

MALE SOLDIERS, FEMALE SOLDIERS, AND THE NOTION OF
COMRADESHIP

I

Despite the fact that women have been fully integrated into U.S. military forces for over a decade, questions concerning the legitimacy of their participation continue to be raised. One of the most prominent forums for this questioning has been the mass media. For example, in a recent episode of *Sixty Minutes* (January, 1989), correspondent Mike Wallace, speaking with a score of women serving in all branches of the military, raised a number of questions about women in the military including 1) Could they perform their military duties as well as men? 2) Did they have problems performing their duties? 3) Were they willing to face the possibility of injury or death on the battlefield? and 4) Did they think the American public would have difficulty facing the prospect of dead and wounded women soldiers?

Or as another example, we might consider the claims raised in the controversial book *Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military* by Brian Mitchell. According to Mitchell, the increased use of women in the military is complicating personnel assignment policies and procedures

and therefore affecting both unit combat capabilities (or readiness) and unit morale. In support of his claims, he mentions a number of studies which find not only that women in the military are not as physically fit or capable as men, but also that women have a lower retention rate, and tax the military health care system more heavily. Mitchell concludes that the disadvantages of women in uniform outweigh the advantages and suggests that they do not belong in the military.

The response to such questions and claims by advocates of women has been fast and forceful. For instance, Carolyn Becraft, responding to Mitchell's book, (*Army Times*, July 10, 1989) asserts that women in the military do two things: 1) they make significant contributions to the readiness and capabilities of military units and 2) they compose a critical part of the current All Volunteer Force.

Although these questions, claims, and counterclaims cover a wide range of issues, perhaps we can break them into two basic types: cultural concerns and comradeship concerns. Cultural concerns are those issues and claims which focus on women and society. These issues primarily relate to society's acceptance or rejection of women as viable members of the military (and the related implications of such service). For example, as noted in the *Sixty Minutes* episode, the issue of whether Americans are ready for their daughters to come back from wars "in body bags" is a cultural concern.

The second type of concerns centers on comradeship. This type focuses on issues of men and women serving together in military units. In our other example, Mitchell's commentary about readiness and combat capability (Can men and women serve together in the same foxhole?) is an example of comradeship concerns. Underlying this consideration is the notion that if a unit is to be successful in combat, the unit members must possess comradeship. (Army Field Manual 22-102, 40)

This paper will focus primarily on this latter type, that of comradeship, although some mention will be made of specific cultural concerns. Primarily, it will explore some dimensions of possible answers to two questions: 1) what is comradeship? and 2) can men and women be comrades?

II

Attempting to define a term, like comradeship, is somewhat difficult. Even the dictionary only defines it as an "association of comrades". The root is a little more helpful, defining comrade as "one that shares the same fortunes or experiences as another". (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 468)

Such a definition remains quite broad, however, covering a variety of relationships ranging from grade

school chums to fellow members of international associations. Under this definition, two people who have never met, yet share common interests, can be called comrades.

And yet, comradeship is a term with strong connotations of closeness or togetherness. We find this particularly true in the military profession through expressions like "comrades in arms." A common image of comradeship in the military is that of two soldiers sharing a foxhole (or fighting position), facing the enemy. Or another image of comradeship, might be that of a night patrol, with soldiers close enough to see the "cat eyes" (reflective tape) on the helmet of the soldier in front of him.

One problem with defining or understanding comradeship is that it is a subject whose nature few authors have addressed. One author who does explore the topic is that rare hybrid, a philosopher and a former soldier, J. Glenn Gray. In his seminal book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, Gray explores some of the dimensions of military comradeship. Specifically, he provides us with a model of comradeship which applies to military units in wartime.

Gray's discussion is focused around what he calls "some [of the] essentials of comradeship." (Gray, 39) Specifically, he addresses questions concerning the nature of comradeship including what calls it into being, what strengthens or weakens it, and what is its essential attraction.

