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Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union



D'Ann Campbell

WOMEN are the invisible combatants of World War II.¹ The concern here is with regular combat soldiers in uniform, not resistance fighters or guerrillas. "Combat" means an organized lethal attack on an organized enemy (and does not include self-defense in emergency situations).² Hundreds of thousands of women engaged in combat. They served on both sides and on every front. German women soldiers

1. Research support was provided in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Research, RO-20660-84. I especially appreciated the comments of Col. Robert Doughty, Col. Kenneth Hamburger, Col. Paul Miles, Lt. Col. Judith Luckett, Capt. Richard Hooker, Connie Devilbiss, Nancy Loring Harrison, Richard Jensen, Dennis Showalter, and Judith Stiehm. Archivists, librarians, and historians were especially helpful at Indiana University; the U.S. Military Academy; the National Archives (NA); the Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library; the WAC Museum at Ft McClellan; Maxwell Air Force Base Library; the Navy History Center, Washington; the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library; the George C. Marshall Library (ML); the U.S. Air Force Academy; the Imperial War Museum (IWM), London; the Public Record Office, London; the Canadian Archives, Ottawa; the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (MF) Freiburg, Germany; Moscow State University; the Georgian State Museum, Tbilisi; the Royal Dutch Military History Museum; and the Austrian Federal Military Historical Service (MSH), Vienna. The Russian archives proved impossible to use. However, there is in Moscow a Soviet Women's Center which helped arrange very useful interviews for me in 1986. Special thanks to Larry I. Bland (ML); Colonel (Dr.) Roland G. Foerster (MF); Dr. Erwin Schmidl (MSH); and Dr. V. S. Murmantseva. Invaluable were the excellent translations made for me by Shannon Jumper.

2. "Combat" is used as it was defined at the time, particularly by the U.S. Army's Judge Advocate General's Office, and also by British policy makers such as Winston Churchill and General Frederick Pile.

helped inflict casualties on American and British forces, and in turn they were killed, wounded, or captured. Likewise, Soviet and British women fought bravely.

American women were not sent into combat. The question is why not—and what does that tell us about gender roles in America? Historians in recent years have been exploring the changes in gender roles during World War II. The general consensus is that on the home front women temporarily assumed new roles (“Rosie the Riveter”) but that no permanent or radical transformation took place.³ The question is more open regarding military roles: making women soldiers was the most dramatic government experiment in changing traditional sex roles ever attempted. Putting these women soldiers into combat constituted a radical inversion of the traditional roles of women as the passive sweetheart/wife/sex object whose ultimate mission was to wait for their virile menfolk to return from their masculine mission of fighting and dying for “apple pie and motherhood” (that is, for traditional social values.) The Pentagon was well aware of the performance of European women soldiers, and Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall conducted a full-scale experiment to see how well American women could perform. There was never a question of an all-female unit; the issue at stake was whether mixed gender units could perform combat roles effectively. The experiment stunned the General Staff: mixed gender units performed better than all-male units. As the draft scraped further and further down the barrel, the availability of large numbers of potentially excellent unutilized soldiers became more and more an anomaly. The demands of military efficiency called for assigning women to combat.

The Luftwaffe lost the Battle of Britain in 1940 but remained a powerful force. It had to be defeated, and the ground soldiers’ preferred solution was strong antiaircraft units (hereafter AA units).⁴ In 1941 the British began using their women Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) soldiers in “protected” AA units; protected because these soldiers were immune from capture and their living conditions could be closely monitored. To help emphasize the importance of women serving in AA units to free more men to fight on the European continent, Winston

3. D’Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, 1984); Leila M. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda during World War II* (Princeton, 1979); Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, 1984); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, 1987); Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston, 1982). William Chafe has argued for radical changes: *The Paradox of Change* (New York, 1992).

4. Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley, and William R. Keast, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, 1948), 120–21.

Churchill's daughter Mary served in one such brigade. Marshall asked General Dwight Eisenhower to investigate the effectiveness of these mixed-gender AA units. When Eisenhower gave a positive report, Marshall decided to conduct his own experiment.⁵ Security was tight—there were no leaks whatever until long after the war.⁶

Marshall wanted to recruit for his experiment women who had already volunteered for military service. He turned to the only official American women's organization at that time, the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) which in July of 1943 would become the Women's Army Corps. Waacs from the 150th and 151st WAAC Technical Companies and the 62nd WAAC Operations Company, a total of 21 officers and 374 enrollees, were selected for this experiment. From 15 December 1942 to 15 April 1943, they were trained in the Military District of Washington on two composite anti-aircraft gun batteries and the nearby searchlight units. The Waacs served with the 36th Coast Artillery Brigade AA. Colonel Edward W. Timberlake, the immediate commander of these experimental units had nothing but praise for them. "The experiences . . . indicate that all WAAC personnel exhibited an outstanding devotion to duty, willingness and ability to absorb and grasp technical information concerning the problems, maintenance and tactical disposition to all types of equipment." Indeed the Waacs learned their duties much more quickly than the men, most of whom had been classified as "limited-duty service." Colonel Timberlake recommended that in the future the training periods for women recruits could be shortened. When evaluating the searchlight units, he reported, "the same willingness to learn and devotion to duty has been manifested in these units as in the gun batteries."⁷

In contradiction to generally existing stereotypes of women being physically too weak to perform combat jobs, Timberlake concluded that women met the physical, intellectual, and psychological standards for this mission. In an echo of a widespread belief at the time, he reported, "WAAC personnel were found to be superior in efficiency to

5. Report no. 1101, Eisenhower to General Marshall, 12 August 1942. Women's Army Corps, WDCSA, 1942-43, 291.9; Reel 306, Item 4688. Original in NA, copy in ML. Marshall to Eisenhower, 6 August 1942, and Marshall Memorandum, 18 November 1942, in Larry I. Bland, ed. *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall* (Baltimore, 1981-), 3: 288-89, 443-44, also 561; Alfred D. Chandler, ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower* (Baltimore, 1970-), 1: 450-51.

6. The first mention of the experiment came in the official history by Mattie Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington 1954), 301-2. Treadwell's work remains the best single source on the WAAC and WAC (and the best on any women's unit during the war).

