

WOMEN IN COMBAT: THE LAST BASTION

Shirley M. Robinson

Remarque de la part des rédactrices invitées pour ce numéro: Les coupures de presse qui préfacent cet article témoignent de la portée du débat féministe actuel sur la question des femmes et de l'armée. Dans un article récent, dans le Toronto Star, intitulé "Les femmes partagent toute la misère, mais pas tout le pouvoir, dans l'armée", Rosie Di Manno demande "pourquoi le font elles?" La même question nous vient à l'esprit, mais comme le montre l'article de Shirley Robinson, les femmes entrent dans les forces armées canadiennes pour les mêmes raisons qu'elles veulent devenir mineurs, trépaneuses, métallos et pompiers. Et elles devraient en avoir le choix.

Bien que les femmes dans le mouvement pour la paix voient une dichotomie dans le rôle des femmes comme agresseuses, les femmes qui luttent pour la liberté et pour leur survie sous les dictatures comprennent néanmoins très bien la nécessité de leurs actions. Faire des femmes les gardiennes d'un code moral supérieur exclut l'utilisation de leur propre force physique, leur ôte le choix de survivre, et laisse les hommes sans blâme en réduisant le dilemme moral qu'ils devraient affronter.

Nous invitons vos commentaires.

— Marion Colby
Shelagh Wilkinson

Comment from the Guest Editors: The newspaper and periodical clippings that preface this article are representative of the scope of the current feminist debate on the topic of women and the military. In an article from the Toronto Star (5 October 1985) entitled "Women share all hardships, but not all power in army," Rosie Di Manno asks "why do they do it?" The same question occurred to the editors but, as Shirley Robinson's article points out, women go into the Canadian Armed Forces for the same reasons that they want to be miners, oil drillers, steel workers and firefighters. And the choice should be theirs.

Although women in the peace movement see a dichotomy in the role of woman as aggressor, woman using her physical strength, nonetheless those women who are fighting for freedom and for food under dictatorships understand very well the necessity of their actions. To make women keepers of a higher moral code that excludes the use of their own physical strength denies them life-supporting choices, and lets men off the hook by lessening the moral dilemma that men should face.

We invite your comments.

— Marion Colby
Shelagh Wilkinson

The Toronto Star (5 October 1985)

Same training

Although females are barred from entering into combat units, they are required to undergo the same basic training, adhere to the same rules and regulations, experience the same physical punishment as their male counterparts.

These young women willingly deliver themselves into the hands of a military establishment that considers itself above the equality provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms — of 33 officer classifications, nine are closed to women; and of 99 regular trades, 32 are closed.

With the exception of those women chosen to participate in test programs begun in 1980 — Servicewomen in Non-Traditional Environments and Roles — Canadian women cannot join the infantry, artillery, serve on naval warships or fly fighter aircraft. They are also excluded from becoming radio operators, linemen, and all the other professions that are considered combat-related or combat-support.

And yet, Canadian women still keep coming to Cornwallis. There are now 7,529 women in the Canadian armed forces — 8.9 per cent of the entire military population.

Why do they do it?

Rosie Di Manno

The Women's Review of Books (October, 1985)

To the Editors:

As a veteran I take issue with Beth Schneider and her review of *Women and Men's Wars* (Vol. II, No. 11, August 1985). I find her academic feminist position to be classist with no consciousness of women in uniform, especially those of us who have served for this country.

To Schneider's reference to women in the military as "physically not present in combat," I want to inform/remind her that women have actively participated in World War II, Korea, and SE Asia. Women in the US armed forces have been taken captive as POW's. Thousands of army nurses were exposed to Agent Orange. Most women who served in Vietnam suffer varying degrees of post traumatic stress syndrome (combat fatigue).

We women have been and continue to be a resource for change while on active duty as well as in our veteran capacity. We challenge women's second class status within the military and have succeeded in effecting changes. We confront the Veterans Administration on all levels, but especially in relation to women's issues like equal access to medical treatment.

In her review, Schneider fails to

affirm women in the military and certainly does not value our experience as a tool for change.

Sincerely, Mary Moran

Beth Schneider replies:

... I never said women were not physically present, only that military ideas, especially about combat, presume that we are not.

