

Home Remedy to Treat Issues with Combat-Arms Gender Integration: One Dose of Engaged Leadership and Two Doses of Education

by MAJ Demarius Thomas

The Women's Armed Services Integration Act – a U.S. law that passed in 1948 – enabled women to serve as permanent, regular members of the armed forces (Army, Navy, Marine Corps and then-recently-formed Air Force). Before this act, women, with the exception of nurses, served in the military only in times of war.



Figure 1. President Harry S. Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in 1948.

However large the act was as a first step, it severely limited the rights of women in the Army. Only 2 percent of any military branch could be women, and they could be involuntarily discharged if they were impregnated. It also limited the number of women who could become officers. Most significantly, it prevented women from commanding men or ever serving in combat.

Deborah Sampson

Throughout history, women would disguise themselves as men to serve in combat. Most notable is Deborah Sampson. She was an indentured servant who joined the Continental Army disguised as a man named Robert Shurtliff. She was able to keep her identity as a woman secret, even when she was shot during combat. She received wounds to her head and thigh. Sampson removed the musket ball lodged in her thigh herself for fear that her gender would be exposed.

She was ultimately discovered when she became ill during an epidemic, was taken to a hospital and lost consciousness. The physician wrote a letter to the unit's commander informing him of her gender; Sampson was honorably discharged as a result.

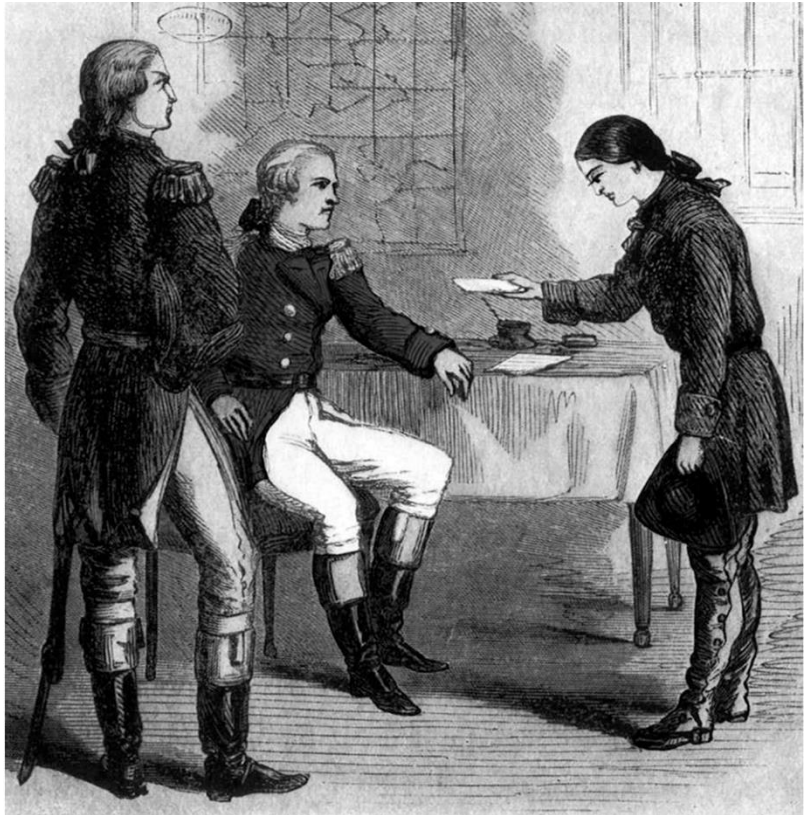


Figure 2. Illustration of Deborah Sampson (Dec. 17-1760 – April 29, 1827), who disguised herself as a man to serve in the Revolutionary War. Left, a portrait published 1797. PVT Sampson served in the Light Infantry Company (an elite unit whose soldiers were slightly taller and stronger than the rest of the Continental Army), 4th Massachusetts Regiment, from 1782-1783 and was wounded during a battle. Right, engraving of Sampson presenting a letter to GEN George Washington at his headquarters at West Point, NY. Sampson later caught a camp-wide fever, and the doctor treating her discovered her gender. After she had recovered, he sent her with a letter to her commanding officer, MG John Paterson, who sent her with a letter of his own to Washington. She was honorably discharged from the Army. (Portrait source: Massachusetts Historical Society, http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&item_id=359. The engraving is by George Graham from a drawing by William Beastall, which was based on a painting by Joseph Stone. Used as the frontispiece of *The Female Review: Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of Revolution* by Herman Mann. Engraving of letter presentation is from the Library of Congress' collection.)

Change to rule

It took decades for the military's restrictions to change. The 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule stated: "Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground." In 2015 Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta rescinded this rule. The action removed all restrictions pertaining to positions women can or cannot hold; specifically, all combat jobs became open to women.

The Army moved quickly to recruit women into its combat-arms branches. The Army provided opportunities for women in combat support as well as service and support jobs to voluntarily switch branches. The Army also initiated recruitment efforts to enlist women as new combat-arms Soldiers and attract officers from the populations of women attending service academies and Reserve Officer Training Corps programs across the nation.



