

**FOR THE AIR FORCE, IT'S
NOTHING NEW.**



WOMEN IN COMBAT

By Amy McCullough, News Editor

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MORE than 200,000 women serve in the US military—roughly 15 percent of the force. These women lead convoys down Afghanistan’s dangerous dirt roads. They risk their lives every time they diffuse an improvised explosive device. They dodge bullets as they provide medical care to wounded troops. They fly fighter jets and drop bombs.

Three female airmen have made the ultimate sacrifice since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began. Twenty-three more have been wounded in action.

After more than a decade of fighting two simultaneous counterinsurgency wars, the front lines have become blurred. One thing is clear: Women have proved capable in combat.

“It’s clear to all of us that women are contributing in unprecedented ways to the military’s mission of defending the nation,” said then-Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta in January as he announced plans to open up more roles to women in combat. He continued, “They’re serving in a growing number of critical roles on and off the battlefield. The fact is that they have become an integral part of our ability to perform our mission.”

Panetta said female service members have “demonstrated courage and skill and patriotism” as they “have faced the reality of combat, proven their willingness to fight and, yes, to die to defend their fellow Americans.”

During that same Jan. 24 briefing, Panetta and Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed a memorandum rescinding the 1994 direct ground combat exclusion rule, which supposedly prohibited women from operating on the front lines.



SrA. Kimberly Pate (l) and SSgt. Stephen Oghe prepare a detonation cord after placing explosive charges around a totaled C-130.

Expanding Roles for Women in the Air Force

Aug. 5, 1943 - The Women's Auxiliary Ferry Squadron (WAFS), comprising women flyers with commercial licenses, is merged with the Women's Flying Training Detachment, which had been formed to recruit and train women pilots for ferrying duties. The new organization, the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), is led by famed aviatrix Jacqueline Cochran.



Feb. 29, 1968 - Jeanne M. Holm, director of Women's Air Force, and Helen O'Day, assigned to the Office of the Air Force Chief of Staff, become the first women promoted to permanent colonel.

July 1, 1968 - The first WAF in the Air National Guard is sworn in as a result of passage of Public Law 90-130, which allows ANG to enlist women.

May 5, 1970 - The Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps admits women after test programs at Ohio State, Auburn University, Drake University, and East Carolina University prove successful.

March 2, 1971 - A new policy allows Air Force women who become pregnant to request a waiver to remain on Active Duty or to be discharged and return to duty within 12 months of discharge.

March 8, 1971 - Capt. Marcelite C. Jordan becomes the first female aircraft maintenance officer after completion of the Aircraft Maintenance Officer's School. She was previously an administrative officer.

March 17, 1971 - Jane Leslie Holley, from Auburn University, Ala., becomes the first woman commissioned through Air Force ROTC.

July 16, 1971 - Jeanne M. Holm becomes the first female general officer in the Air Force.

June 28, 1976 - The Air Force Academy becomes the first of the big three service academies to admit women cadets when it admits Joan Olsen.

March 23, 1978 - Capt. Sandra M. Scott becomes the first female aircrew member to pull alert duty in Strategic Air Command.

May 28, 1980 - The Air Force Academy graduates its first female cadets. Ninety-seven women are commissioned as second lieutenants. Lt. Kathleen Conley graduates eighth in her class.

May 9, 1983 - A C-141 crew from the 18th Military Airlift Squadron, McGuire AFB, N.J., becomes USAF's first all-female crew to fly a round-trip mission across the Atlantic.

Oct. 5-13, 1984 - On the 13th space shuttle mission, Challenger lifts off for the first time with a crew of seven. Mission 41-G is the first to have two female astronauts, Sally K. Ride and Kathryn D. Sullivan (who became the first American woman to make a spacewalk).



Kathryn Sullivan and Sally Ride



SSgt. Tamara Rhone, a crew chief, watches as Maj. Christine Mau, an F-15 pilot, and Capt. Jennifer Morton, an F-15 weapons system officer, don their helmets before takeoff from a base in Afghanistan.