I am not simply an academic feminist reviewer: I pride myself on having spent two years of my life organizing Air Force women and men during the early 1970s. I know first-hand what these women went through, how hard they worked, what promises were made to them and how few were kept. I too saw military women resist its authority and policies. ... I applaud Moran's efforts to further change in that institution.

However, I continue to believe that until there are a great many more women like Moran in the military and a great many other civilian women who feel a responsibility for its operations, the military itself will remain male-dominated and maintain an ideology that denies women's experience in uniform and as veterans.

De Pacifistes ou militaristes: Faites vos jeux

Lors d'une campagne de presse bien orchestrée, le lieutenant-colonel Shirley Robinson, une Canadienne, s'est étonnée de ce que certaines féministes n'entrent pas dans sa croisade pour que les femmes soient admises dans l'armée. . .

À mon avis, il est grand temps d'admettre que divers courants agitent le féminisme et que certains sont diamétralement opposés tant par les valeurs qu'ils privilégient que par les objectifs qu'ils mettent de l'avant. . . Le féminisme de promotion collective, par ailleurs, croit que les femmes ont mieux à faire que de passer de la domination des maris à celle des colonels, fussent-ils femmes. L'urgence, pour les femmes, n'est pas d'accéder aux structures d'oppression pour le consolider mais au contraire, de lutter contre toutes les formes de militarisation de la société.

D'ailleurs, les féministes qui veulent intégrer les femmes dans l'armée ne contestent en rien les buts et les pratiques d'une société militariste, elles contestent uniquement le fait que les femmes en soient exclues. . . La féminisation de l'armée est donc une opération politique qui, sous couvert d'égalité des droits, vise à faire adhérer les femmes aux objectifs de guerre. . .

Il est important de souligner, par ailleurs, que la participation des femmes aux luttes de libération nationale n'a rien à voir avec l'intégration des femmes aux forces armées. Pourquoi? Parce que la violence dans le dernier cas est assimilée à un processus de domination, celui des pays riches sur les pays pauvres, alors que pour les femmes du Tiers monde, la lutte armée n'est souvent pas un choix mais bien leur seule porte de sortie. . . En tant que féministes, que choisirons-nous : le pacifisme ou le militarisme?

Solange Vincent

Women and the military: NAC takes a stand

"I cannot, as a feminist in Canada today, do anything but fight against a policy of overt discrimination." With that statement, former Executive member Carole Wallace concluded her presentation on the "obviously difficult question" of the role of women in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Wallace was arguing for recommendations made in her brief on the armed forces' application for an exemption to Section 15 of the Charter. She explained that she became involved in the issue through working on the case of a high-ranking officer who was fighting for maternity leave.

A long-time peace activist, Wallace said, "I believe there is a place for the military in Canadian society in terms of peacekeeping, natural disasters and national sovereignty. Then one must go the next step and say there is a role for women in the military and it should be an equal role." . . . Not only are there explicit restrictions on the military jobs women can hold, but there are also numerical restrictions. "Life is pretty hellish," she said. In this "last bastion of overt male supremacy," pregnant women are denied sick leave. Wives of military men have been denied the right to rent videos from base stores without their husbands' signatures. "What should NAC's position be?" she asked.

Survival committee member Betsy Carr responded that "NAC is against the arms race and the social deprivation and oppression that result from militarism. Feminists who would integrate women into the armed forces do not question the present system."

Marjorie Cohen, co-chair of the Employment & Economy committee, introduced a compromised position developed out of an all-day meeting last July.

The Executive adopted the following resolution:

1. NAC first and foremost wants to emphasize its anti-military stand.
2. Under no circumstances should there be an exemption to Section 15 of the Charter of Rights. As a result, all trades and classifications in the Armed Forces should be open to women.
3. NAC does not advocate women's involvement in the military.
4. Pregnant servicewomen should be accorded sick leave on the same basis as other personnel.
5. Military service for purposes of promotion eligibility should accumulate during the period designated as maternity leave.
6. Maternity benefits in the Canadian Forces should be brought into line with benefits enjoyed by members of the public service.
7. Servicewomen who become mothers should be accorded the same access to compassionate leave as is granted to other members of the military.
8. The policy which bars homosexuals from serving in the Canadian Forces should be rescinded.
9. NAC supports the rights of spouses of Canada military personnel to organize for equality and improve benefits for themselves and their families on military bases.

When Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms dealing with equality rights became law on 17 April 1985, it heralded in a new era for the women of this country, inasmuch as discrimination on the basis of sex (among other things) will no longer be tolerated unless *bona fide* occupational reasons can be established.

This of course means that women now have legal access to occupations traditionally held by men. They now have choices of employment; and repugnant as it may be to some, that must include combat roles in the Canadian Armed Forces. After all, it is the responsibility of every citizen to help defend the nation by bearing arms if the rights and freedoms of that nation are directly or indirectly threatened. Historically, Canadian women have been denied that right of citizenship, even though the nation has been threatened by outside forces on more than one occasion. Canadian women are still second-class citizens. Moreover, with the growing trend toward anti-militarism, it is perhaps timely to point out that Canada's armed forces play

a vital role, not only for defence purposes, but in activities such as protection of our sovereignty by sea and air surveillance, aid to the civil powers and United Nations peacekeeping. The need for police and firefighting forces is generally accepted. Why then should the need for defence forces be less so?

Women have been part of Canada's armed forces for one hundred years. In 1885, during the North-West Rebellion, nursing sisters (as military nurses were traditionally called) took the field with Canadian troops and were for the first time recognized as members of a military force engaged in a theatre of active operations. Ever since then nurses have served continuously in this nation's armed forces. They have been killed and wounded in action during both World Wars.¹ Canadian women serving in a combat environment is not new.

Women other than nurses have served intermittently over the years. When the need arose they were enrolled to release men to fight, but were quickly demobilized when the crisis was over. However, it was the 1970 Royal Com-

mission on the Status of Women which pressured the Department of National Defence to improve conditions of service for military women. The Commission brought forth six recommendations concerning servicewomen; over the years all have been met - except the first and most important one: the recommendation that *all* trades and classifications (occupations) of the Canadian Forces be opened to women. Today, fifteen years later, only 91 of the 133 military occupations are open or partially open to women. The remainder, all combat-related, prohibit the employment of women. And notwithstanding Section 15 of the Charter, the Canadian Forces have no intention of opening all occupations to women, because they contend that their "combat effectiveness could well be jeopardized if women were employed in combat roles."²

This could be cause for exemption from the Charter if the Canadian Forces had produced any evidence to support their present policy. To date, however, no valid arguments have been put forward that would preclude women from combat roles. A series of trials called SWINTER

(Servicewomen in Non-Traditional Environments and Roles) has been conducted since 1979 that includes land, sea and air operations as well as service in a remote location. No degradation in operational effectiveness has been reported, despite the presence of women in these non-traditional jobs. Nevertheless, much speculation and many assumptions concerning women have been offered in attempting to justify the continuance of an outdated, discriminatory policy. These opinions are based primarily on myths and prejudicial stereotypes about women. No hard evidence has ever been produced in support of such attitudes. In fact, all evidence confirms that women have been combatants in times of war and continue to be; and, skepticism aside, they have conducted themselves just as well and, in some cases, better than their male counterparts. Let's look at some of the most-often voiced "reasons" for excluding women from combat roles.

The maintenance of unit cohesion, morale and discipline are often cited. The importance of these elements among combat personnel cannot be over-emphasized because these, combined with intensive training, are the overriding factors in winning battles. However, it is implied that women have no place in this scenario because of perceived sexual attraction, men's traditional protective attitudes toward women, and because men don't believe that women have what it takes to kill other human beings in hand-to-hand combat. Military leaders contend that the presence of women would be too disruptive and would lead to a break-down of the fighting unit.

Implication is not fact; nor can women be faulted for attitudinal weaknesses exhibited by men. The fact is that mixed-gender units have existed in this country for at least one hundred years, and there is no evidence whatsoever of any significant erosion of discipline, unit cohesion or morale due to sexual attraction. Why would there be on the battlefield, where combatants would be occupied with more immediate concerns – such as staying alive? It is ludicrous to think that, in the heat and dirt of battle, there would be time for romantic liaisons. Close attachments would perhaps be formed, because there have always been close friendships among combat soldiers. Such "bonding" transcends romantic attachments and stimulates combatants to fight more fiercely when one of their number is killed.