Figure 3. 1LT Anna Hodge proudly displays her Ranger tab on graduation day. She was the 15th woman throughout the armed services to graduate from Ranger School and the first Ranger-qualified woman Sky Soldier for 173rd Airborne, Vicenza, Italy. (U.S. Army photo)

Today, in the Army's combat-arms branches, there are about 1,197 women serving in the enlisted and officer ranks. While this is a profound accomplishment for the military and the Army, combat-arms branches are experiencing issues as the Army continues to integrate women. **None** of the issues, however, pertain to women's ability to perform as armor, infantry or field-artillery soldiers and leaders. Therefore, the issues can be solved easily through engaged leadership and education.



Figure 4. 19K one-station unit training trainees from Company B, 1st Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, take a break during a turret training block of instruction. All 19K trainees receive an orientation to the different duty stations (tank commander, gunner and loader) inside the turret of the tank but receive thorough instruction pertaining to the duties of a tank loader. (U.S. Army photo by 1LT Alexander Muzyka)

Engaged leadership (one dose)

The word *engaged* means to be greatly interested and actively involved. Engaged leaders step up, opting to proactively own solutions where others cannot or do not. They energize others, keeping people focused on a purpose and vision with contagious positivity.

Engaged leaders control the climate in their organizations. The organization can be as small as a team or as large as a division, corps or Army. If the climate in an organization is set for zero tolerance regarding sexism, harassment and bigotry, but encourages inclusion, trust and confidence for the women in the formation, the entire unit will emulate those ideas. The aforementioned only works if leaders at all echelons remain engaged and actively seek out and correct individuals whose actions are contrary to the organization's climate and the Army Values.

Engaged leaders must also reflect on their own actions. They must ensure they are not unintentionally isolating or marginalizing the women in their formations, and they must be cognizant of the urge to be overly cautious during interactions with the women in their organizations.

The following observation is from a woman serving in a combat-arms unit: "Everyone needs mentors, regardless of gender. A lot of male leaders tend to try and set up women leaders and soldiers with other women as mentors. This is not the correct answer. As a higher-ranking officer in our branch, we would prefer to learn from you vs. someone outside of our branch. Would you offer the same to a male officer?"

Another combat-arms woman said, "Just because we are women doesn't mean you have to treat us as a liability to your career. If you talk to your male leaders behind closed doors, you should be able to talk to us." This person also stated, "Commanders who will only talk with their women subordinates with the executive officer or another officer present to avoid 'rumors' typically causes distrust. If we are never allowed to speak to you in private, why would we go to you when we need to keep it on a need-to-know basis?"

Leaders must be engaged to avoid the aforementioned. These feelings and situations can be avoided by controlling the climate and maintaining self-awareness through continuous reflection.

Education (two doses)

Education is the second part of the antidote required to cure the issues with gender integration in combat-arms branches. There are two categories of people who require education: women entering combat arms (new enlistees and newly commissioned officers), and the Soldiers and leaders already serving in combat-arms units.

Women who attend one-station unit training and the basic officer leader course must be taught how to conduct hygiene in the field; field hygiene is a little different for women than it is for men, especially during longer field exercises (20-30 days). One woman serving in a combat-arms unit said, "Field packing lists might be uncomfortable to check for feminine products. Would you rather be uncomfortable for a split second or lose a Soldier from training? Soldiers sometimes forget to plan for these items, or they forget them just like a male Soldier could forget things."

Another example of field-hygiene education is using the restroom in the field. Women who enter the Army as new trainees have never been to the field; they must be taught this fieldcraft. There will not always be a portable restroom available. For this reason, leaders must monitor women who are new to the Army during field exercises; dehydration can become an issue. One woman serving in a combat-arms unit said, "As a new Soldier, I would intentionally not drink enough or any water at all during field exercises. I did this because I was uncomfortable using the restroom in field environments."

In addition to the women who enter combat-arms branches, men serving in those branches must also be educated. Soldiers and leaders alike must become comfortable working with women and adapt their planning considerations during training events. One male leader said, "If one of my women platoon leaders didn't speak up at the National Training Center, she and the only other woman (officer) in their unit would have been segregated from their Soldiers and forced to sleep in a women-only tent at the [rotational-unit bivouac area]. I should have been the one to speak for them and ask approval for their integration in the male tent."

A woman serving in a combat-arms unit commented, "Don't make the field weird. During field problems, whenever I needed to change or use the bathroom, it would be a quick, 'hey I'm changing in the turret, don't let anyone on the tank until you see me again.' Or 'hey, I'm going to the bathroom on the right side of the tank.' My crew would do the same thing to give me courtesy."



Figure 5. 1LT Jessica Pauley, shown on an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle in March 2020, became the first woman infantry officer in the Idaho National Guard last year. As a platoon leader for 116th Cavalry Regiment's Company

C, 2nd Battalion, she helped pave the way for junior-enlisted women to take combat-arms positions in her battalion. Now the “leaders first” requirement has been further modified to open even more combat units to women. (U.S. Army photo by Crystal Farris)

The U.S. Army is the best and most lethal in the world, and the women in our combat-arms branches are doing a phenomenal job as Soldiers and leaders. If leaders remain engaged and the force is educated with regard to women in combat-arms units, we will maintain a healthy climate that embodies the Army's values.

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