



(Photo by Sgt. Gene Arnold, 1st Infantry Division PAO)

Members of a female engagement team from the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, attend a women's shura at the Director of Women's Affairs building in Paktika Province, Afghanistan, 21 July 2012 to discuss the needs and wants of the female population and to help improve their way of life. Among the issues discussed were security, how to make a living, and education.

# What the Female Engagement Team Experience Can Teach Us About the Future of Women in Combat

Listen to the author discuss the role of Women in Combat during a 27 January 2013 interview. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz\\_XcO\\_gEYQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz_XcO_gEYQ)

Ashley Nicolas

The status of women in combat arms units is a frequent topic in today's media. Between the admittance of women into The Basic School of the U.S. Marine Corps and the trial phase of the U.S. Army Ranger School, voices can be heard on both sides of the aisle arguing over the perceived capabilities of women in these roles. The prevailing discourse has been the debate over what women can handle, physically and emotionally, and what they are not fundamentally equipped to sustain. Others argue that this is an equal rights issue—that women should be allowed into the ranks simply because men are allowed. Yet, the issue is not whether or not America's women can rise to the challenge; the issue is that modern warfare requires women to be an integral part of combat forces.

## The Need for Female Engagement Teams

The necessity of women in these roles was revealed over the last decade of warfare. The successes experienced by units in the Army, Special Forces, and the Marine Corps during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom—using everything from “Lioness” teams to female engagement teams (FETs) and cultural support teams—prove that modern warfare is changing the role of women in combat. One after action review credits a particular FET with searching hundreds of compounds and thousands of women, and uncovering critical intelligence by members of the team.<sup>1</sup>

These anecdotal results were indicative of the success achieved by many units that deployed with FETs. The current operational environment presents an enemy who uses the lack of women in U.S. combat arms as a tactical weakness. The terror group Boko Haram has seen a disturbing spike in the number of women and girls volunteering as suicide bombers. It has been reported that female suicide bombers affiliated with Boko Haram have carried out “more than a dozen attacks ... with some attacks claiming up to 78 victims.”<sup>2</sup> The use of female suicide bombers in order to exploit cultural sensitivities, as well as the inability of male soldiers to gain intelligence from women and children, weakens the ability of U.S. forces to fight effectively.<sup>3</sup> Further, those same conflicts are occurring in regions where

cultural sensitivity is paramount, highlighting the critical need for female soldiers to conduct specific tasks that male soldiers are unable to execute. If the recent rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State is any indication, these conditions will not be changing in the near future.

A 2003 study by the National Center for Women and Policing found that “women officers rely on a style of policing that uses less physical force, are better at defusing and de-escalating potentially violent confrontations with citizens, and are less likely to become involved in problems with use of excessive force.”<sup>4</sup> These findings are certainly something to consider given that the population in most of our recent conflicts was considered the center of gravity.

The U.S. Border Patrol has also recognized this need. As recently reported by the Associated Press, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (of which the Border Patrol is a part) “acquired a federal exemption to recruit strictly female agents.”<sup>5</sup> Reasons stated by the agency included needing assistance interfacing with women and children as well as assistance searching women—needs that directly mirror the needs of the U.S. military. Given the role of the Army in humanitarian missions, namely the fight against Ebola, the prevalence of building relationships and working among host-nation populations will continue to grow as part of the Army mission.

However, some arguments for the mainstream integration of women into line units have some validity. Some studies suggest that women are far more prone to injury during training than men. According to the 2011 report *Musculoskeletal Injuries in Military Women*, “the combination of anatomy and physiology appears to predispose women to a higher risk of pelvic stress fractures and knee damage.” The report states that female soldiers are “about 67 percent more likely than male soldiers to be discharged for a musculoskeletal disorder.”<sup>6</sup>

