

Mission before Comfort

A Mission-Focused Approach to Gender in the Army

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Repeatedly, when Capt. Clara Martin's unit was tapped to roll out for a recovery, she would only find out afterward. "The TOC [tactical operations center] messenger went directly to the male tent," she explained; she was left behind, unable to account for her team.¹

For Capt. Diana Sluhan, mortar attacks meant an unnecessary degree of uncertainty. She was also housed in the female tent, away from the rest of the members of her section. She said, "It was unnerving during IDF [indirect fire], because I couldn't get accountability until the all clear."²

To some of the soldiers in their units, these were examples of the ways female soldiers hurt unit effectiveness and made even simple things, such as spreading the word about an upcoming mission, more difficult. But the problem is not women. It is that we continue to rely on outdated social niceties about gender instead of mission effectiveness to dictate everything from billeting to battle-buddy teams.³

When conducting predeployment pregnancy tests, sorting people according to their sex is efficient. During a urinalysis, having observers' gender matched to the person giving the sample makes everyone involved more comfortable. Organization by gender creates no inefficiency and has positive effects. However, these two situations are far less complex than most gender-related scenarios that leaders encounter. What happens when the most effective thing to do feels like a privacy violation? What happens when it appears to be gender discrimination?

My answer to both these questions is the mission must always come first. But, before evaluating whether organizing by gender is mission efficient, leaders first need to realize they are actually making a choice. Often, the norm of gender separation is so powerful that no one has thought about the inefficiencies that result from that separation. Leaders need to

The 229th Military Intelligence Battalion, in conjunction with the Presidio's Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers program, held a combatives tournament 16 March 2012 inside the Price fitness center gym in Presidio of Monterey, California. (Photo by Steven L. Shepard, Presidio of Monterey Public Affairs)





put aside social niceties and make their decisions based on what is efficient for mission accomplishment. Where effectiveness cuts both ways, they should seek out solutions that avoid creating unintentional obstacles for female soldiers, and they should lastly consider comfort and privacy.

Taking gender into account should be the exception rather than the rule. Gender separation may provide comfort, but it does not often promote efficacy, and there is no indication that it reduces sexual assault or harassment; nor is there evidence that it reduces the likelihood of relationships that can cause prejudice to good order and discipline. However, it sometimes creates systemic barriers to mission accomplishment by making it more difficult for female soldiers to get the job done. While increased gender mixing may be met with cultural resistance, history has shown repeatedly that when it comes to making the force more effective, the force will adapt.

The Costs of Comfort

Capt. Marcus Petty, a transportation company commander, was a beanpole. He was self-conscious about his thinness and worried it set a bad example for his soldiers. He did not want to be in the position of changing in front of them, so

A jumpmaster assigned to the U.S. Army Advanced Airborne School (USAAAS) rigs a cadet 1 November 2017 before she jumps off a thirty-four-foot tower at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The USAAAS jumpmasters provided North Brunswick High School Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadets the opportunity to experience an aspect of being a paratrooper. (Photo by Pfc. Alleea Oliver, U.S. Army)

instead of living in the company area, he had found an empty bed in a tent with some of the special staff.

It was before dawn when he heard his executive officer shouting for him. That probably meant his guys would be rolling out on a recovery mission shortly. He threw on his uniform, smoothed his hair, and stepped outside.

"Sir, multiple vehicles got hit in two different districts," said the executive officer. "The battalion commander wants to know where you are and why it's taking so long to get you to the TOC. He's pissed."⁴

The battalion commander is unlikely to accept Capt. Petty's privacy concerns as an acceptable reason for a delay in response time for a complex recovery mission. Yet, leaders consistently create such delays for

gender-related privacy concerns, even when the troops themselves do not share those concerns.

Billeting is a prime example of how this plays out. The benefit of separating people by gender is that most people are more comfortable with this arrangement and do not feel like their privacy is being ignored. There is also a widely held assumption that separation reduces sexual misconduct and problematic sexual relationships—this assumption, however, is not supported by the evidence and will be addressed later.

