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Women in the British Military

A History of Women's Entry into the Official British Military Forces and an Analysis of Ideologies and Their Effects on Women's Acceptance within Today's British Military

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Abstract:

Women have had a continual and complex involvement in combat and warfare throughout history; whether directly or indirectly, voluntarily or otherwise, but their involvement is often over-shadowed by that of men. Women's inclusion and involvement in modern militaries since the start of the 20th Century has been shrouded in controversy and debate. Even today women's achievements and roles are overshadowed by prejudices and several detrimental public cases involving female military personnel.

I have been researching the opposition that women have faced entering the previously male-only and still largely male dominated sphere of the military and how the history and interpretation of women's involvement in combat, warfare and the military have given rise to very fixed ideologies, perceptions and beliefs. These stereotypical ideals of 'warriors', 'soldiers', the 'military' and assumed traditional male and female gender roles have been used and continue to be used as reasons to prevent women in the military being on equal terms to men and have prevented women in the military being portrayed and perceived as 'soldiers' as men are. This is coupled with very few known female warriors/ icons from history and those known often interpreted negatively to re-enforce gender differences and capabilities, revealing deep-seated beliefs, making for a difficult struggle by women to find an accepted place in the ethos of 'soldiering' and the military.

Keywords: Women, British Military, Ideologies, Femininity, Masculinity, Sexualization



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Background

This paper presents some of the main topics of my research and questioning so far. From this research basis I then aim to question women in today's military to reveal their own gendered experiences of military life, their perceptions and experiences of expectations and assumptions of women in the military and difficulties they may face. I also hope to gain insights into the women's opinions on recent media cases and their portrayal in the media and what their own icons and role models are.

I take the Equal Opportunities Commission's approach to women in the military which is that it is the *opportunity* to apply that is the key; they do not want reductions in standards or women in roles they can not do, just to make up numbers- but for those women who are capable and meet the required standards they should be allowed the choice and freedom to apply. It may be that relatively few women would make it through. But that is not a good reason for denying all women the opportunity to apply (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002). Allowing women the opportunity to apply gives them equal civil status to men to volunteer to fight for their country.

From a feminist perspective, women being allowed entry to the British military is not necessarily seen as step forward towards equality or even a good thing. It has often been the focus of feminism on the peacefulness and non-violence of women. It could be questioned that achieving entry into the British military for women has failed to challenge the patriarchal view, that war is somehow inevitable.

So have women failed to set themselves as non-violent opposition to 'male warfare'? Or does having women in the military, achieving acceptance, higher ranks and more influence, mean that from the inside women can eventually challenge the very ideals of the military and warfare and make changes for good in the future, perhaps only time will tell, but one simply can not ignore that women have chosen to become part of the military and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

Research Questions and Focus

The idea that women are simply not capable of ‘soldiering’ both physically and emotionally, has been tested by the military and external sources and proven unfounded (Ministry of Defence, 2002; Miller & Harrell, 1997) but still the entry of women into the British military challenges beliefs about combat and violence and goes against traditional historical notions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles and capabilities.

What have been the affects of inclusion of women in the military on the ideologies of women as ‘peacekeepers’ and ‘life givers’ a clear contrast to the violence and capabilities of men for war and also various stances of feminism?

Is it the threat to masculine superiority and ideals, exemplified by the ‘masculine’ hierarchical environment of the military- the last vestige in Britain of male prestige and male identity, finally forced to concede and accept women. How are women’s experiences of military life affected by negative ideas of women’s capabilities, preconceived ideas about gender roles and the masculinization of war and the military?

Prevailing Ideologies of Women

How does having women soldiers challenge many deep-rooted beliefs and expectations of gender roles? Ideologies of ‘women’, especially in relation to or opposed to war and the military include women as mothers, life-givers, more important/ less disposable than men, peacemakers, anti-military, the weaker sex, less aggressive, nurses and to be protected by men. There are also contradictions to these ideologies such as women as supporting the military and women as a distraction to men in the military environment and being in need of protection, which in the context of a woman as a soldier can be very problematic and perhaps even detrimental to women’s acceptance as soldiers and military personnel equal to men.

Ideology of the ‘Soldier’

One must consider that in the British military, a very small part of the forces are involved in direct ground combat and face-to-face killing, and the jobs which typify this are those off-limits

still to women applicants. There are a vast range of jobs and careers in the military but often when one thinks of the military the paramount ideology is that of the soldier in khakis and camouflage face paint carrying a weapon. This ideology alone can cause problems by overshadowing the majority of other jobs within the military.