7. U.S. War Department, Organization and Training Division, G-3. 291.9 WAAC 7 July 1943, RG 165, Entry 211, Box 199, 1-3. Copy in ML, Xerox 2782.

men in all functions involving delicacy of manual dexterity.” He specifically listed their operation at the director, height finder, radar, and searchlight stations, and concluded “their performance of repetitious routine duties is considered superior to that of men.” Indeed he judged that WAAC personnel could be substituted for men in 60 percent of all AA positions. Because men and women were going to be working in close proximity, Timberlake was concerned about any possible scandals which might occur. Promiscuity, or even rumors of impropriety, could undermine the unit’s combat effectiveness. He was relieved to find, “The relationship between the Army personnel and WAAC personnel, both enlisted and commissioned, has been highly satisfactory.” No sexual harassment was noted; instead he found, “A mutual understanding and appreciation appears to exist.” Timberlake asked his superior, Major General John T. Lewis of the Military District of Washington, to judge the experiment for himself. Soon Lewis was as enthusiastic as Timberlake. Lewis wrote that Waacs could “efficiently perform many duties in the antiaircraft artillery unit.” Their high morale and a paucity of disciplinary problems “increases materially the relative value of WAAC personnel in antiaircraft artillery in fixed positions.” Lewis was so proud of his Waacs that in May 1943, he asked Marshall for authority to continue the experiment, increase the number of Waacs to 103 commissioned and 2,315 enrollees, and replace half the 3,630 men in his AA Defense Command with these more efficient soldiers.⁸

Marshall now had to make a choice. If he let Lewis have the women, the whole country would immediately hear that women were being sent into combat. What would that do to proposals to draft women? What would conservative Southern congressmen, who never liked the WAAC in the first place, do to Marshall’s plans to expand the WAAC?⁹ Would the general public approve? Would women stop volunteering? Would the male soldiers react favorably or not? If Marshall approved, he could no longer keep this experiment secret. The Judge Advocate General’s Office said that Congress would have to change the existing legislation and it provided the wording for a suitable amendment: the new Section 20 would read, “Nothing in this act shall prevent any member of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps from service with any combatant organization with her own consent.”¹⁰

8. *Ibid.*, 5-10; 15 June 1943 Memorandum for Asst. C/S G-3, /s/ Lewis, 291.9 WAAC 7 RG 165, Entry 212, Box 199, 1.

9. Representative Carl Vinson, the major Congressional voice on military affairs, opposed women in combat. Marilyn A. Gordon and Mary Jo Ludvigson, “A Constitutional Analysis of the Combat Exclusion for Air Force Women,” *Minerva* 9 (Summer 1991): 1-34.

10. ASF Director of Administration, 020 WAAC, 11-18-42, RG 160, Box 1. [JAG to CofS] Xerox 2000, ML. Also see *Marshall Papers*, 3: 454.

Marshall asked his staff for advice. They recommended that Marshall terminate the experiment immediately. General Miller White of the Personnel Division, General Staff, acknowledged that "The War Department believes the experiment . . . has demonstrated conclusively the practicability of using members of the Corps in this role." However, since the present strength of the WAAC was far below total requirements, he argued that the Waacs "can be more efficiently employed in many other positions for which requisitions are already in hand, and that their use in anti-aircraft artillery to release limited service personnel is not justified under present circumstances."¹¹ In other words, the experiment was a success, but the Army needed these women for higher priority positions. Had Germany or Japan been able to pose a practical threat from the air to the continental United States then putting women in AA positions might have become a high priority. However, given the relative safety of both coasts by 1943, Waacs were most needed to serve in clerical and administrative positions. The AA units had been using men who could only be used for limited duty service and there were more than enough of these men to fill the current need for AA units. However, clerical and administrative positions which normally were filled by women in the civilian world were held by able-bodied men with football fingers who could be in combat instead.

In 1942, Marshall had discovered that some congressmen were so concerned about protecting the women sailors that they amended the law to forbid WAVES from serving overseas.¹² Marshall had been lobbying Congress to upgrade the WAAC from auxiliary status to full military status (the Women's Army Corps—WAC). He wanted the Wacs to serve overseas. The War Department withdrew the WAC bill entirely in April 1943, because of the "flak" over the Navy bill and resubmitted it in May. Finally Congress passed the WAC legislation on 28 June, with authority for overseas service.¹³ Had Congress learned that Marshall wanted the Wacs to serve in combat units, then the WAC bill might have been lost forever or many new restrictions placed on the ability of the Army to utilize womanpower. General Russell Reynolds, Director of the Military Personnel Division, summarized the Army staff's consensus to eliminate the AA experiment before Congress got wind of it: "It is not believed that national policy or public opinion is yet ready to accept the use of women in field force units."¹⁴

11. Brigadier General Ray E. Porter, Asst. C/S, G-3, Xerox 2788 ASF, Director of Personnel, Military Personnel Division, RG 160, Entry 484, Box 491. 14 July 1943. /s/ Col. R. W. Berry, Exec. for Asst. C/S, G-1, copy in ML.

12. Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 20.

13. Ibid. See also Treadwell, *Women's Army Corps*, 220.

14. ASF, Director of Personnel, Military Personnel Division, RG 160, Entry 485, Box 491.

Marshall made the decision. He terminated the experiment, reasigned the Waacs, ordered the results kept confidential, and never thought of using women in combat again.¹⁵ America had drawn the gender line. If the decision had been made exclusively on the grounds of efficiency and performance, women would have been assigned to AA batteries. It was based rather on the current needs of the Army for female office workers, on the state of public opinion, and on the general hostility toward women in nontraditional gender roles in 1943.

To evaluate the full implications of Marshall's decision—to explore what might have happened—it is essential to study the model the United States was watching closely—the British experience. Before the war, in 1938, a prominent woman engineer, Caroline Haslett, was asked to visit the AA batteries at practice and advise the commanding officer, General Frederick Pile, if any of these jobs could be held by women. Except for the heavy work of loading ammunition, Haslett reported that women could perform all the other functions.¹⁶ As the British military began reassigning the most able-bodied anti-aircraft men to the field army, Pile decided to experiment with integrated or mixed batteries. The National Service Act of December 1941 drafted 125,000 women into the military over the next three years while 430,000 more volunteered. The largest of the women's units, Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), began as a woman's auxiliary to the military in 1938 and in 1941 was granted military status (with two-thirds pay of the men of equal rank).¹⁷ Pile went to the ATS to find women soldiers to serve alongside his men who were battling the Luftwaffe bombers day and night. Sir James Grigg, Under-Secretary of State for War, declared Pile's proposal "breath-taking and revolutionary."¹⁸ Prime Minister Winston Churchill was enthusiastic. He argued that any general who saved him 40,000 fighting men had gained the equivalent of a victory. By August 1941, women were operating the fire-control instruments, and men the actual guns in Richmond Park, near the headquarters of AA Command. By September 1943, over 56,000 women were working for AA Command, most in units close to London. The first mixed regiment to fire in action was the 132nd on 21 November 1941 and the first "kill" came in April 1942. As Pile observed, "Beyond a little natural excitement and a

15. General George C. Marshall to Major General Lewis, 13 August 1943, RG 160, Entry 489, Box 492, copy in ML.

16. General Sir Frederick Arthur Pile, *Ack-Ack* (London, 1949), 186; See also J.W.N., "'Mixed' Batteries," *Journal of the Royal Artillery* 69 (1942): 199–206.

17. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 187. Patricia J. Thomas, "Women in the Military: America and the British Commonwealth," *Armed Forces and Society* 4 (August 1978): 629.

18. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 188. See also Shelford Bidwell, *The Women's Royal Army Corps* (London, 1977), 118–19, on British public opinion.



British women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service learn every aspect of this antiaircraft gun except to fire it, which was forbidden. (Courtesy Imperial War Museum.)

tendency to chatter when there was a lull, they behaved like a veteran party, and shot an enemy plane into the sea.”¹⁹

The mixed batteries were commanded by men from the AA regiments. Women officers from ATS served as “gender commissars,” whose only official function was to supervise the military bearing of the enlisted women.²⁰ ATS officers were given a brief course in the general principles of anti-aircraft work, but the only women allowed to participate in the actual fighting were the ATS enlistees. The male chain of command

19. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 188, 191, 193; Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 121–22.

20. “The Second World War Memories of Miss G. Morgan,” MSS PP/MCR/115, 1, housed at the Imperial War Museum, London; Two ATS AA Officers, “Life in a Mixed Anti-Aircraft Battery,” *Army Quarterly* 47 (October, 1943): 82, also points out the excellent discipline in these units.

handled all instruction and supervision of both men and women in the technical areas. In practice, the women officers soon took over some of the fire-control operations—a practice that was condoned by the AA Command and ATS leadership. As one woman explained, “When we arrived at our site we had all been trained for particular jobs, but since then we have learned to do every job in camp except fire the guns—and I bet we could do that too if we were allowed.”²¹ Soon women skilled in fire-control operations learned as well to set the range and bearing dials on the gun itself a few yards away and adjust the fuses on the shells. Indeed they could even take over the complete operation of a light 40-mm AA gun. But regulations strictly prohibited women from engaging the firing mechanism. They could not pull the trigger on a man, even if he was a Luftwaffe pilot.

ATS women were soon assigned to searchlight units.²² These units were scattered around the gun complex and thus each searchlight was some distance from the next. Each unit had to be supplemented with a male soldier firing a tripod-mounted light machine gun to deter any raider who attacked down the beam; the women called him the “Lister Twister” since his other job was to crank the Lister generator providing the power for the light.²³ Some AA officers fretted about what the British public (or the Luftwaffe) might think about these one man/many women searchlight units.²⁴ The Germans never seem to have commented on the matter. Furthermore, the much-feared sex scandals never materialized in the searchlight or battery units.²⁵ At first middle-aged men (presumably more prudent) were sent to the mixed batteries. This policy was not a success because, “The girls regarded the older men as

21. *Ibid.* Freud would have a field day analyzing possible reasons women were not allowed to fire a gun (a phallic symbol) targeted on males..

22. According to Lt. Col. M. S. F. Millington, “The formation of the 83 Searchlight Regiment, with the exception of the Commanding Officer, was composed entirely of ATS and was the only women’s Searchlight Regiment in the world.” Millington, “Gunners’ Mates,” *Lioness* 52 (1979): 36. The British apparently did not know about the all-female Soviet units.

23. Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 127; Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 227–28. See also “The Work of AA Searchlights During the Last War,” *Journal of the Royal Artillery* 75 (1948): 241–52.

24. W. Boileau, “Searchlight—A.T.S.,” *The Gunner* 30 (April 1948): 12, copy at IWM; Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 127.

25. While this was the official version and no scandal campaign embarrassed the mixed battery units, some mixing of the sexes took place. “One of the girls cheerfully admitted to having been a prostitute before she joined up. . . . There were nights when she returned to the hut with her tunic and shirt in disarray and her bra slung somewhere around her neck.” “Memories of Miss G. Morgan,” 1.

grandfathers, and they for their part found the girls a bit tiresome.”²⁶ When younger men arrived, both sexes segregated themselves at work and were not encouraged to mix off duty. Soon, however, they developed close working relationships, a form of bonding which was vital when the batteries came under fire. As one British battery commander suggested, “Loyalty means loyalty in a mixed battery and ‘devotion to duty’ has a more definite meaning than it has had. Isn’t a woman’s devotion more sincere and lasting than a man’s?”²⁷ The women developed bonds with fellow AA workers, male and female, which they did not share with former workers and friends. “After experiencing just a couple of months of communal life, I found that the girls (civilians) with whom I had worked before I enlisted were self-interested. . . . We no longer spoke the same language even and there seemed to be a barrier between us. It was even worse with the boys.”²⁸ Pile observed, “The girls lived like men, fought their lights like men, and alas, some of them died like men.”²⁹

The first woman killed in action, Private J. Caveney (148th Regiment) was hit by a bomb splinter while working at the predictor—the device that predicted where the enemy plane would be when the shell finally arrived at the proper altitude. As had been practiced many times in the casualty drills, the woman spotter “stepped in so promptly that firing was not interrupted.” In another attack, Privates Clements and Dunsmore stuck to their posts despite suffering injuries, caused “by being blown over by a stick of bombs dropped across the troop position.” The total ATS battle casualties were 389 killed or wounded.³⁰

Morale was high in the mixed batteries; soon the women were allowed to wear the AA Command formation sign on the sleeves and to be called Bombardiers and Gunners (only on duty).³¹ As one recruit explained, “I don’t know what it was about Ack girls but we always seemed to be smarter than the rest of the service” and they “acted

26. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 189; Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 124. But there were others who insisted on the strict propriety of all involved. According to ATS volunteer Muriel I. D. Barker, “There was an absolutely monastic segregation when it came to living quarters.” Muriel I. D. Barker papers, ATS/WAAC 1941–1955, 73/31/1, especially 24–47, housed at IWM, quote from 47. One mixed battery commander explained that, “When a couple of girls walk out of a hut in dressing gowns to go to the ablution huts for a bath, nobody takes the slightest notice. This matter of fact atmosphere is what strikes every first time visitor.” J.W.N. “‘Mixed’ Batteries,” 206.