The cost of separation is that units are broken up, creating barriers to mission-essential communication and information dissemination. This form of segregation also diminishes unofficial mentorship and training opportunities and reduces accountability—all essential to a well-trained and disciplined force. Female soldiers end up housed with members from other units on different shifts, which interferes with their sleep cycles, resulting in suboptimal performance. Separating these soldiers from their units also creates the impression of special treatment and different standards for females, which undermines unit morale and trust. Lastly, living together turns people's relationships from colleagues to friends. Separate billeting, and the culture of casual gender separation it perpetuates, decreases the likelihood that women will experience the kind of belonging that helps make the military worth the sacrifices it demands.⁵ Talented soldiers may leave the Army as a consequence.

Billeting separation and its negative effects begin in basic training, where male recruits and training staff are cordoned off from female recruits. Interviews I conducted with soldiers who went to mixed-gender basic training confirm that while this arrangement is designed to protect recruits, it backfires in many ways. Female recruits reported that they frequently missed changes in formation times, uniform changes, meal times, weapons cleanings, and other important communications.⁶ Female soldiers' persistent failure to show up at the right time, in the right place, and in the right uniform tends to create an impression among their classmates and cadre that they are generally less capable or responsible professionals. This unmerited impression of incompetence can feed a perception that males and females are held to different standards, which is poison for unit morale. One RAND study put it succinctly: "To the degree that leadership can address and resolve such issues as the perception of a double standard for men and women, morale will improve."⁷

Female soldiers also miss valuable training due to billeting segregation. One noted, "There were some very knowledgeable male cadre who would often do hip-pocket training with the males, and it wasn't until the last week that the other barracks were made aware."⁸ The pool of peers female soldiers can draw on when they need after-hours help to review a confusing subject or to complete a difficult task is also necessarily reduced. As a result, these soldiers emerge from training less prepared than they could have been, reducing the overall effectiveness of the force.

Segregated billeting is the default option outside of training environments as well. There are fewer regulations requiring separation in the field, but command decisions often create the same outcomes. General Order No. 1 (the order commanders customarily publish that identifies prohibited activities and establishes standards of conduct for deployed units) often addresses relationships and living conditions between males and females.⁹ For example, the General Order No. 1 issued by the commanders of both the 3rd and the 4th Infantry Divisions during their deployments in Iraq prohibited visitors of the opposite sex in each other's rooms.¹⁰ Even if a General Order No. 1 does not address gendered billeting directly, lower-level commanders often make similar policies prohibiting entry into the living spaces of the opposite sex.¹¹

Much like during training, separation in the field can cause communication issues and other unintended consequences. A RAND study from 1997 looked at segregated berthing on ships:

Segregated berthing lessened work group cohesion on recently integrated ships because department heads were generally accustomed to having their entire crew berthed together in the same area of the ship. Both official and unofficial information

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used to be communicated in berthing areas, either verbally or by posting notices, and often one worker would wake his replacement to take over the shift. Now men are still berthed according to unit, but the women are berthed together regardless of work group. Supervisors often did not think to go to women's berthing in addition to their men's berthing to pass along important information, and no male coworker dared to go into female berthing to wake a female sailor if she were the one that happened to oversleep that day.¹²

While the Army does not have to contend with berthing on ships, the same situations arise in field exercises, trainings, and deployments.

Current accounts indicate this is still a problem. One female officer shared, "My deployment had gender segregation, and also shift workers. Females were always dragging because the lights were never out. Someone was always awake or waking others."¹³ While being woken up is an issue in any bay barracks, the mix of shifts and units in female tents coupled with the exclusion of most other unit members make intrusions more frequent and disruptive in female quarters.

Another female soldier described the situation she experienced when her unit decided to make an all-female tent. She had a responsible male noncommissioned officer who ensured she got important messages, but her teammates were affected: "Because my male NCO couldn't come into the tent, he'd yell through the wall for me. This was usually at night when we needed to go out on a random recovery mission. It would wake me up, so I didn't miss the mission, but it also woke all the other females up."¹⁴ Soldiers who are sleep deprived are not primed for optimal performance.

