* former regime elements, criminals, and poor people who were paid by the rich to hide among the civilians and provoke Americans into killing” (Solaro 93). The harsh reality for Iraqi women is “a woman’s place is in the home or the grave. Women can be beaten or even murdered by their husbands for even visiting their birth families without permission” (Solaro 119). Realizing it is more traumatizing, and even deadly, for them to be searched by a man rather than a woman (119), the Lionness and other attachment units would infiltrate hostile villages in order to support the Special Forces and Ranger Teams. Operation New Market was one such mission in which they surrounded Haditha (located on the Euphrates River 140 miles Northwest of Baghdad and about a two-hour drive from Al Asad) and searched for enemy fighters and weapons. The area was populated by Sunnis who entered Iraq from Syria to attack the U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces (Holmstedt 2). One member recalls her mission, “We’ve gone into hostile villages, and they knew we were coming; they were there waiting for us. We took fire but weren’t allowed to return it because we didn’t know who was shooting at us...those very restrictive ROE [Rules of Engagement] do make a difference in your confidence levels” (120). Sometimes even the Iraqi women posed the greatest threat. From 2007-2008, sixty suicide bombings were attempted or carried out by women, one third came mostly from the provincial capital, Baquba, forty miles Northeast of Baghdad (Rubin par. 2). In the last four years, Baquba has become the meeting spot for the most violent terrorist factions, some Sunni extremists groups, some Al Qaeda. With an increase in barricades around the area, there has been an increase in the number of women used as sacrificial lambs. Wearing floor-length abaya, they conceal their suicide vests (par. 2). With each search, the Lionness takes her own life into her hands. As the Lionness demonstrated time and time again, the mission is not always about exceptional physique; soldiers must be mentally exceptional on the “battlefield”. One member remarked, “We killed for peace. We killed for each other” (“The Lionness”). Despite their success in so many villages and the incomprehensible risks they had to take in the line of duty, the History Channel reported on the very missions for which the Lionesses were an integral part, saying, “Marines were hit by IED from all sides. Their harrowing story is told detail by detail by the *men* who were there. Reinforcements make it to the Marines. They outshoot and outlast the enemy.” As the Lionesses watch the documentary, they recognize themselves in Kevlar running in and out of buildings, and are content with their own knowledge that they played a part in saving the day.

One member of the team (whose name is omitted to protect her identity and the operation) shakes her head as she remembers, “When we tagged the SF (Special Forces), we were living out of the back of a truck. Latrines were ‘I’ll be behind this rock or this bush, watch your step” (Solaro 121). Ask any soldier and she would describe Iraq with three words *sand* and *more sand*. They eat it, sleep in it, bathe in it, breathe it, sweat in it, live in it. With temperatures sweltering over 130 degrees on most days, with storms happening more frequently than not, all soldiers learn to endure life in the Sandbox. As soon as they bathe, if they get the chance, sand covers them. They cover their refuse in sand. For women, all humility is sacrificed in the sand.

When the tiniest piece of trash could be concealing an IED, in most camps, the buddy system is imposed to go to and from the makeshift latrine, usually comprised of a piece of plywood covering a hole in the ground, some distance from camp. In Iraq, even performing an everyday bodily function could be a life-threatening situation.