Dempsey said the burden now falls on each of the services to demonstrate why a woman should not serve in a particular specialty. "I don't know how all that's going to sort out, but I'm really eager to begin the journey," he added.

On May 15, each of the four services submitted an implementation plan to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel detailing how they planned to more fully integrate women into the remaining combat roles. The plans, which were reviewed by Hagel and Dempsey before their release on June 18, outline a path to a fully integrated force. Even the most elite positions are expected to open to females in the coming years, including all seven remaining Air Force specialty career fields, Army Rangers, and the Navy SEALs, said Pentagon leaders at the June news briefing announcing the plan's release.

"The department's goal is to ensure the mission is met with the best, most fully qualified, and most capable people





USAF photo by S/A. Sheila Devera

regardless of gender,” said Juliet Beyler, the Pentagon’s director of officer and enlisted personnel management, at the briefing.

The Army and Marine Corps will be most impacted by the change considering the majority of infantry and artillery positions are closed to females. The Navy, on the other hand, has slowly been integrating women into its submarine fleet and other previously closed positions for the last few years. As of June, 88 percent of its force was fully integrated, said Rear Adm. Anthony M. Kurta, director of Navy military personnel plans and policy, during the briefing. Unlike the other services, most Air Force specialty codes already are open to women—special operations remains the sole exception.

Old News for USAF

Because special tactics officers, combat control, and special operations weathermen and officers—four of the seven positions currently closed to female airmen—are positioned under US Special Operations Command, SOCOM will have the final say on opening those career fields. That equates to about 800 positions, said Brig. Gen. Gina M. Grosso, Air Force director of force management policy on the Air Staff.



USAF photo by TSgt. Caycee Cook



USAF photo by TSgt. Russell Wicke

A1C Tiffany Buck, a security forces airman, watches for the approach of suspicious vehicles at Echo One, the main gate at Sather AB, Iraq, in 2007.

The Air Force, however, will determine the most appropriate way for opening the remaining positions still closed to women: combat rescue, pararescue, and tactical air command and control parties (TACP). These Air Combat Command career fields have both an SOF and non-special operations mission, said Grosso.

All together, there are only about 4,700 positions closed to female airmen today out of a Total Force of 506,000 people, Grosso added.

“The Air Force has been actively integrating women into nontraditional skills” since the early 1970s, she said. “Today, less than one percent of all our positions—Active, Guard, and Reserves—are [closed] to women.”

On March 17, 1971, Jane Leslie Holley, from Auburn University in Alabama, became the first woman commissioned through Air Force ROTC. Just four months later, on July 16, 1971, Jeanne M. Holm

became the first female general officer in the Air Force.

By 1983, the Air Force had sent an all-female airlift crew on a round-trip mission across the Atlantic. Five years later, the Air Force began integrating male and female crews in Minuteman and Peacekeeper ICBM launch facilities.

Female airmen would continue to break new ground throughout the rest of the late '80s into the mid-'90s, when in 1994 1st Lt. Jeannie M. Flynn would become the first female fighter pilot in the Air Force.

Flynn, now Col. Jeannie Leavitt, is currently commander of the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C.—another Air Force first, as she is the Air Force’s first female fighter wing commander.

“Women have participated in combat roles for more than 20 years and we remain energized by the overall collective progression,” Leavitt told *Air Force Magazine*. “The Pentagon’s latest guidance

A1C Krysta Laird, a weapons loader, prepares an F-16 to take on munitions at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.

A Combat Medic on

Sparks lit up the darkened interior of the mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle as the rocket-propelled grenade pierced through the MRAP's armored shell, striking the empty seat across from SrA. Bryenna L. Brooks.

At the time, Brooks was attached to the Army's 59th Quartermaster Company, 142nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 101st Sustainment Brigade, based out of Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. She had arrived in theater in November 2010 and only had about two weeks left in her deployment.

While in Afghanistan, Brooks was the lone combat medic on more than 25 supply runs just like this. She traveled more than 3,000 miles across Afghanistan's dangerous and poorly constructed roads and provided care to more than 1,000 personnel.

