



# Introduction: Special Issue on Women and Operation Iraqi Freedom

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## ABSTRACT

Might the voices of women veterans cast a new light on the realities, ravages and aftermath of war? At a time when we have an increasing number of women in active combat, what would it mean to see war through their eyes? What might their writings and reflections have to teach us? During the Iraq War, American women made history insofar as they participated in combat on an unprecedented scale. Yet, public discourse rarely spotlighted or celebrated this achievement. The Iraq War is groundbreaking in both historical and literary terms: first, women not only served but also fought openly as women for the first time in a full-scale war waged by the United States; second, authors have begun to feature openly female combatants as the centerpieces of war narratives. This special issue of *The Journal of Veterans Studies* focuses on the double bind that females face as both women and service members within a hyper-masculine U.S. military culture that often casts this dual position as an inflexible binary, and asked its contributors to reflect on the ways that the Iraq War has produced a body of literature in both fiction and first-person memoir that portrays women as active combatants and participants instead of spectators or victims.

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During Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the military underwent a series of fundamental changes in its culture. Some derived from the unique challenges posed by unconventional warfare and the military response to terrorism within Iraq, and others derived from cultural pressures within the United States (US) and its citizenry that, throughout the long conflict, grew increasingly frustrated with American deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, some changes might best be understood as responding to both influences on the military: the on-the-ground circumstances in Iraq and social changes within America. Perhaps preeminent among the drivers for change was, and continues to be, the shifting role of women within the military.

This special issue of the *Journal of Veterans Studies* takes a closer look at the role of OIF women, both as active-duty service members and as veterans, with the explicit purpose of expanding our conceptions of how women served within OIF and how they have been represented as members of the military, whether in legal documents, medical documents, or various creative modes of expression. Because the Iraq War spans significant changes in US military policy for women, it stands as an especially important conflict for understanding how women have negotiated, responded to, accepted, advanced, or resisted military cultures.

From March 2003, the start of OIF, to December 2011, the official end of combat operations in Iraq, nearly 300,000 women served across both OIF and Operation Enduring Freedom. Initially recruited and serving in purportedly non-combat roles, women became increasingly important to military readiness and combat preparedness as the US began to realize that the fight to “win the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people was most likely to occur through the development of relationships with local leaders and populations. Women would play a central role in that campaign, and in doing so, would take on especially important “combat” roles.

At the same time, activist agitation in the US led to increasingly liberal policies for women in the military. At the outset of the Iraq War, women were restricted to traditionally non-combat roles. By its end, they were not only in combat, but, as of 2017, 166 women had been killed and more than 1,000 had been injured in combat (Service Women’s Action Network, 2017, p. 1). Several earned Silver Stars. The combat exclusion policy, though lifted in 2013 after OIF and fully eliminated in 2015, had been in practice only titular, as women were serving in combat operations in various capacities throughout Iraq. Military bureaucracy permitted the assigning of women to combat units, even if they were not officially attached to those units, a fact explored in some of the articles in this special issue. Indeed, since at least the early 1990s, public

opinion had started to turn in favor of allowing women to serve in any capacity in the military, to include combat, and that public opinion played an important role in fostering change. In response to a 1992 survey that found that most Americans favored permitting women into combat roles, “Lawmakers and senior military officers, many of whom are wary of adopting an unpopular position on the issue, have said that public sentiment would be a key factor in determining future roles for military women” (Healy, 1992, para. 6). In 2013, Leon Panetta lifted the combat exclusion policy, but women remained barred from serving in certain units. In 2015, all exclusions were lifted just as the first three women graduated from Ranger school and the military increased deployments to combat ISIS (Cox, 2015). In the public square, vigorous debate around women’s role in service became a top story both in Congress (Kamarck, 2016) and in the media as Donald Trump made his unlikely run to the Presidency. Trump faced strong backlash in 2015 after tweeting that rape should be expected by women in the military. A group of military leaders declared that “Donald Trump would create a command climate intolerant of women and incompatible with a trained, ready, and honorable military” (Newton et al., 2016, para. 2).

