

AFEHRI File 100.057

Research Materials/Source Documents
STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: The Air Force Enlisted Woman's Perspective of OPERATION DESERT SHIELD/STORM

AUTHOR: SMSgt Barb Ramirez, SNCOA Student, undated, circa Feb 1996

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G.R. Akin date 29 Dec 97

EPC Representative J. Ch. date 7 Jan 98

Scanner Operator Sandy date 9 Jan 98

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

file 19-22-2
J.L.B.

The Air Force Enlisted Woman's **Perspective**

Of Operation Desert Shield/Storm

SMSgt Barb Ramirez
AF SNCO Academy Student

INTRODUCTION

From the onset of the conflict in the Persian Gulf, skeptics were lobbying against the deployment of women to the Area of Responsibility (AOR). Would American women be sent? Would they formally take their place beside our country's men in defending our interests? Could they perform as well as men, or would they place additional burden on the operational commanders they would serve, as skeptics predicted? Ultimately, the question narrowed to, "Do women "belong" in the military?"

The issue erupted into a political bonfire, but the commitment to equal opportunities for women contained it. In 1973, women represented only 2% of the military and by 1989, that number rose to 11%. (4:63) The Report to Congress Persian Gulf War: Defense Policy, stated, " While problems did arise concerning pregnancy, sanitation, rape, and harassment, these problems did not prove to be extensive or debilitating. In fact, they were of little consequence in terms of the overall deployment."(4:65) Another formal report sent to Congress following Operation Desert Storm (ODS) known as Conduct of the Persian Gulf War detailed specific issues, one of which was: *Role of Women in Southwest Asia Theater Operations*. The report listed three accomplishments and selected issues. The accomplishments were: women were fully integrated, women performed vital roles under stress and performed well, and current laws and policies were followed. The selected issues were: media and public interest was centered on female casualties and POW's, deployment criteria for women differed among services. In a few cases the differences existed between local commanders.(1: Vol 1) But what does all this mean?

The question of “belonging” was really left for the deployed women themselves to answer. They were trained, equipped, and mentally prepared to answer the call to fight. Would they fulfill their commitment and when all was said and done, would they pick up their arms to fight again? The question should be asked of the women administrators, air traffic controllers, logisticians, engineer equipment mechanics, ammunition technicians, ordinance specialists, communicators, radio operators, drivers, law enforcement, security guards, pilots, nurses, public affairs, and chaplains who deployed to ODS. The missions they trained in made them invaluable to replace and commanders were aware of this fact.

To receive a plausible answer I sought the opinion of a few of the 5,300 Air Force women who deployed. I feel their *perspective* is the most reliable due to the grassroots level in which they served our Air Force. Their *opinions and comments* are vital to revealing the answer to the question of women in the military. Several issues were discussed: Quality of Life, Training and Education, Equal Opportunity, Medical Care, Recreational activities, Personal Needs, and their opinion of whether women belong in the Military before and after ODS.

Their backgrounds varied. SSgt Norma J. Cordaway, is married and has a son, Julian. An Information Management specialist, she volunteered for postal duty, feeling it was her duty to do so. She was deployed twice, from Oct. 92-Dec. 92 (53 days) and again Jul. 95-Nov. 95 (90 days) to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.(2) SSgt Christy S. Miles, is single and as a Security Specialist, deployed as an M60 Gunner, as part of a security force team in Khamish Mushait, Saudi Arabia. She was deployed from 29 Jan 91-29 Jun. 91 and had just returned from “Just Cause” in Panama.(3) SMSGt Barbara A. Ramirez, is a

single parent and has a 13 year-old son. A Supply Specialist, she deployed as a War Readiness Spares Superintendent to a classified site in the desert. She voluntarily deployed from April 1992- October 1992.(5) MSgt Kathryn E. Richardson, is a single parent, with a 12 year-old son and an 8 year-old daughter. She was deployed to USCENTAF, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from Mar 1991-Sep 1991.(6) This is their perspective.

