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**Effective Use of Females to Support Nation Building Operations in  
Afghanistan**

by

Anne-Marie Houghton, Wing Commander, Royal Air Force

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Advisors: Lt Col Barak J. Carlson and Dr Jonathan K. Zartman

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**The current policies of Western Governments, particularly the UK and the US, exclude the use of women from service in combat arms. This restriction causes challenges when the combat units are required to undertake COIN and nation-building missions in countries with diverse cultural requirements. The front lines have moved and women are no longer solely in the rear echelons and are often required to assist security forces on patrols. Within Southern Afghanistan, the requirement for the Royal Air Force Regiment to patrol the Ground Defence Area around Kandahar Air Field brings them into contact with the local Pashtun population. This local population can provide useful HUMINT to warn of unrest in the area but, conversely, if the actions of coalition troops in the area are culturally insensitive this population could also provide a useful recruiting tool for the Taleban in the area. The main cultural requirement to be aware of in Pashtun areas is that of their attitude to women. Culturally sensitive forces take this requirement into account and include women in their patrols. Unfortunately these women are not combat troops and, as such, are not as well trained as those around them. In addition, the inclusion of women on these patrols is ad hoc and there is no mechanism for them to undertake training with their RAF Regiment counterparts prior to deployment. Recommendations to resolve this include setting up a cadre of female volunteers to undertake deployments with the RAF Regiment and additional training to ensure that they are fully conversant with combat section drills. To enable this there must be an acknowledgement that such a requirement exists and funding made available for such training. The consequences for not being culturally sensitive or appropriately trained could lead to greater loss of life over the course of the campaign.**

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## CONTENTS

DISCLAIMER .....	ii
CONTENTS.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
AFGHAN HISTORY.....	3
PASHTUNS AND KANDAHAR .....	5
WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES .....	9
CURRENT EMPLOYMENT OF UK FORCES IN KANDAHAR.....	14
THOUGHTS FROM THE FRONT .....	18
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	19
CONCLUSION.....	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	24

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report looks at the use of women in combat roles within western militaries. As modern day conflicts have moved towards fighting counter insurgencies and asymmetric warfare, rather than conventional campaigns, the lines between what governments say women can do and what they are actually doing have become blurred. The failure to acknowledge these changes in role can lead to inadequate funding for additional training and, ultimately, the compromise of the success of the mission.

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## ABSTRACT

The current policies of Western Governments, particularly the UK and the US, exclude the use of women from service in combat arms. This restriction causes challenges when the combat units are required to undertake COIN and nation-building missions in countries with diverse cultural requirements. The front lines have moved and women are no longer solely in the rear echelons and are often required to assist security forces on patrols. Within Southern Afghanistan, the requirement for the Royal Air Force Regiment to patrol the Ground Defence Area around Kandahar Air Field brings them into contact with the local Pashtun population. This local population can provide useful HUMINT to warn of unrest in the area but, conversely, if the actions of coalition troops in the area are culturally insensitive this population could also provide a useful recruiting tool for the Taliban in the area. The main cultural requirement to be aware of in Pashtun areas is that of their attitude to women. Culturally sensitive forces take this requirement into account and include women in their patrols. Unfortunately these women are not combat troops and, as such, are not as well trained as those around them. In addition, the inclusion of women on these patrols is ad hoc and there is no mechanism for them to undertake training with their RAF Regiment counterparts prior to deployment. Recommendations to resolve this include setting up a cadre of female volunteers to undertake deployments with the RAF Regiment and additional training to ensure that they are fully conversant with combat section drills. To enable this there must be an acknowledgement that such a requirement exists and funding made available for such training. The consequences for not being culturally sensitive or appropriately trained could lead to greater loss of life over the course of the campaign.

*"My experience has shown that when you deal with culturally sensitive issues, you have no choice but to be as careful and as patient as possible. Every concern should be addressed properly. Otherwise, greater problems emerge at later times, when nothing can be done."*

*Mrs. Farzaneh Davari, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) National Project  
Director, Iran*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Afghanistan and Iraq the front lines have moved. Whereas during total wars women were in the rear echelons, now during these asymmetric counter insurgency conflicts, women are increasingly on the front line whether on logistics convoys or assisting security forces on patrols. However, when assisting with security forces patrols, these female service members are employed on an ad hoc basis with the combat units. This paper argues that for their own safety, and that of their male counterparts, they require more appropriate training and, as such, the requirements for them to perform these roles must be acknowledged by Western Governments to enable such training to be undertaken. The current policies of Western Governments, particularly the UK and the US, exclude women from service within combat arms, this exclusion causes challenges when these combat units are required to undertake nation building operations in countries with diverse cultural requirements.