27. *Ibid.*, 206.

28. “Memories of Miss G. Morgan,” 11.

29. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 36–37; Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 130.

30. Bidwell, *Women’s Royal Army Corps*, 130–32.

31. *Ibid.*, 126. See also “Life in a Mixed Anti-Aircraft Battery,” 80–83.



ATS women were granted military status in 1941, and in August of that year they began operating the fire-control instruments in batteries while men operated the guns. The first “kill” came in April 1942. (Courtesy Imperial War Museum.)

accordingly.”³² In 1944, morale in the mixed batteries soared when news came that some were to serve throughout England (not just around London) and even on the continent. One woman volunteer described the command post situation at the Great Yarmouth Gun Defended Area during and just after a raid:

The atmosphere in the post was calm, almost subdued and little different from that which had prevailed during our many exercises in the past. This changed as soon as stand-down was given and, although we still had work to do, there was at least a buzz of excitement about the place and cigarettes were freely handed around. Somehow it seemed the thing to do for me to take one and light up as well—even though I didn’t smoke, until then that is.³³

32. This excerpted account, entitled, “A Woman’s View of Life in a Mixed AA Battery,” based on conversations held with one ATS Private, compiled and presented by Ronald Hadley, p. 10, is part of the “Second World War Memoirs of Miss G. Morgan,” 1, PP/MCR/115 collection at the IWM.

33. *Ibid.*, 35–36.



Prime Minister and Mrs. Winston Churchill inspect a mixed-sex anti-aircraft battery. (Courtesy Imperial War Museum.)

The living conditions for both sexes were often primitive; the ATS women boasted how harsh it was out on the hilltops at night. Nervous uncles were appalled. Pressure soon mounted to provide better conditions for the women. Before such facilities could be built, one commander assembled the one thousand women of his brigade and offered to have any of them moved to another location within twenty-four hours. Only nine women asked for a change, and all of these were clerks who were

not involved with the fire-control equipment.³⁴ One male leader of a mixed battery unit confessed that he initially hated the idea of commanding a mixed battery, "But now that I have joined this battery, raised it, watched it grow up and shared in its sorrows and joys, I can say I have never been happier than I am now."³⁵ After six months an AA corps commander told Pile that "It has been an unqualified success." He suggested that what immediately impressed observers was "the tremendous keenness and enthusiasm displayed by the ATS in assimilating their operational duties. They learn quickly, and once having mastered the subject very seldom make mistakes." He also remarked that, "Contrary once again to expectations, their voices carry well and can be clearly heard in the din of gunfire."³⁶ Not surprisingly, Pile concluded that "the experiment had exceeded even my more sanguine hopes."³⁷ The mixed unit had achieved a standard of drill and turn-out "better than in any male unit; for when the girls took to polishing their predictors, how could the men have dirty guns?"³⁸

It is possible to ask how women compared with men doing identical jobs. British AA leaders concluded that women were inferior as spotters, comparable as predictors and superior as height finders. The British experience was more complete than the American four-month experiment, but there were no major differences in the findings. The women excelled in several areas, were comparable in others, and were inferior in a few. But phrasing the question in terms of men versus women is highly misleading. The British were not interested in setting up all-female units in order to promote feminism. Rather they set up mixed units so they could shoot down more enemy planes and buzz bombs, while making the most efficient use of the limited human resources available. The effectiveness of a military unit depends on the team performance; team members who are better at lugging heavy shells can be assigned to that task, while those who are better at reading the dials should be doing that. The effectiveness of a team is not the average of each person measured as a Jack/Jill of all trades. Rather it is a composite of how well each specialized task is performed, plus the synergy that comes from leadership, morale, and unit cohesion. The mixed units did very well indeed.

34. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 376–81; Bidwell, *Women's Royal Army Corps*, 132; women assigned to AA units often held several different assignments; one woman was sent back to AA Signals course, then moved to the RAF Plotting Room and eventually to several AA headquarters. See Doris Madill, "Forty Years in Retrospect," *Lioness* 52 (1979): 41–42.

35. "'Mixed' Batteries," 206.

36. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 192.

37. *Ibid.*, 194; "'Mixed' Batteries," 202–4.

38. Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 194.

Britain had to balance public doubts and ingrained gender norms against pressing needs. When Pile and Churchill first assigned women to AA jobs they encountered resistance from public opinion. It was not so much that the women were in danger—every woman in every British city was in danger of death from German bombs, and tens of thousands did die. The public would not support a proposal to allow women to fire the AA guns. But the British were a practical people, especially when bombs were falling. They soon decided, “A successful air defence was an even stronger political imperative than the possible moral and physical dangers to the daughters of the nation.”³⁹ The government did concede some details to public opinion by not formally classifying these AA jobs as combat and by symbolically prohibiting the women from pulling the lanyard. The mixed AA crews were as much combat teams as were the airplane crews they shot down.

One factor in whether nations employed women in combat roles was the urgency of the need for combat soldiers. The tail-to-teeth ratio was very high in the United States because Marshall felt only ninety combat divisions would be needed, and that the war would be largely won by the efficiency of the supply and support mechanism. Women were not needed in AA units (few men were actually needed), but they were urgently needed to handle clerical and administrative jobs. Marshall thought caution the better part of valor when he decided not to risk a confrontation with Congress and public opinion on the matter of gender roles. The British experience fits the next stage on this continuum. Men were urgently needed for front-line infantry units in North Africa at the same time the Luftwaffe threatened the homefront. British women were assigned to defensive missions to enable men to engage in offensive action. They were at risk of being killed, but there was little chance they could be captured. Living conditions, while difficult, protected them from unwanted sexual encounters. How did other European countries react to severe threats with their shrinking manpower assets? Did they employ maximum manpower?