It is not surprising, then, that women veterans have repeatedly and consistently reported feelings of alienation and antagonism as part of their military service, and part of their distinctive trials of military enculturation remains how to adjust to a massive institution that has been built to advance and serve the needs of men. That adjustment is not easy, and nor has it been easy for the US military either. Changing the culture of a vast and diverse service institution requires intentional policies and procedures and, crucially, the will to make the change happen. Given the military’s complex relationship with the body politic, systemic change is at once unavoidable and unwieldy. Indeed, one of the central issues that remains within the military is that women remain, in some respects, essentially objects of an ongoing cultural experiment over which they have only nominal or substantially constrained control. What is the role of the women in the US military? What roles are “appropriate,” and which are effectively and/or practically out of reach or disallowed, whether explicitly or implicitly? How has the historic role of combat as exclusively reserved for men (at least in some technical sense) been negotiated by women service members and, crucially, veterans, some of whom did, in fact, see combat despite being explicitly denied combat military occupational specialties (MOSs) or roles? Who documents, records, or reports on women military experiences, and how have those experiences shaped military policy or procedures? What distinctive traits of OIF contributed to the shifting roles of women in Iraq and as veterans back home?

These questions presume, to some extent, the possibility of an analytic response, one grounded in data or documentation by the military or by governmental bodies or agencies. They presume, in other words, that women's military experiences during the Iraq War can be made the object of analysis and that, indeed, women might themselves be objects for analysis as the military attempts to rethink women's roles in service. Indeed, broader cultural dialogue about women in the military frequently objectify female service members and veterans as distinct from the military itself, as essentially surviving the military experience *despite* being female. The assumption underlying such discourse, of course, is that the military is itself inherently a male occupation and that combat, especially, is the domain of masculinity where any trace of the female body or experience might undermine combat readiness or effectiveness.

The articles in this special issue all interrogate the connection between military service, women's experience of war, and the public's perception of the link between these two entities. Each contributor to this special issue identifies as female, and two of the contributing authors are female veterans of the Iraq War. While we as editors did not make our selection of contributors based on gender, our hope is that the contributors' voices will, to some extent, reclaim subjectivity and provide a counterpoint to the way that military discourse and analytic methods not infrequently continue to objectify the female experience even though it is central to the subject of the militarization of American culture.

The pieces include analyses of "gender neutral" and "integrative" political policies geared toward female service members in the wake of the military's rescinding the female ground combat exclusion policy, the role and representation of female veterans in contemporary US politics and policymaking, the possibility for resiliency and growth amongst female service members following instances of military sexual trauma and/or assault, pedagogical reflections on the needs of female student veterans on college campuses, and the Iraq War's impact on family structures through the lens of contemporary military fiction and drama written by US military veterans. Together, the articles contained within this issue emphasize that women's service in the US military during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, is notable not just in terms of the record number of women who served, but also because of the unique skills and perspectives that female service members bring with them when they serve.

In her article, "In Iraq We Were Never Neutral': Exploring the Effectiveness of 'Gender Neutral' Standards in a Gendered War," Kyleanne Hunter focuses on the military's rescinding of the ground combat exclusion policy

in 2013 and their subsequent creation of "gender neutral" integration plans for the ground combat and special operations MOSs newly opened to women. As a Marine Corps combat veteran, Hunter is well-positioned to investigate the tension that existed between the gendered reality of combat operations and the gender-neutral expectations set out in the military's gender integration implementation plans. Her article utilizes information gleaned from five years of focus groups with military women and in-depth interviews with women who served on Lioness and Female Engagement Teams in Iraq.

Her findings demonstrate that the military's emphasis on gender neutral standards has had a negative impact on their identity as veterans, the pride they have in their service, and their likelihood of remaining in service and/or recommending military service for others. Her study also reveals that such policies have had an unintentional effect on female service members who have yet to deploy, as they detrimentally downplay the way women serve in very gendered ways in the military. Overall, her study challenges the generally positive attitudes towards the repeal of the combat exclusion policy championed by politicians and senior military personnel and suggests that its repeal, and the military's consequent emphasis on gender neutrality, did not necessarily create a more meaningful experience for female service members.

Next, in "Fighting for a Seat at the Table: Women's Military Service and Political Representation," authors Rebecca Best, Kyleanne Hunter, and Kate Hendricks Thomas investigate the role of gender and its connections to military service and political leadership. Hunter and Thomas' shared background as US Marine Corps veterans lend tremendous ethos to their analysis of the role of cognitive-institutional reinforcement related to the public perception of male combat veterans versus female combat veterans. Although combat veterans are generally held in high regard as model and trustworthy citizens, Best, Hunter, and Thomas argue that the public has been slow to recognize the new era of combat arms participation that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan offered women. Despite women's participation in combat, they have been historically denied the "elevated citizen status" frequently enjoyed by their male peers with similar experience.