When new leadership directed a female transportation company commander nine months into a deployment to gender segregate her unit's living quarters, she pushed back against the demands. "I'm safe in a tent with my male soldiers. I'm not necessarily safe seven tents over all alone."¹⁵ Force protection is an inherent part of any mission, and creating a less safe situation to implement separate quarters makes no sense.

Another female commander found herself in a similar situation: "They wanted to create a female tent, and I fought that tooth and nail. They wanted to take people out of their unit, [away from] their

leaders, the people they work with every day, and put them somewhere else," she said. "That made no sense to me. When leaders are not involved, discipline breaks down, and you lose control."¹⁶

Billeting is the most visible area where gender separation happens without analysis and without regard to efficacy. However, battle-buddy systems are another common source of friction. The female transportation company commander's new leadership also created a rule that females on a convoy had to have a female battle buddy. She responded, "So you're telling me as a company commander that I can't go with [my own] convoy unless I arrange to have another female join me?"¹⁷

Other areas of friction include mentorship pairings, unit assignments, and attachment to outposts. And, there is the more general problem that any interaction between soldiers of different genders is potentially a "perception issue." Defaulting to gender-matching sends a strong message that members of the opposite sex are not teammates, and are not to be fully trusted. This hampers the deep level of trust necessary for small-unit combat effectiveness. Those who try to bridge this divide open themselves up to admonishment. One first sergeant told me that a few female noncommissioned officers had confided in him about relationship difficulties they were experiencing during deployment. A sergeant major in his battalion told him that such discussions were inappropriate. The first sergeant countered that he had done the same for dozens of male soldiers, but the sergeant major stood firm.¹⁸ Similarly, a male company commander worked out frequently with a female noncommissioned officer in his company to help prepare her for Ranger School. This eventually caused sufficient hullabaloo that the commander stopped his training sessions. In the same deployment, workout partnerships with similar rank and positional disparities passed without comment because they were not cross-gender.¹⁹ In these two instances, the leaders' abilities to advise and mentor their soldiers were curtailed, and the soldiers had fewer resources to resolve their issues or train themselves to be effective leaders.

Informal advice and unwritten rules can increase this air of distrust. A RAND study found that some leadership provided the following advice to men on how to interact with women: "Don't talk to them, don't sit near them in the mess, don't breathe near them."²⁰ The same RAND study found that "men were reluctant to push women ... because of the fear that the women would retaliate with



an unfounded charge of sexual harassment,” and that most men were hesitant to counsel women without a witness for the same reason.²¹ As discussed below, integration is likely to reduce such a risk, not increase it.

Gender Separation's Impact on Sexual Harassment and Assault

Perhaps leaders separate the genders thinking not only about privacy concerns but also about sexual assault and harassment. It may seem intuitive that gender segregation would reduce sexual harassment and sexual assault, but there is mounting evidence that shows the opposite might be true. Studies on workplace sexual harassment show that encouraging social integration at work can reduce harassment.²² Other studies show that increased contact with an “outgroup” (in this case female soldiers) improves attitudes toward individuals in that outgroup.²³ These improvements are more likely to take place when group membership is *de-emphasized* during the interaction.²⁴ Conversely, emphasis on group membership during cross-group interactions increases anxiety and reduces the benefits of cross-group contact.²⁵ Outgrouping has been linked to dehumanization, which is associated with sexual harassment and rape.²⁶

Norwegian soldiers Pvt. Elina Schnell Hjelle (*left*) and Pvt. Mathias Hoegevoold get dressed early morning 8 April 2014 in their coed barracks at the Garrison of South Varanger in the arctic north of Norway. The garrison was part of a study on army gender relations conducted by the Information Centre for Gender Research in Norway, in which groups comprising two women and six men shared rooms. The study found that gender-integrated rooms had a degenderizing effect—sexual harassment claims decreased and morale increased. (Screenshot of Ruptly YouTube video)

