

Demystifying the "Feminine Mythique" Or, Women and Combat Can Mix

by Angela R. Febraro and Carol McCann

The case is made for women in combat.

In "The Feminine Mythique" (*Gazette on the Net*, 15 May 2002), Col William T. Hewes, USMC(Ret) argues that women do not belong in combat. He presents his arguments in such a way as to suggest that they are self-evident truths, rather than debatable opinions. Indeed, we suggest that Col Hewes reproduces several *myths* about women and combat that require *demystification*.¹ We challenge, in particular, Col Hewes' claims that because combat service is not a civil right, it need not apply to women; that combat is the natural province of men, not women; and that the presence of women in mixed-gender combat units necessarily undermines unit bonding, cohesion, and performance. We also briefly address Col Hewes' remarks regarding the effects of sexuality on bonding and unit cohesion. We conclude that arguments against the inclusion of women in combat roles (made by Col Hewes and others) ignore a solid body of scientific evidence² as well as the historical record³ demonstrating women's combat effectiveness in numerous operational contexts.

Combat Service: A Civil Right?

Col Hewes contends that the argument in favor of placing women in combat units is fatally flawed, mainly because it "presumes that the opportunity to serve in combat is a civil right." Although it may be true that⁴ under current U.S. federal law⁵ military men and women do not enjoy the same civil rights as civilians and combat service does not constitute a civil right for women, neither is combat service a civil right for men. No one, man or woman, has the *right* to serve in the military or in a combat role until they have demonstrated that they can satisfy the requirements. However, in contrast to Col Hewes, we believe that both women and men⁶ as full and equal citizens⁷ should have the *opportunity* to serve in combat. In short, the *civil rights status* of combat service is equivalent for both genders, and thus, it cannot be used as a rationale for excluding women, but not men, from combat service.

Col Hewes' position that a country's military is not an "equal opportunity employer"⁸ that it must be distinct from civilian society (and thus exempt from civil rights legislation)⁹ is not inherently correct. Rather, it is a position rooted in a certain philosophy and set of values¹⁰ and one that is a topic of ongoing debate. Some analysts hold, for example, that a country's military should reflect civilian values, that it should follow civilian laws, and that it should mirror civilian demographics.¹¹ In Canada, for instance, the military is not exempt from human rights legislation.¹² Notwithstanding that the civil rights of the military may be less than those of civilians, it is a matter for debate *how much* less. Furthermore, different nations have handled this question differently.

War: The Natural Province of Men?

Col Hewes argues that war is nearly the exclusive province of men and that this reflects the nature of warfare itself (and implicitly, the nature of men and women). According to Col Hewes, "The physical, emotional, and social qualifications of those best suited to [the waging of war] are unarguably the forte of the male of the species." Yet it is far from clear that this is the case. Regarding physical attributes, females are capable of a much higher level of physical performance than is generally assumed. Training can substantially improve women's physical performance, sometimes to the point that it matches or exceeds that of men.¹³ Although males' upper-body strength is on average greater than females', women can often use their bodies in different ways from men to achieve the same result.¹⁴ Females, in fact, have physical abilities¹⁵ that are becoming more and more relevant to modern warfare; success and survival can now depend much more on the ability to execute rapid sequences of small motions (e.g., in tanks or fighter aircraft)¹⁶ an ability in which females tend to excel¹⁷ and much less on upper-body strength.¹⁸ Furthermore, the trend toward miniaturization in weaponry means that smaller bodies have become more adaptive. In short, technology has changed the nature of war to such an extent that brute physical strength is no longer as important in warfare as it once was.¹⁹

Regarding social and emotional characteristics, substantial empirical evidence suggests greater gender similarity in these areas than gender difference. Research on gender and leadership⁸ and gender and aggression,⁹ for example, indicates that women and men are much more alike than different in these areas. Where gender differences are found, they tend to be small and context-specific, not universal. Thus, although males are more aggressive than females on average, females can be just as aggressive and ferocious as men, depending on the circumstances.¹⁰ Furthermore, given the changing nature of warfare, it may be that women are more likely to possess the social and emotional qualifications needed for combat in certain contexts, such as conflict resolution skills, negotiation skills, and communications skills, than are many men.

Moreover, although warfare may be more prevalent among males, history shows that women have fought in wars in direct physical combat, and fought well. Women have fought effectively both disguised as males and openly as females, and in both single- and mixed-gender units.¹¹ In addition to the extensive use of women in revolutionary, guerrilla, and partisan warfare (e.g., among the Eritrean rebels and the Sandinistas), women fought in the Serbian and Russian Armies in World War I (e.g., in the "Battalion of Death"), during the Russian Civil War, and for the Army of North Vietnam (and to a lesser extent, South Vietnam) in the Vietnam War.¹² In World War II, hundreds of thousands of Soviet women served in combat as snipers, machinegunners, artillery women, and tank women—probably the largest case of women's participation in direct combat in modern history.¹³ Throughout such wars, women's combat experience has also included dragging wounded comrades away from the battlefield. The puzzling question is: why, even after women have skillfully and courageously fought in combat, a collective amnesia seems to sweep over nations such that women's combat service is rendered invisible and forgotten, and women are officially excluded from direct combat in most countries in the world?