Hitler had always insisted that women remain at home and be full-time wives and mothers; Nazi women were to guarantee the survival

39. Bidwell, *Women's Royal Army Corps*, 119, 123. Perhaps women's poor records as spotters were due to their previous lack of experience in distinguishing aircraft. Few women came to AA positions having memorized the British and German models. In a similar sense, women sailors often took longer to memorize the differences in ships than did men who may have grown up “playing” sailors or pilots as young boys. Also, women typically took longer to learn a military rank system and to “spot” a senior officer approaching whom they must salute.

of the Aryan race in the labor room, not on the battlefield.⁴⁰ Even single women were not recruited for jobs in industry at the beginning of the war. By 1941 women were holding jobs in industry and serving in Female Auxiliary Units doing administrative work for the military. After the invasion of Russia, German women in Female Auxiliary Units increasingly began replacing men who were sent to the Eastern front. Berlin did monitor its Finnish ally, which successfully used "Lottas" as auxiliaries to the army.⁴¹ But it was not until January 1943, when the war had clearly begun to turn sour and Albert Speer became the economic czar, that Germany began full mobilization of its human resources. Even so, measures to conscript women into industry were introduced "only with extreme reluctance, and were never efficiently implemented."⁴² Not surprisingly, then, measures to draft women into the military—including Goebbels's 1944 Second Order for the Implementation of Total War—were even less well-enforced.⁴³

German women, however, did serve in the military: in all, 450,000 joined the women's auxiliaries, in addition to the units of nurses.⁴⁴ By

40. For discussions on the German division of gender roles and its effect on the mobilization of German women during WWII, see Jill Stephenson, *The Nazi Organization of Women* (London, 1981); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York, 1987); Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*; Rupp, "Women, Class, and Mobilization in Nazi Germany," *Science and Society* 43 (1979): 51–69; Rupp, "Mother of the Volk: The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology," *Signs* 3 (Winter 1977): 362–379; Louise Willmot, "Women in the Third Reich: The Auxiliary Military Service Law of 1944," *German History* 2 (1985): 10–20; Judith Grunfeld, "Mobilization of Women in Germany," *Social Research* 9 (1942): 476–94; Richard L. Johnson, "Nazi Feminists: A Contradiction in Terms," *Frontiers* 1 (1975): 55–62; Jost Hermand, "All Power to the Women: Nazi Concepts of Matriarchy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19 (1984): 649–67; *International Labour Review* 50 (1944): 335–51; Linda Gordon, "Nazi Feminists?" *Feminist Review* 27 (September 1987): 97–105; T. W. Mason, "Women in Nazi Germany," *History Workshop* 1 (Spring 1976): 74–113, and 2 (Autumn 1976): 5–32.

41. Lottas, founded in 1918, were to take jobs in the rear to replace men who could then fight on the front. They were disbanded in 1944 as part of the conditions of the Armistice because of their Nazi ties. See Else Martensen Larsen, "Das dänische weibliche Fleißerkorps," *Wehrkunde* 14 (August 1965): 403; Document KA:NL Raus B/186/1-Thema 21: "Improvisationen als Mittel der Führung," Code number 851: 26, example #16. Copy supplied by MHS, Austria. For an overview on the Finnish experience, see Charles Leonard Lundin, *Finland in the Second World War* (Bloomington, 1957).

42. Willmot, "Women in the Third Reich," 11.

43. *Ibid.*, 13, 14, 16, 17.

44. Jeff M. Tuten, "Germany and the World Wars," in Nancy Loring Goldman, ed., *Female Combatants or Non-Combatants?* (Westport, 1982), 52–53; see also "A German Anti-aircraft General Speaks," *Antiaircraft Journal* 92 (March 1979): 46; General G. L. Appleton, "Flak: Some Comments on the German Anti-Aircraft Defences 1939–1945," *Journal of Royal Artillery* 74 (1947): 85–89; Franz W.

1945 women were holding approximately 85 percent of the once all-male billets as clericals, accountants, interpreters, laboratory workers, and administrative workers, together with half of the clerical and junior administrative posts in high-level field headquarters.⁴⁵ These German women, in uniform and under military discipline, were not officially referred to as female soldiers. They were unofficially nicknamed “Blitzmädchen.” While it may seem surprisingly that the Nazis ever allowed women to serve in the military in any capacity, to test our hypothesis we must examine the German model to see if women held more than combat support or combat service support positions.⁴⁶

Antiaircraft units became increasingly central to Germany’s war effort, so on 17 July 1943, Hitler, at the urging of Speer, decided to train women for searchlight and AA positions. Basic training was to take four weeks. These AA auxiliaries were placed as follows: three to operate the instrument to measure distances, seven to operate the radio measuring instrument, three to operate the command instrument, and occasionally one woman served as a telephone platoon leader. By the end of the war, between sixty-five thousand and one hundred thousand women were serving in AA units with the Luftwaffe.⁴⁷ Some searchlight units

Seidler, *Frauen zu den Waffen—Marketenderinnen, Helferinnen, Soldatinnen* [Women to Arms: Sutlers, Volunteers, Female Soldiers] (Koblenz/Bonn, 1978), 47, 50, 51, 59, 64, 65. For some of these jobs Seidler says that women were to replace men at a ratio of 3:2 (women to men), sometimes 4:3. Even in traditional women’s work the Germans thought that more women would be needed to do the jobs formerly held by male soldiers; the Allies discovered just the opposite was true.

45. Seidler, *Frauen*, 60, 74. “The Guidelines for Emergency Employment of Women” explained that special care must be given to employing women according to their mental and physical disposition since they would not be able to do all the work done by men. “No work is to be given to women that requires particular presence of mind, determination, and fast action.” Richtlinien für die Beschäftigung von Frauen im Mobfall [Anlage der Reichsarbeitsminister, Ilc 565-38g, 16 September 1938], as cited in Ursula von Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst, 1914-1945* [Women in War Service, 1914-1945] (Stuttgart, 1969), 286; see also Tuten, “Germany and the World Wars,” 56; Gersdorff, “Frauen im Kriegsdienst. Probleme und Ergebnisse,” *Wehrkunde* 11 (November 1965): 578; copy at Federal Ministry for Defense of the Country, MHS, Vienna, Austria.

46. Franz Seidler, *Blitzmädchen. Die Geschichte der Helferinnen der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Koblenz/Bonn, 1979); Leopold Banny, *Dröhnender Himmel Brennendes Land: Der Einsatz der Luftwaffenhelfer in Österreich 1943-45* (Vienna, 1988), 195; copy at MHS, Austria; Seidler, *Frauen*, 29-34. For examples of female soldiers not corresponding to the National Socialist conception of womanhood; see Anlage, Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, 5 September 1944, AZ. 26/27 Nr. 1649/44. Cited in Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst*, 441.