The June 3, 2011, mission would not be the same as all the rest, though.

It was around 2 a.m. and "quite dark," so it was difficult to make out much other than a few trees from the back of the convoy's tail vehicle, where Brooks sat. She felt the MRAP come to a halt after it got a flat tire.

In early 2011, Ghazni was a volatile province. US forces had successfully taken control of several parts that were formerly under Taliban control, but insurgents who had crossed the border from Pakistan into eastern Afghanistan continued to fight back. Brooks was unsure whether the flat tire was coincidence or if it was deliberate and intended to make them sitting ducks for the upcoming attack (though she suspected that might have been a factor).

She did know, however, that the soldiers she was with remained on alert. As the team sat there, Brooks noticed several flashing lights in the town just outside Ghazni, through which the convoy had just passed.

"I guess they were signaling to each other," said Brooks, because a few minutes later the convoy came under attack by small-arms fire. Just as her vehicle's gunner began shooting back, their vehicle was struck by the RPG.

The nauseating smell of burning copper from the RPG made it difficult to breathe, as

ronments for extended periods of time," said Sacolick. SOCOM's subordinate commands are "reviewing every single task in each of our entry-level qualification courses to ensure that they are decisively tied to an operational requirement." This also will include a thorough review of

Jan. 1, 1988 - SAC changes its missile crew assignment policy to permit mixed male/female crews in Minuteman and Peacekeeper ICBM launch facilities.

June 10, 1989 - Capt. Jacquelyn S. Parker becomes the first female pilot to graduate from the Air Force Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB, Calif.

Dec. 14, 1989 - MAC approves a policy change that allows female aircrew members to serve on C-130 and C-141 combat airdrop missions.

April 28, 1993 - Secretary of Defense Les Aspin lifts the long-standing ban on female pilots flying US combat aircraft, including Army and Marine Corps attack helicopters.

Aug. 6, 1993 - Sheila E. Widnall, associate provost and professor of aeronautics and astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, becomes Secretary of the Air Force. Widnall is the first female Secretary for any of the armed services.

Feb. 10, 1994 - Lt. Jeannie Flynn completes F-15E training, becoming the first female fighter pilot in the US Air Force.

Feb. 25, 2011 - USAF announces that 1st Lt. Candice Killian is the service's first female to qualify as a CV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft pilot. She is Osprey pilot No. 97.



Jeannie Flynn

June 1, 2012 - Col. Jeannie Leavitt becomes the Air Force's first female fighter wing commander when she takes command of the 4th Fighter Wing at Seymour Johnson AFB, S.C. She is an F-15E Strike Eagle pilot with more than 2,500 hours, including 300 combat hours.

June 5, 2012 - Gen. Janet C. Wolfenbarger—the Air Force's first female four-star general—assumes command of Air Force Materiel Command, headquartered at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

Jan. 24, 2013 - Pentagon officials announce plans to open more combat roles to women in the military. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin Dempsey sign an official memorandum rescinding the 1994 direct ground combat exclusion rule for women.



Janet Wolfenbarger

is another step in erasing the gender and social barriers our military held in years past. Opening positions to a wider pool of skilled personnel provides a greater range of qualified airmen from which to draw and ensures we put the most capable person in a position, regardless of gender."

"However, any change will eventually force a cultural shift in the mindset of the force," Leavitt noted.

Of all the military leaders sitting at the June 18 briefing, those from SOCOM had the most reservations. Army Maj. Gen.

Bennet S. Sacolick, SOCOM's director of force management and development, said the command will spend the next year collecting and analyzing data before making its recommendations to the Defense Secretary by July 1, 2015. Special operations leaders have some "genuine concerns" that must first be addressed, he said.

"Of particular concern is our mission set, which predominately requires our forces to operate in small, self-contained teams, many of which are in austere, geographically isolated, politically sensitive envi-

USAF photo by SSgt. Brad Fallon

USAF photo by Todd Berenger

the Front Lines



the vehicle quickly filled with smoke. Shrapnel had sliced Brooks' chin, her left arm, and her leg—but she didn't have time to think about that.

