
Defense Report

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Women in the Volunteer Army— How Critical Are They to Its Success?

A few years ago the Army set out to attract more women into its ranks. This was unquestionably the proper course to take but the Army did it for reasons far more important than mere propriety. As recruiting for the All-Volunteer Army became more difficult, women represented a recruiting target that had not been fully exploited and the Army found the number of women interested in trying a military career was large enough to permit greater selectivity than was feasible with the over-recruited male population. For many months the Army was able to insist that female recruits have both a high school diploma and qualifying test scores higher than those demanded of males. The higher qualifications of the women kept the overall Army percentages of high school graduates at or above the desired level.

Of the 346 distinct job specialties in the Army all but 22 were opened to women. Those circumscribed were specialties that would entail direct combat. There was an initial rush of women into the so-called "non-traditional" jobs, such as mechanics and parachute riggers. But some doubts began to creep in when the General Accounting Office issued a report declaring many women unable to meet the full demands of their jobs. Female Air Force mechanics couldn't handle engine cowlings, lady deck hands in the Navy couldn't wrestle heavy docking lines and Army women assigned as ambulance drivers couldn't change the tires or carry the heavy end of a litter.

Now the blush is off the rose and the Army finds itself having difficulty getting women into the non-traditional jobs in spite of a drop in the required qualifications. There are more applicants for clerical and medical jobs than are needed but no ladies waiting in line to be mechanics. In fact the whole female recruiting picture has turned bleak for the Army with most month's statistics showing major shortfalls, primarily because there are insufficient openings in the military specialties women prefer. The only way to create more traditional jobs for women in the Army would be to transfer all the men in those jobs to positions women can't or won't do. This would be as discriminatory as the reverse has been.

The civilian head of the Army's manpower program recently told a national newspaper that the shortfall in the number of women would not mean the end of the volunteer Army. Nothing more complicated than another reduction in qualifications would solve the problem, he said. Apparently nothing, even a less qualified Army, will be permitted to stand in the way of volunteerism.

All soldiers, male and female—and the taxpayers who support them—deserve a more reasoned solution to keeping the ranks filled.