The Lobster Effect

One would assume that women would be the greatest supporters of other women as they face the daily hell on earth known as the Iraq War, yet surprisingly, that is not always the case. One female commanding officer recalls a plot of retaliation when she put her unit into formation at 10:00 p.m. one evening to scold them. She thought to herself, “We’re at war and you want me to not be so mean?” She recounts, “None of them confront me directly; they do it in a group... This happens to women all the time in the military” (Benedict 86). BG Allyson Solomon tries to explain this phenomenon between women in the military that also exists in small factions of the professional civilian world, “By nature, women are competitive creatures, and when we’re the minority in the male world, we feel a sense of entitlement; as though, “I shouldn’t be where I am. I should be where you are” (Solomon). For many military women this attitude is known as the Lobster Effect (Howard); in a tank, when a lobster is at the bottom of the pile, it will claw and fight its way to the top, regardless of the casualties. Like the lobster, women will typically give other women negative advice in the guise of “imparting wisdom” for their own good (Thompson par. 1). Usually this “wisdom” works to tear down the opposition; it is often fueled by jealousy. Instead of projecting one’s disgust or anger at the clear antagonist (perhaps a male in the unit), a female will undoubtedly cast her wrath at an undeserving, naïve victim, her fellow soldier. Women who are not happy with their own circumstances are too cowardly to do anything to change their circumstances, but they trample on another’s ambitions in order to make themselves feel better. In her thirty years of service, Brigadier General Rita Works of the Tennessee National Guard, surmises, “Females know what other women are thinking. They can’t pull the wool over other women’s eyes” (Works). As a result, females are more likely to be harder on one another than they would be on males. In a bit of a catch twenty-two, this ultimately makes them stronger women, better soldiers.

Sexual Harrassment/Assault

Unfortunately, men are not always the greatest allies to women either. As stated previously, women are put to the test at every turn. In an even more adversarial relationship, in Iraq, cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault still exist, albeit there are fewer incidents than reported at the start of the War. “Sexual harassment in a still-predominantly male institution remains a

problem. So does sexual assault. Both are underreported, soldiers and officers say because the rigidity of the military chain of command make accusations uncomfortable and even risky for victims living in close quarters with the men they accuse” (Myers par.13). The Pentagon estimates “as few as 10% of sexual assaults are reported, far lower than the percentage in the civilian world” (“A Peril in War Zones” par.11). Although all 153 veterans’ hospitals treat women, there are merely 22 stand alone women’s health clinics that offer a full range of services (Benedict 203). As Major General Rita Aragon, United States Air Force, admits, “It took a long time for women to achieve the opportunities to serve and unfortunately, it will take additional time to provide the services and care to take care of them. The VA has set women’s centers as a priority, as well they should. They are contracting out services where centers are not provided currently” (Aragon). As deployments are extended for active duty forces and reservists alike, such cases will undoubtedly persist. Not to diminish the trauma felt by the women victimized on foreign soil, but the military is a microcosm of the civilian world, fraught with those with noble ambitions and criminals alike.

The American Family at Risk

As the length of the average deployment (depending upon the tactical mission) increases from months to years, in some cases, America’s families, America’s children are at risk for being casualties of the War in Iraq. For Air Force Lieutenant Polly Montgomery, the greatest challenge for her in Iraq was not transporting troops and cargo into cities and bases in and around the Sunni Triangle; it was the grief of missing all three of her children who were five years old or younger when she deployed. She missed the formative years of her children’s lives that she will never be able to get back: her five year old lost her first tooth, her four year old switched from bottle to glass, and her two year old spoken his first words while mom was gone (Holmstedt 201). Mother’s Day was always the worst day. Fathers talk about missing birthdays, and she knows the heartache they feel. She thinks about what most moms take for granted. Once home, she recalls how she was at a golf course one day and her kids wanted hot dogs. She had to ask them what they wanted on their dogs. The woman behind the counter looked at her in disbelief, as if she was thinking, “How could a mother not know what her own children like on their hotdogs?” (201). In wartime, “No one is exempt from feeling out of control when something happens back home and they are helpless because they are miles away. No one is immune from feeling sad when they miss a child’s birthday, an anniversary, or the memorial service of a grandparent. In some situations, experience doesn’t matter. You are going to be affected by what’s happening back in the States and what’s going on in the desert no matter what because you are human” (202). In today’s military, as in life, every crossroads poses a choice. One of the most momentous decisions soldiers must make is “who will parent my child(ren)?” More than 100,000 female soldiers who have served in the Wars are mothers, nearly ½ the number of women who have been deployed. The vast majority are primary caregivers and a

