



MSG Mawson #524

Female Combat Engineer Officers

This ethics paper will discuss the ethical decisions that senior leaders in the US Army Engineer Corp must make concerning placement of female engineer officers in their organizations. I have personally experienced this ethical dilemma as a 1SG deployed in Kosovo. The situation created conflict between the Company Commander and the Battalion Commander and impacted morale in the unit. Understanding the structure and manning of engineer units is critical to understand the underlying problem that contributes to this issue.

I have been in mechanized combat engineer units throughout my military career, therefore a lot of my examples are based on that environment. There is not any female enlisted Combat Engineer, 21B, soldiers in the United States Army however there are female Combat Engineer officers in the United States Army. When female engineer officers arrive in the organization they are slotted by the Battalion XO with guidance from the Battalion Commander. The female officers are assigned to Brigade and Battalion level staff positions in HHC. The female officers are not assigned to the line companies within the battalion because it's not authorized by the MTOE and against Congressional mandate. This creates an interesting situation as the female officers stay in the Army and move up in rank. Female officers can command the Headquarters Company. They can also be the OIC of the battalion S-3, Executive Officer, and the Battalion Commander.

I was in a mechanized engineer battalion in Germany that had a female officer as the battalion executive officer. After the battalion commander was relieved she served as the

battalion commander for 5 months. I personally feel if the female officers cannot serve as platoon leaders and company commanders in line companies they should not be authorized to be battalion commanders.

While serving as a 1SG in Kosovo, I was told by my company commander that we would be receiving a female officer as a platoon leader in our company. I was confused and told the commander that it was unauthorized. The commander explained that the battalion commander was determined and had the decision approved by the brigade commander. The major reason for the approval was based on the fact that the unit was on a peacekeeping mission and therefore the platoon would not be involved in direct combat with the enemy. However if we were to deploy to war the platoon leader would be replaced with a male combat engineer officer. During the deployment the soldiers were also training on wartime critical tasks. This training must be realistic and involve all the key leaders that would be on the ground in combat. I could not understand how this training would be to standard with a platoon leader that would not go to combat with the platoon. The commander and I had a hard time accepting the decision and prepared a written argument and presented our opinions to the battalion commander. The battalion commander was disappointed in our views and our strong reluctance to accept a female platoon leader. However we were able to convince him not to send her to Kosovo and she was assigned to Bravo Company, which was not deployed. The Bravo company chain of command responded in the same manner and presented there beliefs. However they were forced to accept the battalion commander's decision. The platoon leader took her platoon to an OPFOR rotation at CMTC and then was moved to battalion staff so the platoon could begin there pre-deployment training for Iraq.

Under a 1994 policy, mandated by Congress, women are excluded from units at the level of battalion and below that engages in direct ground combat. Although the Army is barred from assigning women to ground combat battalions, in Iraq and Afghanistan units skirt the ban with a twist in terminology. Instead of being "assigned," women are "attached in direct support of" the battalions. As a result, the Army avoids having to seek Pentagon and congressional approval to change the policy. A House subcommittee, seeking to keep women out of combat, recently passed a measure that would bar women from thousands of Army positions now open to them.

In order to avoid these unethical situations the President, Congress and the Department of Defense need to implement changes to the current policies. These changes need to be clear and avoid any misinterpretation of the regulation. It doesn't make sense to force senior leaders to make these types of decisions without proper guidance. Female officers should not command battalions which they were unable to lead platoons and companies within. My argument is not based on whether females can perform the job. It is solely based on fairness and ethics. The Army must be realistic and apply the new policies to the nature of battle that we are involved in today. I feel that it is almost impossible in an asymmetrical battlefield to keep all female soldiers out of direct fire confrontations. The change to the policy should either allow female officers to hold platoon leader and company commander positions in combat engineer battalions or prevent them from commanding combat engineer battalions. Another recommendation for policy change is to allow mixed gender combat support battalions to support combat battalions. This has been tried with the reorganization of the new combat brigades. The engineer career management field is very large and consists of many different skills that

are an asset to the battlefield. Some of these jobs are topographical engineers, construction engineers, heavy equipment engineers and many others. These units are combat support and combat service support and are very different from combat engineer battalions. A lot of soldiers have very strong beliefs concerning this topic. However we must always remember the words spoke by President George Bush on 11 January 2005 "No women in combat".