

# Soldier for Life Sergeant Major Aims for No Gender Barriers

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While Sgt. Maj. Billie Jo Boersma said she's glad all branches are now open to women, she hopes for the day when gender no longer becomes an issue because gender barriers of all types will be gone.

Boersma, who is the sergeant major for the Army's Soldier For Life program, or SFL, said she's had the good fortune to have not encountered very many gender barriers during her 24-year Army career.

At age 21, Boersma rode her bicycle past an Army recruiting office. On a whim, she went inside and enlisted. It was October 1991, not long after Operation Desert Storm had ended. No one in her family had ever been in the Army, so she knew she was breaking new ground.

Little did she realize she'd make a career of it, she said.

Her parents had brought her up with strong values and a good work ethic. She was competitive and prided herself on never giving up, all qualities that would aid her well in the Army.

Boersma described her years in the Army as rewarding, and highlighted a few of her experiences:

## Drill Sergeant

The toughest job Boersma said she ever had wasn't one of her four combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was her stint as a drill sergeant at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, from 2002 to 2003.

While it was her toughest job, she added that it was also her most rewarding.

"At the end of nine weeks, you meet the mother and father of a new Soldier," she said, speaking of graduation. "Sometimes they tell me: 'he or she stands so straight and looks so proud and confident. You've done what I couldn't do in 18 years.' That's pretty rewarding."

After earning the title of Drill Sergeant of the Year in 2003, Boersma wanted to stay in that job for the rest of her career. However, she "got promoted out of it," she said.

## Afghanistan

Boersma's most recent combat tour was in Afghanistan from 2013 to 2014. She served as the command sergeant major for 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division.

The position was for a male Soldier at the time, she said. But because she had the good fortune of serving with the brigade's commander, Col. William Ostlund, she was offered the position.

"He saw me as a leader, not a female," she said. "He put his trust in me and allowed me to lead."

Ostlund had her accompany him to all briefings, as well as meetings with tribal leaders and government officials, where he didn't require her to cover her face or head, she said.

"He empowered me," she said.

Afghan women looked up to Boersma, and she felt like she was making a difference, she said. In turn, Boersma said she looked up to her Afghan female counterparts who worked in their army, police force or government.

Boersma said she was aware of the stereotype that all Afghan males are misogynists, but found that the majority of Afghan men are happy to see women succeed.

## **Outlook for Women**

Opening up all the branches of the Army to women is just a start, Boersma said.

It will take years and even decades for women just coming into those branches to put in the years to get to brigade-level and higher leadership positions.

It's not an option to move a senior female NCO laterally from one branch into a previously closed one, so getting there will take time, and young female Soldiers will be the ones doing it.

"I had the good fortune to lead infantry Soldiers in combat," she said. "Col. Ostlund made that happen.

"But it's not just him," she continued. "I've been blessed with outstanding mentors throughout my career, all of whom were men."

Boersma said she always tries to be a good mentor to her Soldiers, both male and female, and expects excellence from all of them. But, she said, it may often be tougher for female Soldiers, because, for example, if one of them presents a sloppy appearance in uniform, it tends to reflect badly on all women.

## **Soldier For Life**

Upon returning from Afghanistan in 2014, Boersma was chosen for the senior enlisted position at SFL.

She said SFL is rapidly growing, but is still very much a work in progress.

The Army is all about people, and SFL is in the people business. From the time a young man or woman joins the Army to the day they die, they remain Soldiers For Life.

SFL has been working to connect Soldiers and veterans with communities across the country. It's a win-win for everyone, she said, because Soldiers like to volunteer, and their leadership and values are great assets to any community.