The argument for excluding women from combat because of men's protective attitude towards women derives from one of society's most lofty ideals; protection of the weak. But does today's woman see herself as weak? I think not. Protection can be seen as something given by the strong or "superior" to the less able or "inferior" (that which is given to a developing nation or a child – not to an adult).

Adverse public opinion is also quoted as a reason for excluding women from combat. However, public opinion polls conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s indicated that the majority of Canadians favoured some form of combat service for women.³ It would seem that the public supports justice over bigotry. After all,

why should it be acceptable for young men to kill and be killed but not young women? One of the principal themes of those who oppose women in combat is that women should not be subjected to the sufferings of war, but should instead devote themselves primarily to the propagation of the species. Yet women have suffered in wars since the beginning of time. They have been exposed to violent death, mutilating injuries, and capture as prisoners. Just because these women were and are mostly civilians doesn't make it any less horrendous. The difficulty military men and parts of society seem to have is with women bearing arms in order to defend themselves and their territory. As for propagating the species, it cannot be assumed that every woman

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aspires to (or should) become a mother. In today's society women have many options. Yet it is hard to break with custom in a society which still teaches its offspring phrases such as "women and children first."

One of the most over-used (and over-emphasized) excuses for excluding women from combat roles is the physical strength and endurance issue. Various research findings are often quoted by defenders of present policy. It is important to remember, though, that the conventional assumption underlying research is that no difference exists between groups until a difference is demonstrated, and that much research is sexist. It is true that the *average* woman today is weaker in upper body strength than the average man. However, if a certain level of physical strength is required for a particular job, then this should serve as one of the selection criteria for the job.⁴ Rather than assuming that all women are incapable of performance by virtue of the average woman's lack of physical strength, specific requirements should serve as the selection criteria, not gender. By the same token, we cannot assume that all men are capable of performing jobs that require a high level of upper body strength. Not all men meet the strength requirements for certain combat roles: all men, however, are not excluded from combat. And if the trend towards increased participation in sports by young girls continues, we can expect Canadian women of the future to be considerably more physically fit.

In certain other ways women are not the weaker sex at all. It has been shown that, while exercising, women show fatigue less than men do. This can be attributed to the fact that women's muscles produce less lactic acid – a byproduct of exercise which causes fatigue. And women actually endure better than men: male infants are at higher risk prior to and after birth than females; more male fetuses abort spontaneously; boys are more likely to die of congenital conditions, illnesses, infections and accidents; males also die earlier.⁵ Women's bodies are better insulated and therefore lose less heat in cold weather than men's: in extreme weather conditions women can

survive longer on little or no food because they have more subcutaneous fat to sustain them. Heart rate and blood sugar tests have also shown that women can tolerate noise better than men.⁶ And there is currently no evidence to substantiate claims often made that women would be less capable of performing under the stress of combat than men. There is, however, a great deal of evidence showing that military women have performed on a par with their male peers in situations of severe psychological pressure; this includes documented descriptions of the reactions of women in the Second World War (among them, women who were prisoners of war).⁷ And let us not forget the Canadian nurses who proved their physical and emotional stamina while performing their jobs under combat conditions.

Women have established that they can endure the hardships of battle. During the American War of Independence tens of thousands of women were involved in active combat;⁸ in the Second World War Soviet and Yugoslavian women fought and died in battle, as did women during the Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967. These women fought with great courage and skill: no evidence has been produced to suggest that the presence of women caused any deterioration in the units' combat effectiveness.⁹ And we must not forget the Resistance fighters, the Vietnamese War and numerous other conflicts when women fought alongside men. Although it has been argued that women are called upon to fight only when the homeland is invaded, Soviet women soldiers fought their way into Germany near the end of the Second World War. Why is it that, when the conflict is over, women are demobilized and expected to return to their traditional roles? That question can be answered only by the men in power who made those decisions.

It is assumed that Canadian combat formations containing women might not be acceptable to other countries. The fact is that when Canada had military women with our United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in the Middle East (1975-79) they performed admirably and *were* accepted by other nations. Although the necessary authority still exists to send servicewomen

with our UN Forces, none have been sent since 1979, not because of other nations' perceptions of women, but because of the perceptions of Canadian military men! Excuses such as accommodation problems and the risk factor are used to keep our military women out of UN service. If risk is such a problem, why then do other nations have military women with their UN forces? What about civilian women serving with the UN, including women reporters? Accommodation is a problem only when excuses are being sought to keep women out of certain areas.

