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Women take on major battlefield roles

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A goodwill mission to deliver kerosene heaters to Iraqi schools erupts into the fiery chaos of a roadside bombing - and Maj. Mary Prophit shields a comrade so he can rescue a critically burned Iraqi soldier.

A convoy outside Baghdad is ambushed by machine-gun wielding Iraqi insurgents - and Spc. Ashley Pullen races down a road to save an injured sergeant.

A Black Hawk helicopter is struck by a rocket-propelled grenade in Iraq - and co-pilot Tammy Duckworth, bloody and severely wounded, struggles to stay conscious until the damaged aircraft is down and her crew is safe.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, women warriors are writing a new chapter in military history, serving by the tens of thousands, fending off enemy fire and taking on - and succeeding in - high-profile roles in the battlefield and the skies as never before.

"The American public is beginning to realize that women are playing an equal part in this war and that they are facing the same risks," says Duckworth, who lost both legs in the 2004 insurgent attack. "This is the first time in our nation's history ... when it's normal to see female names as part of the war wounded or those killed in action."

More than 155,000 women have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002, according to the Pentagon, nearly four times the number during the Persian Gulf War. Females now account for 15 percent of the active duty force.

The number of women casualties - 68 dead and more than 430 injured - represents a tiny fraction of the total. Still, by one estimate, the deaths exceed the number of military women who lost their lives in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War combined.

The public, long accustomed to seeing disabled male veterans and grieving widows clutching folded U.S. flags, has adjusted to a new set of somber images: women soldiers coming home with life-changing injuries and tearful farewells to mothers, wives and daughters.

In just two weeks in September, bombs killed four military women in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among them: Sgt. 1st Class Merideth Howard, a 52-year-old former firefighter with a master's degree in marine biology, and 2nd Lt. Emily J.T. Perez, a 23-year-old West Point graduate of the "Class of 9-11" who played the clarinet, spoke fluent German, read the Bible daily and helped start an AIDS ministry at her church.

There is no shared experience that binds together the women of war. Each has a different story, a reason why they're in uniform, an explanation of how their lives have changed.

Some feel pressured to prove themselves as women. Others don't. Some never fire their weapons. Others engage in life-and-death battles. Some are professional soldiers. Others enlist for college money. A few are grandmothers; many more are in their 20s.

Almost all serve anonymously, though a few have captured headlines back home. Former Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski made news as the highest-ranking officer punished in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. Jessica Lynch, the former prisoner of war, rocketed onto the nation's TV screens when she was portrayed as a guns-blazing, all-American heroine - a depiction she herself disavowed.

But Lynch's job - Army supply clerk in a maintenance company - illustrates one of the realities of the war: No place is safe. As the insurgency took hold, that grew even more apparent. Front lines don't exist. Combat troops still face the heaviest losses and while women are mostly in support roles, a mortar or bomb can strike anywhere from a mess hall to a supply convoy.

"My dad has friends who constantly tell him, 'Oh, your daughter's fine in Iraq. She's not in harm's way or she's not involved in combat,'" says Capt. Mary Caruso, who served two tours in Iraq, one as a platoon leader in the 194th Military Police Company.

"I don't think the general public really sees what females are doing over there," she says. "We don't have a linear battlefield anymore. The enemy's everywhere."

Women are barred from units assigned to direct ground combat - the infantry, armor and artillery, for example. While many remain in traditional jobs, such as health care, they've also served as translators and mechanics, commanded police companies and support battalions, flown jet fighters and attack helicopters.

They've been heroes, too.

In the Kentucky National Guard's 617th Military Police Company, Army Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester became the first woman since World War II to win the Silver Star for heroism. After a supply convoy was ambushed, she and others counterattacked, killing more than two dozen insurgents.

Spc. Ashley Pullen, another member of the unit, received a Bronze Star for valor, risking her life to help save a wounded soldier in the same attack. In recommending her for a medal, her company commander praised her "incredible courage."

"We now know women can hold their own, they're brave, they do have the physical and mental stamina to face combat-like situations," says retired Navy Capt. Lory Manning, director of the Women in the Military Project at the Women's Research and Education Institute in Washington, D.C. "We now know that men don't go to pieces and the American public doesn't go to pieces if women are killed. And we know that women, in fact, can defend men."

Manning says that represents a change in perceptions.

"I used to get a lot of guff that women can't do this, that women are weakening the military, women are feminizing the military - that's gone with the wind," she says. "The debate about whether they belong there seems to be over."

Not quite. Though women are widely viewed as essential with the nation's fighting forces stretched thin and they perform jobs off-limits to men for cultural reasons - searching Iraqi females, for instance - the critics have not been silenced.