47. Seidler, *Frauen*, 60, 65, 86, 87; Tuten, “Germany and the World Wars,” 55. Details on AA basic training are found in Der Reichsarbeitsführer Az. D1 Nr. 680/43g. 8 August 1943. Betr.: “Aufstellung von RAD-Flakbatterien” (Bundesarchiv NS 6/vorl. 345); copy supplied by MHS.

were eventually 90 percent female.⁴⁸ Similar to the British experience, German women who joined AA units were soon “proud to be serving as AA-Auxiliaries,” and were “Burning soon to be trained well enough to be able flawlessly to stand our ground at the equipment.”⁴⁹ In these units women developed the unit cohesion which had been evident in the British AA units. As one veteran recalled, “We have been raised with the same kind of spirit, we had the same ideals, and the most important was the good comradeship, the ‘one for all.’”⁵⁰ Here again these AA-Auxiliaries emphasized their continued femininity. As Lotte Vogt explained:

In spite of all the soldier's duties we had to do, we did not forget that we are girls. We did not want to adopt uncouth manners. We certainly were no rough warriors—always simply women.⁵¹

As in Britain, however, the German women serving with AA units learned all aspects of the guns, but were forbidden to fire them. Hitler and his advisers firmly believed that public opinion would never tolerate these auxiliaries firing weapons.⁵² Indeed, German propaganda warned all women in the auxiliaries not to become “gun women” (*flintenweiber*).⁵³ “Gun women” was the contemptuous German term for Soviet women who carried or fired weapons. Many Soviet women were without uniforms and thus considered de facto partisans. The Germans looked upon armed Soviet women as “unnatural” and consequently had no compunction about shooting such “vermin” as soon as they were captured. The verbal degradation of enemy females made it easier

48. Center of Military History, “Military Improvisations During the Russian Campaign,” U.S. Department of the Army, CMH Pamphlet 104-1, 1986, 80.

49. Jutta Rüdiger, ed. *Zur Problematik von Soldatinnen: Der Kampfsatz von Flakwaffenhelferinnen in Zweiten Weltkrieg — Berichte und Dokumentationen* (Munich, 1987), 29, quoting Lotte Vogt.

50. *Ibid.*, 91.

51. *Ibid.*, 28.

52. Docky Manner, *Die Frau in den USA. Schriftenreihe der NSDAP* (Munich, 1942), 44, as cited in Seidler, *Frauen*, 153. See also 60 and Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst*, 441.

53. In February 1944 one of the naval auxiliaries wrote to a friend who had been captured: “I’ve been sent to the Naval Auxiliary Service. I am now a soldier who replaces you in the country. The service is not difficult as we are not raised to be gun women. What is good about it is that one is also treated as a woman. Obviously we must conduct ourselves honorably as women otherwise [indecipherable] is completely lost. We are amongst sailors but we have nothing to do with them.” Excerpted in “Studies of Migration and Settlement,” Administrative Series. Field reports 8-12, “Women in Nazi Germany,” part E, “Morale,” 27, in Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

for German soldiers to overcome inhibitions about harming women.⁵⁴

In November 1944, Hitler issued an official order that no woman was to be trained in the use of weapons. The only exception was for women in the remote areas of the Reich which could be easily overrun by the Soviets. In one such area, a twenty-two-year-old Pomeranian woman, "Erna," was awarded the Iron Cross (second class) when she, together with a male sergeant and private destroyed three tanks with bazookas. Indeed, the German propaganda suggested that the bazooka was the most feminine of weapons.⁵⁵ The Freikorps Adolf Hitler was formed in 1945 and trained in the use of bazookas, hand grenades, and automatic rifles. Lore Ley, daughter of a leading Nazi, once knocked out a Soviet armored scout car and took from its commander military documents and money.⁵⁶ In all, thirty-nine German women received the Iron Cross (second class) for their duty near the front. The majority of these women, however, were nurses.⁵⁷

The true Nazis resisted weapons training for women auxiliaries serving with the Army or Luftwaffe until the final stages of the war. As Reichsleiter Martin Bormann sputtered to Reichsminister Dr. Josef Goebbels, as late as November 1944: "As long as there is still one single man employed at a work place in the Wehrmacht that could as well be occupied by a women, the employment of armed women must be rejected."⁵⁸ More and more desperate every day, in February 1945 Hitler capitulated and created an experimental women's infantry battalion. Ironically, this unit's mission was in part to shame cowardly men

54. Seidler, *Frauen*, 60, 153, 170; Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst*, 441. Seidler also states that the National Socialist propaganda mocked the American Wacs who were considered traitors to their sex because they were performing functions in the Army under the pretence of emancipation. Seidler, *Frauen*, 153. On brutalization, see Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991), 66–72, 89, 94, 135.

55. March 1945 order from Bormann (Reichsleiter) Rundschreiben 119/45. 5 March 1945. Bundesarchiv NS 6/vorl. 349, as cited in Seidler, *Frauen*, 349. For handling of bazookas in special cases, see Anlage, OKW No. 1350/45, 23 March 1945, cited in Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst*, 531. Seidler dismissed both the description of bazookas as feminine and the heroics by Erna as propaganda, Seidler, *Frauen*, 155. Bazookas were light-weight and did not have the heavy recoil that only a large body could absorb.

56. Guenther W. Gellermann, *Die Armee Wenck—Hitlers letzte Hoffnung. Aufstellung, Einsatz und Ende der 12. Deutschen Armee im Fruehjahr 1945* (Koblenz: Bernard und Graefe Verlag, 1984), 43–44; copy housed in MHS, Austria.

57. Seidler, *Blitzmädchen*, 99. Hitler's test pilots Hanna Reitsch and Melitta Schilla-Stauffenberg were the only women to receive the Iron Cross (first class); see Karl Otto Hoffman, *Die Geschichte der Luftnachrichtentruppe*, vol. 2, part 1 (Neckargemünd, 1968), 182, cited in Seidler, *Frauen*, 158.

58. BA R43 II/666c, Reichsleiter M. Bormann to Herrn Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels, 16 November 1944, cited in Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst*, 465.

who were evading their natural gender role of dying for their country (thousands of men were deserting in 1945). The cowards ought to stay with their units and fight like real men. The war ended before the women's battalion could be raised and trained.⁵⁹