These statistics, as well as the physically demanding requirements of many of these jobs, have called into question the number of women physically qualified to volunteer for these positions. Despite assurances from the Pentagon that high qualification standards will be maintained, skeptics wonder if standards will ultimately be lowered to answer the call for the presence of women by those solely



focused on equality.<sup>7</sup> As former Army Lt. Col. Robert Maginnis told *Time* magazine, “Pentagon brass are kowtowing to their political masters and radical feminists to remove exemptions for women in ground combat in defiance of overwhelming scientific evidence.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite these claims, the need for women in situations where combat is likely cannot be denied. This then begs the question: What is best way to employ women as a combat multiplier? There is a strong argument for the presence of women in a separate “engager” military occupational specialty (MOS) specifically designed to fit within infantry units. This MOS would be designed to satisfy the need that has been identified by taking the most qualified women who meet both the physical and mental standards of the infantry but also satisfactorily complete additional training to address the unique role that women would play in these units. Recent experiences of FETs preparing for deployment to Afghanistan provide a model for the potential implementation of such a program and the challenges that exist in selecting, resourcing, and training.

## Experiences with the Female Engagement Team

In 2011-2012, I had the honor of serving as the FET leader for the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 2nd Infantry Division, based out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. 4th SBCT deployed to Regional Command–South in Afghanistan in the fall of 2012. We knew prior to the deployment that 4th SBCT would primarily be functioning as “battlespace owners” in the Panjwai District with a support battalion on Kandahar Airfield.

Nine months prior to the deployment, the decision was made to augment the brigade with a FET.

This decision was made for several reasons. First, many of the brigade’s responsibilities would include work at the village level, especially during base closures. Additionally, around the same time that 4th SBCT began planning for deployment, an Army requirement was released that mandated FETs for brigades deploying to Afghanistan. In many ways, this requirement was the direct result of the successes that teams had experienced in prior rotations.

Because the decision to form the team was made so early, 4th SBCT had the luxury of nine months of training prior to the deployment. Unfortunately, because we were resourcing the brigade team internally, we did not have the ability to pull any female soldier who was interested in joining the team. Once we eliminated those who were not medically eligible to deploy and those who were mission essential, we were left with a fairly small group of women to train.

This brings me to my first point: It is critical

that women selected for these roles are volunteers who are valued for their unique skill set, not “extra” soldiers performing an additional duty. If an MOS was created specifically to fill the role of “engagers,” brigades would not be stretched thin trying to fill this requirement from their own ranks. Further, when the time and resources spent on the team are taken from the brigade organically, the FET can be seen as a distraction from the rest

of the mission rather than an added capability.

This also creates a situation where the FET is fighting against every other unit in the brigade for resources. Without a specific line in the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), the FET is often left without a strong representative in that fight.<sup>9</sup> I specifically remember drawn-out fights over the assignment of M9 pistols to team members. Although it should have been obvious



(Photo by Sgt. Kimberly Lessmeister, 69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade)

1st Lt. Christina Rath, the officer in charge of a female engagement team assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 12th Field Artillery Regiment, speaks with local women 15 February 2013 during a shura, or consultative meeting, in Dand District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.



(Photo by Spc. Kristina Truluck, 55th Signal Company Combat Camera)

Sgt. Lidya Admounabdfany writes down information from a local woman 17 December 2011 at the Women's Center near the Zhari District Center outside of Forward Operating Base Pasab, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Admounabdfany is a member of 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division's female engagement team and is gathering information so the team can distribute blankets and winter clothing to the women and their families.

why there was a need, because the engagement team was not a line item listed on the brigade MTOE, the unit was seen as a logistical liability and not as an asset that needed to be equipped.

As the 4th SBCT training plan was developed, a strong relationship was formed between FET leadership and the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness team at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The training plan focused on the “whole soldier” concept—developing soldiers who were well rounded physically, mentally, and spiritually. Soldiers were selected for the team by demonstrating maturity, a willingness to adapt, and a strong commitment to teamwork. The training plan developed with Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness team featured several sessions on the development of team identity, communication, building mental toughness, goal setting, and resilience. This was combined with a concentrated effort to build

“engager skills” that included work with Fort Huachuca mobile training teams and cultural training programs to ensure team members were well versed in interpersonal skills, report writing, cultural sensitivity, and communication.