third are single mothers” (“Wartime Soldier, Conflicted Mom” par. 9). Often women and men alike are torn between their commitment to duty and their duty to their families. Brigadier General Carole Briscoe, the first female general officer promoted in Maryland since 1874, explains, “For a large part of my career, I was single. My son was raised by the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He doesn’t feel harmed at all. He has the same friends. He served in the Navy for six years and he doesn’t feel like he missed anything. It just takes a community to help you and *planning!*” (Briscoe). Particularly in the midst of two concurrent wars, military parents must plan and ensure they are making the wisest choices for their children. Although e-mails, Skype calls, webcams, and plain old fashioned letters can never replace real hugs and kisses, children (particularly adolescents who demand the most guidance and discipline) need reassurance that they are loved and safe. Ironically, nearly half of the military personnel interviewed who were parents have children who have followed their parents’ lead and joined the military themselves. Obviously they saw something rewarding and positive in their parents’ call to service.

The Emotional Rigors of War

For women in the military, the sacrifices abound, but certainly, in war the greatest sacrifice is human. Opponents of females in combat argue that in crisis, women will not be able to kill on command, women cannot handle the rigors of war, the list continues. Yet this can be said of women as well as men who must kill another human being. Nothing can prepare an individual for the taking of another’s life. Charlotte M. Brock, 22, deployed to Camp Taquaddum, Iraq, with the 1st Force Service Support Group, United States Marine Corps reflects:

I sat outside the hangar on a wood board and sang and prayed. I didn’t believe in God, but I opened my mind, my heart, my soul to the universe. I asked for guidance and tried to prepare myself for what I was about to do...A few days later, as I sat in an unarmored Humvee, facing outboard ready to take my M-16 off safety and fire at any moment, I watched the Iraqi countryside flashing by... “Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me! And I will give you strength.’ I couldn’t remember the rest of the words. [However] our convoy made it through all of southern Iraq, up to the Tigris Valley, and west to Anbar Province without getting hit, although the convoy that followed us was attacked” (Mirable 2).

In many instances, soldiers who have never believed in any higher power start to when they find themselves completely alone and unable to control what lies ahead. Many troops find comfort in their respective god, their only solace.

Commander Cheryl Lynn Ruff, United States Navy (Ret.) describes the life of a nurse on the “frontlines” of Iraq. “3 April 2003, We had no sooner set up the tents of our field hospital in Iraq than the helicopters began arriving with the dead and wounded...the first young American

Marine was carried off in a tarp, not even a body bag...toward a large box that served as a morgue” (2). Deeply moved by scene that will remain forever tattooed in her memory, Ruff explains that he was no more than 19 years old. One boot had been removed to affix the dog tag to his other foot. As his lifeless body moved past her, she couldn’t help but think, “I am just as much of a target of the enemy as the combat Marines are” (2). Similar to many other soldiers, she wondered, “Will I be able to handle, within my own mind, body, soul, and spirit, the horrendous devastation of humanity that I will not only be a witness to, but also be a primary player in offering healing and comfort? God give me strength to make the right decisions” (2). Timing is life or death in war. Recalls one female soldier tagged with the Infantry, “If you see someone heading toward you, he could be approaching to offer you information. He could have an explosive device strapped to his waist and be about to kill you. He might want to ask you for food. You have to make that call—instantaneously... You have to decide whether you shoot him where he stands, or whether you attempt to communicate with him from a distance” (Williams 237). Everyone is the enemy. That’s survival.

When sweeping a village where suspected terrorists were hiding, Lance Corporal Carrie Blais followed orders to “shoot” from her Staff Sergeant. She fired two shots from her AK-47 and the wounded Iraqi started crawling toward his weapon. Following orders to “finish it,” Blais fired two more shots and the Iraqi man’s white robe turned to crimson red (Holmstedt 20). Blais “didn’t know what to say. She had just taken a man’s life. The Staff Sergeant must have known it was the Lance Corporal’s first kill because he grabbed her Kevlar, turned her had so she was facing him, looked her in the eyes, and said, ‘Think of all the lives you just saved’” (20). Once the realization set in that she had taken another human being’s life, she began to have mixed emotions. On the one hand, she felt as though she had completed her mission; however, on the other hand, she felt remorse as she pictured him with his family (25). These internal battles are what haunt all soldiers, male and female when and if they return home.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Sergeant Shannon Morgan, a Lioness from the Army’s 1st Engineer Battalion, carried a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW), as she served as back up for the Marines. “I remember hesitating and then thinking about what I was told, ‘If you hesitate you’re dead.’ Then I remember wondering, ‘God, is this right?’ Because no one really knows. I don’t want to go to Hell for killing somebody. But then I realized I bet you he’s not caring over there or he wouldn’t be shooting at me and I got him right in my peeps and fired. He just dropped” (“Lioness”). When she returned home, she would wander aimlessly through the woods. “I remember the ditch where we threw the bodies because we didn’t have anywhere else to put them. I’ll never forget that smell of rotting bodies. It didn’t seem very humane to me. Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad to