The authors contend that the perception that women either do not serve in the military or, when they do serve, do not participate in combat, has cost women veterans the credibility to engage in government in the same way as their male peers. They propose that one way to help alter these perceptions is to increase the visibility of women in the military and female veterans through their campaigns for political office and representation in government. Importantly, their piece underscores that,

although historically the absence of public recognition for the service of female veterans decreases their electoral prospects, this same lack of recognition has spurred some of the female veterans of the Iraq War to run for public office and increase the visibility of veteran women in public life, thereby enhancing future electoral prospects for both veteran and non-veteran women.

In “Resiliency and Posttraumatic Growth following Sexual Trauma in Women Veterans,” Victoria McKenzie, Amaris Maydon, Elizabeth Anderson, and Geetha Shivakumar analyze the upsurge in combat exposure, length and number of deployments, and perceived personal danger for female service personnel during the Iraq War compared to women veterans of previous eras and its effects on PTSD in female service personnel. Their article focuses on treatments grounded in positive psychology, resiliency, and posttraumatic growth that are designed for and accessible to [female] veterans with histories of military sexual trauma (MST). In so doing, McKenzie et al. show how such treatments contribute to decreased symptom presentation, increased quality of life, and reduction in utilization and cost of care amongst female service members. They interview four women from the OEF/OIF/OND eras who experienced MST and/or a diagnosis of PTSD to explore four major areas: experiences of life after military, impact of trauma on factors that influence resiliency, what was and was not helpful for trauma recovery, and the concepts of resiliency and posttraumatic growth. Their piece examines the possibility of resiliency-based therapies for female military personnel who have suffered sexual trauma during their service, their dual burden of exposure to combat experiences and sexual trauma, and their readjustment to civilian life after their military service. McKenzie et al.’s emphasis on resiliency-based therapeutic intervention in the wake of sexual trauma provides a framework for continued functional recovery among affected female veterans and a baseline for what they term “posttraumatic growth.”

Following McKenzie et al., the emphasis shifts toward the connections between female military service, community writing, and literature. In “Empowering Female Veterans through Community Writing and Experiential Learning in the Classroom,” Meghan Buckley argues for the importance of community writing groups on college campuses targeted towards female student-veterans to aid in their successful transition to the university. Specifically, this chapter discusses the impact of a pilot community writing initiative from fall 2019 at a midsize research one (R1) university where civilian students in an upper level “Literature of War” course embarked on an experiential learning process to write about their relationship to the military alongside female veterans. While Veteran Service Organizations can

play an important role in rebuilding eroded support levels and creating a social bridge for transitioning veterans, studies indicate that many current organizations do not reach women veterans with ideal effect. Buckley argues that the presence of veteran community writing groups on college campuses directed toward females may encourage female student veterans to disclose and self-identify their veteran status. Further, given data that indicates returning female veterans are likelier to have negative personal and family reintegration experiences, her articles contends that these writing groups can provide a much-desired sense of camaraderie, increase social connectivity and positive relation to the university, and create an outlet for secure emotional expression.

Concluding the issue are two pieces from Andrea Bellot, both of which focus on former US Air Force pilot James Allen Moad II’s independent theatre production on the war in Iraq *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home* (2016). In “The Phantom in the House: Women and War in *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*,” Bellot analyzes the representation of women in Moad’s play. By focusing on the role of female civilians in Moad’s play, Bellot illustrates how post-war damage, treatment, and representation is primarily male related. The equally damaged women’s voices and their perspectives in the play remain in the background and their silence, she contends, “fills up the space of the not-said and the not-seen.” Following her analysis of the play, Bellot provides a transcript of her interview with Moad from August 2020 titled, “Discussing *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home* (2016): A Conversation with the author, James Allen Moad II.”

Taken together, these articles represent only a small attempt to bring greater awareness to how and why the female experience of the Iraq War deserves special attention. As both the military and American society drove changes within the military, women negotiated and endured new expectations from other service members and an American citizenry whose understanding of war and warriors had emphasized male combat roles in the military. Cultural representations and, crucially, military policy had to shift to accommodate the increasing number of women and roles allowed for women in the military during the first 20 years of the new millennium, and those shifts were complicated, conflicted, and contested. By offering a vision of what those changes looked like and their continuing effects, our hope is that this volume prompts further focus on OIF as especially important to understanding women’s role in military culture and the way that those roles affect the civilian space both during and after wars. This special issue is intentionally cross-disciplinary because we hope to show that the impact of women on war and the military deserves broad based analysis and inquiry. Our belief is that

further research will not only validate the centrality of the Iraq War in the history of women's roles in the US military, but that it will help cultural institutions rethink how best to invest women with the agency needed to reshape the organizations in which they already serve with distinction.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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