

## LIVING AND FIGHTING ALONGSIDE MEN, AND FITTING IN

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE WARHORSE, Iraq — There is no mistaking that this dusty, gravel-strewn camp northeast of Baghdad is anything other than a combat outpost in a still-hostile land. And there is no mistaking that women in uniform have had a transformative effect on it.

They have their own quarters, boxy trailers called CHUs (the military's acronym for containerized housing units, pronounced "chews").

There are women's bathrooms and showers, alongside the men's. Married couples live together. The base's clinic treats gynecological problems and has, alongside the equipment needed to treat the trauma of modern warfare, an ultrasound machine.

Opponents of integrating women in combat zones long feared that sex would mean the end of American military prowess. But now birth control is available — the PX at Warhorse even sold out of condoms one day recently — reflecting a widely accepted reality that soldiers have sex at outposts across Iraq.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the first in which tens of thousands of American military women have lived, worked and fought with men for prolonged periods. Wars without front lines, they have done more than just muddle the rules meant to keep women out of direct enemy contact.

They have changed the way the United States military goes to war. They have reshaped life on bases across Iraq and Afghanistan. They have cultivated a new generation of women with a warrior's ethos — and combat experience — that for millennia was almost exclusively the preserve of men.

And they have done so without the disruption of discipline and unit cohesion that some feared would unfold at places like Warhorse.

"There was a lot of debate over where women should be," said Brig. Gen. Heidi V. Brown, one of the two highest ranking women in Iraq today, recalling the start of the war. "Here we are six years later, and you don't hear about it. You shouldn't hear about it."

In many ways, General Brown's career trajectory since the war began reflects the expanded role for women at war.

In 2003, as a colonel, she commanded a Patriot air-defense brigade that joined the push from Kuwait to Baghdad, losing nine soldiers in a maintenance battalion outside Nasiriya three days

after the invasion began. One of them, Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa, was the first woman killed in action in Iraq; Pfc. Jessica D. Lynch was captured in the same attack. Now, as the American role in the war declines, General Brown will oversee the logistics of withdrawing the vast amounts of military hardware in Iraq over the next year.

“We’ve needed — needed — the contributions of both our men and women,” said Brig. Gen. Mary A. Legere, the director of intelligence for the American war effort here and the other highest ranking woman in Iraq.

The military, of course, is not gender blind, especially in a war zone.

Sexual harassment in a still-predominantly male institution remains a problem. So does sexual assault. Both are underreported, soldiers and officers here say, because the rigidity of the military chain of command can make accusations uncomfortable and even risky for victims living in close quarters with the men they accuse.

As a precaution, women are advised to travel in pairs, particularly in smaller bases populated with Iraqi troops and civilians. Capt. Margaret D. Taafe-McMenamy, commander of the intelligence analysis cell at Warhorse, carries a folding knife and a heavy, ridged flashlight — a Christmas gift from her husband, whom she lives with here — as a precaution when she is out at night on the base.

Staff Sgt. Patricia F. Bradford, 27, a psychological operations soldier, said that slights, subtle and not, were common, and some were easier to brush off than others. Women are still viewed derisively at times in the confined, occasionally tense space of an outpost like Warhorse.

“You’re a bitch, a slut or a dyke — or you’re married, but even if you’re married, you’re still probably one of the three,” Sergeant Bradford said.

At the same time, she and other female soldiers cope with the slights, showing a disarming brashness.

“I think being a staff sergeant — and a bitch — helps deflect those things,” she added.

The issues that arise in having women in combat — harassment, bias, hardship, even sexual relations — are, she and others said, a matter of discipline, maturity and professionalism rather than an argument for separating the sexes.

Sergeant Bradford recalled the day during her first tour when her convoy moved south while a soldier with whom she was then engaged to be married moved north on the same highway. She listened on the radio as his convoy came under an attack that continued after she was out of range.

“For four days, I had no idea what happened to him,” she said, “but I still had to continue my mission, because that’s what you do when you’re a soldier.” (He emerged unscathed, she later learned.)