Effects of the Presence of Women on Bonding and Unit Cohesion

One of Col Hewes's main arguments against women in combat (including combat support units and combat service support units) is his claim that women, due to their biology, are "incapable of bonding with men in a manner that contributes to unit cohesion." In contrast, the vast majority of men, claims Col Hewes, possess a "compelling instinct to be . . . perceived by other men as being manly." This instinct, he maintains, is demonstrated by conforming to a consensus of what constitutes manliness that is reached through the process of male bonding. Col Hewes is adamant that the existence of male bonding rituals is "exclusively a guy thing, one of the fundamental facts of life that can no more be behaviorally modified than can a woman's exclusive ability to bear children."

In addition to noting the essentialist, dichotomous, and circular thinking that pervades Col Hewes's arguments, we question his claim that bonding depends on "manliness" (an argument that de facto excludes women, who cannot possibly be manly!) or that women cannot bond with men. In making his claim, Col Hewes not only discounts the effective mixed-gender bonding that regularly occurs within police and fire departments, he completely ignores examples of successful mixed-gender bonding that has occurred, for example, among Eritrean rebels (in which 35 percent of the frontline troops were reportedly women), in Vietnam,¹⁴ and in numerous other military contexts. During DESERT STORM, for instance, the combat support units, ships, and aircrews that included women performed their missions well—even under direct fire. According to CPT Cynthia Mosley, USA, commander of a combat support company that was in the thick of the action during the ground attack into Iraq: "When the action starts, every soldier does what they've been trained to do—nobody cares whether you're male or female. It's just—can you do the job?"¹⁵ There is also evidence to suggest that mixed-gender units may perform even more effectively than single-gender units in some cases—as they did in North Vietnam and El Salvador, for example. Some American commanders of experienced mixed-gender units have noticed a similar pattern of positive dynamics: the women often work harder to gain approval, and the men work harder not to be outdone. This was apparent, for instance, in the Persian Gulf.

These experiences are also supported by studies conducted by the U.S. Army Research Institute that showed that women in combat support units did not adversely affect unit performance; by Canadian military research that showed that the assignment of women to nontraditional roles in land, air, and sea environments did not have negative impacts on operational effectiveness;¹⁶ and by Danish research that showed that women performed just as well as their male counterparts in land and sea combat roles.¹⁷ In general, research indicates that cohesion and bonding are not adversely affected by women's presence in military groups and that men and women can work

together well—especially when women are not a novelty in a unit and especially when women and men are deployed in the field.¹⁸ As Col Paul E. Roush, USMC(Ret) has stated:

Bonding requires three elements: organization for a common goal, the presence of (or potential for) danger, and a willingness to sacrifice. Not one of these is gender-specific.¹⁹

Rather, cohesion is affected by group solidarity, *leadership*, and the adequacy of supply and command channels, and bonding is primarily related to situation, circumstance, and environment—to a commonality of experience that is shared by everyone in the group. None of these have anything to do with gender.²⁰ Still, the assumption that cohesion or bonding will be undermined by the presence of women in combat units persists.²¹

The Sexuality Issue

Col Hewes maintains that although women do not have the “innate ability” to bond with men in combat-related contexts, they do have the capacity to “couple” with them, and this, according to Col Hewes, is a significant problem in combat units such as warships. In his words, “There is no more room for sex aboard ship (or in the foxhole or ready room) than there is in the corporate office, for (he argues) the former costs lives and the latter costs dollars. According to this logic, women should be excluded from working in corporate offices as well as combat roles. Is this ultimately what he is advocating?”

Col Hewes also implicates the inability of women to bond with men as one reason for what he terms the “alleged” sexual harassment problem in the military. He attempts to make clear that he is not referring to rape, assault, or other violations of the *Uniform Code of Military Justice*, but is referring to the “crude and profane verbal give-and-take [that is] traditional to life in the military” behavior that he claims “women confuse with criminal sexual harassment.”²² Col Hewes argues that women’s inability to tolerate such behavior has a devastating effect on unit cohesion, male bonding, and the mental preparedness necessary for war, and that eventually this will drive the best men out of the military (who, he claims, are there largely because they wish to prove themselves “manly.”) Once again, however, Col Hewes’s arguments are challenged by scientific research that shows, for example, that attitudes toward women in combat tend to become more positive as more soldiers are exposed to females performing combat-related duties.²³ His arguments are also challenged by the performance of 800 military women who participated in 1989 in the invasion of Panama, many of whom experienced actual combat and whose performance was praised as highly effective.²⁴ In this conflict there was no evidence that readiness levels were compromised by women’s participation.

