



Policy Brief

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Women in Combat: Learning from Cultural Support Teams

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On 12-14 July 2015, Women in International Security (WIIS) conducted a three-day data-gathering workshop with over twenty women from the U.S. Special Operations Command's Cultural Support Team (CST) program—the all-female teams that deployed with U.S. Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan from 2010 until 2014. Approximately 200 women participated in this program over 5 years. In addition to the workshop, we surveyed over 25 CST members from various years and several men whose teams the CSTs supported. Following is a report of the initial findings from the workshop.

Main Findings:

- Women who were part of the CST program demonstrate that women have already served extensively in combat operations and have integrated all male combat teams.
- Women not only contributed to combat missions, they directly improved the capabilities of Special Forces and Ranger units operating in hostile environments.
- The varied responses of Special Forces and Ranger males to female CSTs illustrates that attitudes and leadership are critical to women gaining acceptance in all male units.
- The experiences of CSTs dispel myths about physical capabilities and the types of accommodation and hygiene needs women require in war zones.
- Largely as a result of their temporary and 'attached' status, CST members faced an incredibly difficult reintegration process when they returned from deployments; their experiences were fundamentally not recognized by the military.

Background

The CST program was established at the behest of International Security Assistance Force Commander General Stanley McChrystal to engage local women in Afghanistan in a culturally sensitive manner.² Subsequently, Special Operations Command (SOCOM) moved forward with a plan to recruit and train US servicewomen from all services to operate on their teams.³ Approximately 200 US servicewomen volunteered for and served on these teams.

The SOCOM recruiting website explained that, "CST's directly support activities ranging from medical civic-action programs, searches and seizures, humanitarian assistance and civil-military operations. Cultural support training will primarily focus on basic human behavior, Islamic and Afghan cultures, women and their role in Afghanistan, and tribalism. Training is conducted at Fort Bragg, N.C. Cultural Support Program members must make, at a minimum, a one-year commitment to the program."⁴

The selection and training portion of the program took approximately two months and was followed by an eight to ten month deployment. Some women served more than one deployment.

Deployments

The women were assigned to Ranger Teams conducting Direct Action (DA) missions or to Special Forces Teams conducting Village Stability Operations (VSO).

The women assigned to the Ranger Teams participated in day and night DA raids on enemy locations. DA raids are “*short duration strikes and other small scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.*”⁵

While on target the DA CSTs’ mission was to round up, search and question all of the women and children in the target vicinity. In Afghanistan these raids generally required being inserted, via helicopter, on or near a target. CSTs conducted infiltrations with their teams, which sometimes required fast roping onto objectives or hiking, in excess of 10 km over rugged terrain, to objectives. CSTs were in firefights, conducted searches and seizures, and played a key role in tactical questioning and information gathering. Two servicewomen, 1st Lieutenant Ashley White and 1st Lieutenant Jennifer Moreno were killed in action during direct action night raids.

The women assigned to the Special Forces Teams participated in Village Stability Operations, a form of Foreign Internal Defense (FID). FID operations are conducted “*to free and protect society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to security.*”⁶

Typically, a Special Forces (SF) team was assigned to a remote Afghan region to work with local villagers to establish and train village security forces to be capable of resisting insurgent and criminal elements that threatened their communities. CSTs participated by engaging with and enlisting the support of local Afghan women and men. Normally, these teams engaged in extensive patrols over rugged terrain to visit villages within their area of operations. These teams not only trained local Afghan security forces but they assisted them when they conducted local security operations.

