

For Female GIs, Combat Is a Fact

Many Duties in Iraq Put Women at Risk Despite Restrictive Policy

By Ann Scott Tyson
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, May 13, 2005; A01

MOSUL, Iraq -- Jennifer Guay went to war to be a grunt. And the 170-pound former bartender from Leeds, Maine, with cropped red hair and a penchant for the bench press, has come pretty close.

It was mid-February and Guay, 26, an Army specialist who was the first woman to be assigned as an infantry combat medic, was spending 10 hours a day on missions with the 82nd Airborne Division, dodging rockets and grenades in the crowded streets of Mosul.

"Break-break-break: U.S. soldier down!" a hard-edged voice came over the radio. A gun battle had just broken out.

In less than five minutes, Guay was at the scene. She dashed to Sgt. Christopher Pusateri, 21, who was lying on the ground, a bullet through his jaw. "I was in charge of this man's life," she recalled. Pusateri had "a massive trauma injury, and I had to get him off the middle of the street."

Day after day, Guay has faced situations that would test the steel of any soldier. And female soldiers like her -- as well as Army officers who support them -- are seizing opportunities amid Iraq's indiscriminate violence to push back the barriers against women in combat. As American women in uniform patrol bomb-ridden highways, stand duty at checkpoints shouldering M-16s and raid houses in insurgent-contested towns, many have come to believe this 360-degree war has rendered obsolete a decade-old Pentagon policy barring them from serving with ground combat battalions.

"The Army has to understand the regulation that says women can't be placed in direct fire situations is archaic and not attainable," said Lt. Col. Cheri Provancha, commander of a Stryker Brigade support battalion in Mosul, who decided to bend Army rules and allow Guay to serve as a medic for an infantry company of the 82nd Airborne. Under a 1994 policy, women are excluded from units at the level of battalion and below that engage in direct ground combat.

"This war has proven that we need to revisit the policy, because they are out there doing it," Provancha, a 21-year Army veteran from San Diego, said from her base in what soldiers call Mosul's "mortar alley." "We are embedded with the enemy."

Dozens of soldiers interviewed across Iraq -- male and female, from lower enlisted ranks to senior officers -- voiced frustration over restrictions on women mandated in Washington that they say make no sense in the war they are fighting. All said the policy should be changed to allow, at a minimum, mixed-sex support units to be assigned to combat battalions. Many favored a far more radical step: letting qualified women join the infantry.

But Congress is moving in the opposite direction. A House subcommittee, seeking to keep women out of combat, passed a measure this week that would bar women from thousands of Army positions now open to them. In Iraq, female soldiers immediately denounced the vote.

"I refuse to have my right as a soldier taken from me because of my gender," Guay wrote in an e-mail. "It is my right to defend my country. . . . I am well aware of the danger. . . . Let me (us) do our job."

For many inside Army camps, the disconnect between Washington officialdom and the reality that female troops confront in Iraq was epitomized by President Bush's Jan. 11 declaration of "No women in combat."

"That's an oxymoron!" said Sgt. Neva D. Trice, who leads a female Army search team that guards the gates of Baghdad's Green Zone, where many U.S. and Iraqi government facilities are located. "If he said no women in combat, then why are there women here in Iraq?"

Several male Army officers also dismissed Bush's statement as woefully uninformed. "The president got blindsided. The president didn't understand what the policy really was," said one officer, who requested anonymity because he was questioning the commander-in-chief. He and others urged Army leaders to push for new policies that reflect women's expanded role.

"I'm ashamed," he said, "that the Army has not taken this on."

Valor Under Fire

In sheer numbers, women are essential to the American military effort in Iraq -- where tens of thousands have served -- and are playing a bigger role than in any previous U.S. conflict. Historically, women's involvement in the military has surged in wartime. Today, that pattern is amplified by the all-volunteer U.S. military's growing share of women, which has steadily expanded in recent years to 15 percent of the active duty force.

Moreover, in contrast to their roles in past wars, women are serving in a widening variety of Army ground units -- from logistics to military police, military intelligence and civil affairs -- where they routinely face the same risks as soldiers in all-male combat units such as infantry and armor.

