
Defense Report

AUSA



Women in the Army — What is the Right Number?

Women wearing Army green have been and will continue to be an extremely valuable asset to our senior military service. They have shrugged off the traditional role as clerk and medic and are now constructively involved in almost every one of the Army's multitude of jobs, although there is lessening interest in the nontraditional assignments. At a time when the recruiters were having a hard time finding enough male recruits there was a steady flow of well-motivated women into the ranks. Since the beginning of the All-Volunteer Army it has been the female recruits who have been the best educated. Today there are about 69,000 women in the Army and the service has been directed by the Department of Defense to climb to a total female strength of 87,500 (11 percent of the active Army's strength) by fiscal year 1986.

The Association of the U.S. Army does not think this should be done. More women, the Association is convinced, will upset the already shaky balance between the number of male and female soldiers. Commanders in the field are concerned that the growing number of women assigned to units in the combat area could present problems of strength and stamina at the most critical of times — the opening days of a conflict. One armored division in Germany, for example, has about 1,300 women, or almost one-tenth of its total strength. While these women are not assigned to fighting units, they would be functioning in the division's area of operation where they could easily be involved in combating a successful enemy thrust and would most certainly be subjected to artillery fire and air attack. Quite aside from the risk, there is the very real question of their physical ability to perform vital tasks under the stress of combat.

There are other reasons why the Army should level off at about its current number of women. They are more expensive to recruit, to train and to support and they are twice as unlikely as men to complete their initial period of service. It has been Army practice for many years to have soldiers rotate between assignments in combat and support units, but, as the number of women in support units has grown, there have been fewer opportunities for men to periodically get out of combat units. There is another hard, physiological fact, too. At any given time, about ten percent of the women in the Army are pregnant. For obvious reasons, there are substantial periods of time during pregnancy and immediately after it when the female soldier is unable to perform all her duties, so other soldiers must do double duty.

This is not a chauvinist point of view. We can look around every day and see women doing outstanding jobs of all kinds — better than men in many situations. But the Army's mission is to fight and win, so, in the final analysis, it is more important to have an Army that is ready than it is to have one which reflects societal changes. Women have an established constructive and valuable role in the Army, but, by their sheer pervasiveness, they should not imperil the Army's ability to fight.