

Written evidence submitted by Anthony King, Chair of War Studies, Warwick University

**The Female Combat Soldier:
The challenges and opportunities of integration**

1. Background:

I am Professor Anthony King, Chair of War Studies at the University of Warwick. I have been studying the armed forces for nearly two decades, including dedicated research into female integration into the infantry. I have advised and mentored the British Armed Forces and NATO throughout that time, including on the issue of female integration. I present a brief summary of my research findings for your consideration.

2. Introduction: Female integration into the combat arms

Females have been steadily integrated into more and more branches of the UK Armed Forces since the 1980s. However, along with the US, the UK resisted pressure to allow females to serve in ground combat units. Canada, with a different civil and military culture and alternate force posture, integrated women fully in 1989. By contrast, the UK was the last NATO force to change its ruling on female accession to the Royal Marines, the infantry, and the armoured corps in 2017. There are very small numbers of females currently now serving in the armoured corps. This statement outlines the challenges of integration and provides some recommendations of how they might be minimised in order to maximise the success of accession.

There have been – and remain – two debates about female integration into the ground combat role:

3. Physical:

The ground combat role, especially, the infantry is the most demanding military task. It involves extreme physicality. Combat soldiers must march and fight in often appalling conditions with carrying heavy loads, with inadequate food, water and sleep. Not only is it physically intense but inadequate physical preparedness is also associated with psychological and emotional breakdown in battle. In order to fight in close combat, soldiers need to be fit, strong and robust.

Some commentators have claimed that the physical pressures of close combat are exaggerated and have become irrelevant in an era of high-tec warfare. This is false. While it is true that western forces have employed technology to augment their operations, at the level of ground combat, the brutal reality of battle endures. The briefest examination of military operations in Basra or Helmand demonstrates this. Indeed, for infantry soldiers, the physical demands of close combat have increased. In the Second World War, infantry soldiers carried about 40-50 pounds of equipment in battle. Today, substantially because of combat body armour and advanced equipment, soldiers carry far more weight. In Helmand, the average load for a soldier on patrol (in sometimes 50 degrees Celsius heat) was 80lbs; but many carried much more – 100lbs was normal.

Women who serve in the combat arms and especially in the infantry must be as physically capable as their male colleagues. They must be physically able to perform their duties. Combat effectiveness and therefore survival demands upon it. Consequently, in training and on exercises, all soldiers – male or female - must be subjected to the same physical tests and they must attain the same standards. This is not only vital for combat

effectiveness but also, crucially, for the professional credibility of female soldiers. In order to be treated as equals, they must be equals. Allowing females (who might well be capable of passing male standards) into the combat arms on a lower standard is not only operationally counterproductive but also undermines the chances female soldiers of succeeding professionally. The implication is that females will be carried by stronger, fitter men once they are in the unit. Even if this is not true, it is deleterious to successful integration.

Since women must pass the same physical tests as men in order to join the combat arms, the numerical limits of female integration have to be recognised. About 30 per cent of males are capable of serving in the combat arms; only these men have the physical capability of passing the tests and performing the role. However, because of the differential physical capabilities of men and women, the number of women who will qualify for service in the combat arms is very small. Although some women are stronger and fitter than some men, on average, females are weaker than males; they are smaller, have less muscle, smaller bones, and more fat. Most men are, therefore, much stronger than most women; and even the strongest women will not be as strong as the strongest man. Consequently, on purely physical grounds, the number of women who qualify for close combat service is very small. Theoretically, the top centile of women might be capable of passing tests into the infantry, practically, only about the strongest 1 per cent of females will be able to serve in the infantry. The armed forces would have to look at physically exceptional females, many of whom will already be outstanding athletes at national or international levels. In the Canadian Army, which has been integrated for over 30 years, infantry units have sometimes comprised 1 per cent females; but sometimes the figure is much less, 0.5 per cent or less. These women have been respected professionally and have often served well on operations. However, the pure physicality of close combat puts severe limits on the number of women who will be able to serve in the armoured forces and especially the infantry, even if they wanted to. Women in the combat ground arms are the exception not the norm. The aim of the British Army and Royal Marines should be to recruit and train the very best women in this country for ground combat service; but it should be acknowledged that, if standards are not reduced, no more than 1 per cent of the force will ever be female. It is important in policy terms to recognise this reality.

