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Women at War

Female soldiers face unique risks in battlefields

By Steve Young

On the streets of Minnehaha County, with her 7-month-old son strapped into his car seat, Tracy Heiser is never far from the echoes of Iraq.



Sgt. Suzanne Gluf, 22, of Luverne, Minn., works in base security in Baghdad, Iraq. More than 155,000 U.S. women have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002, including more than 200 South Dakotans. (Photo by Submitted photo)

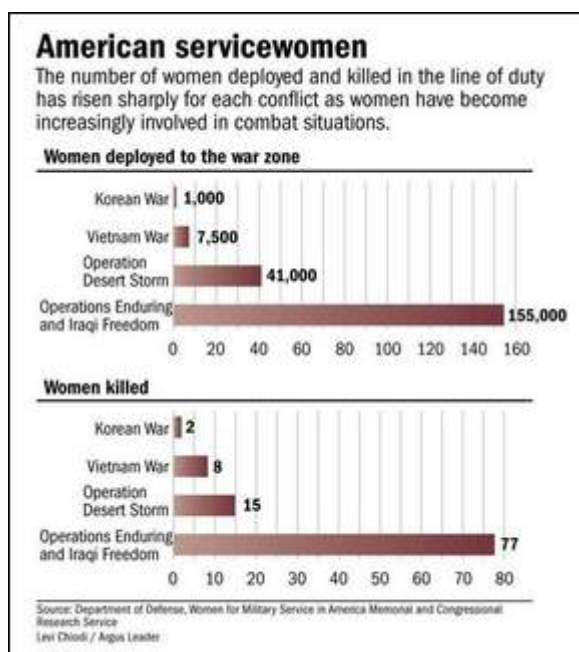
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“I don’t have nearly as much problem with it now as when I first came home, not that I ever had a big problem with it,” Heiser, a first lieutenant in the South Dakota Army National Guard, says as she sits in her kitchen. Still, she adds, “there’s not a day goes by that I don’t think about it.”

The image of women soldiers and airmen coming home from combat zones with war seared into their memories is no subtle adjustment for a public more accustomed to seeing disabled male veterans and widows crying over flag-draped coffins.



More than 155,000 women have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002, the Pentagon says, including 184 soldiers and 28 airmen from the South Dakota National Guard. Females account for 15 percent of the active duty force, with almost four times the number serving now than did during the Persian Gulf War.

The high-profile among them fly jet fighters and attack helicopters. South Dakota's female Guard members are mostly truck drivers and medics. They fix night-vision goggles and patrol the streets of Baghdad with Iraqi national policeman.

Even in those roles, they face danger around any corner. In a place where front lines don't exist, more than 450 women have been injured and another 77 killed. Though that's only a fraction of the more than 3,560 Americans who have died, it still exceeds the number of military women lost during active duty in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War combined.

South Dakota hasn't felt that loss. But its women warriors have experienced improvised explosive devices, rocket-propelled grenades and small-arms fire. Sixty-two of them earned Combat Action Badges for their exposure to combat. Another five returned home with the Bronze Star for meritorious achievement – meaning they did their jobs extremely well.

But a number of them brought back the darker side of war with them, too.

Reports of Sexual Abuse Foreign to S.D. Women

At the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Sioux Falls, officials are treating female veterans for everything from muscular and skeletal problems to depression and the trauma of sexual harassment and abuse.

“Fortunately, it is very small numbers,” Lisa Flinn, a VA case manager for returning combat veterans, said of women – mainly National Guard members or reservists – who reported being verbally or sexually abused. “But I can tell you for a fact that there are women who experienced sexual trauma. And it is very difficult for them.”

Former Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, who made news as the highest-ranking officer punished in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, has said publicly that she's aware of several female soldiers who died of dehydration because they refused to drink liquids late in the day. They were afraid of being assaulted or even raped by male soldiers if they had to use the latrine after dark, Karpinski said.

U.S. military officials say they can't verify any deaths under those circumstances. And even women soldiers from this area seemed skeptical of Karpinski's claims.

“On my first deployment, I heard of a couple of females getting raped at night going to the bathroom,” Sgt. Suzanne Gluf, 22, of Luverne, Minn., said in an e-mail from Camp

Liberty in Baghdad, where she works in base security. “But I have never heard or read any stories about females dying of dehydration, nor does this seem realistic to me.”

