

Equipping and Training Modifications for Combat Arms Women

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In July 2016 at Fort Benning, Georgia, U.S. women for the first time began training to become Army infantry and armor officers. This first cohort of women has neither been issued women-specific equipment that is already in inventory, nor has the Army acquired equipment to accommodate smaller physical frames. In addition, while some equipment challenges can be addressed through modifications in training, others require equipment modifications and new procurement. To optimize women's performance in this uncharted terrain, the Army must ensure they receive appropriate training and equipment and also collect, monitor, and evaluate data on the performance of all its soldiers.

Issue Available Equipment

Women in physically demanding occupations like infantry and armor must be issued women-specific body armor before they begin training. The Army cannot expect optimal performance from soldiers whose equipment does not fit properly. While the Army has designed and procured this body armor, it exists in the supply inventory only in small quantities and apparently not at all at Fort Benning.¹ Women in infantry and armor training should get priority for receiving available body armor for women, which now exists in both second-chance vest and plate-carrying form. Another item already available in the supply system is the female urinary diverter, which allows women to urinate without removing equipment and clothing and while standing.² This item is cheap and should be readily available to women in all units, but especially during initial entry training, when soldiers are learning to use new equipment.

Procure New Equipment

The Army should procure and issue tanker Nomex apparel and mechanics coveralls in smaller sizes. Coveralls with large rolls at the ankles and wrists and where the crotch hangs low impede soldiers' mobility. Furthermore, ill-fitting suits make soldiers look foolish in front of other soldiers.

Ruck frames for women must be procured and issued immediately to ensure optimal performance of female combat arms soldiers. Just as outdoor outfitters offer male and female backpacks for serious backwoods explorers, the Army can and must offer similarly appropriate equipment. There are three key differences in backpacks and frames for women:

- Women's shoulders are narrower on average, so a pack that is made for women will be designed with this in mind. Having a comfortable pack—one that takes the weight off your shoulders—is a combination of different features interacting properly. For instance, an improper width of shoulder straps makes it harder to find the right balance.
- Women typically have shorter torsos than men, so a pack's length from shoulder to hip will be smaller. Ruck frames that come with adjustable back pieces allow the wearer to shorten or lengthen the torso.
- Women have wider hips (for carrying loads) than men, which means backpacks and frames aren't going to sit the same on their bodies. A good hip belt is vital to ensuring that shoulders do not bear all the weight of a backpack.

Make Training and Grooming Modifications

Modified training can handle some equipment problems. Because weapon systems are designed to fit the average male soldier, soldiers who are smaller often have problems qualifying on some weapons systems. For example, small-handed soldiers consistently fire low and to the right and have lower qualification rates with the M9. When women first became military police (MP), they were issued revolvers. When the Army transitioned to the M9, however, women were not issued a smaller weapon. MPs found that soldiers with smaller hands could be taught techniques to compensate for the large pistol grip. A trained weapon instructor can teach smaller handed soldiers how to qualify at the same rate as soldiers for whom the weapon is optimally designed.³

Today, the only units that issue different weapons based on best fit are Special Operations units. If this solution

is not available to small-handed shooters, then weapons qualification instructors must learn how to teach these soldiers to shoot the M9 accurately.

There are likely other weapons systems that smaller soldiers have difficulty operating. Efforts should be made to identify those systems through qualification rate analysis and to find training solutions or equipment modification options.

Longer hair as well as smaller frames can pose challenges. For example, tanker headsets do not accommodate large buns. Some women report having to press the earphones against their heads in order to hear. One woman reported driving a tank one-handed while simultaneously pressing the earphone to her head in order to hear the tank commander. This presents both performance and safety problems. The Army should consider either letting women wear ponytails or French braids during training or modify the headsets to accommodate women's hair.

Solutions offered by women tankers:

- “A lot of us have been able to wear our hair in ponytails, and it’s covered by a balaclava. I addressed it with our cadre; they’ve been more than willing to accommodate this issue. So maybe a good recommendation would be to allow women to wear their hair in ponytails when safety is a concern. Or let us braid the ponytail, making it easier to stow away and tuck somewhere so we aren’t wearing the balaclava forever.”
- “The CVC [combat vehicle crewman headset] fits fine if you wear a low bun. If your hair is too long and your bun is too big, like mine was, cutting it to have a smaller bun is a sacrifice you may have to make. Once I cut about 13 inches of hair after one day of gunnery (my hair is still

well past my shoulders), my CVC fit perfectly, no issues with the hearing protection or audio aspects ... even when I had a gas mask on.”

Collect Data, Monitor, and Evaluate

Although women have been slowly joining combat occupations for years and some equipment modifications have been made to accommodate them, more will likely need to be considered if women are to function well in ground combat occupations. Some of the modifications and procurement requirements identified here are obvious ones; others may not be as readily apparent. Thus the Army must collect and analyze sex-disaggregated data on training, equipment, and injury rates and reasons. It is entirely possible that the higher injury rates identified for women are a product of equipment and training that has yet to be modified to accommodate them. Until such data are systematically collected, disaggregated, and analyzed, female soldiers will miss opportunities to optimize their performance during training and in combat operations.

References

- 1 <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/03/04/form-fitted-body-armor-rolling-out-combat-roles-expand-women.html>
- 2 NSN 4510-01-470-28
- 3 Scott Langley, the Branch Chief of Law Enforcement and Tactics at the MP School is currently developing a new POI for weapons instructors who teach the m9. It includes training techniques for small-handed soldiers.

WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Women In International Security (WIIS) hosts the Combat Integration Initiative (CII). CII provides analysis, policy recommendations and resources to policy makers and practitioners as they integrate ground combat units in the U.S. military. This policy brief draws on discussions and online feedback from servicewomen who are currently attending training at infantry and armor schools at FT Benning, GA.

In September of 2016 CII published the 1st Edition of the Combat Integration Handbook: A Leader's Guide to Success. The Handbook is a reference guide for U.S. Army combat arms leaders on how to successfully lead gender integration in their units. The goal of the initiative is to assist in the successful integration of servicewomen across all units and occupations of the U.S. military.

POLICY**brief**

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Women In International Security (WIIS) is the premier organization in the world dedicated to advancing the leadership and professional development of women in the field of international peace and security. WIIS (pronounced “wise”) sponsors leadership training, mentoring, and networking programs as well as substantive events focused on current policy problems. WIIS also supports research projects and policy engagement initiatives on critical international security issues, including the nexus between gender and security.

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