"Engaging the enemy in this uncivilized thing we call war is a job for men, not women," Kate O'Beirne, a conservative pundit and Washington editor of the National Review, said in a radio interview this spring. She likened it to a man sending his wife or daughter to check out a possible home break-in.

Martin van Creveld, a prominent military historian and Iraq war critic, argues the contribution of females in the conflict has been dramatically exaggerated. "They're not occupying any particularly important positions or fighting in the front ... If there were not a single woman (deployed), the war would be the same," he says.

The Center for Military Readiness, a conservative think tank, contends that the Army has ignored its rules that prevent female soldiers from being in units that "physically collocate and remain with" ground combat troops.

Elaine Donnelly, the center's president, says that creates the potential for romantic involvement, morale problems and physical hazards. A woman, she says, might not be strong enough to rescue a wounded male soldier.

"All these social issues do matter," she says. "Cohesion is what lives depend on. It's all about survival. If you start causing doubts, you make the job more difficult or dangerous for everybody."

Last year, some members of Congress tried to curb the role of women in combat zones, but retreated after running into opposition from the Pentagon and lawmakers from both parties.

Capt. Christine Roney was tangled in the debate in 2004 when she was about to take command of a forward support company that would accompany a combat battalion.

She says she was told several male captains fired off e-mails to members of Congress and the Center for Military Readiness opposing the move. One captain, she says, messaged one of her peers asking: "What are you guys doing sending a female over here?"

When plans changed and a man was chosen to take command, Roney says she was disappointed at first, then

reconsidered. "I probably did think having a female would have been disruptive in some sense," she says. "They might think they have to act differently with a woman."

Roney, who ended up commanding a logistics company that conducted more than 500 missions in the streets of Baghdad, thinks gender walls will crumble as more women and men work together.

"Sometimes," she says, "they need to get females in the unit to see they have some of the same abilities, the same competencies as the male soldiers."

Some of that already has happened.

Capt. Tara Stiles was a platoon leader in the 194th Military Police Company supporting the First Marine Expeditionary Force. "At first, they were kind of leery," she says. But after a few weeks "they'd rather have my platoon vs. one of the others led by males. .. They needed their backs covered and we were there. And vice versa."

Stiles' company was commanded by Capt. Terri Dorn, who says she noticed some Marines were uncomfortable dealing with females, but she didn't detect resentment.

"I never felt like someone was trying to tell me we're in the wrong place," she says. "It was, 'Oh my God, what do we do?' ... Really what you're doing is teaching that person how to deal with a female."

Dorn says when men would tell her they'd never had a woman in their unit, she'd reply: "Don't think of them as females. Talk to them as soldiers."

It was advice she, too, found useful. "I wasn't a female," she says. "I was a company commander."

Dorn says some Iraqi military leaders proved a far bigger obstacle. There were those, she says, who refused to shake her hand. "It didn't hinder our conversation," she says. "It didn't hurt my feelings ... I proved myself by not allowing them NOT to speak with me."

For decades there have been questions about men and women bunking in the same quarters and whether they could serve together without distractions. While problems such as sexual harassment and assault remain, some say that gender lines blur when lives are on the line.

"Traditionally, the front is the most sexless place in the world. Behind the lines is where trouble happens," says Joshua Goldstein, a professor emeritus of international relations at American University and author of "War and Gender."

Lt. Col. Cheri Provancha, who commanded a Stryker Brigade Support Battalion in Iraq with 700 soldiers, says she didn't detect a gender gap among her troops.

"It didn't matter if you were male or female," she says. "You're going through the same thing as your buddy. That creates a bond."

Provancha also says she has noticed firsthand how attitudes toward women have changed in her 23 years in the Army.

"In the 1980s when a male soldier walks in the door, the expectation is they are competent. The woman on the other hand, it was 'I've got to see what you have before I give you that level of confidence,'" she says. "Now when I walk in the door, I feel like the guys do."

But other officers say the military is far from having an even playing field.

Janis Karpinski, who was demoted to colonel after the scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison, says she was a scapegoat - and she blames many of her problems on being a woman.

When the prison conditions started unraveling, she says, "there was not a good ole boy network to support me. They wouldn't let me in. ... There was not a male commander to say, 'Hey, Janis, you better watch out.' Had I been a man, I would have been aware of it all along."

Karpinski says the military is still regarded by many men in uniform - especially the older ones - as the "last bastion of male dominance and they're very reluctant to give up this turf to women."

And yet, some see progress, partly because younger men are moving up in the ranks along with women.

"Gender integration is not perfect by any stretch, but it's a heck of lot better than it was 30 years ago when women entered the military academy," says Mady Wechsler Segal, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland and an expert on the military.