1. Quality of Life

The Quality of Life issue is significant because of the mind set it establishes upon arrival to a deployed site. We discussed living conditions, sanitation, and customs. The airmen who deployed to Saudi Arabia were prepared for the customs and courtesies which would inhibit their duties and lifestyle. All felt the quality of living conditions were adequate. However, everyone experienced a slightly different housing arrangement. SMSgt Ramirez lived in an underground facility shared by 7 women. Each one had a private 6'x 10' "room" and shared all common areas. SSgt Miles was housed in a crowded 3 bedroom villa, with 40 women. All available room was utilized for bunkbeds and cots, i.e. each bedroom housed at least 6 women, the livingroom housed 10 women, 2 closets were equipped with cots and considered rooms, a tent was attached to the back of the facility which housed 12 women on cots. Conversely, ESKAN village in Rhiyadh provided spacious living conditions. But, besides the living conditions, the task at hand was fulfilling their deployed role and contributing to the war effort. How well prepared were they for their roles.

2. Training and Education

The level of experience and training each airman received played a psychological role in their confidence level upon arriving to their deployed unit. All were highly motivated and all but one respondent received training prior to deploying. SSgt Cordaway reflected on the situation upon her arrival. "They just threw you up on the front window and expected one time was enough to be able to operate the computer."(2) However, during her tour, she developed a training aid for all subsequent postal volunteers. SSgt Miles received team training for her duties in operating an M60 and as part of the security team assigned to protect the F117 Stealth, she was "ready to shoot".(3) She and the other airmen, were completely confident in the contributions they made. One aspect of the training, was having sources of experienced personnel. As SMSgt Richardson indicated, "the classes we go through are good, but we can learn more from(sic) people who have been through it before. Not many of them around anymore".(6) If experience represents half the recipe for optimum performance, then opportunity is the other ingredient.

3. Equal Opportunity

The opportunity to perform in a capacity fitting of your rank, irregardless of gender is critical to an airman during a conflict. Her self-esteem would be degraded if not provided with the responsibilities commensurate with her rank. The idea of fully integrating women in the military services comes to fruition in the operational tempo of a

war. Difficulties arose, as stated in Congressional reports, regarding the customs in Saudi Arabia. Initially, SSgt Cordaway was not able to drive the mail off-base. However, this policy was lifted for women performing “official” duties. SSgt Miles indicated the “girls” were actually treated better than the men treated each other, and does not recall “one instance I felt mistreated or needed to speak up”. (3) SMSgt Ramirez and MSgt Richardson agreed. These airmen were mentally prepared, and were given opportunities to contribute to the war, but what of the more specific problems women faced. The physiological needs of deployed women were discussed.

4. Medical Care

In their report “Women Marines: Their perspective from Southwest Asia”, authors Major Rathmell, USMCR and Staff Sergeant Adamson described a void in the medical professionals deployed. Apparently, male medical personnel were not familiar with acute female infections and were not comfortable in discussing them with their patients. Additionally, the medications typically packed to forward locations didn’t contain appropriate treatments for women. (8: Vol 1) Our airmen felt there was adequate care, however, as SSgt Cordaway and SMSgt Ramirez indicated, preparations were made for common ailments, but less common ailments were routinely treated with prescriptions of “motrin”. MSgt Richardson had no personal experiences, but recalled instances where other airmen had difficulties. SSgt Miles had no medical problems arise. It is common knowledge that physical well being relies on more than medication, and every individual

must have an outlet to remain healthy. The Air Force recognized this need and provided for morale and welfare recreational activities.

5. Recreational Activities

Services played a major role in maintaining the morale of those deployed to ODS. The availability of gender neutral recreational activities was evident in the types of facilities they provided. The Gym, movie tents, swimming pools, libraries, video libraries, were just a few. The airmen interviewed felt these facilities were more than sufficient and encompassed the overall needs of both genders. SSgt Cordaway indicated trips to the beauty shop were eventually offered to women, and SSgt Miles mentioned the organization of the Co-ed sports activities as a primary impetus in creating a harmonious atmosphere. Likewise, SMSgt Ramirez felt the inclusion of women in every activity created a sense of "family". By crossing, not only gender lines, but by also crossing AF Specialty and rank lines the site became truly homogenous. But the organization cannot possibly reach this point without individual effort and preparation. How then, did these particular airmen prepare for their specific needs?

6. Personal Needs

Having to plan ahead is every airman's responsibility. However, under times of extreme duress airmen are faced with physical responses which no one can predict. The Post Exchanges carry some items of necessity for women, but could they have been better prepared? Women were supported through two sources, care packages and AAFES.

“Care packages” were donated from companies in the U.S. and mailed from family members. The respondents felt AAFES provided for minimal needs and were very responsive in ordering items not normally stocked.. Additionally, items such as nail polish and make-up were available at larger AAFES facilities. But, beyond their efforts to fight like a man, while acting like a lady, these women broke through the layers of skeptics and years of gender bias to successfully represent themselves as *airmen* in a war. Did their perception of women in the military change?