"We live and work with the infantry," said Maj. Mary Proffit, 42, who heads a four-person civil affairs team with a Stryker battalion in Mosul. An Army reservist and librarian from Glenoma, Wash., Proffit handles security duties from the hatch of a Stryker armored vehicle, watching houses during searches and returning fire when shot at. "Civil affairs teams have to be prepared to perform infantry functions, because at any time we could be diverted," she said.

In January, Proffit was delivering kerosene heaters to a Mosul school when insurgents detonated a roadside bomb as her convoy passed, fatally wounding three Iraqi soldiers. Proffit moved to shield the medic treating the wounded, firing at insurgents who were shooting at them from a mosque across the street. "Women in combat is no longer an argument," she said matter-of-factly at her camp near the Mosul air field. "There is no rear area."

At least as often as insurgents attack all-male infantry forces, they strike targets such as military supply convoys, checkpoints and camps where U.S. servicewomen are often present. As a result, hostile fire in Iraq has taken a proportionally larger toll on servicewomen than in any prior U.S. conflict, killing 35 and wounding 279.

"You can't tell me I'm not being shot at. You can't tell me I can't handle combat," said Provancha, who has nearly been hit by road bombs, rockets and the chow hall suicide bombing that killed 22 in December. "That was pretty frickin' direct fire if you ask me," she said, holding up a piece of shrapnel.

Far from shrinking from the fight, women in Iraq are winning medals for valor under fire.

Spec. Shavodsha Hodges, 29, of San Antonio, says she joined the Army because her GI husband encouraged her to. She is a veteran of the 2003 Iraq invasion and well into her second year in a war zone. She and about 100 other women make up 20 percent of Provancha's logistics battalion in Mosul. They serve as truck and Stryker drivers, medics, mechanics and supply soldiers like Hodges who conduct between 50 and 70 convoy missions a month. Ferrying critical goods from Mosul to outlying bases on the precarious roads of northern Iraq, Hodges has developed keen instincts.

On Oct. 29, she was in a supply convoy heading out of the hostile town of Tall Afar, near the Syrian border. "We were told to watch out for an Iraqi national in black," she recalled. "Within seconds we were hit with an IED," or improvised explosive device, the military's term for a roadside bomb.

As her Humvee began to roll over, Hodges reached over and grabbed the legs of Pfc. Gregory Burchett, who was manning a .50-caliber machine gun. She pulled him down from the hatch and into the vehicle just before it flipped, saving him from being crushed.

Burchett was disoriented and moaning in pain. His face was bleeding from multiple shrapnel wounds and he couldn't move his arm. Hodges helped him out of the vehicle, but almost as soon they climbed out they came under small-arms fire from insurgents 200 yards away.

"Stay down!" Hodges yelled. Cradling Burchett's head in her lap, she lay forward over his upper body to shield him from the bullets. "Don't get up!" she said, twice sheltering the gunner from enemy rounds.

Meanwhile, the Humvee's commander, Staff Sgt. Armando Mejia, had his hand trapped under the vehicle. After the shooting stopped, Hodges and other soldiers pushed it up enough to free him. Only later did she realize that she, too, was injured.

For her quick thinking and bravery in the ambush, Hodges became the first woman in her brigade to be awarded the Army Commendation Medal with "V" device, for "valorous conduct" that "saved the lives of her fellow soldiers."

Between missions at her camp in Mosul, Hodges said she had no doubts about women's abilities in the war zone. "I think a woman is just as capable of dealing with this as a man," she said.

"You think fast, and you react fast," she said, her tone confident but sober. "You have to be prepared at any moment, for anything."

'Attached,' Not 'Assigned'

Many commanders in Iraq say they see a widening gap between war-zone realities and policies designed to limit women's exposure to combat.

Although the Army is barred from assigning women to ground combat battalions, in Iraq it skirts the ban with a twist in terminology. Instead of being "assigned," women are "attached in direct support of" the battalions, according to Army officers familiar with the policy. As a result, the Army avoids having to seek Pentagon and congressional approval to change the policy, officers said.