Women have a long history of military service going back to the Revolutionary War, when they sometimes disguised themselves as men to defend their country. Through the many wars, they've been spies and soldiers, nurses and pilots - and prisoners.

Relatively few, however, have fallen from enemy fire. In World War I, for example, nearly 360 servicewomen died, mostly nurses stricken by influenza, according to the Women's Memorial Foundation.

And in World War II, more than 330,000 women served both domestically and abroad, and more than 540 died, mostly from vehicle accidents, air crashes and illness, according to the foundation. Sixteen Army nurses died by enemy fire, the group says.

In the Persian Gulf War, about two-thirds of the 15 women who died lost their lives in non-hostile incidents. (In Iraq and Afghanistan, more than a third of the deaths have been non-combat fatalities.)

After the Gulf War, the Army opened thousands more jobs to women, including piloting attack and scout helicopters.

Maj. Tammy Duckworth - who recently lost a bid for Congress - says when she joined the Illinois Army National Guard, she picked aviation because it was a combat position open to women. "I wanted to be treated equally to the males in my unit ... and I felt part of that was accepting the same kind of risks," she says.

Early on, she says she adapted to being a woman in a man's world. "I tried to be one of the boys, to be tough or tougher," she says. But her attitude changed as she was promoted. "I knew I was a good enough officer on my own and I stopped trying to be extra-macho," she says.

Besides, she adds, some of the guys were already teasing her that she had "ovaries of brass."

But other women say they're mindful of being a minority and feel pressure - some of it self-imposed - to demonstrate their physical strength and their mental toughness so no one thinks they'll crumble when bullets start flying or bombs start exploding.

Alicia Flores says she earned the respect of male comrades in the Army's 92nd Chemical Company by hauling bodies, cleaning up feces, doing everything men did. "I had a lot of guys look up to me and say, 'How could you be out here doing this?' "

Flores says she was determined not to show weakness.

"I saw a lot of guys break down," she says. "Most of the times I did a lot better than they did. ... I wasn't going to break down and cry. Crying wasn't going to get me anywhere. It was just going to get me dirtier."

Aneta Urban stood out as the only women in her Marine police company during training in Camp Pendleton, Calif. She could feel all eyes on her.

"When it's 100 guys and you're the only girl, it's like proving yourself every day," she says. "When you're doing rifle training, close combat training, they're looking at you a lot more closely. They're wondering: Can she do it? Can she handle it? You don't want to be laughed at."

Two years later, when she was deployed, she felt she had measured up.

"They knew they could depend on me," she says. "They knew I could pull my own weight. They knew they could trust me if something happened."

Even so, Urban, a native of Poland who served as translator on a second tour, says she would never complain about "stupid girly issues" such as the lack of bathrooms.

"We were under enough stress as it is ... without worrying about finding a place to go pee," she says.

Some women say hygiene issues, whether it's going to the bathroom in a hole in the ground or not being able to wash your hair for a month, tend to be harder on females than men. Some find creative solutions.

Maj. Mary Prophit, for instance, secured her own shower, trading a Benchmade knife in exchange.

Prophit was part of a four-member Civil Affairs team and one of three women among a task force of 700. If that didn't set her apart, her age did. "I was old enough to be their mother," says the 42-year-old mother of three who is a library assistant in Glenoma, Wash. "I thought it was kind of cool."

Despite two decades in the Army Reserve, Prophit says she felt internal pressures to be a good model. "I knew if I screwed up, someone would say, 'That's why we shouldn't have women in the military,'" she says. "I want to make sure that no one thinks the mission dragged on because I'm there."

In January 2005, Prophit demonstrated her skills when the convoy she was in was attacked by a roadside bomb, ripping into the truck behind her that was carrying Iraqi soldiers.

With ammunition exploding from the blazing truck, Prophit used her body as a shield so a medic could tend to one of the badly burned Iraqis. Later, she laid down fire at a mosque where insurgents were hiding.

Prophit then propped up the critically wounded Iraqi with her body in the tight quarters of the Stryker armored vehicle, placed his head in her lap and tried to keep him conscious as they raced to the hospital.

"My performance was a testament that women can be in combat," she says. But she draws a line. "I definitely don't think women should be in the infantry. It's not because they're not mentally strong enough or physically strong enough. If you mix genders, that alters the dynamic of the group."

After the war ends, the military and Congress will evaluate these kinds of experiences and there will be renewed discussion about what combat is, but any changes will probably be incremental, not dramatic, says Manning, the military expert.

For now, though, she says, "the public accepts that women are in the military, that there are going to be shootings, that they're going to be dying, and that's fine - with most people."