Findings from the July Workshop

I. Women Engaged in Offensive Combat

Although their stated mission was primarily to engage with and search Afghan women and children, the unpredictable and varying nature of counter insurgent warfare meant that most of the CSTs saw direct combat and faced the same grueling combat conditions as their male counterparts during their eight month deployments. The CST members we spoke with identified as combat soldiers and described events and missions they were a part of that proved this. In fact, 100% of the CST members surveyed said that they considered themselves to be combat-tested service members. CST members described various combat activities they participated in, including engaging in firefights, and participating in long foot patrols and night raids. A CST member who served two deployments with the Ranger Regiment said that, depending on the operational tempo of the team and region of the country, she and her CST colleagues participated in 64 to 160 Direct Action missions each during an eight-month deployment. The women typically supported 2 to 3 Ranger teams during their deployments because the Ranger teams rotated out every 3 to 4 months while the women stayed on to support the next team.

Speaking of both her experience prior to the CST program and her role as a CST member, Captain Meredith Mathis said, “*I feel like I’ve seen as much if not more combat than a lot of infantry soldiers: leading patrols, IEDs, getting mortared...I’ve seen combat and I consider myself a combat-tested veteran.*”

Other examples of combat experience include the fact that, on occasion, team extractions did not go as planned and teams had to hike out over rugged terrain inhabited by hostile forces. One CST member described one such incident saying that although she carried the same combat load as her male colleagues she had no problem keeping pace while a few of her male team members fell behind.

Again, it is important to note that female CSTs were in the same insecure environments and often accomplishing the same physical tasks as their male counterparts. For example, women carried and operated the same equipment as their Special Forces teammates. CSTs became proficient on weapon systems like the .50 caliber

machine gun and the use and employment of the CROWS. The CROWS is an integrated system that allows users to remotely operate multiple small arms weapons, including the MK19, the M2, the M240B and the M249. Captain Allison Lansing said that when a SEAL team joined their location the women were tasked to train the younger SEALs, who were on their first deployment, on how to operate these weapons systems. Sergeant Janiece Marquez said she was assigned as the primary gunner for her team for the last three months of her deployment with her Special Forces team.

Despite the fact that servicewomen have been participating in direct offensive combat operations for many years Sergeant Emmy Pollock noted that, *“A huge portion of the population is just completely unaware that women are already doing this.”* Indeed, even Eric Olsen, former commander of US Special Operations Command and an architect of the CST program seems unaware of the full spectrum of the duties these women performed while serving. In a recent interview he concluded that the CSTs primary role was *“to be women, not to be combat soldiers, and the first thing they did when they fast roped out of the helicopter on the target was take their helmet off, let their hair down and corral the women and children....”*⁷ Such statements diminish and contradict the varied experiences of CSTs. Nearly all CST members received combat action badges; several were wounded and received Purple Hearts. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, both Ashley White and Jennifer Moreno’s deaths were the result of Direct Action. This, combined with testimonies from CST members themselves clearly proves that women were doing more than letting their hair down and corralling women and children.

II. Improved Capabilities

CSTs gathered information and conducted searches that produced, by one estimate, a 20% increase in overall mission success. Captain Amanda Tamosuins said that adding women to special operations teams ultimately *“opened up 70% of the population in which we were operating.”* According to the CSTs they were able to engage men, women and children in local communities in ways that were different from their male counterparts. Indeed, CSTs often became favorite interlocutors

for Afghan men in the villages. The men saw servicewomen as a sort of “third gender,” women who operated outside of traditional gender norms and were less threatening members of the international security forces.

Reportedly, the mere presence of CSTs on missions had a calming effect on all operations, including Direct Action raids. One Ranger said that before they took the CSTs on raids the Afghan women and children would scream incessantly, to the point that the team had trouble communicating over the radios. After the CSTs began participating the Afghan women and children stopped screaming and provided valuable information to the CSTs. In several instances Afghan women, via the CSTs, pointed the teams to weapons caches and insurgent hiding places. Indeed, according to the CSTs they were not only able to search women, but also were very good at picking up nonverbal clues, leading to better intelligence and overall situational awareness.

