

By David Houghton-Carter, UK Defence Forum Research Associate

Recently, the New York Times, concurrently with its International Herald Tribune arm, has been running a series of articles offering an insight into the increasing front-line presence of women in the US Army. Here at the UK Defence Forum, we've also taken an avid interest in helping to promote the valuable contribution made by women on today's battlefields, from the dust and heat of Afghanistan and Iraq to the important job of keeping up the pressure to excel in the corridors of power. Then there's the forthcoming MOD review into the role of women in Britain's armed forces, prompted partly by the demands of EU equality policy. Is it fair to assume that the times may finally be a'chargin'? Perhaps so.

An NYT article has cited the likes of US Army medic Specialist Veronica Alfaro, who won a Bronze Star for valour in combat, in studying the increasing adaptability of female soldiers. Though, as in Britain, women are still formally barred from serving in combat infantry units, they are serving alongside men in "support roles" - medicine, intelligence, logistics, bomb disposal and military police, as in the photo above (two military policewomen from 4 Mechanised Brigade) - which often mean that they find themselves in 'contact' with the enemy. Getting the right person for the job - not just the right man - sometimes means that US generals are getting creative with how they fill out the paperwork, but the result is the same, with women willing and able to give as good as they get under fire. A key factor seems to be the fluidity of the modern combat theatre. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, and the insurgency in Iraq, has been one of irregular enemies, roadside bombs, cars loaded with explosives, mobile mortar teams and makeshift rockets. There is no fixed 'front line', with only the odd saboteur or stray conscript slipping past a wall of tanks, bunkers and fixed machine-gun emplacements. Instead, as the NYT points out, ground combat often means a sudden attack in a bustling town centre or on a fortified military compound. Of course, as we've seen from images of Operation Panther's Claw, there are still pitched battles out in remote areas of desert and scrub. But a noteworthy proportion of the action now takes place in the areas where we wouldn't expect to find male-only infantry units. And we can't dismiss the numerous accounts of women in the US military joining men on aggressive combat operations. These changes in the reality on the ground have stirred up a lot of debate in USA, with Senators and think tanks lined up on each side of the argument, and the Centre for Military Readiness particularly strong in condemning these developments as ad hoc, lacking real planning and oversight. Then there are the practical problems which are often rehearsed as arguments against female integration; as the NYT acknowledges, pregnancy, sexual assault and rape do happen, despite the ready availability of contraception and determined efforts to stamp out harassment. But, as pointed out by Staff Sgt. Patricia Bradford, interviewed for the NYT's article, it's fundamentally a matter of professionalism, maturity and adaptability, and the argument that sexual segregation is the only solution is ringing increasingly hollow. And, for the prudes - newflash folks, soldiers have sex, and that doesn't make them any less good at their job. The increasingly progressive approach of the US military makes attitudes still seemingly prevalent in India's military establishment look positively Neanderthal. Of course, there are those who still see women as 'the weaker sex', another myth challenged by the various soldiers interviewed by the New York Times, with the series referring to many female soldiers getting by just as well as their male counterparts. Dangerous patrols, riding along in the gunner's seat on an armoured vehicle, sleeping on the floor of some truck or an Iraqi hut, marching with a heavy pack - there a plenty of accounts which show that women have no problem earning the respect of the men they serve alongside (or, as is often the case, command). And, as emphasised by Bonnie Erbe on the US News

website, this really shouldn't surprise us, as deployed soldiers, male or female, are all medically verified to be in damn good physical condition. We should also recognise the valuable historical contribution made by women on the front lines. In these pages just a few weeks ago, Elayne Jude, writing as Paula Jaegar, highlighted the contribution of women pilots, the 'Night Witches', to the Soviet war effort as Nazi Germany marched across Russia. Even as far back as the 19th century, women were serving in front-line roles in the British army, either overtly or covertly. And, of course, we can also cite the varied female 'auxiliary services', from those that played a crucial role in World War Two, all the way back to US plans to give aviatrixes a role in the Great War Today, about 9.4% of serving British forces personnel are women, 17,620 people, including 3,760 commissioned officers. The RAF has the highest proportion of roles open to women of the three services, at 96%, followed by the Navy at 71% and the Army at 61%. A BBC report from May this year suggests that as many as one in five of those currently serving in Afghanistan are women, proportionately greater than their overall representation in the military. Our own research has revealed that the RAF has 58 qualified female pilots, some 12 of whom are qualified to fly Fast Jets, out of a total of 148 female aircrew. Still a small proportion of the final tally (720 qualified Fast Jet pilots, 1989 qualified Pilots, based on data from April this year), it shows that women are making inroads into the RAF's most prestigious front-line roles. And, since 2004, 7 women have died in operational theatres, including Corporal Sarah Bryant, killed in an explosion in Afghanistan during June 2008.

Still, there is a bit of a logical inconsistency. It would be a taxing exercise to attempt a survey of the number of women in American law enforcement who put themselves in harm's way on a daily basis, and we have female firearms officers here in the various British Police services who are expected to participate aggressively in defending the public. If we can accept that an armed woman is perfectly capable of facing down a well-armed, rabid gangster (or a terrorist with a bomb) on the streets of New York or London, why not take a chance on giving women the opportunity to serve in our infantry formations? Maybe we could take a leaf out of Canada's book, where women are being actively recruited for front-line roles, or perhaps learn a few things from Israel about training and participation.

FLIGHT SERGEANT ANN CARTER MBE

During three tours of duty at the Basra Contingency Operating Base, Flight Sergeant Carter led her Immediate Response Team to deliver life saving medical treatment, frequently with the ever present threat of death and personal injury.

In one incident, Flight Sergeant Carter was deployed to extract a Danish soldier seriously injured by an Improvised Explosive Device. On arrival at the scene, she assessed the incident and rightfully declared it as a major incident. Personally supervising the evacuation process and without regard for her own safety, Flight Sergeant Carter's clear direction to her team and guidance to the medical chain of command resulted in a successful and flawless evacuation. Flight Sergeant Carter repeatedly demonstrated this level of bravery and professionalism over three operational tours and is was recognised by the award of the MBE last year.

Photos courtesy of Elayne Jude 17dragons Photography