Since the coalition movement into Afghanistan in 2001, and the overthrow of the Taliban at the end of that year, Western troops have been engaged in the rebuilding of the country. This rebuilding is taking place in a non-permissive, hostile environment. Therefore, the nature of the threat necessitates that combat troops are deployed within these areas of operations. However, these Counter-insurgency Operations (COIN) increasingly require troops to enter homes to search, arrest, visit and gather intelligence. Afghan culture, particularly in the Pashtun areas,

requires the separation of women from men in the home and forbids unknown males interacting with females. This cultural dynamic in Afghanistan creates the necessity for a woman service person to be available to interact with the females in the homes being visited. The Royal Air Force (RAF) Regiment provides security of the Ground Defense Area (GDA) around Kandahar Airfield (KAF) in Kandahar Province. These are combat arms troops who, under UK government policy, do not employ females in the front line but who, in the course of their duties, are required to interact with the local Pashtun population. This population has very strong cultural rules regarding females and their interaction within society; as a result, it is necessary for the patrols to take females with them on certain operations within the community. However, these women have not been combat infantry trained or previously integrated with their RAF Regiment colleagues; this can, therefore, present a liability in a hostile environment.

This paper uses the problem/solution method to examine the way in which Western Governments, particularly the United Kingdom, prepare their troops, both male and female, for nation building operations in Muslim societies that are culturally sensitive. In this respect, culturally sensitive means areas such as Afghanistan in which people hold rigid expectations regarding gender roles. This paper explores ways in which military females can be better prepared for such deployments thus enabling them to be more effective when attached to combat arms units. To do this, the paper will look at the use of women with the RAF Regiment for security operations around KAF as an example of such interaction. It will cover the history of Afghanistan, look at the culture of the Pashtuns in Kandahar, it will then move on to cover the employment of UK forces in Kandahar and the history of the employment of women in the UK Armed Forces, particularly in non-conventional roles. Finally, it will review recent experiences of British personnel in Afghanistan and offer some recommendations as to the way ahead with

regards to the training and integration of women into military combat units. This paper does not advocate a change in the policy of not employing women in the combat arms; rather it intends to show that, due to the requirement to interact with the Afghan populace, women will need to be attached to such units. As a result, this type of employment of females must be formally acknowledged and endorsed so that appropriate training can be provided.

### **AFGHAN HISTORY**

Afghanistan stands at the heart of Asia; it is an ancient country, with a rich history that has been shaped over many years by both internal and external influence. The Afghan territory has been contested for centuries by the Greeks, Indians, Persians, Arabs, Turks, British and Russians, all of whom left historical and cultural legacies. The result is a crossroad of cultures with many ethnic groups; the Hazara, Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz and the Pashtun. The Pashtun are the largest majority in the country; their control over the crucial southern border of Afghanistan makes them the one group without whose support success in Afghanistan is doomed to failure.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more important historical legacies within Afghanistan came about as a result of the 'Great Game' of the 1800s between the Empires of Great Britain and Russia: the Durand Line. In 1839, the British invaded Afghanistan to install an Afghan prince named Shah Shuja as king in the hope of creating a dependable client state and ally. This campaign aimed to counteract the Russians moving through the central Asian steppes towards the modern day Afghan northern border. However, the manpower requirements to keep control of India forced most of the British Army to return to India, leaving only a small garrison force within Kabul, in Bamian and in Kandahar.<sup>2</sup> By 1841 the British occupation of Afghanistan was causing animosity. Their decision to stop paying the tribes for guaranteed safe passage through the

passes from India resulted in the Afghan tribes cutting of the British lifeline into India.<sup>3</sup> By November 1841, the Afghans had sacked the British Residency and a national revolt by the tribes started. On 6 January 1842, the British retreated from Kabul. The British defeat was humiliating and marked a clear victory for the tribes in Afghanistan. The Afghan nation was thrown into one of its many Civil Wars, emblematic of the recurring pattern in which the diverse tribes unite to repel an invader, but then no one tribe achieves sufficient dominance to maintain control after the external crisis has passed. Indeed, Afghanistan has never coalesced into a cohesive national community. It consists of an assortment of diverse regions with mixed populations engaged in a strong competition for dominance and resources.

By 1874, the British in India and the Afghans were becoming more concerned about the Russian threat to the north. However, another British invasion of Afghanistan to counter the Russian threat fared no better than in 1842. In 1885 the Russians succeeded in invading northern Afghanistan and the British considered this to be a threat to their interests in the area. To avoid all out conflict between the two Empires, the British and the Russians engaged in a series of negotiations. These negotiations resulted in the establishment of the northern border of the country. In addition, in 1893, Sir Mortimer Durand delineated Afghanistan's eastern border. The 'Durand Line' as it became know "[cut] a nonchalant swathe through Pashtun territory"<sup>4</sup> dividing the tribes between Afghanistan and British India (later to become Pakistan).

In 1919, following a Third Anglo-Afghan war, the Durand Line was made permanent by treaty and the nation of Afghanistan as it is known today was created. However, the legacy of splitting the Pashtuns across the Afghan Pakistan border is still influencing the life of the Pastuns and politics in this region today. This split and the inhospitable terrain that the border covers means a fluid border for Pashtuns and foreign fighters between Pakistan and the lands to the

south of Afghanistan, thereby creating sanctuary and a steady flow of trained anti-coalition fighters.

