

G.I. Jane's second war pushes gender barriers

About 10 percent of soldiers deployed from Fort Campbell to Iraq were women.

By AMY RITCHART

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Women deployed to Iraq say they see themselves as soldiers - not women at war.

"I never looked at myself as the female pilot, or the female platoon leader," said Capt. Monica Strye, an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter pilot with 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry, 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell.

"I don't think my squadron commander hesitated to put me in situations. If I was the one on station, then I got the mission."

Women were first deployed in large numbers with the rest of the 101st during Operation Desert Storm, said Fort Campbell's historian, John O'Brien.

"There were some growing pains," he said of Desert Storm. "This deployment, (women) were just soldiers like everybody else. There was a maturation of the attitude."

Strye, who spent time as a platoon leader, said her unit's mission included scouting enemy positions and providing security for ground forces.

"I never looked at myself as the female pilot or the female platoon leader. I received just as much hostile fire from the ground as any other pilot," she said. "We all had an equal opportunity to get fired upon."

Her squadron, she said, was one of the first aviation units in the Army to fly in front of the forward infantry. And though she was the only woman in her troop, she said gender didn't affect the rapport in her unit.

"We all looked out for one another," she said. "Having a good camaraderie within a unit is key. Eventually ... those people become your family."

Sgt. Katrina Gunn of the 501st Signal Battalion said she didn't know what to expect before she left for Iraq.

"I was on a remote team," she said. "I never had any problems. You just all learn to get along."

Gunn said being part of Signal Battalion meant traveling with whatever unit her team was attached to. Each unit, she said, is different, and soldiers in each branch have different experiences.

"You belong more along team lines than you do along gender lines," she said.

No 'women's work'

Maj. Lora Elliott has been deployed to Desert Storm, Bosnia, and for 610 of 730 days to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. She deployed most recently as the historian for the 101st Airborne Division and with Division Support Command, 101st Airborne Division, during Operation Desert Storm.

Women were about 10 percent, or 2,200, of the 22,000 Fort Campbell soldiers deployed during Desert Storm, Elliott said. And Maj. Charley Holstein, Deputy G1, 101st Airborne Division, said military records show between 1,400 to 1,800 female soldiers were deployed with the division and another 250 to 300 female soldiers were deployed with the Core Support Group during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

During Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, Elliott was commander of the 48th Military History Detachment. Over her 22 years as a reservist, she learned women could make inroads in areas she had thought reserved for men.

"I think the biggest realization is that women are in combat regardless of their role," she said. "There's no such thing as front lines anymore."

This is because many job categories are deployed with combat units, she said.

"When the first group goes," she said, "a slice of everything goes with it. You've got maintenance people, supply people, telecommunications people."

Elliott chose the military intelligence field over air defense artillery because at the time of her commissioning the thinking was that a woman could never become a battalion commander in an air defense artillery unit. She's since found women have been able to reach higher ranks and positions of authority.

"I think we're actually getting there," Elliott said. "I saw females who were combat leaders, who were sergeants of the guard for the perimeter. For the first time ever we had (a female) air defense artillery battalion commander."

Valuable differences

Still, Elliott would like to see women have the opportunity to go to infantry schools and become involved in special forces units.

"No one would ever suspect a female from the United States to be able to get that type of intelligence," she said. "(Women) would never be suspected ... in special operations in an urban setting."

Strye said she learned several things from her deployment - some she feels are unique to her gender.

"For me, the biggest thing is I proved that women can do these missions with the same level of competence in a situation where you're in a hostile environment," she said. "A lot of people are afraid we'll crack under pressure."

Strye also developed new friendships while deployed.

"One thing that I learned is that women in the Army need other women around them," she said. "There are times when you just need women in your life. What this deployment did was force you to put ... barriers aside because you need that.

"We should look out for each other."

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"I received just as much hostile fire from the ground as any other pilot. We all had an equal opportunity to be fired upon." - Capt. Monica Strye

Photo Caption:

Maj. Lora Elliott, commander, 48th Military History Detachment, historian, 101st Airborne Division, stands in front of a portrait of fallen Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein at the airbase in Iskandariyad, south of Bagdad. She said that in the Iraq wars "the biggest realization is that women are in combat regardless of their role," she said. "There's no such thing as front lines anymore." Contributed photo

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