"What has changed? Nothing," said Lt. Col. Bob Roth of the 3rd Infantry Division. "You just want someone to feel better by saying we don't allow women in dangerous situations."

A debate over the policy erupted in Washington last year. As the Army began reorganizing its combat brigades, the 3rd Infantry attempted to assign mixed-sex forward support companies to combat battalions. Capt. Christine Roney was on the verge of taking command of one of those companies when a soldier in her unit e-mailed Congress and opponents of women in combat. The Army reversed itself.

Eventually, the Army sidestepped the problem by making the forward support companies "attached" instead of "assigned," officers said. But Roney was nonetheless denied the job.

"A week before I was supposed to take command, they pulled me into the office and told me I couldn't be assigned," said Roney, of Loudonville, Ohio, now in Baghdad. "It was very disappointing." Instead, she was given a company in a noncombat battalion.

Roney and other Army officers interviewed in Iraq agreed overwhelmingly that the Army's ban on locating female support soldiers with combat battalions was meaningless and should be lifted. The bigger question raised by the Iraq conflict, they said, is whether women should be allowed into combat units such as infantry and armor.

"I'm for it, because I think we can do it," said Pfc. Laura Springer, 20, of Odessa, Tex., one of only three women in her brigade licensed to drive the Army's Stryker vehicle. "At first all the infantry guys were staring at me. But I'm a good driver -- I haven't hit anything -- the same or even better."

Male and female soldiers said many women in Iraq were performing well in risky jobs that require infantry skills -- from military police and civil affairs troops to female search teams that go on raids with Army and Marine infantry units. On raids, a woman is "as much infantry soldier on the ground doing the duties as anyone else," Roth said. "She may not have been the person who knocked the door in, but she's with the next stack getting ready to come in."

Most soldiers and officers interviewed also agreed that women need tougher physical fitness standards to perform well in infantry jobs, but that many could meet those standards. For some,

the impact of pregnancy on readiness was a concern. Commanders of mixed-sex units in Iraq said that from 5 percent to 15 percent of their women became pregnant and did not deploy to Iraq, but one said health and family issues kept a similar percentage of men home.

From Mosul to Ramadi to Baghdad, women such as Guay, who spent three months with the 82nd Airborne, have shown that they can be valuable players in combat units.

Guay was a student, engrossed by the moral dilemmas of war, when she decided to enlist in the Army in September 2002 to test her beliefs. "I called an Army recruiter. I wanted to be as grunt as possible," she said.

She lifted weights and studied combat medical skills. Once in Iraq, she actively sought missions "outside the wire" of the Mosul camp. When the 82nd Airborne arrived and needed a medic, Guay wanted to go. Provancha, whose team of medics is 40 percent female, assigned her.

"She wanted to be part of breaking the barrier down," Provancha said. Provancha took full responsibility for her decision, informing superiors rather than asking permission.

"Think of the fallout if she had gotten wounded or killed," Provancha said. "I probably would have been brought up on charges for defying Army policy." But that didn't happen. Instead, she said, Guay "did magnificently."

Initially, the 82nd questioned the move. At first, the grunts watched Guay. Then, in a casual sign of acceptance, they began calling her "Doc." A few firefights later, she became their "kick-ass medic." She was one of them.

"I was always working out and being strong and proficient," said Guay, proud of the fact that she could "out-bench some of the guys." She lived, ate and went on daily missions with the paratroops, bonding with the men whose lives could at any moment be placed in her hands.

When the soldiers fell, as Pusateri did in the firefight that gray day in February, Guay gave them her all, even when hope was slim. Recalling how she knelt at the mortally wounded sergeant's side, she said she would never forget being the last person with him, and the profound respect it engendered.

She quickly inserted an IV and ran a tube into his throat, pumping a bag every five seconds to put precious air into his lungs.

"Squeeze my hand," she told him. He did. She pumped the bag again. Pusateri was stable, but slowly losing consciousness. "You're so brave," she said, rubbing his head as everything around them faded into a blur. "You're amazing."