

WOMEN in Combat in the Canadian Forces

Brenda's Story

By MCPL BRENDA HAWKE - *Infanteer* *
Introduction by William Hawke **

Introduction

A study conducted by the British Ministry of Defence in 2002 concluded that women are not suitable for combat duty. The stated reason was that women have a far lower capacity to develop muscle strength and aerobic fitness than men. The study found that only 1 percent of women can equal the performance of the average man, and that women have to work between 50 and 80 percent harder than men to achieve the same results. The overall conclusion was that women cannot meet the load-marching and other combat duty tasks, and that any reduction in standards would pose unacceptable risks to the effectiveness of the forces.

The Canadian military, however, had been enrolling women into combat roles since Year 1998. While she was preceded by Capt. Nicola Goddard (See box) and a few other brave young women, Brenda Hawke (now Master Corporal) enrolled in a combat regiment (RCR1) in Year 1999. She has since served in Kosovo, Bosnia and Afghanistan, seeing combat in the latter. The following story relates her options and experiences with regards to women in combat.

Brenda's Story

I am an infanteer. I've been one for almost ten years. I've been on three overseas tours and have seen combat. During my time in the infantry I've seen and done the some amazing things and I've witnessed the unimaginable. I have slept on dirt floors, in mud, snow and through rain and sand storms. I've been in temperatures that would fry an egg or freeze one solid. I've been shot at with



Brenda and her husband Rick taking a break from soldierly

everything from an AK47 to a rocket launcher. I've shot back with a rifle and a heavy machine gun. I've led soldiers and have followed. I have seen cowards and heroes. I've carried 2/3rds of my own weight on my back and survived on that for a month. I know how to kill with a rifle, machine gun, rocket, cannon, artillery, aircraft and my own hands. I am also a woman.

With a dramatic opening like that many would assume that I must be a large burly 'man of a woman,' a freak of nature; sometimes I wish, but I'm not anything close to that. I'm an average size Canadian female, five feet five inches tall, and I weight about 135 pounds. Compared to the guys I work with

I'm pretty small. I am also not a huge feminist, though I believe in women's rights. I am simply a wife and mother who also happens to be in the infantry. I never joined or fought my way through to be noticed or to make a point. I stumbled into this job and then refused to let it defeat me.

The reason I am writing this is because I've been asked for my opinion on women in combat roles. The answer is pretty obvious but not exactly simple. I believe that if you are capable then yes anyone can serve in a combat role. I've been trying to come up with things women offer that would be different from men, but I'm really having a hard time. Every person is different, I've led soldiers

* *Infanteer*: While it hasn't made its debut in the Oxford Concise yet, 'Infanteer' is a newspeak word that is pseudonymous with 'infantryman' except that it is not gender-specific. ** William Hawke, Managing Editor, Diplomatist, is father of the Infanteer

who have loved working with me and others who have hated it, and neither has been because of my gender. Well that isn't entirely true; I had a couple of soldiers who gave me a hard time because they didn't like being faulted by a woman. I really don't see that as a gender problem, but more as an ego flaw. As for special treatment, I'm still waiting!

There have been a few who think I got where I am because I'm a woman, but they really have no legs to stand on there. The only special treatment I've ever gotten was from other units besides mine and it was only in the form of separate sleeping quarters. In my own unit I am never separated and I shouldn't be; there have been of course, the few times I've needed privacy (to clean) and they have given me that as I have in return. Modesty has been a big key to survival; I don't dress special, or wear make-up and I never talk about personal

Brenda Please be Careful

There's a girl I love who's in harm's way.
That girl is Corporal Brenda.
She's a pretty thing as some might say,
And good to be a friend*

She broke the mould at an early age.
Now she strives to do her best.
I was proud then but more at this stage,
As she wears protective vest.

She has helped to enforce freedom earned,
In those war-torn lands afar.*
She will employ many lessons learned,
As she serves in Kandahar

I've watched her grow from a little girl,
To a soldier strong and true.
She now stands proud as colours unfurl,
In a land where terror grew.

The Taliban are a deadly foe,
As they brawl in Allah's name.
While cause is wrong and forces grow,
Allah negates their foul game.