The entry of women into the military seems then to challenge how the very term ‘soldier’ is conceived. All military personnel may consider themselves ‘soldiers’ but their roles may be far removed (both males and females) from the business of ‘soldiering,’ as it is often perceived. It is not necessarily straight forward for women to adopt a ‘soldier’ role or even receive the same status in this role as her male counterpart. ‘For men, military achievement enhances their masculinity, while for women it frequently involves a rejection of femininity’ (DeGroot & Peniston-Bird, 2000: 180). So how can a female soldier role be created and accepted?

Historical Ideologies

Until more recently women’s history had never received much attention and the focus on women was much overdue. So one can imagine with the lack of women’s history in general is it any surprise that women in relation to ‘war’ and ‘combat’ have been largely overlooked or deemed merely as exceptions (Jones, 1997; Pennington, 2003).

There is a lack of female ‘warrior heritage’; meaning there are so few heroines, role models, women warriors, soldiers and leaders to refer to in comparison to the numbers of male role models etc, and even those we do have, have been subject to much interpretation to suit society’s ideals and expectations of women and to fit neatly into gender roles.

There seems to be a continual use of historical and archaic ideologies today to overshadow women’s achievements and capabilities and are often used detrimentally to women’s public image and acceptance as soldiers in the modern military.

There are often incorrect or made-up ideologies, which can be believed as truth and can be used as examples (albeit incorrect) to ‘prove’ women’s capabilities, incapability’s and unsuitability for certain roles. My research has looked at some of the most recognisable historical ideologies/ icons of women in combat roles and how they have been interpreted and used today.

Boudicca

Boudicca is one of the earliest and often cited as the Original Warrior Queen and British heroine. However, very little is known other than from two Roman sources written long after events in 60AD. Boudicca often falls into two interpretations; firstly as a barbaric, ruthless queen on her chariot. Accounts list atrocities such as killing thousands of men, women and children and even cutting off women's breasts and stuffing them in their mouths as they hung dying (Collingridge, 2005: 217).

Or Boudicca is seen as a more motherly figure. Under which guise all of her actions could, of course, be excused as she was given a good motive- that of avenging the Roman's who flogged her and raped her two daughters.

This idea of Boudicca as seeking revenge (especially for her offspring) is often used as a motive for women- assuming women can not be violent (or as violent as men) without provocation. There is an assumption that women are not as predetermined to aggression and violence as men. Though the military has done testing on capabilities for aggression of females and concluded that even though 'The capacity for aggression/ was generally lower for women who required more provocation/ There was evidence though that this gap could be closed given sufficient social license and provocation' (Ministry of Defence, 2002: *Section 12- Psychological Factors*). And surely it might be a good thing for *all* soldiers to need more provocation?

Elizabeth I was in fact responsible for bringing back to life the long forgotten tales of warrior queen Boudicca. Stories of Boudicca were paramount in Elizabeth's reign giving the queen a good historical reference for her own actions, in a way, making herself more acceptable as there was someone before her in the same light (Collingridge, 2005: 285-287).

Amazons

Amazon women are greatly overshadowed by myth- we just really don't know who they were or if they even existed. There are references to women warriors throughout early history from the Gladiatorial arena, female Goddesses to women depicted on vases fighting against men. We have Amazons from the rainforests and Amazons in the Mediterranean fighting boldly against Alexander the Great (Salmondson, 1991; Webster Wilde, 1999).

The terms Amazon or bunch-of-amazons are often used to describe any woman or group of women against the norm. Again the term can have clear negative or positive connotations – they can be seen as ruthless and barbaric with associations of myths of cutting off their breasts and killing all their male babies. Or Amazon can be used to mean a tall, strong, muscular woman, a female hero, a female warrior or powerful woman or the principle of heroism conceived and expressed in a female form.

Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc can be used as the archetypal woman warrior in armour, leading the French to victory over the English, which is probably why she's often left out of British history and condemned as a witch or crazy person, since she heard voices, but Joan was never tried for being a witch but was accused of heresy- being against the church. 'The religious overtones associated with Joan's temporary acquisition of male power also served to soften any real threat the contemporary soldier might pose' (Wheelwright, 1989: 109).

But what was the reality? Again very little is actually known of Joan of Arc, like Boudicca she is overshadowed by myth and miss-interpretation and not a single contemporary image of her remains.

Joan of arc was a leader, she rode a horse and wore armour, but she wasn't the warrior she is often imagined to be. She led others to fight and kill on her behalf in the name of god, but she never shed blood herself, apart from her own (DeVries, 1999). Joan may well have just been a figure head used to shame the men into fighting. It could be said that having women along side men may have this affect today, encouraging them to more bravery so as not be out done by the women.