III. Acceptance

Initially some Ranger and Special Forces teams resisted the inclusion of servicewomen on their teams. In our survey with CSTs, they listed attitudes and cultural stereotypes as the greatest obstacle to women’s full integration into the military. Despite the challenges, over time their value became so apparent that requests for CSTs exceeded the training pipeline. Sergeant First Class Meghan Malloy said that, *“we went from starting with an ODA (Operational Detachment- Alpha Special Forces team) that maybe, was like very, very hesitant about taking us out on missions to actually having them ask for us to be extended so we could stay with them longer because we were able to get them information that they needed.”* A preliminary survey with CSTs indicated that most respondents felt that, over time, the men they worked with began to accept them. CSTs highlighted leadership and the culture of a particular all-male team as significant factors in determining their level of acceptance. One female respondent noted: *“If leaders were not for us and didn’t promote that within the team, it was a lot harder to get buy-in [from the men].”* In a similar survey with men who served with CSTs, the majority of respondents said that women largely positively impacted the capabilities of their previously all-male unit.

IV. *Dispelling Myths*

The experiences of the CSTs directly refute lingering myths about the types of accommodation women require on the battlefield. CSTs lived with their Ranger or Special Forces teams for six to eight months in remote and austere conditions. Living conditions varied from the “high end” where some teams had access to small, shared plywood rooms with rudimentary bathrooms and running water to the “low end” where integrated teams shared common living and sleeping spaces that consisted of dirt floors, open windows, no bathrooms, and no running water. Water often had to be carried in from local wells and streams and food was cooked over an open flame.

CST members also refuted claims that women have special hygiene requirements. Captain Allison Lanz said they “*lived in the middle of nowhere, didn’t shower for 47 days, washed my clothes in a stream.*” She said it got interesting in the winter when their clothes froze before they could dry. Chief Warrant Officer Raquel Patrick described eating frozen corn dogs for days on end while her team waited for a resupply mission. Captain Victoria Salas smiled when she described sharing the same bathroom with her team. She said that at first the men were a little nervous when she and her partner walked into the bathroom while they were using the urinals but they got over it and it quickly became routine. For many of these women, the fact that there are still perceptions that women need to shower more regularly is frustrating and simply an outdated and inaccurate representation of how women operate in the field.

Finally, most CSTs acknowledged that there was still a perception in the military and the public that women simply cannot compete physically with men on the battlefield. While CST members acknowledged overall differences between men and women’s bodies, they highlighted several instances where they were able to accomplish the exact same grueling physical tasks as men. 1st Lieutenant Christina Trembley responded directly to the claim that women could not drag a 200-pound comrade to safety in a war zone. She said, “*I watched one of my teammates carry a 200- pound girl and her rucksack and the other girl’s rucksack and her weapon.*” Trembley added “*I didn’t see one female [on CST teams] who couldn’t have passed the PT test at the male standard.*” When surveyed about physical standards, 100% of CST respondents said that

they would like to see a single job based standard equally applied to men and women—they believe women who want these jobs will be able to meet the same standard.

V. *Reintegration Challenges*

When their deployments were over CST members were returned individually to their original units. They received little to no support returning home. Unlike the Special Forces and Ranger Teams which returned as a team to their parent organizations where they had support structures in place, the CSTs were generally left to find their own way back and to do their best to locate a support structure. For most CST members their parent units had no idea what kind of work they had been doing, what their new skills sets were, or how to take advantage of their combat experience and training.

Almost every CST member said that their combat experience was not recognized. Worse, some women said that healthcare professionals discounted their experiences. One Staff Sergeant said that when she was out-processing her medical questionnaire raised some red flags that caused her to be referred to a mental health specialist. However, when she got to the specialist he asked her a few questions and then encouraged her to change the answers on her questionnaire so it would no longer draw attention or require counseling. Despite the fact that this Staff Sergeant had served with Rangers on Direct Action missions, the specialist told her, “*you didn’t really do anything so you shouldn’t have any problems reintegrating*” and he cleared her for out-processing.