### Unforeseen Issues

Such issues were not foreseen when the war in Iraq began in 2003, even though the initial invasion force included women in the vanguard.

On a practical level, the military was not prepared to house and otherwise address the specific needs of women in a war zone — including issues like health and privacy.

Early on, bases were largely makeshift and far more dangerous. Few soldiers, male or female, had more than rudimentary quarters or latrines. None had much privacy.

Sgt. Dawn M. Cloukey, a communications specialist, spent her first tour in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 as the only woman among 45 soldiers, operating a retransmission station in the mountains of northern Iraq and then in the center of Baghdad. She lived out of a rucksack, with no toilet or room of her own. She described the experience as isolating.

“I always felt like the plague,” she said at Warhorse, on her second tour in Iraq, where she handles communications for the commander of the First Stryker Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division.

As the United States military settled into more permanent bases, many initial difficulties abated, as the Army gradually adapted to the new reality of waging war with a mixed force. So have the soldiers themselves.

Women have sought acceptance in a still-predominately male environment not by emphasizing their sex but rather by displaying their toughness, their willingness to adjust to conditions that are less than ideal.

“I’ve kicked my guys out of the truck to pee in a bottle like that,” Sgt. Joelene M. Lachance, a soldier with the 172nd Military Intelligence Battalion, said at Warhorse, pointing to one of the liter water bottles that are ubiquitous at bases in Iraq. “Cut the bottle off and pee in the bottle and then dispose of it. Sometimes it’s an issue, but most of the time, I just make do.

“I don’t try to, like, ‘I can’t sleep here,’ ” she continued. “If they’re sleeping there, I’m sleeping there. I spent five days out in the truck once — with six of my guys, sleeping on the floor.”

Warhorse still reverberates with the rumble of armored convoys and the thud of helicopters ferrying troops and, at times, the wounded. It is just north of Baquba, the regional capital of Diyala Province, one of the most restive provinces in Iraq. Here, the war is not over. Warhorse will very likely be among the last bases to close in Iraq before American troops withdraw in full.

At the outset of the war, the introduction of women into outposts like Warhorse raised fears not just of abuse or harassment, but also of sex and pregnancy. The worst of those fears, officers say, have not materialized.

In fact, sex in America's war zones is fairly common, soldiers say, and has not generally proved disruptive.

In April, the latest iteration of General Order No. 1, the rules governing the behavior of soldiers in Iraq broadly, quietly relaxed the explicit prohibition on sex in a war zone, though it still bars sex with Iraqis and spending the night in someone else's CHU. Some commands, including Baghdad, retain broader restrictions, for example, on being in CHUs belonging to members of the opposite sex.

"The chain of command already has to deal with enough," Captain Taafe-McMenamy said. "They don't really want to have to punish soldiers for dating."

Women do become pregnant — a condition that, intentional or not, in or out of wedlock, requires the woman to be flown out within two weeks, causing personnel disruptions in individual units.

The Army and Marine Corps declined to say exactly how many women left Iraq and Afghanistan as a result of pregnancies, but it appears to be relatively rare and has had little effect on overall readiness, commanders say. At Warhorse, the First Stryker Brigade, which has thousands of soldiers, has sent only three women home because of pregnancies in 10 months in Iraq, the brigade said.

"There was a fear if we integrate units, you will have a bunch of young people with raging hormones, and it will end up in too many unwanted pregnancies, and it's more trouble than it's worth," said Peter Mansoor, a former battalion commander in Iraq who, until retiring recently, served as Gen. David H. Petraeus's executive officer. "With good leadership and mentorship, we have been able to keep those problems to a minimum."

### Taking On New Roles

Roughly 1 in 20 of the 5,600 soldiers at Warhorse is female, a smaller ratio than in the military as a whole. Nonetheless, they are fully integrated in the base's operations.

Many of the women at Warhorse serve in jobs that have traditionally accommodated women: the base hospital, food service, supply and administration.

Others, though, serve on the brigade staff, in intelligence and psychological operations, which until recently were part of the Special Forces and thus off limits to women.

