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Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women

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Photo courtesy of U.S. Army

Photographed by Air Force Staff Sgt. Cindy Haught

Photo is of Sgt. Katherine Tripp, from the 982nd Signal Company, as she prepares for a mission in a Stryker vehicle departing from Forward Operating Base, Marez, Iraq.

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Summary

Introduction

In January 1994, informed by the report of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women to the Armed Forces, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin established the current DoD assignment policy for women in the military with a memorandum that stated that personnel can

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. . . .¹

The same memorandum also promulgated a definition of direct combat on the ground:

Direct ground combat is engaging the enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.

¹ Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, "Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule," memorandum, January 13, 1994. The memorandum is included as Appendix A.

The Aspin memorandum also indicated that the military services' policies and regulations could include certain restrictions on the assignment of military women

where units and positions are doctrinally required to physically collocate and remain with direct ground combat units that are closed to women.

The Army policy for assigning women, Army Regulation (AR) 600-13,² predates the Aspin memorandum and is similar to, but not the same as, the DoD policy for assigning military women. AR 600-13 states,

The Army's assignment policy for female soldiers allows women to serve in any officer or enlisted specialty or position except in those specialties, positions, or units (battalion size or smaller) which are assigned a routine mission to engage in direct combat, or which collocate routinely with units assigned a direct combat mission.³

Important to understanding the Army policy is recognizing that it defines direct combat differently from the DoD policy. The Army policy defines direct combat as follows:

Engaging an enemy with individual or crew served weapons while being exposed to direct enemy fire, a high probability of direct physical contact with the enemy's personnel and a substantial risk of capture. Direct combat takes place while closing with the enemy by fire, maneuver, and shock effect in order to destroy or capture the enemy, *or while repelling the enemy's assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack.*⁴

² Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, Army Regulation 600-13, Army Policy for the Assignment of Female Soldiers, March 27, 1992.

³ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army (1992, p. 1).

⁴ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army (1992, p. 5). Emphasis added.

There are several important differences between the Army and DoD policies. First, the DoD policy restricts the assignment of women to units whose *primary* mission is direct ground combat, whereas the Army restricts assignment to units that have a *routine* mission of direct combat. Second, the Army also restricts assignment to units that collocate with direct combat units. Third, the Army and DoD policies define combat differently: The Army's definition of direct combat includes a requirement that there be a risk of capture, but also includes "repelling the enemy's assault." These differences are significant, and it is notable that the Army did not update its policy when Congress repealed the legal restrictions against women serving in combat aircraft positions and on combatant ships nor when Aspin revised the DoD policy in 1994.

Nonetheless, as a result of the DoD policy change, Army units and occupations were opened to women, resulting in positions for women within the headquarters of maneuver and support brigades, as well as in the headquarters of other units types, such as the special forces group.⁵ As of the end of fiscal year 2006, the active-component Army includes more than 48,000 women, who have the opportunity to serve in 92.3 percent of Army occupations; 70.6 percent of Army positions are open to women.

Given the Army's recent modularization, as well as the differences between military missions in Iraq in the context of the GWOT and military missions fought on the linear battlefields of past military engagements, concerns have arisen among some members of Congress and other interested parties as to whether the roles of Army women in Iraq are consistent with existing policies; thus, Public Law 109-164 requires the Secretary of Defense to submit a report on the current and future implementation of DoD policy for assigning military women. The research presented here is provided as input to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

⁵ The Army assignment policy, AR 600-13 (Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, 1992), predates the Aspin memorandum (Aspin, 1994). Positions were opened to Army women in 1994 as a result of Secretary Aspin's removal of the risk rule from the DoD assignment policy.

This research assesses the extent to which current policy pertaining to the assignment of military women is appropriate for and reflected in Army doctrine, transformation, and operations in Iraq. More specifically, this study focused on answering three main questions: (1) Is there a shared interpretation of the assignment policy for Army women? (2) Is the Army complying with the assignment policy? and (3) Are the language and concepts in the assignment policy appropriate to future Army operations, given what we know about operations in Iraq?

In analyzing current policy and the Army's compliance with it, it is important to underscore the purpose of that policy, which limits the units to which women can be assigned but not the ways in which female service members can be tasked or utilized once in the theater of operations.

Is There a Shared Interpretation of the Assignment Policy for Army Women?

In answering the first question, we find that neither the Army nor the DoD assignment policies for military women are clearly understandable. Our interviews with senior personnel from the Army, OSD, and the Joint Staff (JS), as well as our sessions with personnel recently returned from Iraq, confirm that there is no shared interpretation of the meanings of many of the words used in the policy, including *enemy*, *forward* or *well forward*, and *collocation*. This is the result of the many policy changes that have occurred since 1994, including the Army's transformation, as well as the nature of warfare in Iraq.

Given the lack of a common understanding of the "letter" of the policy, this research sought to ascertain whether there was a shared interpretation of the "spirit" of the policy. Although senior Army, OSD, and JS personnel fairly consistently portrayed the objectives of an ideal assignment policy, we find from interviews with and public statements by members of Congress and interviews and meetings with congressional staff that there is not much agreement among members of Congress. Further, there was not a majority consensus among the

senior DoD interviewees regarding the objectives reflected in the current assignment policy.