### **PASHTUNS AND KANDAHAR**

As the majority tribe within Afghanistan, the Pashtuns hold the key to the success, or failure, of reconstruction in Afghanistan. Because Pashtun fighters enjoy ready access to recruits and safe havens across the border in Pakistan, Pashtun support for the Afghan government and coalition efforts in the country constitutes the centre of gravity for the coalition. Culturally insensitive interaction with Pashtuns could forestall the rebuilding process and strengthen the effectiveness of the Taleban recruiters. The Pashtuns are a fiercely independent and disciplined people committed to a strict code of conduct, known as Pashtunwali. Pashtuns observe the norms and rules of this code with great seriousness. One of the more notable obligations in this code, which confuses Western forces, is the duty of hospitality to one's enemy if they seek sanctuary. The code of Melmastia requires that a Pashtun is "delighted to receive a guest regardless of his past relations or acquaintance and prepares a delicious meal for him."<sup>5</sup> Another strong obligation, called Nanawatey, requires the forgiveness of a penitent enemy if that vanquished party goes to the house of the victors and begs forgiveness. However, this does not apply when the dispute involves injury to women.<sup>6</sup> In addition, "under Panah, a subsidiary element of Nanawatey, one can take shelter under the roof of a Pashtun's house irrespective of caste, creed, status or previous relations."<sup>7</sup> This sanctuary can even be given to "deadly enemies."<sup>8</sup> In history this brought the Pashtuns into conflict with the British because they were 'harboring outlaws,' but "the Pashtuns [...] often refused to oblige the authorities in spite of threats of reprisals and severe punishment."<sup>9</sup> This means that Western forces must be aware of the codes of honor under which the Pashtun operate and find ways to work within them. Other

elements of Pashtunwali, that are particularly relevant for coalition forces, include the immediate reparation for a wrong doing. If a family member is killed, then it is essential that the aggressor family immediately makes reparation for that killing. If not, the blood feud must be avenged and this can lead to many years of conflict between families. This knowledge is extremely important for members of the coalition who must interact with Pashtuns, as any slight to their Pashtun family honor will lead a sustained blood feud where a member of the aggrieved family vows to avenge the wrong doing by picking up arms against Western soldiers.

Pashtun devotion to Pashtunwali has a number of significant provisions, necessitating study and understanding by Western armies. For example, Badal means revenge, an eye for an eye, as a result of an insult or an attack on someone's self-respect. If this insult is not avenged then those who failed in revenge lose prestige in the eyes of their compatriots.<sup>10</sup> Saz, means blood money or compensation in lieu of killing where the penitent approaches the deceased's family to make a payment of blood money to end enmity between them. Of all the tenets, the most important for the purposes of this paper is Tor; the honor of Pashtun womenfolk, where even slight touching of a woman or looking at an uncovered woman by a man (other than her husband) is considered an intolerable offence.<sup>11</sup> As succinctly expressed in the website "Kyber.org", "The Pashtuns are sensitive about [the] honor of their womenfolk and [any] slight molestation of women is considered a serious and an intolerable offence."<sup>12</sup> In many cases this can lead to death for the women and the man involved.

Pashtun attitudes regarding the interaction of men and women differ greatly from the social norms common in Western society. The separation of men and women into different quarters within the house and the strict rules governing how male and female family members and guests can and cannot interact are very important. As a result Western forces must ensure

that they are culturally sympathetic and aware of the situation in which they find themselves. As Seth Jones notes in his book *Counter Insurgency in Afghanistan*:

The bottom tier of Taliban guerrillas include[d] thousands of local Afghan fighters. They were primarily men from rural villages who were paid to set up roadside bombs, launch rockets and mortars at NATO and Afghan forces, or pick up a gun for a few days. Most were not ideologically committed to jihad. Rather, they were motivated by unemployment, disenchantment with the lack of change since 2001, or anger over the killing or wounding of a local villager by Afghan, U.S., or NATO forces.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore one misplaced action could ensure that a feud is started between the family and coalition forces, thereby ensuring a continuing supply of fighters for the insurgency. Such tactical events, or seemingly tactical events to Western minds, can have strategic affects in the long run. Therefore, the coalition forces must be educated in the details of the culture within which they find themselves.

Kandahar is the historical capital city of Afghanistan. It is the centre of the Pashtun tribal region and as such the spiritual home of the Pashtun. Kandahar along with Quetta in Pakistan, has long been the stronghold of the militant Taliban. This gives the Taliban a natural constituency within the south-east of Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> According to the Taleban original founding story, they were initially seen as liberators who brought justice to peoples suffering from the corruption and cruelty of local warlords. However, they imposed strict Islamic rule over society by force and became very oppressive. Due to years of neglect around Kandahar by both the Soviets and then the Taleban, the only viable crop became the opium poppy whose yield further funded the Taleban and corruption in the area.<sup>15</sup>

The modern day Taliban does not want to cede control of such a lucrative crop, and the power that comes with it, and has engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of the locals with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces now employed in the South. The Taleban message is that “the Americans and their allies are infidels, Karzai is their puppet, and

those who co-operate with either are equally guilty and will be punished when the Taleban defeats the enemy.”<sup>16</sup> As a result the local population, despite its deprivations, is wary of supporting one side or the other until they know that victory is fully assured; the consequences from getting this decision wrong could be disastrous. It is also worthy of note that over the centuries Afghans have been willing to wait out the reign of any ‘invader’ and then resume their lives once these invaders have gone. Therefore, the coalition must not act in a manner that reinforces the Taleban position that ISAF are infidels, and that reconstruction represents a modern day crusade to impose Christian values upon Afghanistan. Insensitive nation-building efforts have the potential to drive undecided Afghans back toward the Taleban. This support does not even need to be overtly for the Taleban; ambivalence to the rule of law by the Afghan government will also give a victory to the Taleban. It is therefore, extremely important that coalition forces understand the fragility of the situation and work within these very strict cultural constraints.