Col Hewes claims that the negative impact of women on unit cohesion will become evident when the U.S. Armed Forces engage in combat with a credible opponent and the “body bags start coming home.” Using graphic description and highly emotional discourse he argues that the casualties would have been much worse in the Korean War had the combat units included 15 percent women. Col Hewes’s prediction is pure speculation, of course. But as earlier discussed, research demonstrating the effectiveness of mixed-gender units, as well as the historical record, suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Col Hewes’s arguments against women in combat can be reduced to one central theme: women do not belong in combat because they are women, not men—a circular argument if ever there was one. Both empirical research and the historical record have demonstrated women’s capabilities to function in combat environments, even under direct hostile fire. Ultimately, it may be that relatively few women will seek out, or meet, the requirements of combat service. Even if this turns out to be the case, however, it does not follow that women, as a class, should be excluded from combat service—any more than it means that men, as a class, should be excluded from “nontraditional” activities. In short, it is our view that both genders, as full and equal citizens, should have the opportunity to serve in combat if they meet the bona fide requirements for the job. To exclude women from combat is to deny women an equal opportunity to serve their country and the type of experience needed to attain senior leadership positions—as well as to deny a great deal of empirical and historical evidence demonstrating women’s combat effectiveness in numerous operational contexts.

1. Views similar to those of Col Hewes were published in the February 2001 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette* in an article by Julie W. Sherman entitled, "Combat Duty for Women? One Woman's Point of View," pp. 41-42.
2. Moskos, C., J. Williams, and D. Segal, *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces After the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
3. Following legislative changes that began in 1989, when a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that women were to be fully integrated into all Canadian Forces roles, all combat roles are now open to Canadian women. Since the mid-1980s, several Western European countries have introduced similar legislation based on values such as gender equality and the philosophy that a military should reflect the broader society of which it is a part. Also, see A. Hoiberg, "Military Psychology and Women's Role in the Military," in G. Reuvan and D. A. Mangelsdorff (Eds.), *Handbook of Military Psychology*, 1991, pp. 725-739.
4. Baldi, K.A., "An Overview of Physical Fitness of Female Cadets at the Military Academies," *Military Medicine*, Vol. 156(10), 1991, pp. 537-539.
5. Goldstein, J.S., *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001.
6. Also noteworthy is that, whereas women had been assumed to have a more difficult time adjusting to G forces than men, research now suggests that the structure of women's bodies may make this task easier for women, on average, than men. Goldstein.
7. In his argument that war is the natural province of men, Col Hewes also includes the fact that women are not "immune to pregnancy" like men. Concerns about pregnancy affecting military women and unit morale, however, have been vastly overblown. Pregnancy may have a negative effect on unit morale in isolated cases, but research suggests that this is not generally the case. Also see P.J. Thomas and M.D. Thomas, "Mothers in Uniform," in F.W. Kaslow (Ed.), *The Military Family in Peace and War*, Springer, New York, 1993, pp. 25-47.
8. Eagley, A.H., S.J. Karau, and M.G. Makhijani, "Gender and the Effectiveness of Leaders: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, pp. 125-145.
9. Eagley, A.H. and V.J. Steffen, "Gender and Aggressive Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Social Psychological Literature," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 100, pp. 309-330.
10. Goldstein.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. Also see E. Hancock, "Women as Killers and Killing Women: The Implications of Gender-Neutral Armed Forces," M. Evans and A. Ryan (Eds.), *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle*, Allen & Unwin, pp. 159-176.
13. Goldstein.
14. Thomas and Thomas.
15. This example also makes clear that in modern warfare it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish direct combat from combat "support" roles. Thus, even in the modern U.S. military, women have served in direct combat "if unofficially."
16. Hoiberg.
17. Goldstein.
18. Ibid.
19. Thomas and Thomas, p. 40.
20. Goldstein and Hoiberg.
21. Wilson, J., "First Female Green Beret Still Can't Be a Marine," *The Globe and Mail*, 1 June 2002.
22. It would seem that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) of the United States also "confuses" such behavior with sexual harassment. According to the EEOC, which provides legal definitions of sexual harassment, behaviors such as sexual jokes, teasing, remarks, and gestures "behaviors that Col Hewes claims simply require a "robust sense of humor and a tough skin" and are central to bonding" fall into the "hostile work environment" category of sexual harassment.

23. Hodson, S.E. and J.S. Salter, [Attitudes Towards the Combat-Related Employment of Women](#), [Australian Army Psychological Research Unit Report AR 009 044](#).

24. Hoiberg.

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