Further training was conducted with the brigade military police platoon to focus on detainee operations and personnel and vehicle searches. This would be a critical point in developing a new MOS. It is worth noting that women filling roles in front-line units would not just be female infantrymen. These women would need to develop key skills that would make them an invaluable asset of that unit. As female soldiers in these positions, they would need to be prepared to fill a role that is a unique combination of a military police officer, a human intelligence collector, and a civil affairs soldier. This combination takes special training, careful selection, and a deliberate effort on the part of Army Human Resources Command to ensure that





(Photo by Pfc. Alisha Brand, Combat Camera Afghanistan)

An Afghan girl peers intently at a U.S. Army soldier 20 June 2011 during a meeting at Baqi Tanah, Spin Boldak District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. A female engagement team from Combined Task Force Lightning met with women and girls to focus on health education.

they are placed in the right positions at the right times to be best leveraged.

## Creating Opportunities for Women

As an Army, we have trained countless women to fill these roles in the last decade, but because of a lack of a real system of accountability, of uniformity in training, or of proper evaluation, there is no way to account for the level or quality of FET training across the Army.

Further, because no supporting personnel tracking and evaluation system existed, many of the women who volunteered for these roles ultimately did not receive the credit they deserved (awards or evaluations), and were therefore ultimately punished for their courage in taking on these roles. They did not enjoy the boost to their careers that many of their male counterparts did, nor did they enjoy due recognition for their efforts even though they fought side-by-side with their brothers-in-arms.

This lack of benefit was often due to a lack of understanding. Although a soldier's Enlisted Record Brief may

state that she served on an FET, the wide variations in quality of training, levels of experience, and standards for performance make it very hard to measure performance against a soldier who has served in a widely understood and accepted position, such as infantry team leader.

Additionally, soldiers who have served on FETs in the past decade have often been coded as "over strength" in order to allow for personnel transactions that enabled their transfer into an infantry unit. This, combined with inconsistent and unreliable applications of the Army's FET additional skill identifier, makes it very difficult for soldiers to demonstrate their accomplishments—in proper documentation—for promotion boards.

This lack of recognition serves to create "two classes of service members based on gender—[of] which neither preserves a legitimate national security interest nor shields women from enemy fire. Instead, it protects and perpetuates the brass ceiling that women in the military have yet to shatter."<sup>10</sup> The advent of an engager MOS would help to change all of that.

Separately, none of the above would change the need to open the door to Ranger School to all women, regardless of MOS. Currently, Ranger School is seen as the premier leadership development school available to young soldiers and officers. Excluding women from the school denies them the experiences, training, and recognition that accompany graduation. This barrier ultimately affects promotion rates, job opportunities, and perpetuates the feeling that women are “guests” in infantry units, where they have not had an opportunity to prove their credibility. By running a trial phase, providing training opportunities for women, and maintaining high standards, it seems that the Army is handling this integration the right way and tackling the challenge head on. It is my hope that regardless of the outcome, the doors will remain open to all those who qualify.

## Conclusion

Although U.S. forces are closing the chapter on Afghanistan, conflicts with Islamic extremists do not seem to be going away anytime soon. The Army should continue to prepare for situations in which women will play a key role in engaging with the population, interfacing with leaders, and satisfying a tactical necessity. The nature of modern warfare necessitates that women be trained and ready to fill these roles within the U.S. military. The current situation, in which selection and training for soldiers filling these critical roles are left to the unit, cannot persist. It is time for the Army to identify key skills, standardize training, and create an MOS that will continue the successes of past FETs and cultural support teams for decades to come. ■

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## Notes

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9. A modified table of organization and equipment, or MTOE, is a document that identifies a unit’s authorized organization, personnel, and equipment. Since the FETs were ad hoc units (not included on the MTOE), they did not automatically receive the personnel and equipment needed to effectively accomplish their missions.

10. Katie Miller and Lindsay Rosenthal, “Women and Warfare: Denying Combat Recognition Creates ‘Brass Ceiling,’” *Center for American Progress* website, 20 December 2012, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/military/news/2012/12/20/48619/women-and-warfare-denying-combat-recognition-creates-brass-ceiling/> (accessed 7 January 2015).