Emphasis on Joan of arc can be firstly on her virginity, purity, youth and innocence calling herself *la Pucelle*; the maid. She is also known for her saintliness because after First World War when France was much in need of patriotic heroes, who better than Joan of Arc to canonize in 1920? Like Joan of Arc, 'The female warrior's acceptance was often based on denial of her sexuality and great emphasis was placed on her virginity or sexless-ness in popular representations' (Wheelwright, 1989: 12), 'only a heroine, stripped of her sexuality, could be

portrayed sympathetically, another transgression of the male-female duality made understandable' (Wheelwright, 1989: 77).

So often women are seen as exceptions or oddities or abnormal because they do not fit into society's gender ideals and are made to seem 'other' as if they need explaining and categorising. Women combatants, warriors etc, especially those who need to cross-dress and disguise their true sex to fulfil their aims, are also often considered as 'wanna be men' or tomboys that have never grown out of it. Women who cross- dress are also sometimes labelled as being lesbians, which may well be true for some, but often this is cited as their sole reason to cross- dress, to fulfil their sexual desires, 'Desire for a male lifestyle became conflated with homosexual impulses as psychologists actively participated in the reconstruction of sexual concepts' (Wheelwright, 1989: 152). However, this completely ignores the countless other reasons why women would want to pursue 'male' roles- for adventure, escape from societies expectations, to make money, for independence etc..

Often biographical accounts of these 'exceptional' women seem to excuse all their behaviour by adding that after all their adventures; they neatly reverted back to female clothing and getting married, including, a woman sailor, Mary Lacy who had had a woman in every port! (Stark, 1996: 165).

Weak and Feeble Women

Despite evidence of a range of women warriors and leaders and combatants throughout history, the literature and literal re-writing of some histories during the Victorian period have given light to many assumptions of the roles of women as weak and feeble. During the 18th and 19th centuries there was a great change in the way militaries were conceived, constructed and regulated. Often this involved a trend towards a permanently employed and trained fighting force, rather than personnel recruited for particular conflicts or engagements. With more regulations and demands on the 'standing army' the role of women in relation to militaries, and indeed warfare, was completely re-considered and largely reduced. Women auxiliaries, fighters, supporters, camp followers, nurses, prostitutes etc., became so reduced, the doing so seems to also have written them out of any previous history and involvement.

Damsels in Distress

Despite women having proven themselves capable of warrior, combat and military roles, ‘There seemed to be no real blood tie joining modern women flying fighter planes and battling in the gulf to the Amazons of history’ (Muir: 1998: 81). There are also still fears today of capture, rape and death of women in the military. America and Britain have already had women soldiers killed in action and in the US women taken prisoner, admittedly they made head line news but policies were not changed. A woman has not yet been raped by the enemy (that is publicly known) so reaction is hard to gauge and one must remember women accept the risks as men do in modern *voluntary* military service.

There are also fears that men will take extra risks to protect a woman than a man. But the Equal Opportunities reply to this claim was again to stress that training was the key, suggesting that through the correct training all soldiers were capable of the job in hand. After all, no one enters the military already having killed someone but the training allows them to. (Defence Select Committee: Minutes of Evidence, 2000: Section 174) It is also worth noting that men throughout history have often been rewarded for taking extra or even foolish risks in battle to defend or rescue their male comrades, so how is it different if that person is a female?

Historical Ideology of Damsel In Distress- Jessica Lynch

A well-known case in America was the capture and rescue of soldier Jessica Lynch in 2003. The case was leapt upon as an example of women being unsuitable for war and was blown up into an epic tale of brave men going to rescue her and bringing her very triumphantly and patriotically home. ‘Jessica Lynch was easily turned into a classic narrative of damsel-in-distress with a plot that featured a dramatic rescue’ (Andersen, 2005: 369). References in the media were to her being a ‘damsel in distress’, with focus on her youth, beauty and vulnerability all emphasised to re-iterate gender differences and to re-assert male dominance of warfare. ‘Rescuing the damsel in distress reasserted male superiority and military paternalism, values essential to a new culture of war being (re)constructed by highlighting fear of terrorism’ (Andersen, 2005: 369)

The case of Jessica Lynch seemed to show deep seated beliefs in America that they felt guilty for letting her get caught or for even being there in the first place and it would have been a

public disaster if she had been killed or raped, neither of which occurred, although reports do vary as to her treatment while captive.