Although she was still unsure exactly what had struck the vehicle, she knew her comrades needed medical attention. Brooks honed in on her medical bag, which had been placed on the empty seat about a foot away from her. She reached out, but what she found didn't do much to calm her nerves. There was a huge hole where the RPG had hit and most of the medical supplies were ruined.

"I could move my arm, but I guess I was more just in shock. I tried to stand up, but I really wasn't able to," said Brooks.

Wounded, and with very little gear, she began to assess the situation.

The assistant gunner, who was sitting in the back with her, had shrapnel in his legs and his face was bloody from a gash on his lip.

The gunner had sprained his ankle as he ducked down to avoid the incoming RPG and also had shrapnel in his legs.

The driver had shrapnel in his arm.

Only the truck commander escaped the initial onslaught without injury. Brooks said the team was fortunate because, despite the RPG hit, all the crew's wounds were "relatively minor."

Outside, small-arms fire continued to rain down on the convoy, leaving no escape from the suffocating smoke inside. "Because of the injuries there wasn't a whole lot I could do," said Brooks. So she focused on making sure everyone stayed calm. "That was a big thing, especially with all the smoke in the vehicle. It was really hard to breathe."

To keep their minds off the suffocating smoke, they asked each other questions about "how much pain [they were] in, how they were doing, what was going on." Just maintaining that communication helped keep everyone's nerves under control, she said.

The vehicle had caught fire in the attack and the convoy restarted, but had to stop momentarily for a second time so the wrecker could put out the flames. Thankfully, the MRAP was able



to continue on despite the RPG attack, she said.

They were still too far away from Bagram, so they rerouted to COP Sayed Abad—a small, remote combat outpost 45 miles south of Kabul. It took about 15 minutes for the convoy to make its way through Afghanistan's bumpy, dirt roads. When it pulled up to Sayed Abad's clinic, Brooks and the three wounded soldiers were put on stretchers and taken inside for evaluation.

The doctors removed some shrapnel from her chin and stitched up the wound, but there were too many tiny pieces embedded in her left arm and leg, which were nearest the blast. Some of those pieces would eventually work their way out of her body on her own, she said, while others would serve as a constant reminder of her first deployment.

A few minutes later an Army Black Hawk arrived to evacuate all four to Forward Operating Base Shank in eastern Afghanistan's Logar province. They would be treated for the rest of their wounds and then sent to a traumatic brain injury clinic for further evaluation.

For her actions that day, Brooks received the Purple Heart, a Combat Medical

Badge, an Air Force Combat Action Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, and a Joint Service Commendation Medal. She also was named one of the Air Force Association's 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year for 2012.

She is described by most as "one of the most humble, kind, caring, and nicest people," said Col. Paul M. Fortunato, commander of the 2nd Medical Group at Barksdale AFB, La., where Brooks is now assigned.

Brooks is "the poster child for our Air Force core values," said Fortunato. "She takes the high road all of the time, doing the right thing for the right reason."

Fortunato said what struck him most about Brooks was her willingness to put herself back in harm's way. Today she is essentially recovered, though her left arm is sometimes still numb from nerve damage suffered in the attack. Brooks said it doesn't affect her ability to do her daily job, though.

"I was so impressed with her before she deployed, but even more after she returned," commented Fortunato. "What I remember distinctly was that she said she would be happy to deploy again. Amazing."

"their organization, training, education, and leader development programs."

SOCOM also has either commissioned or is internally conducting multiple studies assessing the social and behavioral implications of integrating women into its small team structure. He said it is fea-

sible that in the very near future a single female commando could be assigned to a 12-member special operations team.

"We're looking for smart, qualified operators. You know, there's just ... a new dynamic. I mean, the days of Rambo are over," said Sacolick. "The defining

characteristic of our operators [is] intellect. And when people fail in the Special Forces qualification course, predominantly, they fail because they're not doing their homework."