Kandahar city is not the only area within which ISAF must operate sensitively. Kandahar Airfield (KAF) is ISAF’s ‘gateway to the South’ and, as such, is of strategic importance to all member countries of Regional Command (South). The protection of the airfield is vital and hostile local fighters can make it difficult for the airfield to fulfill its mission. Even ambivalent locals mean that human intelligence (HUMINT) ‘tip offs’ as to arms caches and planned attacks would cease. Such mission compromise could come as a result of offending a family due to inappropriate handling of the cultural situation.

In dealings with locals, Western forces, must be trained in the local customs and must ensure that female soldiers are available, even on aggressive patrols, to deal with the women within the communities. They must make time to sit down and listen to the elders of the family

or village, to understand what they require. The British learnt during their time in Northern Ireland the importance of ensuring that local customs are upheld and the value of HUMINT gathered from interactions with locals. “Direct collection of low-grade intelligence by security forces relies upon the eyes and ears of the entire force.”<sup>17</sup> For coalition forces, knowing that this type of interaction is required means that pre-deployment training can be tailored appropriately. Forces should deploy with the mindset that this is a vitally important part of the mission. Pre-deployment training for UK and other western forces includes training in the cultural aspects of the country in which they are deploying to. Those individuals who are likely to come into regular contact with the locals are given booklets of useful phrases and customs reminders to act as an aide memoire. However, the combat arms troops who are more likely to operate with the local populace undertake more in depth training than those who are sent to well founded operating bases. As combat arms forces do not employ women it is necessary to attach women to units when they undertake such patrols ‘outside the wire’. However, the women chosen will not have had the depth of training as their male counterparts, both in infantry skills and in the cultural aspects of the country in which they are operating. As a result, should these patrols come under attack the women present may represent a liability.

### **WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES**

Over the centuries women have been excluded from taking part in military action. Historical sensibilities and the requirements of the hiring army prevented their recruitment. Nonetheless, many women found ways to hide their identity and enlisted in both the Army and the Royal Navy; for instance Hanna Snell, the daughter of a dyer from Worcester, enlisted in the army in 1745, deserted, and then enlisted in the marines. Hanna saw action in this capacity, and was eventually badly wounded in both thighs. Despite this, her true sex was never identified, and

she recovered from her wounds. In 1750 she revealed her true identity, became a celebrity and starred on the stage.<sup>18</sup> Over the years, women have repeatedly demonstrated the resolve to serve. However, as armies have become larger and technology more advanced over time, the carnage that modern warfare entailed meant that Western sensibilities continued to preclude the use of women in the combat arms. Even into the Second World War women were channeled towards supporting roles within the Army, the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Combat was not seen as appropriate for women. Among the justifications for excluding women from combat was the belief that "they are not capable of the aggression needed to win wars."<sup>19</sup> The "idea of women in combat [...] conflicts with deeply held beliefs that the female role is to give life, not take it," this has led to an entrenched idea throughout the Western world as to the position of women in the military.<sup>20</sup>

After the fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1940, the French resistance started, this was aided by agents from the United Kingdom. Early on in this period the United Kingdom formed the Special Operations Executive (SOE), whose members were recruited to be sent to France to organize, assist and equip resistance cells and to be available to assist once the Allied invasion took place. It was realized that the use of women for some of these tasks would be appropriate as, unlike their male colleagues, they would not arouse suspicion in occupied France. The role of the courier "could best be carried out by women [...] Women could invent a hundred cover stories as they moved around [France], and aroused little suspicion."<sup>21</sup> As a result a number of women were recruited, trained and deployed to fulfill such roles. Training included instruction in "intensive paramilitary work – explosives, stalking and silent killing."<sup>22</sup> Further instruction was in parachute training and then, once their abilities were confirmed, training was completed at Beaulieu in operational 'fieldcraft.'<sup>23</sup> This was an extremely clandestine operation and it wasn't

until early 1942 that ‘unofficial’ authority was granted for these female agents to be sent behind enemy lines.<sup>24</sup> Their deployment was “secretly nodded through by [Sir Winston] Churchill and his War Cabinet, but the decision was never avowed.”<sup>25</sup> The women were commissioned into the *civilian* First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) for as long as they were behind enemy lines as the FANY were not subject to the Geneva and Hague Conventions regarding combatants, and in particular the use of women in combat roles. So, although this was an extremely difficult mission and had many detractors within the United Kingdom Government, it was seen as so vital to the success of the war effort that it was condoned as necessary. It led to formal training courses being run for the women without the necessity for a change in combat arms policy for their employment.