In contrast to the Germans, the Soviets mobilized their women early, bypassing the "auxiliary" stage entirely. About eight hundred thousand women served in the Red Army during World War II, and over half of these were in front-line duty units. Many were trained in all-female units. About a third of the total number of women serving were given additional instruction in mortars, light and heavy machine guns, or automatic rifles. Another three hundred thousand served in AA units and performed all functions in the batteries—including firing the guns.⁶⁰ When asked why she had volunteered for such dangerous and "un-womanly" work, AA gunner K. S. Tikhonovich explained, "'We' and 'Motherland' meant the same thing for us." Sergeant Valentina Pavlovna Chuayeva from Siberia wanted to settle the score and avenge the death of her father: "I wanted to fight, to take revenge, to shoot." Her request was denied with the explanation that telephone operator was the most vital work she could do. She retorted that telephone receivers did not shoot; finally a colonel gave her the chance to train for the AA. "At first my nose and ears bled and my stomach was completely upset. . . . It wasn't so terrible at night, but in the daytime it was simply awful." She recalled the terror of battle: "The planes seemed to be heading straight for you, right for your gun. In a second they would make mincemeat of you. . . . It was not really a young girl's job." Eventually she became commander of an AA gun crew. Private Nonna Alexandrovna Smirnova, AA gunner from the Georgian village of Obcha, did not like the training program in which men with little education, often mispronouncing words, served as their instructors. The uniforms they received were designed for men. Smirnova, the smallest person in her company, usually wore a size 34 shoe but was issued an American-made boot size

59. Seidler, *Frauen*, 155; Tuten, "Germany and the World Wars," 56; Wilmott, "Women in the Third Reich," 18–20.

60. Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," in Goldman, ed., *Female Soldiers—Combatants or Noncombatants?* 69, 73; see also K. Jean Cottam, ed., *The Golden-Tressed Soldier* (Manhattan, Kans., 1983); Cottam, "Soviet Women in Combat in World War II: The Rear Services, Resistance Behind Enemy Lines and Military Political Workers," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 5 (1982): 363–83. Shelley Saywell, *Women in War* (Toronto, 1985); V. S. Murmantseva, *Soviet Women in the Great Patriotic War*, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1979) (in Russian); Murmantseva, "The Military and Labor Achievement of Soviet Women," *Military-Historical Journal* 5 (1985): 3–96; L. I. Stishova, ed., *On the Home Front and on the War Front: Women Communists during the Great Patriotic War* (Moscow, 1984). During May 1986, this author met in Moscow with

42. "They were so heavy that I shuffled instead of marching."⁶¹ (In every nation the women's services had trouble with the quartermaster's notion of what a shoe should be.)

The noncombat-combat classification which preoccupied the Americans, British, and Germans proved an unaffordable luxury to the Soviets. In a nation totally controlled by the Kremlin, organized public opinion was hardly a factor. Implicit public opinion regarding the primacy of traditional gender roles was another matter, but the evidence available does not speak to that. (The Kremlin controlled the media and the historiography—and even the memories of World War II; perhaps someday *glasnost* will loosen some tongues.) Article 13 of the universal military duty law, ratified by the Fourth Session of the Supreme Soviet on 1 September 1939, enabled the military to accept women who had training in critical medical or technical areas. Women could also register as part of a training group and after they were trained they could be called up for active duty by the armed forces. Once war broke out, these Soviet women together with their fathers, brothers, and husbands went to the military commissariats, to party and Komsomol organizations to help fight. They served as partisans, snipers, and tank drivers.⁶² After one woman's tanker husband died, she enlisted herself, served in a tank she named "Front-line Female Comrade" and perished in 1944.⁶³ Women constituted three regiments of pilots, one of fighter pilots (the 586th Fighter Regiment), one of bombers (the 587th), and the most famous, the 588th Night Bombers who proved so effective at hitting their targets that they were nicknamed by the Germans the night witches. According to one veteran German pilot, "I would rather fly ten times over the skies of Tobruk [over all-male British ack-ack] than to pass once through [Russia where] the fire of Russian flak [was] sent up by female gunners."⁶⁴ In all, Soviet women made up about 8

several Soviet women veterans of World War II who explained the multiple roles women played during the war. There is little material written on these women and what is available is written with a "Military-patriotic" purpose as Cottam describes it; see K. Jean Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II* (Manhattan, Kans., 1983), ix-xiv.

61. S. Alexiyevich, *War's Unwomanly Face* (Moscow, 1988), 9, 49, 83-86; translated from the Russian by Keith Hammond and Lyudmila Laxhneva.

62. Murmantseva, *Soviet Women in the Great Patriotic War*, Chapter II, especially 126.

63. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and war," 70.

64. *Ibid.*, 69. On Soviet pilots, see also Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat*; Bruce Myles, *Night Witches: The Untold Story of Soviet Women in Combat* (Novato, Calif., 1981); Cottam, ed. and translator, *In the Sky Above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen Participants in the Great Patriotic War* (Manhattan, Kans., 1984).

percent of all combatants. Between 100,000 and 150,000 of them were decorated during the war, including 91 women who received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, the highest award for valor.⁶⁵

The Soviets boasted that their women were in combat units, and even sent some abroad on publicity tours.⁶⁶ Combat roles were not publicized in Germany, Britain, or America, even as the generals realized that women soldiers in AA units had combat missions.⁶⁷ They were shooting at the enemy, and he (or she) was shooting back. The British discovered that Luftwaffe gunners fired at everyone around the searchlights or the guns and not just the men there. As Shelford Bidwell, the distinguished historian of artillery and of the ATS, concluded, "There is not much essential difference between manning a G.L. set or a predictor and firing a gun: both are means of destroying an enemy aircraft." He noted that, "The situation became more absurd when the advance of automation was such that the guns were fired by remote control when on target, from the command post." After June 1944, most of the targets were V-1 robots, but the women still could not shoot.⁶⁸ What stopped the British, Americans, and Germans from allowing the AA women to pull the trigger was their sense of gender roles—a sensibility that had not yet adjusted to necessity.

Understanding the reaction of the servicemen to women in combat involves study of the structure of gender roles in society at large and the military in particular, and calls out for a comparative framework. In the United States, most male soldiers were strongly opposed to the Women's Army Corps and urgently advised their sisters and friends not to join. Scurrilous rumors to the effect that Wacs were sexual extremists (either promiscuous or lesbian) chilled recruitment and froze the Corps far below its intended size. The rumors were generated almost entirely by word of mouth by servicemen. In point of fact, rumors were false because the servicewomen were much less sexually active than service-

65. Griesse and Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," 74.

66. When Junior Lieutenant Liudmila Pavlichenko met with reporters in Washington, she was dumbfounded to be asked about lingerie instead of how she had killed 309 Germans. *Time*, 28 September 1942, 60.

67. The German military provided the female AA-Auxiliaries with special identity cards as they were considered "combatants" but this was not broadcast to the German public. These women had to be at least twenty-one years old, volunteers, and have no children. "Dienstordnung für Luftwaffenhelferinnen" Heft 2, Flakwaffenhelferinnen (Service Regulations for Female AA-Auxiliaries) 15 December 1943, BA-MA, RL 6/16, 1-5; copy from BA-MA, Freiburg, supplied by Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Freiburg.

