

The MOD recently completed a review of its policy which excludes women from duties in close combat. The review was published on 29th November. The service chiefs made all of the right noises about gender equality and empowerment, but still stand on their view that close quarter combat is no place for a lady.

One might think this is commendable, but a moment's reflection on the nature of modern war, as characterized by "war among the people" style counter-insurgency will show this conclusion to be rather old fashioned. If we are to believe that high intensity warfare is low on the threat level, it doesn't follow that close quarter combat is also a low risk. There are no front lines nowadays. Today 17,900 women serve in all three armed services, 9.1% of total manpower. In the airforce women can serve in 96% of posts, including fast jets. In both the navy and the army the figure is 71%.

The unsubtle message is that women are believed to dislike killing; or rather in our society we don't like the idea of recruiting women killers. It is often noted that in the naval and air forces people man equipment, while in the army men are equipped. All very true, but all a bit reminiscent of the 1940s. In other armies women do serve in "front line" roles, such as the U S and Israeli armies. So what makes British women different? In World War II Russian women pilots flew fighter aircraft in the "night witches" squadron.

The language of the related MOD press release is instructive on this matter. "There was no evidence to show that a change in current policy would be beneficial or risk free and so a decision was made to take a precautionary approach and maintain the current position." So fall out all those women in risky posts, such as rescue pilots who get the DFC for evacuating wounded under fire; or medics who get the MC for providing first aid to comrades under fire.

Of course there is a difference between performing a life saving, or mission critical duty under fire and actually killing someone. Isn't there a self selecting process when people freely choose to join the military? History is replete with examples of women who have been able to kill, even in biblical times. The MOD press release produces another excuse:

"The key issue is the potential of having both men and women in small teams. Under the conditions of high-intensity close quarter battle, team cohesion becomes of much greater importance, and failure can have far-reaching and grave consequences." So the message is clear ladies – you are too weak and feeble for this ugly business. Leave it to the chaps!