Some women reported negative career impacts for accepting this assignment. All of them knew that they were taking time away from their standard career paths, thereby possibly giving up career enhancing opportunities, but they didn’t expect that because they were attached and not assigned to Special Operation Command that this assignment would not be reflected anywhere in their official records. For example, Sergeant First Class Meghan Malloy says that her official photo, in which she is wearing a Special Forces combat patch, doesn’t match her enlisted record file that shows she was assigned to a medical unit and not Special Operations Command.

Many women found this assignment to be the most important one of their career and wanted to continue working in this capacity. During the workshop introductions the women were asked to identify a career highlight and with no exceptions they pointed to their assignment as a CST member. Air Force Captain Amanda Tamosuins said, *“this was my defining moment in the military.”* She further stated that she would have been an Air Force para-rescue operator if that career had been open to her when she joined the military. Para-rescue operations remain closed to women as of July 2015.

Staff Sergeant Darti Jensen said, *“When we got home, it was like it never happened. Like you had finally found the place where you felt you belonged and then just didn't have it anymore. It was tough to know that that life was out there but you could no longer be a part of it.”* Some women saw entry into Army Civil Affairs as a path to maintaining a foothold within the special operations community and many have subsequently transferred to that occupational career field.

Conclusion

The experiences of the CSTs are extremely important as the US military gears up for the full integration of women in to combat specialties and units. Foremost, they demonstrate that women have operated in extremely difficult combat positions and have done so successfully. They have also shown that their presence enhances operational effectiveness. Their attachment to Special Forces and Rangers teams improved their teams' ability to deal with the local population and their functionality was not limited to interacting with just women and children.

The experiences of CSTs also underscored the importance of leadership. Those units who had strong leaders favoring a diverse, effective force

were able to integrate the CSTs in a seamless manner. Those who did not support the integration of women had more difficulty using and integrating the CSTs.

Finally, many of the CSTs were dismayed that neither the Army nor SOCOM seemed interested in learning from them about the challenges they faced integrating all male combat teams, how they overcame those challenges or how they were impacted by their experiences. In fact, the Army Women's Museum attempted to interview these women for an oral history project in 2014 but permission to visit FT Bragg and observe CST training or interview the CSTs was denied.

Policy discussions are moving forward without fully considering the CSTs experiences. In just a few months, some of the Services and SOCOM may submit requests for exceptions to the new policy, which would keep women out of some of the types of roles that CSTs have already proven that women can fill. The full integration of women in the military should move forward based on facts and a full understanding of women's capabilities and contributions.

The CSTs have expressed their intent to organize and run a much larger, private event for those who were unable to make the July event or were officially discouraged from attending. They are keen on sharing their experiences and supporting additional research.

Although WIIS only had access to a small sample of the total CST population (25 out of 200) the initial findings indicate that more rigorous research is required. WIIS is committed to making the experiences of CSTs more widely known and to collecting best practices and lessons learned in order to define the best conditions for the effective integration of women in to combat positions.



**Combat
Integration
Initiative**

The Combat Integration Initiative supports the integration of women into the opened combat positions following the rescission of the Direct Ground Combat and Assignment Rule on January 24, 2013. The project monitors the 1) transparency of the implementation process; 2) communication of policy changes; 3) establishment of gender neutral occupational standards; 4) training of leaders; and 5) addressing military culture.

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² Stanley M. McChrystal, *Engagement with Afghan Females Directive*, (Kabul, Afghanistan: Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, May 31, 2010).

³ Army Special Operations Command, Recruiting Battalion website.

http://www.sorbrecruiting.com/SORB_CST.html

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02*, June 2015, p. 68,

http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf

⁶ Ibid. p. 92.

⁷ Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "As Deadline Nears, Special Ops Chiefs Talk Women in Combat," *Defense One*.

http://www.defenseone.com/management/2015/07/gender-integration-deadline-nears-ussocom-chiefs-talk-women-combat/118560/?oref=defenseone_today_nl