7. Women in the Military

Well, the real essence of war may be a delayed reaction and the significance of its' impact on one's life may be very different. This is no less true, if you are a woman. The question of “Do women belong in the military” is answered wholeheartedly “yes” by all respondents. SSgt Cordaway indicated that although there was a fear factor, she is more appreciative of the U.S. by the experience. SSgt Miles summarized her feelings like this: “It has been, in my experience, that it's not necessarily men vs. women; it's if you can do the job, do it and it's great to have you here. If you can't do the job -it's see ya', male or female.”(3) SMSgt Ramirez said, “an organization reaches success by utilizing every individuals talents to their fullest to achieve the mission objectives. This was apparent on the site. We all augmented each other, whether it was in helping the plumber change a shower head or jumping on a 10K Forklift to off-load an aircraft. We were a team in every sense of the word, and our work wasn't done until the last pallet was off-

loaded.”(5) It appears as if the experience actually solidified the perspective of these airmen.

CONCLUSION

From the onset of the conflict in the Persian Gulf, skeptics were lobbying against the deployment of women to the Area of Responsibility (AOR) questioning whether women really “belonged” in the military. In the final analysis, the accomplishments were evident: women were fully integrated, women performed vital roles under stress and performed well, and current laws and policies were followed.

The question of “belonging” was answered by these women, amongst other issues. First, the Quality of Life, as experienced by these women, was very good. The Air Force is proactive in maintaining a standard of quality of life for all airmen, even as indicated by SSgt Miles who experienced a crowded situation and SMSgt Ramirez’ unique housing. Secondly, training was not targeted to a specific gender and accept for one individual, all were prepared to contribute to the war effort, which subsequently contributed to the successful outcome of the war. Next, equal opportunities existed at all deployed sites addressed here, and harassment was not experienced by these women. In addition, medical care was adequate, however, more preparation could’ve been made in regards to acute female infections and stocking of medications for their treatment. While medical needs were minimally met, the recreational activities were more than adequate and the services operations were extremely diligent in their efforts to appease everyone’s needs. Although personal preparation for a deployment of this nature cannot be understated, AAFES filled in the gaps. They provided adequate support for women and were proactive

in filling special requests at all sites addressed here. Lastly, the question of whether women belong in the military was a definite “yes”. These airmen filled their roles and would do so again. Gender roles were not an issue, except in the media and these airmen ultimately, received appropriate recognition for their contributions. They filled various levels of responsibilities and as such are proof of the full integration of women in our military. Evidence of the success can be found in a report to Congress, The Gulf War: Military Lessons Learned, which stated, “we firmly believe quality personnel and leadership won this war.”(7: 51) I think that answers the question of “belonging.”

Bibliography

1. Conduct of Persian Gulf Conflict, Interim Report to Congress Department of Defense. July 1991, Vol. 1 of 2. Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm Documentation. Interim Report to Congress pursuant to Title V Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-25).
2. Cordaway, Norma J. SSgt, USAF, Interview with author, San Antonio, Texas 12 Feb 96, HQ AETC, Chief, IM Technology Systems Branch, Randolph AFB, Texas.
3. Miles, Christy S. SSgt, USAF, Interview with author, Landstuhl, Germany, 16 Feb 96, Telephone Interview, Security Specialist, 569th US Forces Police Flight, Landstuhl, Germany.
4. Report of Congress Persian Gulf War: Defense Policy. 15 May 1991. (Additional Title: Persian Gulf War: Defense Policy Implications for Congress. Prepared by the Library of Congress; Ronald O'Rourke, Coordinator.
5. Ramirez, Barbara A. SMSgt, USAF, Interview with author, Maxwell, Gunter Annex, 12 Feb 96. Superintendent, Contracts Analysis Section, HQ AETC, Randolph AFB, Texas.
6. Richardson, Katherine E. MSgt, USAF, Interview with author, Tucson, Arizona, 12 Feb 96, Superintendent, 612 ASPTS, Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona.
7. The Gulf War: Military Lessons Learned, July 1991. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C. Project Director: James Blackwell, Michael J. Mazair, Don M. Snider.
8. Women Marines: Their perceptions from Southwest Asia. Vol. 1. Major Anne E. Rothmell, USMCR and Staff Sergeant Kim T. Adamson, USMCR, July 1991.