This theory was put to the test when the Norwegian army conducted a study on unisex housing.²⁷ In the study, separate groups of two women were housed with six men. They found that sexual harassment claims dropped. The authors of the study postulated that the integrated rooms had a degenderizing effect, dampening the “us versus them” mentality that can lead to sexual harassment.²⁸

While a single test conducted by a foreign military is far from conclusive, a plausible theory and supporting data should be sufficient evidence to prompt reconsideration of the benefits of segregation. This is especially true when failure to do so may sustain the military's sexual assault problem and perpetuates the



general inefficiencies of gender segregation. Shared male-female bay barracks and tents are likely the best way forward in the field and during deployment but not necessarily in garrison or other environments that allow more flexibility. It should be one option of many in a spectrum of organizational possibilities.

Along with the concern about sexual misconduct comes concern about false accusations of sexual harassment or assault. Determining the proportion of sexual assault reporting that is false is difficult and imprecise. The best estimates are at a lowly 6 percent; nonetheless, most military men have an understandable fear of being on the wrong side of this nightmare scenario.²⁹ Increased integration should ameliorate this problem for the same reasons it diminishes the problem of sexual assault. The same dehumanization that is required to sexually assault someone likely underlies a false accusation of sexual assault, and increased gender mixing has a humanizing effect.

Furthermore, the basic facts in many sexual harassment reports are undisputed, but the events are often

Soldiers from 135th Quartermaster Company, 87th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade (3SB) flip a tire 27 April 2017 during the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Prevention (SHARP) Stakes obstacle course on Donovan Field at Fort Stewart, Georgia. The obstacle course was part of a SHARP campaign hosted by 3SB. (Photo by Pvt. Zoe Garbarino, U.S. Army)

mired in misunderstandings.³⁰ Increased mixing is likely to reduce such misunderstandings where it would narrow the gap between the social contexts of male and female service members. In circumstances where a female soldier is trying to fit in, she may be hesitant to create tension by vociferously rejecting an advance. Such a clear rejection might embarrass her pursuer and cause peers to see her as someone who unnecessarily degraded their friend. Instead, she may send subtler signals—shaking off a touch, or turning her back to her pursuer and engaging with other people. If women already feel like they belong, they will be less hesitant to be assertive and

vocal about their objections to a sexual advance or to being touched. This is true whether the situation is one-on-one or in a group setting.

Additionally, male pursuers, with greater exposure, would begin to see their female counterparts less as exotic creatures and more as part of their peer group. This would be likely to diminish the “tea leaf reading” they engage in to interpret female behavior. In this case, a turned back, male or female, would simply be a signal that this person is not interested in talking, not an invitation to try harder or be more aggressive.

Other Efficacy Concerns

There is more room to observe social niceties outside of direct combat, be it on large combat bases, in garrison, or during training. However, when it comes to direct combat, the social niceties that underlie gender segregation go out the window. Female combat-camera soldiers sleep on the ground next to their male comrades when they go outside the wire.³¹ On long convoys, men and women urinate in front of each other because that is required to stay safe.³²

The Army must train and retain the best soldiers of both genders. However, many of the anecdotes conveyed in the first section of this article showed how policies can impede women from getting the mission done. One result of these impediments is that the Army will not be able to best identify some of its most talented soldiers because some face obstacles that others do not. While it can be difficult to pinpoint single instances where the separation of genders creates an obstacle that holds back a female soldier’s career, the cumulative effect of these obstacles can stunt a career progression. Even where it does not stymie a career entirely, it narrows opportunity for advancement and increases the difficulty of promotion. Where leaders implement policies to allay privacy concerns, but those policies have a negative impact on soldier readiness, career progression, and unit cohesion, those policies should be discontinued.

Another reason commanders may be hesitant to increase gender mixing is the increased opportunity it creates for distracting relationships to form.³³ However, the degenderizing effect of increased gender mixing discussed above would likely reduce the formation of sexual relationships. Even if it did not, the current state of affairs seems to do very little to deter such relationships; those who are immature enough to

let such entanglements affect their professional lives are the ones most likely to skirt the rules to pursue such a relationship in the first place. Segregation in billeting has obvious and identifiable negative impacts on the mission, and any benefits it has on good order and discipline are conjecture at best.