be home and glad to be alive, but at the same time, I'm lost. I lost part of me over there" ("Lioness"). The Pentagon estimates that 18-20.5% of all returning veterans from Iraq come home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Benedict 200). The number is likely to be much higher, but most cases go unreported, because many soldiers adopt the military attitude to "suck it up," not realizing the devastating and long-lasting effects not seeking help will have on their lives and the lives of those around them.

As one Lioness named Mickiela Montoya, a Mexican-American from Los Angeles, describes, "Nobody said welcome back or nothing...It was like I was out of sync with everyone else. It's like you're a ghost, like you died and you're coming back to life and you've got to weasel your way back in because everybody had to adjust without you" (Benedict 198). This is a common reaction among those who return to a nightmare of hallucinations and flashbacks of what they saw. At once they are glad to be at home with their loved ones, yet only feel "at home" with others who have experienced exactly what they have endured on the battlefield. Only other soldiers can truly understand what it is like to journey to hell and back. One Army enlisted soldier explains, "When someone asks you how you are doing in the grocery store, it's not like you can say, 'Today is a good day. I wasn't shot at. And you?'" (198). While all returning veterans need support to re-assimilate into their lives before Iraq, women seem to face unique challenges because they are forced into their domestic roles quickly, and with little time to deprogram from the atrocities they survived but are still ever-present.

Women Warriors & American Literature

Even with the countless barriers female warriors have demolished in the last decade, their voices are strikingly missing from the canon of American literature. There are no outstanding female protagonists or modern day war heroes that mirror what women have truly accomplished. (Most women claim "GI Jane" is not an accurate portrayal.) Although "Lioness" has received much acclaim and several stories and poems from Columbia University's collection entitled *Powder* (2008) is making its way into classrooms, Pulitzer Prize winning author David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers* (a documentary of non-fiction) has won more accolades for his details of the heroic efforts of Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Kauzlarich and his band of young men. He recounts "the Surge" of April 6, 2007-2008, as he shadows Battalion 2-16, Infantry as they sweep into Baghdad and suffer many casualties on their valiant mission. Ironically, missing from his pages are five women who participated in the Surge. Even though military women are making great strides, they still are not receiving their due recognition. *Powder* is a magnificent anthology of stories and poems about women in combat, their emotions, real life experiences, day-to-day strife, and strength in the face of adversity. Sadly, until more texts are published, fiction or non-fiction, American culture will probably only embrace mythologized and glamorized versions of superhero women on the big screen rather than everyday women truly making a difference.

Conclusion: The War Still Rages

More women have received the Bronze Star of Valor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Purple Heart, and other notable awards, but their battle is not over. “To the women working for the cause, more change will come, slowly. At any rate, the assignment of a soldier to any position within the military should depend upon his or her qualifications, physical ability, and mental and psychological wherewithal for the position. These criteria will give our forces the best state of readiness and our nation the best defense” (Skaine 186). In Iraq, in a multitude of ways, women have proven they stand tall and are ready to serve, regardless of the mission. “From the storm-lashed decks of the Mayflower...to the present hour, woman has stood like a rock for the welfare and the glory of the history of the country, and one might well add...unwritten, unrewarded, and almost unrecognized,” Clara Barton, Founder of the Red Cross. However, she will continue to serve, with honor, integrity, and pride, for so many women before her paid the ultimate price for her to do so.

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