We dispatch our young to fight our wars.
The mission is still undone.
We'd welcome them back on friendly shores.
Of course *they* won't cut and run.

Look, a dog's corpse on the road ahead.
It could be a booby trap!
They'll try anything; they want her dead,
But that's not in her road map.

You're at the front of the War on Terror.
Oh Brenda please be careful.
Stick to the book, no trial and error.
Your Daddy's ever prayerful.

* Kosovo and Bosnia

A Poem by 'Father of the Infanteer,'
written in September 2006 while operation
MEDUCA - a Canadian-led offensive by
major elements of the ISAF and Afghan
National Army - was in full swing

experiences. I don't want them to see me as anything but myself. I always answer any rumours or questions they have about me honestly so they know the truth and will ask when they hear something different.

A lot of people believe that women are a distraction or liability in combat roles and in some cases that may be true, but I really haven't seen it. Some say that men are more likely to stray from task if a woman in there section is injured or harmed; this also may be true but how often is it going to happen. In Afghanistan, my last tour, no one was jumping in front to 'save' me. They were a little busy worrying about their own hides, as was I. Yes I do think my platoon worried about my safety as much as they worried about each other's. There have been a few occasions where I've been watched more closely by my peers and that was mainly to do with the cultures of the countries in which we have been. Women, believe it or not, are not treated fairly all over the world, hard to believe but true. So in crowds and when I've had to work with men outside of our army, civilian police for example, I have been a little more protected or checked on. At times I have been ignored, spat at, laughed at and even lusted after. Sometimes that also works in my favour. I've been a talking point many a time when we wouldn't have been approached otherwise. Other women feel more comfortable when I am there and usually will give us more information because of it. Men will approach us to see what I am doing there and sadly sometimes just to gawk.

A funny example of this happened in Afghanistan. My Section had set up our armoured vehicles in a small village and was awaiting orders. We were going to be there for a few hours so we set up security and the rest of us relaxed for a while. I was sitting in the sun with the medic, also a female, and fell asleep. When I woke up there were, no exaggeration, 14 teenage men staring at us from behind a chalk line drawn in the sand. Apparently as we were sleeping they began to gather; the numbers grew rapidly and they were slowly getting closer. They were no threat but my boss not wanting to wake us drew a line in the sand and told them to stay behind it. Very creepy but not that surprising, because they don't see a lot of female faces outside of their own families. So I guess I could come up with one difference that a man can't really offer.

As I stated in the beginning I am an infanteer. That said, and without turning this into a 'how to' manual there are

In Memory of a Brave-Hearted Infanteer



CAPTAIN NICHOLA KATHLEEN SARAH GODDARD, MSM

Captain Goddard (1980-2006) was the first female Canadian soldier to die in combat.

She died on 17 May 2006, during a fire-fight in the Panjwaye District near Kandahar. As troops were moving into a building to capture 15 alleged Taliban members, several dozen hidden militants began firing from neighbouring houses. As a crew commander, Goddard was half-exposed in her Light Armoured Vehicle, which was hit by two rocket-propelled grenades early in the battle. The battle ended after approximately 45 minutes, shortly after a B-1 Lancer dropped a 225 kg bomb. The two-day operation saw Goddard, an Afghan National Army soldier, and 40 Taliban killed, as well as around 20 Taliban captured.

At press time (05 May), more than 80 Canadians soldiers and one diplomat have lost their lives while serving in Afghanistan.

some qualities, as a woman, I feel you need to possess. The infantry is a male dominated occupation and you really have to understand that before joining. There are dirty jokes and crude things going on, but it really is the nature of the beast; so a good sense of humour and self is important. You have to know when to draw the line, when and how to stand up for yourself and to never allow anyone to walk over you. Confidence is a must or the ability to fake it at least. I love my job and truly do believe that anyone who so desires should have the opportunity to try it out. It really isn't for just anyone but I don't think you should be excluded because of gender. Every person is different but in a lot of ways we are all the same, man and woman. Simply put, some people fit this job; most don't. **Pro Patria.**

This article was approved in its original form by the author's Commanding Officer