"We have changed so much," Col. Burt K. Thompson, the commander at Warhorse, said of the Army, noting that every time he leaves the base, his patrol includes two women, including

Sergeant Cloukey “on comms” — communications — and a medic, Sgt. Evette T. Lee-Stewart. “To have a female on an infantry brigade staff? Oh my God.”

Like many commanders who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, he said that women have ended the debate over their role by their performance.

“I’ve relieved males from command,” he said. “I’ve never relieved a female commander in two and a half years as commander.”

The nature of the war has also done much to change the debate over combat roles. Any trip off the heavily secured bases now effectively invites contact with the enemy.

Many women have also been pulled off their regular jobs and trained to search Iraqi women at checkpoints because of local cultural sensitivities, putting them as much at risk as any male counterpart.

When Specialist Jennifer M. Hoepfner goes “outside the wire” at Warhorse, as going on patrol is known, she clammers into what she calls “the best seat in the truck,” the turret atop the Army’s newest armored vehicle, the MRAP.

“I’m the gunner on all our missions,” she said, having qualified for the M240B machine gun at an expert level.

“I think some of the males are a little confused when I go up,” Specialist Hoepfner said. “They’re like, ‘Who’s your gunner?’ ”

Women are also increasingly “attached” to infantry and armored units that train and advise Iraq’s police and military forces. Now that almost all American combat forces have pulled back to bases outside of Iraq’s cities, that training has become the main mission in Iraq.

The involvement of women in it has been a cultural shock for Iraqi men far less accustomed to dealing with women professionally, especially in the military.

Women spoke of inappropriate comments or uncomfortable flattery, and even gifts. “It was everything from candy to lingerie,” said Capt. Victoria Ferreira, 29, who spent a year with an 11-person squad training Iraqi officers. “How do you react to that? ‘Thank you?’ ”

For the most part, though, Iraqis seem to accept the role of women in the American military — they have even expanded their own ranks for tasks like searching women at checkpoints — even if it seems unlikely that women will be incorporated more widely into the Iraqi armed forces anytime soon.

“I think now, six years since the war started, they’ve learned to adapt or tolerate the fact that in the American Army we have high ranking positions that are filled by women,” said Capt. Violeta Z. Sifuentes, who commands the 591st Military Police Company.

It was not always so, she recalled of her first tour in Samarra in 2006. “They always thought my platoon sergeant or my squad leader was the one in charge until I was like, ‘Listen here. I’m in charge whether you like it or not.’ ”

The captain’s remarks were typical. The women serving in today’s military represent a generational shift. They are confident young women who have not had to fight the same gender battles their predecessors in uniform did.

“I never felt like I had to fight to succeed in the Army” was how Captain Taafe-McMenamy, who is 27, put it.

### **Adapting to the Tasks**

Women in today’s military say they do not feel the same pressure to prove themselves. They adapt and expect others to adapt. They preserve their femininity without making much of it.

Specialist Hoepfner and her roommate, Sergeant Bradford, belong to the 361st Tactical Psychological Operations Company, which patrols the towns and villages of Diyala with infantry squads to spread and collect information.

On a recent patrol in the small village of Shifta, they seemed more of a novelty to the Iraqis they encountered than the soldiers they patrolled with, taking up defensive positions alongside their male colleagues whenever they paused.

“I actually had this million-dollar idea my first deployment,” Sergeant Bradford said of her tour as a truck driver hauling supplies in 2004. “I was like, I need something that’s like a beer bong that I can hold in place so I can pee standing up without pulling my pants down. Cause we were truck drivers. We’d stop on the side of the road. There’s no bushes. I was telling one of my soldiers about this great idea, and he said they already make that.”

She produced from her bunk in her CHU a device sold by REI called a “feminine urinary director.” “It’s even pink,” Specialist Hoepfner interjected.

Warhorse’s supply officer — a woman — acquired dozens of them.

“The first time one of them came around a truck and saw me peeing on a tire,” she said of one of her male colleagues, “I thought he was going to have a heart attack.”