The confusion and difficulties surrounding women in military environments was shown during the First and Second World Wars when many countries needed their women to take on previously male only roles both in military and society (Adie, 2003). The confusion at these times over changing male and female roles and expectation for women to ‘do their bit’ while retaining their femininity can be seen in the military recruitment posters. An Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.) recruitment poster showing a very glamorous painting of a lady with smart military hat and collar was deemed as too feminine and not representative of the hard and unglamorous work women were expected to do. While the American favourite poster icon of ‘Rosie the Riveter’ was deemed by some as too butch and off putting for women who wanted to help but didn’t want to *become men*.

Post-Modern Female Soldiers and Combatants- Sexualization of Women in Combat and Military Roles

In contrast to reality, more recent ideologies of women in combat and military roles stem from films, TV, comics and computer games, there’s Wonder Woman, the original Amazon Princess, also Xena warrior Princess and Charlie’s Angels and Lara Croft Tomb Raider. It seems today that there are more fictional heroines to refer to than real ones.

If fiction reflects reality, and after all, what is history but fiction, then it may be that people perceive it more acceptable for a woman to become a warrior if they par this off against their heightened sexuality: it is acceptable for a woman to bare arms as long as she’s sexy. Even Jessica Lynch was very attractive and posed for many photo shoots and in the media was never short of make up once rescued. Also it may be more acceptable for women to adopt male roles of soldiering and warfare if they are heterosexual, another issue for more questioning.

Is this then an issue for women in the military today, or in fact in other areas of society previously off-limits that remain male dominated, to balance their job roles with their gender roles in society? How do our British soldiers cope with expectations of being equal to men as soldiers but out of uniform to revert back to ‘feminine’ roles. Like in the biographies mentioned earlier, it’s ok for women to ‘play at being soldiers’ as long as they revert back to wearing ‘female attire’ afterwards.

Even in *GI Jane* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 1997) the ultimate female soldier film to date, they cast Demi Moore, well known for her looks and sexy roles, admittedly I thought she did very well with the shallow plot in which all she had to do was shave off her hair to de-feminize herself and take a few punches and she was accepted as one of the guys- but it is really is not that straight forward. (Walsh, 2004: 202-204; Peniston-Bird 2000: 320-336). And also, do women really want to be one of the guys? Why can't they just be one of the 'team' as themselves- women? This is another area for questioning of female military personnel today.

So the American and British public had seen women killed, mothers killed and women taken prisoner. However, no one seemed quite ready to accept the images of American soldier Lynndie England, photographed abusing prisoners of war. The images came to light in 2003 and were published in newspapers in many countries. This was another case like Jessica Lynch's story used to re-iterate gender differences and to re-assert females as being unsuitable for military life and warfare.

The fact that torture and abuse have been part of warfare through history was largely ignored by the media. For women to become part of that aspect of warfare, one could say that this was inevitable with letting women into the military in the first place. What was definitely inevitable was the media focus on the women involved. Would it have been as 'atrocious' and 'disgusting' to people if only men were doing it? It takes a case like this to bring out peoples well hidden but still heart felt beliefs of gender roles- what is acceptable and what is not from males and females and from people in general in our modern society.

What does this case mean for the fears of 'feminization' of the forces? No one thought about the 'masculinization' of women, beyond any recognisable and assumed 'feminine' role. Furthermore, what do these images do to the ideas of the sexualization of women in combat roles like those we've just looked at? Lynndie England is not a stereotypically good looking as Jessica Lynch, would their stories have been perceived differently if their looks had been reversed?

Both Lynndie England and another woman were arrested, tried and imprisoned. For some reason I couldn't find out what punishments the several men involved received, or even their names. And nowhere outside of military circles mentions that the real issue was lack of responsible authority and supervision of these soldiers. 'In the case of Abu Ghraib, the focus on female sexual deviance drew criticism away from official policies. / The dangers of female

sexuality took the blame for torture, not the military policies and larger culture of war that promote it' (Andersen, 2005: 369). It is likely that worse torture and abuse has been done before under the all-excusing flag of Warfare; just never with *ladies present* before.

Summary – The Affects of Historical Ideologies

In my research paper I have highlighted some of the ideologies and debates surrounding women in war and combat roles affecting women in the British military. My further research is now to question women in the British Military to see how they experience their roles in military life. I will ask about their heroes, heroines and icons, their knowledge of female warrior heritage, any negative perceptions, and their gendered experiences within the military sphere.

There seems to be a need to re-create/ re-envision/ re-sell more positive female warrior and leader role models. Women in the modern military are over shadowed by negative cases of when things go wrong and few notable inspiring female figures in the military seem to have appeared as yet. How do British military women feel about the bad press and sweeping generalizations of their roles and what are their thoughts on recent media cases of women taken prisoner and abuse of prisoners of war case?

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