Staff Sgt. Kelley Crane of the 82nd Civil Support Team in Rapid City said she knew women who wouldn’t drink water because they didn’t want to get up to use the restroom but said she doesn’t think it was related to a fear of sexual assault.

“I just thought it was stupid,” said Crane, 37, who spent a year in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005. “I never felt there was a possibility that I could be sexually assaulted. I’ve always felt safe with the people I’ve been deployed with.”

Heiser, who commanded a platoon within the 1742nd Transportation Co., said South Dakota’s females probably had fewer issues with sexual harassment and assault because of the makeup of their units. Many Guard members are from smaller communities and went to high school with each other, know each other’s families, or are even related to each other, she said.

Feeling of Community Unites South Dakotans

Paul Rentz, a psychologist at the VA Medical Center, calls that the “South Dakota phenomenon.”

“The fact they come from the same community and went to the same high school together ... takes away a lot of the anonymity you find in other units, especially in larger cities,” Rentz said. “I get the feeling that Guard units in South Dakota are very family-like, and things like sexual assault wouldn’t fly.”

Women from this region seem divided on whether they would be comfortable in a combat situation with someone who had sexually harassed or abused them or someone else in their unit.

“I would not be able to trust that person,” Crane said. “I would not trust them in a combat situation at all.”

But in the heat of battle, even those issues need to be put aside, said Sgt. Casey Thompson, who drove trucks in and out of Iraq from April 2003 until March 2004 with the 727th Transportation Co. based out of Brookings.

“If I had an issue with someone, even if I couldn’t stand them, all that stuff goes out the window when you’re in a combat situation,” said Thompson, a 23-year-old Winner native. “At that point, we’re all battle buddies.”

Among those surveyed, none ever faced such a scenario. Nor for the most part did they endure situations where their male colleagues even questioned their abilities to command or to do their jobs because they are women.

Col. Nancy Wetherill of the 109th Engineer Group in Rapid City spent a year in Afghanistan as a commander with Task Force Coyote, which was involved in everything from clearing mines and building roads to repairing runways and installing sewer systems.

Different Cultures, Different Attitudes

She not only commanded American soldiers, but worked alongside Polish, Slovakian, Korean and Australian service members as well. And in each case, her gender wasn't an issue, said Wetherill, 51, who earned the Bronze Star for her leadership in Afghanistan from May 2004 to May 2005.

"I think we had respect for each other," she said. "They all worked for me. Some were more curious than others. But they didn't question my ability because I was a woman."

Nor has that been an issue for Lt. Col. Andrea Thompson of Sioux Falls, who was the highest-ranking female military intelligence officer with the 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell, Ky., before she recently was assigned as military assistant to the chief of staff of the U.S. Army.

Thompson, too, was awarded the Bronze Star after her second tour in Iraq. While men's attitudes are different toward women depending on their culture, she doesn't recall being shown disrespect by anyone because of her gender.

"In those cultures that are more open to the integration of men and women, it's seamless," said Thompson, 41. "There are other cultures obviously where women are treated as second-class citizens. Men in that environment are caught off-guard by females in leadership positions.

"My experience in my deployment to the Middle East is, as there's been an integration of coalition forces with the Iraqis, they've even become more accustomed to female officers. They may not accept it. But at least they treated me with respect."

Not all of South Dakota's women warriors can say that. Some indicated that they've been scoffed at by Iraqi civilians, even as the women held M16 rifles in their hands. Others indicate they've been physically touched – almost groped – by Middle Eastern men.

"When I was in Saudi Arabia the first time, oh my goodness, the male culture," Crane with the 82nd Civil Support Team said. "They wanted to touch you, wherever they wanted to touch you. I don't know if they think American women are sleazy or what. It's definitely a different culture."

Debate about Combat has not Subsided

Critics say that's another reason why women shouldn't be working in war zones. Among other things, they are distractions, those critics say.

Martin van Creveld, a prominent military historian and critic of the Iraq War, told The Associated Press earlier this year that the contributions of American service women have been dramatically exaggerated.

“They’re not occupying any particularly important positions or fighting in the front,” van Creveld said. “If there were not a single woman (deployed), the war would be the same.”

Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, wouldn’t go that far. As head of an independent public policy organization that concentrates on military personnel issues, she said she respects women who volunteer to serve in the military.

But Donnelly also supports a U.S. policy that prevents women from serving in ground combat forces. And she contends the Defense Department is circumventing that policy by making them part of support units - such as cooks, mechanics, medics and others – that are grouped together in forward combat units.

“Placing women in collocated units, and having them go into direct combat battalions themselves, that’s not legal,” Donnelly said from her home near Detroit. “It’s not fair to women. It’s not fair to the men with whom they’re serving.”

The U.S. Army’s Public Affairs Office did not respond to a request for a response to Donnelly’s statements. But having served on President George Bush’s Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces in 1992, Donnelly said “there are huge bodies of evidence” to show why women shouldn’t be put into ground combat situations.

If an infantry soldier is hit by a sniper in battle and is bleeding on the street, the soldier next to them might be a male-collocated support soldier, a mechanic or cook, Donnelly said. That soldier could successfully evacuate the combat soldier so his life can be saved.

“But if you substitute that collocated soldier with a female, you lose the life of the infantry soldier,” she said. “A female soldier cannot lift that soldier and remove them. The evidence documented in studies showing that cannot be denied.”

Female soldiers from this area are divided on that issue.

Heiser said she is comfortable with the idea that women can’t be part of ground combat forces.

“I can’t carry 100 pounds of ammunition,” she said. “Not all men can, either. But those men aren’t in those ground combat units, either. So I don’t have an issue with it.”

But Sgt. Shannon Crane with the Recruiting and Retention Battalion out of Rapid City isn’t sure there should be a blanket policy excluding women from certain military jobs.

“To me, if a female thinks she can keep up with those guys and do the job they can do, and she shows she can, I don’t see a reason why she can’t be allowed to serve in that

capacity,” said Crane, 35.

The reason is simple, Donnelly responded.

“Even if you have one or two women who fit the definition of the Amazon myth, a woman who is strong as a man, you don’t make policy on exceptions,” she said. “I don’t think anyone’s son should be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.”

Combat or Not, Scars of War can Linger

It’s not an issue given easily to consensus. But then, women returning home to the American plains from the Middle East don’t seem overly upset about their exclusion from ground combat jobs, either. As it was, most of them experienced their share of stress and fear and danger without ever fighting in a battle.

Heiser won the Bronze Star for commanding a transportation platoon that covered more than 750,000 miles in Iraq as it delivered equipment and supplies.

She didn’t lose one soldier. But she was there each time the bombs and rocket-propelled grenades exploded, injuring several of her men.

Those memories lay close to the surface as she was driving a minivan across Fort Carson, Colo., on one of her first days back from Iraq. A cannon went off nearby in salute to President Ronald Reagan, who had just died, and Heiser instinctively veered the minivan to the right and slammed on the brakes.

“That was kind of my first sign that this was going to take some adjustment,” she said.

She’s not alone. VA health care providers say they see men and women from the National Guard and reserves struggling with readjustment issues from depression to post-traumatic stress disorder. While each story is different, men more often act out, turning to alcohol, for example, as a coping mechanism, VA doctors say. Women are more likely to want to talk about their struggles.

But like their male counterparts, females experience the same psychological difficulties. It affects their ability to work. They use more sick time. Relationships with their spouses and children are strained.

“Think about it,” Rentz, the VA psychologist, said. “Today you have women who are stay-at-home moms who are also in the Guard. So they go from staying at home suddenly to being deployed for 12 months and driving a truck in a combat zone, being shot at, and their colleagues are being shot at or killed.

“And then all of a sudden, a week or two later, they’re back driving a family van to take the kids to day care. But now they’re very hypervigilant, looking for roadside bombs as they go down the street, or looking for snipers under the I-29 bridges.”

Heiser can attest to that. For her, and for many of South Dakota's female warriors, the echoes of Iraq are never far away.

"I knew the dangers when I signed up for the Guard, so it didn't take me by surprise," she said. "But maybe you don't understand completely how dangerous is dangerous until you get over there. I certainly understand it now."

Reach reporter Steve Young at 605-331-2306 or syoung@argusleader.com.

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