Another example of the recruiting and training of women for missions alongside the combat arms occurred during the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. Women were not deployed overtly to the Province. There were a large number of infantrymen deployed, but women remained in supporting roles within the Women’s Royal Army Corps (WRAC) and the Women’s Royal Air Force (WRAF). However, just as there were men employed in a covert intelligence gathering role within the Province, women were also recruited to this clandestine role. All were volunteers for ‘special duties’ and underwent a rigorous selection process. Those who succeeded gained an exceptionally high standard of training. This training involved surveillance advanced driving courses, skill at arms work and self-defense techniques. The training was thorough and required mental and physical abilities of the highest order to succeed. Men and women were trained together and came to rely upon each other in all circumstances. Following successful completion of the training course the women were employed within 14 Intelligence Security Group (Northern Ireland), otherwise known as ‘the Det.’<sup>26</sup> This Group had originally been a

Military Reaction Force manned by volunteers but “was not a great success due to the lack of training.”<sup>27</sup> This again it shows that appropriately trained individuals, be it male or female, provide a better end result. The women of ‘the Det’ worked alongside their male colleagues and the Special Air Service in Northern Ireland throughout the troubles. During their time, ‘the Det’ was “at the cutting edge of the bitter fight against Republican and Loyalist terrorism.”<sup>28</sup> The public was unaware of the role that these women were playing in the Province and their existence was repeatedly denied, however they provided a unique and fundamental service during the conflict.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, precedent exists within the United Kingdom for specifically recruited and trained women to serve in particular roles within a warzone, whilst not changing the combat arms ruling. Such proactive recruiting and training of the right people for the job has been shown to lead to success.

In addition to the United Kingdom precedent, comparable practice evolved in the United States. Around the same time that the United Kingdom was introducing women into a greater range of military roles so too was the United States. The conclusions of US Congress and the Department of Defense mirrored those of the British Parliament and the Ministry of Defence in excluding women from the combat arms.<sup>30</sup> Despite a number of papers and much discussion on the subject in both countries, these decisions face little likelihood of reversal since both nations train for total war and conduct operations other than war with the same trained staff.

Nevertheless, due to the cultural requirements of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Forces have recruited women from combat support and combat service support units to accompany combat units on patrols. A recent documentary, “*Lioness*” has publicized this employment of women outside their traditional roles.<sup>31</sup> This documentary followed women of various ranks from the US Army and discussed their use in the Ramadi area of Iraq alongside the USMC. Whilst all

were honored to have been called to serve and were aware of the necessity to be there, most felt that they were inadequately trained for the task required of them. Reports from the women who were engaged in the *Lioness* operations confirm that they needed the same pre-deployment training as the men they supported.<sup>32</sup> Supporting Army units was easier as they were Army soldiers and had received basic Army training. However, they found that when they were attached to the Marines, the Marine language and way of operating caused them confusion. Female Marines were not always available at the bases from which these patrols operated and, as such, the *Lioness* units were required to accompany such patrols.

The basis for using these women on patrol showed a sound appreciation of the cultural situation, indeed this requirement was borne out on more than one occasion. As they accompanied soldiers on evening raids into houses, they encountered women and children panicking at the thought of being searched by coalition males. The soldiers of the *Lioness* unit took off their helmets to show that they were female. This simple act and their empathy calmed the women down, which led to a successful search and less ill feeling towards the coalition.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of these successes, the *Lioness* women commented that “I felt that we needed to know more [and that we] went in with very little training.”<sup>34</sup> Women who were required to be in Ramadi to help with offensive ground operations had a steep learning curve. They made mistakes and learned from them whilst out on patrol.<sup>35</sup> This lack of training puts all members of the patrols, male and female, at risk. In addition, the lack of recognition as to the roles that these women were being required to undertake and the lack of a formal unit identity was cited by some as being a factor in their struggle to come to terms with the ‘real world’ once they had returned from the combat zone. Other members of their regular units who had not undergone such missions did not understand the strains that they had been placed under.<sup>36</sup>

The nature of modern warfare means that these women are in a 'grey' zone regarding the Congress' rulings as to the employment of women with and in the combat arms. The importance of the tasks imposed upon these women necessitates, at the very least, a pre-deployment work-up with the units they are likely to support. Whilst all units undergo some pre-deployment training, it has been seen from the experience of the Lioness soldiers that they would have preferred some interaction prior to meeting up at the forward operating bases. Whilst the Lioness units are in Iraq, as the US shifts its focus to Afghanistan, all members of the coalition will face the continuing necessity of using women soldiers to support combat operations.

### **CURRENT EMPLOYMENT OF UK FORCES IN KANDAHAR**

On 15 June 2006, the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defence [sic] announced that the United Kingdom was deploying a RAF Regiment Squadron and a Force Protection Wing Headquarters to Kandahar Airfield in Southern Afghanistan to undertake the task of defending the airfield and its environs.<sup>37</sup> The RAF Regiment has a specialist airfield defense capability that is unrivalled anywhere within NATO. The RAF Regiment was formed in 1942 during the Second World War as a result of "official recognition of the necessity for an indigenous and credible RAF ground defence [sic] force."<sup>38</sup> This force was designed to allow the RAF to defend its own assets and thereby release Army units for redeployment.

