

A SALUTE TO WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: VETERANS DAY 2010

By Nick Gier

On November 16, 1943, the *New York World-Telegram* ran a story with the title “Nation’s Only Feminine Test Pilots.” Three members of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were assigned to test fly Gruman Hellfire fighters and Avenger torpedo bombers at Gruman’s Long Island plant.

Describing the “pretty girls” as 5’ 5” and on average 110 pounds, the female author commented about how casual they were about their demanding tasks. Mary Center, “another pretty blond,” was directing them from a Long Island control tower.

By the end of the war over 1,000 women pilots had tested all types of aircraft (including the first jet in 1944), and they had ferried over 12,650 fighters and bombers to bases around the world. Significant to note is the fact that the women’s accident rate was about the same as the men’s.

Fast forward to August of 1972, when Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt instructed his officers to "eliminate any disadvantage to women resulting from either legal or attitudinal restrictions." This led to female sailors being assigned to ships, trained as fighter pilots, and just recently, given submarine duty.

The Army started training female helicopter pilots in 1974, and in 1976 the Air Force allowed women to enter pilot training programs. Still, female military pilots were barred from combat until 1993.

As a sign of progress, Major Nicole Malachowski was the first female pilot to join the Air Force’s premier Thunderbirds in 2006, and in 2008 Commander Sara Joyner was the first woman to head up a F-18 squadron. She is in charge of a dozen Tom Cat fighters as well as 245 pilots and support crew.

With the 360/24/7 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combat and non-combat zones have been blurred. There are no longer any distinct front lines in these conflicts, and soldiers who are assigned to non-combat positions regularly come under enemy fire.

In Iraq and Afghanistan army patrols now routinely include women soldiers, primarily because they are needed to calm, frisk, and provide medical care to the Muslim women in the houses that are searched. In one instance a Special Forces unit needed an experienced .50 caliber machine gunner and the best available recruit was a woman.

Army Capt. Sarah Piro piloted a Kiowa scout helicopter in Iraq and received nothing but praise from her fellow officers. “They call her 'Saint Piro' — she's just that good,” said her co-pilot, said Chief Warrant Officer Todd Buckhouse.” “There was no one I wanted to hear more on a raid than her. She's a spectacular Army aviator,” said Maj.

Chris Kennedy, commander of Piro's regiment. As with the pioneer women in 1943, the accident rate for women pilots is no worse than the male rate.

While performing their duties very well, women in the military face a number of problems. It is incredible to learn that half of the women in the military who have children are single mothers. Even more serious is constant sexual harassment, which is largely responsible for a high number of cases of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome among women soldiers and sailors.

Strong sexual harassment policies have been in place since 1980, but military women, about one third according to a 2008 survey, are still being intimidated and assaulted. (The lower civilian rate of 1 in 6 is still not to be tolerated.) CBS News stated that "more than 2,900 sexual assaults were reported in 2008, up nearly 9 percent from the year before. Nearly two-thirds of the cases involved rape or aggravated assault."

The most dramatic case is that of Suzanne Rich, who was court-martialed for refusing to re-deploy to Iraq. Interviewed on NPR, her mother Sarah Rich said that her daughter described her situation as one of prey being hunted down by predators.

The alleged rape by her own sergeant was never prosecuted. Commonly known as "command" rape, the officer demands sexual favors on the threat of making the woman's life miserable. When Rich started to refuse her sergeant's advances, she received daily punishment. One day she was forced to wear a wall clock around her neck.

Those who argue against women in the military contend that it precisely this type of abuse from which women should be protected. The solution is not to bar them from service; rather, we should insist on much tighter enforcement of harassment policies. More generally, I offer the modest proposal that our boys be raised to respect women and be warned that they should not expect any sexual favors from them.

(One of my first grievances as a faculty union officer involved "command" rape. The department head had deliberately recruited a woman with the understanding that she be his lover. When the relationship turned sour, her evaluations went south. This was the late 1970s and the best I could offer I could get from a very reluctant administration [I had to deliver the love letters before they would take it seriously] was a positive recommendation for another job. The department chair was not punished in any way.)

A recent study has revealed that more women than men are leaving military service because of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT). Even though the number of gays and lesbians discharged is going down, the percentage of lesbians leaving is increasing. The Associated Press (10-8-09) reports that "the disparity was particularly striking in the Air Force, where women represented 20 percent of all personnel but 61 percent of those expelled."

Calling it "lesbian baiting," former Marine Anuradha Bhagwati is quoted by the AP: "Often times the lesbians under my command were under scrutiny by the same men

who were also sexually harassing straight women, so it was this kind of sexist undercurrent of ‘You don't belong here.’”

Desperately needed pilots, linguists, nurses, and doctors--many of them decorated officers--are being forced out because of DADT, which has now been found to violate the 14th Amendment. Marine Corps Captain Julie Sohn, after having served seven months in the Iraq's hot-spot Falluja, was fired after criticizing Pentagon policy on guys and lesbians. She said that she simply got tired of questions about why she did not have a boyfriend.

On September 25, 2010, former flight nurse and lesbian Margaret Witt won reinstatement from a district court judge. Witt's colleagues testified that rather than hinder “unit morale and cohesion”—a common charge by those opposed to homosexuals in the military—her presence enhanced it.

The Obama Administration believes that DADT should be overturned by the will of the people through Congress (the repeal is stalled in the Senate), but equal rights under the Constitution is not an issue for a majority vote. As John Stuart Mill wrote in his famous essay *On Liberty*, the rights of a minority of one must be protected under the law.

As we celebrate our veterans on November 11, let us remember that all of them took an oath to defend and protect the Constitution, the 14th Amendment of which states that no state shall “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.