SSgt. Kimberly Pate has been in the Air Force for more than eight years. She



USSAF photo

Above: Col. Jeannie Leavitt, USAF's first female fighter pilot, in the cockpit of her F-15 at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., where she commands the 4th Fighter Wing. Right: Brig. Gen. Gina Grosso, director of force management policy, answers questions about opening up the last few billets to women during a Pentagon briefing in June.

wanted a career field that was challenging and made her feel like she was truly making a difference. She chose explosive ordnance disposal—generally a male occupation.

Pate is the only female Active Duty EOD tech assigned to the 4th Civil Engineering Squadron at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., and she previously served as one of only three female airmen in the career field at Hill AFB, Utah. Pate says being a minority among her peers has forced her to work extra hard to prove her capabilities.

“Especially going through the school-house training, you’re surrounded by mostly male students and counterparts. You get stereotypical looks like you’re probably not going to make it,” she said. “You can’t just squeak by on the requirements. You have to prove you deserve to be there.”

Eventually, Pate said she did earn her peers’ respect.

“Once you have proven yourself you definitely get more respect because you can keep up and can do everything they can do,” she said. “They see you have to go through more trials and tribulations to get there and I do think they respect you a little more after that.”

SrA. Bryenna L. Brooks, an aerospace medical services technician assigned to Barksdale AFB, La., had a similar experience during her first combat deployment to Afghanistan.

While deployed, Brooks said she noticed she was among a small group of females.



USAF photo by Jim Varhegyi

“A moment that stands out to me was arriving at my first premission briefing. As the medic, I was to address the group and explain my role,” said Brooks. “When looking into the group, I realized not only was I the only Air Force member, but I was also the only female that would be on this convoy mission.”

She said at first she “sensed doubt” from the group as to her capabilities as a medic, but over time “that sense of doubt changed.” Once they started calling her “doc,” she knew she had earned their respect.

“To me, this was an honor that I can’t explain through words,” she said. “We were a family: I knew they always had my back and I had theirs. While the official change to allow women to fill combat roles happened almost two years later, I could tell that me being a female made no difference in the minds of my fellow soldiers. I was able to physically and mentally meet the challenges of the job, and that’s what mattered.”

Brooks traveled from one remote forward operating base to another during her 205-day deployment and earned the Purple Heart for continuing to care for the wounded despite injuries she sustained during a rocket-propelled grenade attack on one mission.

The Air Force’s implementation plan is focused on three major tasks, said Grosso. The first is to look at existing policies and procedures prohibiting women from certain positions. The Air Force will then begin updating those policies to be ready for a July 2015 implementation.

The second step is to validate the tasks required for both men and women to go into these positions—something the Air Force typically does every five years. Grosso said the Air Force is not limiting this task to the seven remaining closed positions. “We’re doing 100 percent validation,” she said.

“We’ve had these positions open to women for a very long time. ... If you think about an aircraft maintainer, if you look at airplanes over time, they’ve become increasingly more and more sophisticated and much more computer-driven,” said Grosso. “So the skills that [maintainers] may have needed in the 1970s, and the strength, is very different than the skills and the strength they might need in 2013 for an F-22.”

Grosso said the Air Force needs to understand “how much does the toolbox weigh 25 years later?” That’s part of the validation process—for both men and women—that is slated for completion in 2015, she said.

“The Air Force has a long history of successfully integrating women into combat positions and doesn’t expect significant challenges as it completes preparations to integrate women into additional combat roles,” said an Air Force spokeswoman.

“Opening positions to a wider group of skilled personnel maximizes military capabilities, provides a greater pool of qualified members from which to draw, and reduces the operational tempo for those currently deploying,” she concluded.

The goal is to begin recruiting for the newly opened positions by Oct. 1, 2015, and to start bringing women into the pipeline by Oct. 1, 2016. However, Grosso noted that each of the seven off-limits career fields under consideration for women have long pipelines—between a year and 18 months each—so the Air Force does not expect to see women in these operational units until Jan. 1, 2018, at the earliest. ■