Sometimes mission-effective policies result in a negative impact on women as a group. Unfortunately, this might be a necessary outcome. In a mission to train partner-nation forces, for example, the partner-nation soldiers might be reluctant or unwilling to take instruction from females. In this situation, strategic-level leadership would have to decide whether the mission is to teach combat or other occupational skills to partner forces, or if there is a broader need to promote the value of equal rights. The latter would entail opening positions to qualified women who want to serve, and being willing to learn from whoever has the expertise to teach, male or female. Having women conduct training in this scenario could set a beneficial example. However, if the mission is simply to teach occupational skills to partner forces, then gender-integrated training would be less efficient and a waste of time. This might cut female service members off from some valuable deployment and leadership opportunities, which is an unfortunate but appropriate side effect of putting the mission first.

Cultural Resistance

We may not be able to set the standard for our partner forces, but we can set the standard for ourselves. If there is resistance within our own ranks to the most efficient arrangement of our forces, military effectiveness has to triumph. While some service members—both male and female—would resist increased integration, their preferences do not trump readiness. As Adm. (retired) Gary Roughead put it, “It is not our practice to go within our military and poll our force to determine if they like the laws of the land or not.”³⁴

This approach worked for racial integration. A poll conducted in 1945 interviewed white company commanders and platoon sergeants of the twenty-four infantry companies that contained black platoons. Sixty-four percent of respondents had unfavorable views of integrating companies before they experienced integration.³⁵ After integration, 77 percent of both officers and non-commissioned officers reported having a more favorable view of the project than they did at the start.³⁶ Sixteen

percent of officers and 21 percent of noncommissioned officers reported feeling the same as they did at the start, and no one reported feeling worse.³⁷

It also worked for the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the U.S. military’s previous policy on homosexuals in the military. A coalition of over one thousand retired flag officers warned that repeal “would undermine recruiting and retention, impact leadership at all levels, have adverse effects on the willingness of parents who lend their sons and daughters to military service, and eventually break the all-volunteer force.”³⁸ This doomsday prediction did not bear out. Instead, all reports indicate that unit cohesion was largely unaffected by the repeal, and that military readiness has slightly increased.³⁹

Anecdotal evidence indicates that this would likely be the outcome for increased gender mixing as well. A female officer who went through ROTC Advanced Camp, where males and females shared barracks, said integration helped cadets work together better. As for shared bathrooms—they just posted times for showers for each sex, and a sign to turn for all other times.⁴⁰ A civil affairs officer reported that tents were integrated during selection. “This was so necessary for team cohesion,” she said. “Girls turned their backs when they changed. No issues.”⁴¹ Another said, “One of my fondest memories is a male cutting my bangs in the sink because they’d gotten too long while we were all rehashing how to make the next event better.”⁴² Men reported that they “appreciated the opportunity to have friendships with women,” and that they were able to discuss some things with women that they did not feel comfortable discussing with men. This, in turn, allowed them to handle their own stress better, and perhaps it reduced disciplinary issues down the line.⁴³

The Solution

The current culture of gender separation benefits no one. Company commanders and first sergeants, first-line supervisors and their soldiers, chaplains and soldiers who seek their counsel—these are all potential opposite gender situations where one-on-one meetings are necessary and appropriate. The unthinking stigma against cross-gender association results in increased stress, reduced communication, decreased mentorship and training, and less cohesion. While civilians may have the luxury of subordinating their professional lives to social niceties, military professionals do not.⁴⁴ By resetting defaults to put the mission first, even when it comes to gender, the Army can fix this culture. The three biggest changes leaders can make are the following:

1. Default to mixed-gender billeting. Where billeting is separated by gender, allow members of the opposite sex to enter with permission of a resident.
2. Eliminate battle-buddy pairing by gender. Trust soldiers to know with whom they are safe.
3. Instead of stigmatizing cross-gender engagements that create perception issues, quash the rumor-mongering that make them an issue.