Is the Army Complying with the Assignment Policy?

To answer the second question, we consider whether Army women are assigned to units proscribed in the assignment policy, i.e., whether Army women are assigned to direct combat units below the brigade level (or battalion-size or smaller)⁶ and whether Army women are assigned to units that collocate with direct combat units. This monograph finds that the Army is complying with the DoD assignment policy, although it may not be complying with the separate Army assignment policy.

Are Army Women Assigned to Direct Combat Units Below the Brigade Level?

To determine whether women are assigned to direct combat units, it is important to consider whether women are assigned to maneuver units whose established primary mission is direct combat and whether support units have adopted direct combat missions.

Women are not assigned to maneuver units below the brigade level, and this complies with DoD and Army assignment policy. However, we found that, under certain circumstances, support units to which women are assigned are in relationships with maneuver units that differ very slightly from the actuality of being assigned to those maneuver units, and that, in some circumstances, members of such a support unit have a closer relationship with the maneuver unit than with the unit in their assigned chain of command. Although these assignments meet the “letter” of the assignment policy, the assignments may involve activities or interactions that framers of the policy sought to rule out and that today’s policymakers may or may not still want to preclude.

⁶ The DoD policy specifies “below the brigade level” whereas the Army policy specifies “battalion size or smaller.”

Support unit personnel in Iraq, including women, were trained, prepared, and expected to defend themselves and their fellow personnel. Level I self-defense (against snipers, agents, saboteurs, or terrorist activities) was a routine mission among support units in Iraq. Interviewed service members confirmed that women in support units were actively involved in routine self-defense missions that included providing security for their own units, providing personal security for leadership, and, in some cases, providing security for other support units. The Army assignment policy includes “repelling the enemy’s assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack” in the definition of direct combat and states that units that have a *routine* mission of such direct combat should be closed to women.⁷ However, it is unclear whether level I self-defense is included in “repelling the enemy’s assault,” as another interpretation of this phrase of the policy is that it intentionally refers to the documented core mission of maneuver units, which is to “close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver to destroy or capture enemy forces, or to *repel their attacks by fire, close combat, and counterattack.*”⁸

If individual or small-group self-defense is included in the direct combat definition, then assigning women to units that routinely conducted self-defense was not in compliance with the Army policy. Compliance with this interpretation would have significant consequences and could close to women many, if not all, support units. Of note, however, is that such assignments would not violate the DoD assignment policy, which does not include repelling the enemy’s assault in its definition of direct combat and which also closes to women only those units whose *primary* mission is direct combat.

Are Army Women Assigned to Units That Are Collocated with Direct Combat Units?

The Army policy states that women cannot be assigned to units that routinely collocate with direct combat units. The interpretation of this restriction depends on the definition of *collocation*. The Army policy

⁷ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army (1992, p. 5).

⁸ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, *The Brigade Combat Team*, FM 3-90.6, Washington, D.C., August 4, 2006b, p. 2-1. Emphasis added.

provides a definition that appears to be contingent on the proximity of units, but some interviewees maintained that collocation is defined as both unit interdependence and physical proximity. We consider the implications of both definitions in this monograph.

We find considerable evidence that support units are collocated with direct combat units if the definition is based purely on proximity. However, if the definition of collocation is based on interdependency *and* proximity, the evidence is inconclusive. Although some might maintain that the ability of maneuver units to accomplish their missions independently, even for a limited number of days, means that the support units and the maneuver units are not collocated, others might argue that the maneuver units' dependence on forward support companies (FSCs), or even the support units' dependence on maneuver units for security, *does* constitute collocation. Neither proximity nor the combination of proximity and interdependence of support and maneuver units would be inconsistent with the DoD assignment policy, which does not include a collocation restriction, but the assignment of women to support units in Iraq may not be consistent with the Army's assignment policy, given that support units are in proximity to maneuver units and that they may be both proximate to and interdependent with maneuver units.

It is important to note that this ambiguity stems from the fact that the policy as stated is ambiguous in its intent. Is the intent to keep women from being assigned to *any* units that might, for a variety of security or operational reasons, share the same base with maneuver units? If so, this is not being achieved in units to which women are assigned in Iraq. Or is the intent simply to keep women from areas that are especially vulnerable to large-scale enemy attack? If so, then policy is consistent with current operations in Iraq.

Are the Language and Concepts in the Assignment Policy Appropriate to Future Army operations?

Even though the DoD and Army assignment policies relate solely to assignment and do not have any bearing on the utilization of indi-

vidual personnel in military operations, we nevertheless saw the need to consider the assignment policy in the context of Army operations in Iraq. Our view is that these operations provide insights into the actual roles and risks experienced by women under current policy and, perhaps, also offer information relevant to how a new assignment policy should be crafted. Additionally, the Army policy is written such that determining whether Army women are being assigned to appropriate Army units, based on some aspects of the Army policy, depends on the activities of the units while deployed.