All members of the RAF Regiment are trained as combat infantrymen and have a reputation for tenacity, versatility and an air minded outlook. Following their deployment to KAF, the RAF Regiment Squadrons have concentrated on winning the trust of the local population. This increase in trust and the Squadron's dominance in patrolling the 350 Square kilometer Ground Defense Area (GDA) has meant that there has been an increase in protection of personnel at KAF and the air assets operating from the airfield. This increased patrol activity

and interaction with local villages has had a marked affect on the Taleban's operational capability. Rocket attacks on the base are less frequent and those that do occur are less accurate as the enemy is forced to move further away and to resort to 'shoot and scoot' tactics for fear of capture, wounding or death.<sup>39</sup> These patrols within the GDA are as low key as possible and whilst patrolling the squadron attempt to engage with the local population, to make contacts, help plan village improvement projects and to try to bring security and prosperity to the region. It is within this context that the use of women to interact with females within the local villages is required.

The RAF Regiment is the RAF's infantry; as such they are governed by the same rules of employment as the British Army's infantry. When, in 1997, the then Secretary of State for Defence announced the extension of opportunities for women within the Armed Forces the services opened up a number of front line appointments to women. Since 1998, women have been able to serve in 73% of posts in the Naval Service, 70% of posts within the Army, and 96% of posts in the RAF. The only employment exclusions made at that time were from ground combat roles, submarines and some diving roles.<sup>40</sup> Once these preliminary rules were established the Government set out to review this policy within two to three years. A thorough review was conducted in 2002 and retained the clause that women were not to be employed in such units that were required to "deliberately close with and kill the enemy face-to-face"; the RAF Regiment is one of these units.<sup>41</sup> The rationale and research behind this decision is not in question and the requirement for these units to operate in small man teams with intense hand to hand fighting in war is not in debate. However, what the report also concluded was that

"it had been the experience of British Armed Forces in recent years that units deployed on operations other than war may also have to engage in direct combat without warning. There is, therefore, an ever-present risk of involvement in high intensity combat"<sup>42</sup>

Whilst this report, written in 2002, detailed why combat arms should remain all male, what it also showed was that in operations other than war there is now no front line and that personnel required to routinely operate ‘outside the wire’ could be called upon to face and close with the enemy. This does not change the findings of the report, in that there will always be a necessity to have combat soldiers to fight future wars, however there is a requirement to ensure that the training of those in non-traditional trades who may have a likelihood of operating in close quarters combat areas are at least able to protect themselves and not be a burden upon their colleagues.

During the operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001 we have seen that the front line is porous. Trades, specialties, services and genders that would normally have been placed behind the lines are now required to routinely operate within a combat environment where the risk of attack and injury remain ever present. As quoted in the UK newspaper *The Times* on 19 June 2008, Army women in the combat support or combat service support categories “now routinely operate on the front lines – and often under fire – in Helmand.” The article cited “the death of the [female] intelligence officer [to illustrate] the changing role of women soldiers on the ‘asymmetric battlefields’ of Afghanistan and Iraq, where the traditional roles of frontline and support roles have become blurred.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore all women who are likely to be employed outside the wire need to be appropriately trained and prepared for the possible threats they may face.

Whilst members of the Army have a relatively sound basic training in section drills and tactics, the RAF does not have the same in depth training. Individual Reinforcement Training (IRT) prior to deployment can be a Category A or B. Those undertaking Category B training are not expected to be employed ‘outside the wire’ and pre-deployment training only covers

enhanced weapon training, environmental training, anti-ambush drills, mine detection, cultural factors etc. Those who are Category A trained receive a more intensive 2 week course that covers in depth weapons, environmental training and anti-ambush drills, etc., to enable them to operate outside the wire. Conversely the RAF Regiment units, who undertake 6 month rotations, train together for at least 6 months prior to deployment. They undertake section drills, mission rehearsals and prepare to fight the enemy in their own backyard. As noted, due to the sensitivities of the villages around KAF there is a requirement for women to be attached to patrols when there is a likelihood that the patrol will interact with families. There is no doubt as to the need to attach women to these patrols but there is the likelihood that some of the women who are selected to patrol with these units have been selected from other posts within the Expeditionary Air Wing (EAW) and will have only received Category B training. Indeed, the vast majority of RAF personnel attached to EAWs will only have received Category B training. Those who are likely to be attached to British Army units will have undertaken the more rigorous Category A course. From personal experience I believe that the Category B training would be inadequate should I be required to patrol with the RAF Regiment. If it is acknowledged that women are being required to undertake such roles then women need to be officially attached to the RAF Regiment and be made available to undertake pre-deployment work ups with the squadrons. The MOD's review of women in the armed forces acknowledges that "the success or failure – and survival [of combat units] – depend[s] upon the cohesion of the team in extreme circumstances."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the patrols need to have absolute faith in the personnel attached to them and need to have trained with them to develop this mutual trust<sup>45</sup>.