In any case, the prejudicial attitudes and perceptions of other nations should not be allowed to take precedence over that which is now entrenched in Canadian law. Notwithstanding the slow progress made over the years in employment opportunities for servicewomen, the most important goal has not yet been reached. Surely it is time for Canada to place less emphasis on outside influence and approval from other nations.

There are no legitimate occupational reasons for excluding *all* women from combat roles. Nor is there any evidence to support the military's contention that combat effectiveness would be jeopardized if women were introduced into fighting units. There is no doubt that the present policy of the Canadian Forces is in contravention of the law of the land and must be struck down. Just as military effectiveness is the goal, so should be justice and civic responsibility.

If the Canadian Forces gain exemption from the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a dangerous precedent will have been set: it will be a signal to the people of Canada that women can continue to be excluded from certain employment solely because men don't want them there. It has nothing to do with women's capabilities, but it has a great deal to do with the fear that women in combat would disorient men and deprive them of their unique role. The last bastion would be conquered at last. In order to fulfill our military requirements, an armed force needs to have the necessary person power and technology, and be motivated by the belief that the military establishment reflects the values of society from which it

originates. The presence of women is much more consistent with this objective than the preservation of an antiquated, machismo ethos. Is it not time for the Canadian Forces to be brought into the 1980s – where they belong?

¹Col. G.W.G. Nicholson, *Canada's Nursing Sisters* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert and Company, 1975), p. 1.

²*Canadian Forces Policy On The Employment Of Women* (17 March 1985).

³*Directorate of Women Personnel* (National Defence Headquarters, 1984).

⁴Mady Wechsler Segal, *The Argument for Female Combatants* (Chicago: Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 1980), p. 271.

⁵*Statistics Canada*, 1985.

⁶*University of Toronto*, Department of Athletics and Recreation, 1985.

⁷Segal, pp. 274-275.

⁸Linda Grant De Pauw, *Women In Combat, The Revolutionary War Experience* (George Washington University, Armed

Forces and Society, 1981), p. 209.

⁹Nancy Loring Goldman, *Female Soldiers – Combatants or Noncombatants* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 5.

Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Shirley M. Robinson served for thirty years as a Nursing Officer (enlisted originally in the Royal Canadian Air Force). In her last Canadian Forces appointment, she worked as Deputy Director of Women Personnel, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa.

IN A GLASS HOUSE

(poems for my step daughter)

CHOICES

Your cat is named "Dabby Grey".
You were babies together,
now you're both five, and I'm
allergic to cats.
Eyes blazing you tell your father
"Keep the cat, get rid of . . ."
I nearly choke

but supposing
the cat were mine,
you were allergic . . .

SNOW WHITE

Mirrors never lie,
in illness you grow fairer,
skin snow iris,
eyes sad black moons,
blonde hair damp with fever

For weeks he sleeps beside you
Moved by love and something
darker I stroke your face
tempt you with delicacies

BATH

Ponytail, wild filly legs,
you capture him
with skittish looks.

Young enough
to nip the towel from his thighs,
share the tub he laughs
and soaps you down.

When I watch you prancing wet,
his unbridled gaze

my eyes are whips.

POSTER OF A MISSING CHILD

afraid to sleep

dead in all my dreams
"girl six, blue jumper, carrying a
recorder,
last seen . . ." never met would
recognize anywhere
so much like

you fighting me
for life today
screamed and bit how many
times my demon dreams
trembling in blood cellars

betrayed that picture face

GLASS

Your mother's gone.

You pick at food, refuse
to flush the toilet

dream you were born
in a glass house, slept in a
blue glass cradle

pretend she's a far off
magic queen, rub an old stone
and she speaks to you,
understands when you say

you tried your best
to make the kitten swim

but it drowned in the puddle.

GRAFFITI

"You're not my mother,
you can't make me."
I lock you spitting, stamping
in your room, only to find
you glaring from the kitchen wall
indelible in bristling hair,
jagged teeth, protruding tongue.
I'd haul you down, force you to
scrub,
but knowing tomorrow
you'd crayon the cupboards,
scrawl behind doors,
I go upstairs, unlock
rage no coat of paint
will ever hide.

Donna Langevin
Toronto, Ontario