68. Bidwell, *Women's Royal Army Corps*, 126-27.

men, and rather less active than comparable civilian women.⁶⁹ The rumors therefore reflected a strong hostility, but to what? Senior officers had mostly been opposed to the WAC, but almost unanimously reversed their position when they realized how effective the women were and how many men they could free for combat. Most of the senior officers had been trained as engineers (especially at the military academies) and perhaps were more sensitive to efficiency than to human sensibilities. Most women themselves probably opposed going into combat.⁷⁰ Some enlisted men with noncombat jobs were aghast at the idea (explicit in recruiting posters) that women who enlisted would send a man to the front. As one officer wrote from the South Pacific:⁷¹

They [Wacs] are good workers and much more so than many of our regular men. You perhaps have heard many wild stories about them but I wouldn't believe everything that I hear. In comparison, our men are a lot worse. So many men talk about them and it seems they are the ones who haven't seen a Wac, or doesn't know anything about them, or even is a little jealous. Then again some of the girls take over easy jobs that some of the men hold and they don't like it when they have to get out and work.

Young men furthermore saw military service as a validation of their own virility and as a certificate of manhood. If women could do it, then it was not very manly.⁷² The exhilaration of combat could become an aphrodisiac, if not a sexual experience in its own right; perhaps like the

69. Treadwell, *Women's Army Corps*, 191–218; Diane Gertrude Forestell, “The Victorian Legacy: Historical Perspectives on the Canadian Women's Army Corps” (Ph.D. diss., York University, 1985).

70. At least WAC veterans in the 1980s did not support the notion of opening contemporary combat roles to women. D'Ann Campbell, “Servicewomen of World War II,” *Armed Forces and Society* 16 (Winter 1990): 263–66.

71. Letter from Air Force quartermaster officer, excerpted in “Monthly Censorship Survey of Morale, Rumors, and Propaganda: August 1944,” in Maxwell Air Force Base Library, code 704.7011, August 44.

72. Samuel Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, 1949), 2: 131–34; John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values, 1939–1945* (1985), 192; William Arkin and Lynne R. Dobrofsky, “Military Socialization and Masculinity,” *Journal of Social Issues* 34 (1978): 151–68; Judith Hicks Stiehm, “The Protected, the Protector, the Defender,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (1982): 367–76, on the necessity of women being absent; George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990), 60–61, 203–10 on manhood and German motivations. The proscription against homosexuality likewise involved a protection of the ideal of manliness. Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York, 1990), 176.

“Tailhookers” of recent days they felt this should be forbidden territory to females.⁷³ The closure of territory to females was strongly enforced by every fifth word the men spoke—language deliberately offensive to women.⁷⁴ At a deeper level, can society allow women to shoot at men? (The “battered wife defense” is a case in point.)



The question of women in combat has generated a vast literature that draws from law, biology, and psychology, but seldom from history. The restrictions against women in combat that persisted for decades in the United States were not based on experimental research (quite the reverse), or from a consideration of the effectiveness of women in combat in other armies. The restrictions were primarily political decisions made in response to the public opinion of the day, and the climate of opinion in Congress. Still horrified by Belleau Wood, Okinawa, and Ia Drang, many Americans to this day visualize “combat” as vicious hand-to-hand knife fighting.⁷⁵ Major Everett S. Hughes displayed a keen insight into the issue of women in combat in a report to the General Staff:

73. Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 169. For a Persian Gulf reference, see Peter Copeland, *She Went To War: The Rhonda Cornum Story* (Novato, Calif., 1992).

74. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959); H. Elkin, “Aggressive and Erotic Tendencies in Army Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 51 (1946): 408–13; Wayne Eisenhart, “You Can’t Hack It Little Girl: A Discussion of the Covert Psychological Agenda of Modern Combat Training,” *Journal of Social Issues* 31 (1975): 13–23.

75. Women soldiers did in fact die in hand-to-hand combat on Okinawa. The Japanese drafted high school students, male and female, into militia units that were hurled into combat, and killed to the last person. The saga of the all-female “Lilly Brigade” is now part of Japanese folklore. Thomas R. H. Havens, *Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War Two* (New York, 1978), 188–90. If MacArthur had invaded Kyushu, he probably would have encountered thousands of women

We have handicapped ourselves by numerous man-made technical definitions of such things as Combat Zone. . . . Some of us conclude that women have no place in the Theater of Operations, others that women have no place in the combat zone. We fail to consider that the next war is never the last one. We forget, for example, that what was the Combat Zone during the World War may be something else during the next war. We use technical terms that are susceptible to individual interpretation, and that change with the art of war, to express the idea that women should not participate here, there, or yonder. We are further handicapped by man-made barriers of custom, prejudice and politics, and fail to appreciate how rapidly and thoroughly these barriers are being demolished.⁷⁶

Hughes's report was made in 1928, and was not rediscovered until after the war. It was not feminism but fear of the lack of sufficient "manpower" to fight World War II, which served as the catalyst for Marshall's experiment, Pile's mixed batteries, and the Soviet Night Witches. Necessity, once it was dire enough, could overcome culture. "If the need for women's service be great enough they may go any place, live anywhere, under any conditions," concluded Major Hughes. Success in combat was a matter of skill, intelligence, coordination, training, morale, and teamwork. The military is a product of history and is bound by the lessons it has "learned" from history.⁷⁷ The problem is that the history everyone has learned about the greatest and best-known war of all times has airbrushed out the combat roles of women.

infantry. Apart from cartoons, I have never seen an American reference to fighting enemy women. In 1945 Willie tipped his hat to a Blitzmädchen he was taking (at gunpoint) to a POW compound. She wore a helmet, a Luftwaffe jacket, and a civilian skirt; a hand grenade was still tucked in her belt because he was too much of a gentleman to search her. The cartoon succinctly captured the uncertainty of an unexpected sex role. *Bill Mauldin's Army* (Novato, Calif., 1983), 348.

76. 21 September 1928 "Memorandum for the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-1. Subject: Participation of Women in War" (copy in ML, Xerox 612; original in WDWAC 314.7) by E. S. Hughes (Major, General Staff), approved by Brig. Gen. Campbell King (Asst. Chief of Staff).

77. Ibid. M. C. Devilbiss, *Women and Military Service: A History, Analysis, and Overview of Key Issues* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., 1990), comes to a similar conclusion that necessity has been a driving factor for the military in dealing with gender issues.