The current deployment cycle for RAF personnel in Afghanistan who are undertaking an Individual Augmentee position within the EAW is generally four months. The RAF Regiment

Squadrons and Force Protection Wing Headquarters undertake six month rotations due to a shortage of squadrons and the need to manage their dwell times at home. As a result the deployment cycles of the individual augmentees to the EAW at KAF do not correspond to the Regiment Squadron's rotations. This imposes a constant need for members of each squadron to build relationships with the various females from the EAW that have been assigned to assist in the patrols. If women were selected exclusively for this role prior to deployment and then deployed with the Squadron for their six month tour of duty, then such relationships would already be in place and would, inevitably, enhance the effectiveness and survivability of the unit.

### **THOUGHTS FROM THE FRONT**

Whilst the details regarding the current employment of forces around Kandahar set the scene, it is important that those who are required to undertake such missions can comment regarding the viability of such a proposal. The members of the Royal Air Force and Royal Air Force Regiment that I have been able to consult, although a small sample, have supported this paper's hypotheses. It is particularly comforting that there is already an acknowledgement as to the cultural nature of the conflict in which coalition troops find themselves. Cultural awareness training is being undertaken by all coalition partners prior to deployment in an effort to appropriately prepare their personnel. This training has helped members of the RAF Regiment to understand the need, in certain circumstances, for women to accompany their patrols. Indeed, one officer stated that "women in supporting roles would be very useful in situations dealing with mixed or female population groups."<sup>46</sup> In addition, he confirmed that it was not suitable for females to liaise with local men; this is another example where awareness of the cultural situation must always be, and is, at the forefront of coalition minds. It was also acknowledged that in a contact situation i.e. when a patrol came under fire, that, as the women were not combat

infantry trained, they would not take part in such firefights. In one example given, an untrained female caught in such a contact situation “moved out of the fight at the soonest opportunity however, her presence did not affect the combat.”<sup>47</sup> Of note here is that the female in question did not affect the way the contact developed, but was left to her own devices until the contact concluded. There is the possibility that, had she been more appropriately trained she could have more adequately and aggressively defended herself and, if necessary, provided assistance to the patrol to which she was attached. The females that are being selected to go out on these patrols are generally ordinary airwomen who have been assigned to the EAW at Kandahar Airfield in order to undertake jobs within the wire<sup>48</sup>. Most are volunteers to go out on patrol but, as has been seen above, their lack of training could compromise the success of the mission. It is therefore essential that any EAW personnel that are likely to be asked to fulfill such duties are identified before deployment so that training needs can appropriately identified.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Women who are called upon undertake unusual roles in conflicts are invariably volunteers. They are willing to serve, but examples, from the Second World War until today, show some basic requirements for their success in operations. First, as shown with the Lioness units, these women wish to be considered as part of a unit, to be identified and respected for what that unit stands for. Such a unit ethos also gives them the chance to work and socialize with others who have been through the same experiences. Secondly, they wish to be trained properly so that they can integrate with the units to which they are attached and that they will not be a liability. There is also no substitute for appropriate selection and training for the task they must undertake. It is inconceivable that a pilot with just a private pilot’s license would be selected to go into combat without military training. Equally therefore, there is no reason to send untrained

women into combat situations where the requirement for their presence has been acknowledged. This acknowledgement is crucial in that funding for training will only be made available if the task is mandated. Indeed, in their op ed regarding the DVD *Lioness*, the *New York Times* states that “There is a disconnect between what US policy says female soldiers can do and what they are actually doing; this needs to change so that they [the women] can get the training they need.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the use of women in these roles should be formally acknowledged by their governments and provision made for their formal training.

With regards to the United Kingdom, the use of women in non-traditional roles in Afghanistan should also be formally acknowledged. Once the requirement has been acknowledged a review should be undertaken to:

- Devise methods for identifying and selecting suitable women to undertake such missions. In addition, there will also be a requirement for a small cell of airwomen at the training centre at RAF Honington to co-ordinate and mentor such volunteers. This would give volunteers a point of contact to discuss their missions and roles and to provide follow-on camaraderie post deployment
- Use the experience of SOE, 14 Int Group and *Lioness* create a unit as a basis to organize, train and equip airwomen to be attached, as required, to RAF Regiment squadrons. This cadre of volunteers should also be trained in both military skills and in the culture of the Pashtun population, particularly their interaction with women and children.
- Ensure that women from such a unit were made available to conduct pre-deployment training and work ups with the RAF Regiment squadron to which they will

be assigned. These women would have been trained already to Category A IRT standards but would also include integration with the units to which they will be attached.

- Ensure that appropriate posts are annotated within the EAW that the post holder should be capable of augmenting, as necessary, RAF Regiment patrols. This would ensure that trained personnel are available to be formally attached to the RAF Regiment squadron and deployed on the same deployment cycle as the Squadron to which they can be attached.

As part of the review, the future use of the RAF Regiment should not be overlooked. There is no recommendation that the RAF Regiment should move away from the United Kingdom policy regarding women in the combat arms. In addition to the recommendations above, the review would need to establish the number of posts that would need to be annotated to undertake the mission. Whilst there is the hope that indigenous forces will take on responsibility for such tasks in the future, indeed the ANP is training and standing up women's units, the lack of any depth in this area means that in the near term this proposal should be implemented.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Afghanistan and Iraq the front lines are blurred. In the past women were in the rear echelons, now in these time of asymmetric counter insurgency conflicts, women are increasingly being found on the front line carrying out their duty and assisting their male counterparts. These female service members are being attached to combat units without formalized and appropriate training. The requirement for women to perform such tasks must be formally acknowledged, thereby allowing this training to take place and be funded. Current policies of Western Governments, particularly the UK and the US, exclude women from service within the combat

arms and this exclusion causes contradictions when the combat units are required to undertake nation building operations in countries with diverse cultural requirements.