Therefore, to help policymakers decide whether the policy should change, this study also evaluated whether the concepts and language in the current policy for assigning women are appropriate for future military operations, given the Army's experience in Iraq. As a point of departure in this evaluation, we include the attitudes and perceptions of returned service members regarding the current assignment policy. Not surprisingly, many personnel recently returned from Iraq did not know about the policy, as they were not generally involved in the assignment of personnel to units. Those who were familiar with the assignment policy did not generally find it understandable or useful. Some felt it was a backward step from operations in which women were involved that were being conducted successfully in Iraq. Some personnel also expressed the opinion that adherence to the policy, if it were interpreted strictly, would be a backward step in the successful execution of the mission in Iraq, in which women have been involved in many aspects of operations, and that a strict interpretation of the assignment policy could even prevent women from participating in Army operations in Iraq, which would preclude the Army from completing its mission. We acknowledge that many of their perceptions may be based on misinterpretations of the policy, but nonetheless, their attitudes confirm both the confusion about the actual meaning of the assignment policy as well as the necessity of an analysis of the appropriateness of the specific wording of the assignment policy.

While the perceptions of returned service members provide useful context and a valuable understanding of the conduct of Army operations in Iraq, this portion of our analysis focused primarily on the appropriateness of the specific wording of the policy. In many ways,

the language and concepts in the current policy for assigning military women do not seem well suited to the type of operations taking place in Iraq. The focus on a defined enemy and the linear battlefield does fit the picture of traditional military operations but is inappropriate to Iraq. Further, the Army restriction on women in units that have a mission to repel an enemy's assault requires clarification with regard to the inclusion of self-defense missions. If it does include self-defense missions, that clause seems inappropriate to current operations in Iraq and potential future operations there and elsewhere, including those conducted during the period of insurgency and sectarian violence.

The appropriateness of other aspects of the assignment policy is a matter of interpretation and judgment. For example, the restriction against assigning women to maneuver units does keep women from being part of units that initiate direct combat or that close with the enemy. However, none of these restrictions preclude women from interacting closely with maneuver unit personnel or from interacting with the enemy or with potential enemy personnel. These restrictions do ensure that support units (and the women in them) are trained and mentored by other support unit personnel while in garrison, but they do not ensure closer proximity to the support unit in the chain of command than to maneuver units while in the theater. These restrictions could be interpreted to exclude support units from the benefit of extra security provided by maneuver units and could eliminate female service members from jobs they have performed successfully in Iraq. Indeed, a very strict interpretation of the Army's assignment policy could preclude some women from deploying to Iraq. Finally, granted that the assignment policy focuses on the assignment of women to units, judging the appropriateness of this focus requires consideration of the employment of women in the theater. Military effectiveness and flexibility entail adapting to changes in enemy strategy, tactics, and weapons, and this implies that commanders may need to employ military resources, including individual women and units with women, in ways not initially envisioned in policy and possibly not well addressed in doctrine.

The Iraq example has shown how the application of the current assignment policy has led to the employment of units including women

in ways that are consistent with DoD policy but might not be consistent with the Army's assignment policy, and yet, based on our interviews and focus groups, has been consistent with maintaining unit effectiveness and capability.

Recommendations

This research effort set out to assess the extent to which the assignment policy for women is appropriate to, and reflected in, Army doctrine, transformation, and operations in Iraq. The intent is not to prescribe policy, but rather to report research findings about the assignment policy and Army operations in Iraq and to identify issues in policy, interpretation of policy, doctrine, or employment for DoD's consideration. The critical first issue is whether there should remain an assignment policy for military women. Removing the assignment policy for military women would be tantamount to asserting that women should be permitted to serve in combat units. This monograph is not intended to inform the policy debate that would emerge from completely removing the assignment policy.

If there continues to be an assignment policy for women in the military, then we recommend these considerations to guide its design, implementation, and any legal reporting requirement:

- Recraft the assignment policy for women to make it conform—and *clarify how it conforms*—to the nature of warfare today and in the future, and plan to review the policy periodically.
- Make clear the objectives and intent of any future policy.
- Clarify whether and how much the assignment policy should constrain military effectiveness and determine the extent to which military efficiency and expediency can overrule the assignment policy. For example, does the requirement to provide Congress with 30 days' notice of any change to the policy constrain military effectiveness, and would a longer time requirement do so?

- Consider whether a prospective policy should exclude women from units and positions in which they have successfully performed in Iraq.
- Given that the assignment policy is unusual because of the legal requirement to report policy changes to Congress, consider the extent to which an individual service policy should differ from overall DoD guidance. Recognize that those differing policies could present reporting challenges.
- Determine whether an assignment policy should restrict women from specified occupations or from both occupations and units. For example, should women be assigned to supply positions in an infantry battalion?
- Determine whether colocation (proximity) is objectionable and whether collocation (proximity and interdependence) is objectionable and clearly define those terms, should they be used in the policy.
- If unit sizes (or levels of command) are specified in the assignment policy, make apparent the reason and intent for specifying unit size, given that modularization, as well as the evolving battlefield, may blur or even negate this distinction.
- Consider whether the policy should remain focused on the assignment to units rather than the individual employment of women.