4. Fraternization

The second long-standing argument about female integration into the combat arms refers to fraternization (sexual relations between soldiers). It remains a concern. Fraternization is not a problem in most civilian organisations. However, in the armed forces, and especially in close combat units, it is a major issue. It has been repeatedly demonstrated in historical and sociological studies that since war is terrible and terrifying, small unit cohesion is vital to combat effectiveness. Only when soldiers are bound into close knit groups are they motivated to risk their lives for each other. Combat requires a special form of motivation which arises from the equally intense bonds of fellowship found in military units. It is certainly true that in a professional force, the bonds of comradeship have changed radically. Professional forces unite over their training and their competence. Comradeship becomes a function of professionalism; only competent soldiers are accepted and considered as friends. However, very close bonds of trust develop between soldiers in platoons or troops; they are crucial to combat effectiveness.

Under the aegis of professionalism, women have been accepted into the armed forces and might be accepted into infantry and armoured units. Indeed, on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, many women were integrated fully into the infantry units with which they served. They became part of these teams because they have proved themselves professionally capable. However, the problem of fraternization has to be recognised. The problem here is

that the fraternization between female and male soldiers changes their relationship to each other and their relationship to everyone else in the platoon or troop. Sexual fraternization undermines cohesion; it is a threat to good order and discipline.

It has to be recognised that not only does fraternization represent a danger to the armed forces but the very demography of the military makes it very likely. 42 per cent of the Army is aged under 25 and 79 per cent is under 30 but in combat platoons and troops almost all the soldiers are under 25; they consist of very young men, often from difficult and tough backgrounds. Since soldiers live together for long periods of time especially on operations, the possibility of fraternization – and, worse, sexual abuse – between young soldiers is very high.

The threat of fraternization should not obstruct female integration. However, some mitigation has to be put in place to minimise the risks it possesses to professional cohesion. Effective disciplinary measures have to be put in place to reduce or prevent it. It should be punished quickly and effectively when discovered, with soldiers moved to different platoons or troops. One important area to be addressed here is the problem of double standards. At present, if two soldiers are guilty of fraternization, the female is blamed and denigrated. This is unfair and hypocritical. Both soldiers are equally responsible and both should be held equally accountable. Indeed, where male superiors have fraternized with their female subordinates, they should be deemed more responsible. In addition to the double standards of blame, offensive and derogatory terms are still routinely employed in the armed force to denigrate and exclude women; the abusive terms ‘bitch’ and ‘slut’ are very common. These should also be excised.

The problems of fraternization might be reduced by institutionalising additional social boundaries between male and female soldiers. Fraternization is most likely between soldiers of equal age in the same platoon or troop. Consequently, it might be useful to integrate older females into the infantry not as riflemen but in specialist, more senior roles as radio-operators, machine-gunners, snipers etc. If these females held rank as corporals or lieutenants, the social distance created by military hierarchy might also reduce the chances of fraternization. In addition, it might also reduce the sense of isolation which some females have recorded on serving with the combat arms.

5. Recommendations:

The British armed forces are integrating women into the ground combat arms for the first time. In order to ensure that this integration continues to be successful, I propose three measures:

1. That the physical requirements are applied equally to all prospective combat soldiers, male and female.
2. That all policy be constructed around the fact that only 1 per cent of the combat arms is likely to be female, if standards are maintained.
3. That fraternization between male and female soldiers be severely and equally sanctioned.
4. That every effort is made to highlight and to eliminate abuse and harassment of women and especially the commonly used derogatory terms for female soldiers.
5. That female soldiers who are accepted into combat units be assigned to specialist functions in order to facilitate their integration and reduce their sense of isolation. It would be useful if these female soldiers were older than the average rifleman and held rank.

Underpinning research:

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