

Running Head: Women in Combat

An Ethical Situation: Women in Combat

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Abstract

This ethics paper looks into the Army's stance on women in combat. In the Global War on Terrorism, the battlefield is nothing like the battlefield from previous engagements. Terrorism changed the way the US military fights. Asymmetric warfare is nature of warfare today. Because of this, there is no clear front line. The rise of the insurgency in the Middle East made the battlefield the way it is today. Everyone is now an active combatant, including women. This paper looks at a case where women, serving on the front lines, redefine the Army's policy of women in combat.

Ethics is defined as the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the conduct of the members of a profession. In the military, we have a code of ethics we govern ourselves by. If we come across an ethical problem, we have an ethical decision making process that may help solve our problem. A long-standing debate in the Army is the role of women in combat. The Army currently prohibits women from possessing Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) that serve in direct combat roles. Women are also prohibited from serving in units that engage in direct ground combat. In today's Global War on Terrorism, the role of women in combat is changing. The battle lines are blurred. Long gone are the distinguishable battle fields where the combatants on either side are easily identified. The entire area of operations is now a battlefield and women are finding themselves right in the middle of the fight.

As a First Sergeant of a Firebase Harriman in Orgune, Afghanistan, I was responsible for 126 Soldiers. Nearly two-thirds of those Soldiers were from combat arms MOSs. The rest of the Soldiers were made up of combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) Soldiers. On my firebase, I had a forward air refueling point (FARP) that served as a refueling point for the helicopters. Two of the fuel operators that supported the FARP were female Soldiers. One of the females was a Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) and a very motivated individual. The FARP stayed busy throughout the day and night supporting the aircraft that were continually flying missions. I had a total of five personnel that supported the FARP. Because the support crew was small, they stayed within the confines of the firebase all the time. However, the female NCO assigned with the FARP wanted to patrol with my infantry Soldiers.

SGT Buzzard was one of two NCOs that worked at the FARP. She was young in her career and this was the first time she was deployed to a combat zone. Being only one of two women on the compound in the middle of a combat zone, SGT Buzzard attracted quite a bit of attention. She was no ordinary female Soldier, though. She felt that she was as good as any of my infantrymen. When she would converse with my Soldiers, she would ask about tactics and ask what the experience of going on a combat patrol was like. Prior to every mission, the patrol leader conducted a rehearsal with the patrol members. SGT Buzzard could often be found observing the rehearsal. SGT Buzzard then began to extract as much information as she could from one of my platoon sergeants. Before I knew it, SGT Buzzard was learning how to disassemble and reassemble light and heavy machine guns, she was learning our unit standard operating procedures (SOPs), and she even began configuring her fighting load carrier (FLC) like that of my Soldiers.

After a few weeks of taking the crash course in infantry tactics, SGT Buzzard felt it was time to put her newly found skills to the test. She asked me if she could go on one of the dismounted combat patrol outside the firebase. Apart from the mounted patrols that ran at least twice a day, we would conduct several dismounted combat patrols. These patrols would go into the Orgune Valley, into the mountains that flanked the firebase, into the low foothills that overwatched the compound, and through the dirt streets of the town of Orgune. The dismounted patrols lasted anywhere from two to three hours. Although my Soldiers would patrol combat light, the equipment they wore and carried was far from light. By the time you added water, ammunition, radios, your individual weapon, night vision gear, and any other special items of equipment, the

combat light mode didn't seem too light at all. If we patrolled in the mountains, the air got thin, your Individual Ballistic Armor (IBA) constricted the fully expansion of your chest during breathing, and your legs burned as you climbed to about 10,000 feet above sea level. The dismounted patrol took its toll on my Soldiers and my Soldiers were all in very good physical condition. And now, a non-combat arms, inexperienced female Soldier who weighed almost as much as a combat load wanted to go on a combat patrol with my Soldiers. I was very skeptical of the whole situation.

I brought the issue to my commander. We were the senior ranking individuals on the compound and were responsible for all operations taking place both on and off the firebase. Understanding the military's stance on women in combat, we both hesitated to allow SGT Buzzard to conduct a dismounted patrol with our Soldiers. But, by the same token, we also expected SGT Buzzard to defend the firebase in the event of an attack. The FARP personnel were assigned a fighting position to man in the event of an attack. The FARP personnel also pulled security in the perimeter towers during the evening. Essentially, SGT Buzzard was already conducting combat operations in a combat zone, although in a limited role. For my commander and I, we were presented with an ethical dilemma. Should we allow SGT Buzzard, informally trained in infantry tactics and yet unproven on the battlefield, to act as a member of a combat patrol? SGT Buzzard definitely possessed the drive to be successful. We just weren't sure if she would prove to be too much of a liability to a young Staff Sergeant who would be in charge of the patrol.

My commander and I continued to discuss the situation. It's not that we were entirely against women in combat. For whatever it was worth, we were in a forward-

deployed firebase with only 126 Soldiers to patrol an area of well over 400 square kilometers in Southeastern Afghanistan, the most volatile part of the country. The question was no longer if women should be in combat but whether how much of an active part would women take in combat.

Back at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Salerno, a platoon of Military Police (MPs) was attached to our sister companies stationed there. In the MP platoon were also two females. These females acted as both driver and turret gunners on the MK19 Automatic Grenade Launcher. The MPs regularly conducted mounted patrols in the area surrounding FOB Salerno. Those two women MPs regularly conducted combat patrols. Although women would not be placed into combat arms units, there were already very well integrated into the daily combat operations of Operating Enduring Freedom (OEF). The difference being that the female MPs were trained and had been with their platoon for quite some time. That unit was well established long before they were deployed to Afghanistan.

After some careful consideration and planning, my commander and I decided to allow SGT Buzzard to conduct a dismounted patrol. She was fitted with her combat gear, given a set of night vision goggles, and taken to the range to learn how to properly use the optics on our M4 rifles. She was tested on the use of our SOPs and took part in a full dress rehearsal prior to the patrol. My commander and I integrated SGT Buzzard into the best squad we had. To further minimize any risk, a platoon sergeant and myself would be part of the dismounted patrol. SGT Buzzard would be between myself and another senior NCO towards the tail-end of the patrol. There would also be a section from my anti-armor platoon close by conducting a mounted patrol. They would serve as a Quick

Reactionary Force (QRF) in the event of a situation. The patrol route would be through the town of Orgune during the daytime. The town of Orgune was very friendly to the US forces. Whatever risks there were for SGT Buzzard, my commander and I felt that we mitigated them to an acceptable level.

The role of women in combat is changing and evolving on the battlefield. The traditionally “safe” rear locations are nonexistent. The Global War on Terrorism is changing the face of battle and how the military fights.