



First Sgt. Raquel Steckman salutes her platoon sergeants with the 374th Engineer Company (Sapper), headquartered in Concord, Calif., during formation. Steckman is the first female in the Army appointed to a combat engineer unit as a first sergeant. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michel Sauret)

# Barrier Broken with Combat Engineer Company's Female 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant

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EDITOR'S NOTE: 1st Sgt. Raquel Steckman is the first female combat engineer senior sergeant (12Z qualified) in the Army appointed to a Sapper Company as a first sergeant. A sapper company is filled with combat engineer Soldiers (12B) whose entire mission is combat-focused. They are the equivalent of light infantrymen in their function, but with expertise in explosives.

Our initial story said Steckman was the first female first sergeant across all combat engineer companies. There are other engineer companies with 12B Soldiers in the Army, and it was brought to our attention at least one female first sergeant was appointed to such a unit. However, no previous female first sergeant was qualified as a 12Z, which is a requirement for the position.



First Sgt. Raquel Steckman works on an operations order for a coming demolition range for the Army Reserve 374th Engineer Company (Sapper), headquartered in Concord, California. Steckman is the first woman in the Army appointed to a combat engineer company as a first sergeant. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michel Sauret)

She took charge of the formation for her first time since joining the unit. There was no fanfare. There were no pink balloons or colorful streamers announcing her arrival.

“Receive the report,” 1st Sgt. Raquel Steckman ordered the company.

Each platoon sergeant did, taking accountability of Soldiers among their ranks.

They reported back to Steckman: the first woman in the Army appointed as a sapper company first sergeant while qualified as a combat engineer senior sergeant (12Z).

A sapper company is the engineer equivalent to a light infantry unit, where engineers have a combat-focused mission with expertise in explosives.

But for her, being a woman is irrelevant. When the topic is brought up, she laughs it off entirely.

“I just don’t think it’s a big deal. Why do you have to point out that I’m a freaking female? I’m trying to do a job here. It just blows my mind,” said Steckman, now with the 374th Engineer Company (Sapper), an Army Reserve unit located in Concord, California.

Being a female first sergeant, after all, is not such a monumental occasion. There have been plenty of them before Steckman around the Army, and plenty others who served as commanders and command sergeants major. Ranger school has recently opened to females, and more than 40 women have graduated the elite sapper training since 1999.

“Gender or race have no impact on how well (Soldiers) will perform a task,” Steckman said.

So, end of story. Stop the press.

Except her appointment marks another barrier breached in the integration process of women in combat units. There are more than 20,500 combat engineers across the Army, and currently none of them are women. The position is expected to open to females once a congressional notification from the Secretary of Defense makes it official. It will become one of 14 combat-specific military occupational specialties (MOS) that have been exclusive to males until now.

Steckman became eligible for this position because she joined the Army as a bridge crew member. Soldiers in her MOS train alongside combat engineers frequent-



ly, even as early as basic combat training. Combat engineers (12B) and bridge crew members (12C) both feed into the same leadership role: combat engineer senior sergeant (12Z). Only five women in the Army currently hold that position. All five are in the Army Reserve.

Being an Army Reserve unit doesn't make these combat engineers any less "manly." They talk about 12-mile ruck marches, bivouacking and 5-mile runs like it's their everyday life. During formation, platoons compete against each other.

They each appoint a Soldier to disassemble and reassemble an M240 machine gun to see who can do it fastest. Their Army jobs revolve around explosives, blowing stuff up.

However, both Steckman and her company commander have said that being an Army Reserve unit in the Bay Area, just an hour north of San Francisco, made this appointment an easy transition. That's why for Steckman, this "female thing" isn't such a big deal for her Soldiers.

"Their whole life isn't focused on (their Army job). They leave. They go home and they do other jobs. So their spectrum is much broader. The reason why it's different in the Reserve is because those guys go to civilian jobs, where they interact with females all the time," Steckman said.