The most important component of solving this problem is recognizing it. The social niceties that lead to these inefficiencies are norms in both civilian and military life, but in the military, they need to be recognized and rooted out where they interfere with mission accomplishment. We owe our nation the most effective fighting force possible, and unthinking gender segregation is hindering us. ■

Notes

1. Clara Martin (U.S. Army officer), online interview by author, 23 March 2017.

2. Diana Sluhan (U.S. Army officer), online interview by author, 23 March 2017 and 9 July 2017.

3. Author’s note: This article specifically avoids commenting or taking a position on the integration of women into combat arms. It is an issue distinct from and beyond the scope of the topic of this paper, which is the organizational and cultural separation of men and women.

4. This is a fictional scenario.

5. Benedict Carey, “While at War, Female Soldiers Fight to Belong,” *New York Times* (website), 24 May 2015, accessed 12

December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/25/health/while-at-war-female-soldiers-fight-to-belong.html>.

6. Rebecca Grainer, Charlie Seto, Natasha Green, and Josie Steed (U.S. Army soldiers), interviews by author, Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, 22 February 2017.

7. Margaret C. Harrell and Laura L. Miller, “New Opportunities for Military Women: Effects Upon Readiness, Cohesion, and Morale” (monograph report, RAND Corporation, 1997), 83, accessed 12 December 2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR896.html.

8. Ariana D’Isola Mac, 28 January 2017, comment on Army Women’s Officer Mentorship Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com>.

[com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/) (membership required).

9. Center for Law and Military Operations, *Forged in the Fire: Lessons Learned during Military Operations, 1994-2008* (Charlottesville, VA: The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center & School, September 2008), 321.

10. Ibid.

11. For example, Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan Commander's Policy Memo #14, 1 December 2016.

12. Harrell and Miller, "New Opportunities for Military Women," 64.

13. Sadie Mac, 28 January 2017, comment on Army Women's Officer Mentorship Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/> (membership required).

14. Heather Coulton, 28 January 2017, comment on Army Women's Officer Mentorship Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/> (membership required).

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16. Laurence Lessard, "Interview with MAJ Sarah Albrycht," (report, Combat Studies Institute Operational Leadership Experiences project, 13 March 2007), accessed 13 December 2017, <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cdm/ref/collection/p4013coll13/id/660>.

17. McCool, "Interview with CPT Jennifer Mlocek."

18. Unnamed master sergeant, interview by author (name withheld by mutual agreement), Eglin, Florida, 7 June 2017.

19. Personal observations of the author.

20. Harrell and Miller, "New Opportunities for Military Women," 80-81.

21. Ibid., 73.

22. Charles W. Mueller, Stacy De Coster, and Sarah Beth Estes, "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Unanticipated Consequences of Modern Social Control in Organizations," *Work and Occupations* 28, no. 4 (2001): 411-46, doi: 10.1177/0730888401028004003.

23. Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751-83, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Dora Capozza, Gian Antonio Di Bernardo, and Rossella Falvo, "Intergroup Contact and Outgroup Humanization: Is the Causal Relationship Uni- or Bidirectional?," *Plos One* 12, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0170554.

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30. Personal observation of the author based on six years' experience as a Judge Advocate General officer.

31. Tammy Hinline, "Q+A - What's It Like to be a Military Photographer," *Photography Talk* (website), September 2013, accessed 13 December 2017, <https://www.photographytalk.com/forum/photography-general-discussion/254278-q-a-what-it-s-like-to-be-a-military-photographer>.

32. Nancy Steele and Linda H. Yoder, "Military Women's Urinary Patterns, Practices, and Complications in Deployment Settings," *Urologic Nursing* 33, no. 2 (March-April 2013): 61-71.

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37. Ibid.

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41. Kelly Jo, 28 January 2017, comment on Army Women's Officer Mentorship Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/> (membership required).

42. Kate Numerick, 28 January 2017, comment on Army Women's Officer Mentorship Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/army.women/permalink/1783597601857966/> (membership required).

43. Harrell and Miller, "New Opportunities for Military Women," 82.

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