This paper suggests ways in which females could be better prepared for such deployments to ensure that they can be effectively attached to combat arms units. This paper identified areas that could be improved in the use of women with the RAF Regiment for security operations around KAF. The history of women in the UK Armed Forces and the US approach to the use of women with combat arms troops demonstrates the character of the challenges facing all coalition forces. The paper does not advocate a change in the policy of the employment of female service personnel with regards to the combat arms; but showed that for certain operations women must be attached to these combat units to enable more effective nation building and COIN operations.

As the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan have shown there is an urgent requirement for troops undertaking COIN and nation building missions to be both culturally aware and sensitive. The suggestions in this paper, whilst directed at Afghanistan, will be relevant consideration for future conflicts. Currently the likelihood of a large conventional war involving the UK or the US appears remote. However, the threats of conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan are ever present and, in the current world climate, are likely to require cultural awareness. As a result, the recommendations presented in this paper will hold for all such future conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> Windsor, *Kandahar Tour*, Pg 3.

<sup>2</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan*,Pg 144.

<sup>3</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan*,Pg 157.

<sup>4</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan*,Pg 218.

<sup>5</sup> [www.khyber.org](http://www.khyber.org), *Melmastia*.

<sup>6</sup> [www.khyber.org](http://www.khyber.org), *Nanawatey*.

<sup>7</sup> [www.khyber.org](http://www.khyber.org), *Nanawatey*.

<sup>8</sup> [www.khyber.org](http://www.khyber.org), *Nanawatey*.

<sup>9</sup> [www.khyber.org](http://www.khyber.org), *Nanawatey*.

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- <sup>10</sup> www.khyber.org, *Badal*.
- <sup>11</sup> Pashtunwali, afghanland.com
- <sup>12</sup> www.khyber.org, *Tor*.
- <sup>13</sup> Jones, *Counter Insurgency in Afghanistan* Pg 41
- <sup>14</sup> Windsor, *Kandahar Tour*, Pg 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Windsor, *Kandahar Tour*, Pg 21.
- <sup>16</sup> Windsor, *Kandahar Tour*, Pg 25.
- <sup>17</sup> Jackson, *Counterinsurgency Intelligence in a “Long War”*, Pg 77.
- <sup>18</sup> BBC, *British History*
- <sup>19</sup> DeGroot, *Women as Peacekeepers*.
- <sup>20</sup> DeGroot, *Women as Peacekeepers*.
- <sup>21</sup> Helm, *A Life in Silence*, Pg 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Helm, *A Life in Silence*, Pg 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Helm, *A Life in Silence*, Pg 8.
- <sup>24</sup> Helm, *A Life in Silence*, Pg 9.
- <sup>25</sup> Helm, *A Life in Silence*, Pg 10.
- <sup>26</sup> George, *She Who Dared*, Pg 104.
- <sup>27</sup> George, *She Who Dared*, Pg 104.
- <sup>28</sup> George, *She Who Dared*.
- <sup>29</sup> George, *She Who Dared*, Pg 104.
- <sup>30</sup> Secretary of Defense Les Alpin to Secretary of Army, Navy, Air Force, Chairmen of the joint Chiefs of Staff, and Assistant Secretaries of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and Reserve Affairs, memorandum, 13 January 1994 as quoted in HASC Report No. 103-50, Hearing before the Military Forces and Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, US House of Representatives, “Assignment of Army and Marine Corps Women Under the New Definition of Ground Combat,” 6 October 1994. Pg 90-91
- <sup>31</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>32</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>33</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>34</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>35</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>36</sup> *Lioness*, DVD
- <sup>37</sup> Hansard, 15 June 2006
- <sup>38</sup> MOD, The RAF Regiment-History.
- <sup>39</sup> MOD, RAF Regiment go on foot to make a difference in Kandahar.
- <sup>40</sup> MOD, *Women in the Armed Forces*.
- <sup>41</sup> MOD, *Women in the Armed Forces*, Para 7.
- <sup>42</sup> MOD, *Women in the Armed Forces*.
- <sup>43</sup> *The Times*, 19 Jun 2008. A female intelligence officer had been killed the previous day, along with her two male colleagues, whilst out on patrol in Helmand province.
- <sup>44</sup> MOD, *Women in the Armed Forces*, Para 7.
- <sup>45</sup> Whilst it could be considered that an increase of training to Category A standard may help this dilemma, in my experience, given the numbers of individuals needing to be trained for overseas deployments, there are very limited numbers on Category A courses. Any increase in throughput would have to be funded and additional instructors resourced.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview, Author and RAF Regiment officer
- <sup>47</sup> Interview, Author and RAF Regiment officer
- <sup>48</sup> Interview, Author and RAF officer
- <sup>49</sup> New York Times video, 11 November 2008

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