Steckman doesn't ask herself what her role is as a "female" first sergeant. Her focus is on the job, not the gender.

"I'm constantly asking: What does a first sergeant do? They always say beans and bullets, so (my) responsibility is to make sure the Soldiers are taken care of as far as training, vehicles and their well being," she said.

Steckman has wanted to serve in the military for as long as she remembers.

"My dad's favorite picture of me is where I'm wearing a purple one-piece swimsuit and my curly long hair sticking out from underneath my grandfather's sailor's hat, saluting. It's his favorite picture. Carries it around with him still," said Steckman, who grew up in Eben Junction in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

She wanted to join the Marine Corps at 17, but her parents wouldn't sign the paperwork. Instead, she joined the Army Reserve in 1998. She became one of the first female bridge crew members, which had opened up to women a few years prior. She fell in love with the job, learning to operate boats as a private.

"We went out on the water, and they said, 'Sure let's see how you do on the boat.' And they say you either get it or you don't. You either can operate or you can't. And I loved it. I freaking loved it," she said.

From there, she grew in the ranks, eventually joining the Active Guard Reserve program and served as the operations sergeant at the company and battalion levels. Her office is decorated with awards, plaques and coins she collected from each unit or school she attended.

One multi-role bridge (MRB) company presented her with a red-haired Barbie dressed in a GI Joe uniform holding a plastic rifle. The Barbie is mounted to a wooden base with a plaque thanking her for her dedication and service. Her most prized award is a paddle from the 652nd Engineer Company (MRB), from Hammond, Wisconsin, where she spent 12 years.

When she graduated from her senior combat engineer course in North Dakota, she received two coins: one for making the commandant list, and the other for being the first female to graduate the course.

"I was actually pissed off they gave me a coin for being a female," she said.

There's no malice or resentment in her voice when she said this. She's not an "angry" woman, or a "bossy" woman. She doesn't see herself as having something to prove. She's just a Soldier in uniform.

"I just. I don't know. I've always wanted to fly under the radar and just be. I never wanted to be the center of attention," she said.

Interestingly, Steckman isn't the first woman to join the 374th Engineer Company. There are four other females in the unit already, all holding non-combat positions: Two are medics, one a mechanic and one a nuclear, biological and chemical specialist.

When asked, they don't make a big hoopla over having a female first sergeant.

"I was thinking about this. It's not about us," said Staff Sgt. Katherine Goodwin. "It's about all the women who had to deal with not being accepted and having to fight for their rights to do their jobs. We're just here. We're doing what we could have done all along. But somebody 20 years ago had to bust their ass. There's been nurses and medics getting killed that are female that weren't given the same opportunities that are now being given to us."

She doesn't have to look far to see this reality.

Her fellow medic, Staff Sgt. Melissa Ruggieri, is now 38 years old. She said that 10 or 15 years ago, she was in the best shape of her life, but she was never afforded the opportunities some of the women are granted today.

She spent six years in active duty. She remembers a moment when she was about to pick up a combat litter during a training event, and a male Soldier cut her off. He grabbed the litter before she could. As though she were too fragile, and she might break from carrying her own share of the weight.

For much of their Army lives, they've seen female Soldiers treated as liabilities instead of assets. But now, things are changing.

"I wanted to be able to test myself, and see how far I could go (but wasn't allowed). I'm so happy for the females that are coming in that are able to test themselves to the limit. To go for it. Unfettered. It's gotta be amazing," Ruggieri said.

Being a Soldier doesn't mean they have to stop being feminine.

Steckman's face lights up when talking about her two children. Her motherly affection becomes evident in her eyes. She's been married five years to a man whom she considers a mentor. He is also a first sergeant, but with the Wisconsin National Guard.

Sometimes, when he opens the door for her, she playfully steps back so he can go through it first.

"I'm opening it for you," he would object. "Ever heard of chivalry?"

"I don't know what that is. I'm a Soldier," she would rebut, jokingly. "But he's always treating me like a lady." ■



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