As a start, he defines comradeship as "a communal experience marked by the feeling of belonging together that men in battle often find a cementing purpose." (40) This feeling doesn't just exist; instead, it must be awakened (or called into being) in soldiers by an external reason for fighting; there must be a cause, a reason, or a purpose. It may be the defense of one's homeland, the propagation of a religious faith, or the furthering of a political ideology. Whatever it is, the external reason acts as a force which unites the interests of soldiers and provides them a common direction.

This is not to suggest that comradeship necessarily ends when the reason for fighting no longer exists. A transformation of sorts can take place among the affected soldiers, and once this happens, it is the feeling of loyalty to the group which prevails.

This in turn leads to a consideration of the important elements (or requirements) of comradeship. Somewhat surprisingly, Gray dismisses the notion of physical closeness as the central requirement of comradeship. Physical proximity of men can provide no more than the minimal condition of comradeship. Soldiers can be together, in close quarters, for varying lengths of time, in a variety of circumstances, and not be comrades. His most vivid examples of this circumstance are groups of WWII German soldiers who have just surrendered and are on their way to Russian Prisoner of War (POW) camps. Here we find (in some

cases) thousands of soldiers in close proximity, who are guarded by only a few soldiers with weapons.

While the prisoners possess the numbers and strength to overwhelm the enemy, they fail to do so. This failure is attributed to the lack of assurance that other prisoners will act in similar manner (or in other words, act as comrades would).

Instead of physical proximity, Gray suggests that comradeship is composed of three major elements (or necessary conditions) including: 1) organization for a common goal, 2) the presence of danger, and 3) a willingness to sacrifice. (41)

The first element is actually a reduction of the previously mentioned external reason for fighting. An infantry company may indeed be interested in "defending the homeland" but they need a more specific goal towards which to organize their collective efforts and resources.

For example, the infantry company may be assigned the mission of taking a certain hilltop. The commander lays out a plan to accomplish that mission, a plan with clear and specific goals. The company is then organized to accomplish that mission (e.g., all platoons on line) and executes it. Even though there may be heavy enemy fire and extensive friendly casualties, the company members develop a feeling of specialness or comradeship through an awareness of an obstacle to be overcome through common effort. The members of the unit are one in which the many are of a like mind and

determination, agreed upon to subordinate individual desires in the interest of a shared goal.(42)

The second element of comradeship is danger or a dangerous environment. Danger is a distinct and important consideration in comradeship. One will find true comradeship only on the battlefield (or in similar circumstances, like terrorist actions). Until the bullets start flying, the grenades bursting, and the artillery shells impacting, we will never really know who are and who are not our comrades.(43)

There is a sense of irreversibility found here that is not found in peacetime (no matter how realistic the situation and how well-trained the unit). Expressions used by soldiers such as "this is for keeps" indicate a consciousness of the great consequences of their actions; the possibility of injury or death looms great.

The final element of comradeship is that of self-sacrifice. Unlike either of the other two elements, organization for a common goal and danger, self-sacrifice is a difficult concept to explain. According to Gray (46), it is grounded in the curious mixture of both earnestness and lightheartedness found in soldiers in battle. The notion of pursuing one's tasks or mission with complete dedication and seriousness (e.g., parachuting behind enemy lines to destroy an enemy headquarters, with the strong possibility of being captured) is combined with soldiers' ever present humor or jokes (e.g., joking about the delicious, gourmet meals one

finds in MREs). There is a thrilling sense of reality found only when acting in unison with others for a concrete, dangerous goal that costs something absolute for its attainment. Both earnestness and lightheartedness derive from a consciousness of power and freedom which is supra-individual.

In a sense, the individual soldier is liberated from (his/her) self and in union with his fellow soldiers; an expansion of the boundaries of self occurs. Individual fate loses its central importance. It is not "myself" which is important but the unit (be it squad, platoon, company).

What is important here is that there must be a willingness on the part of soldiers to sacrifice for each other. Particularly this notion holds true if the form of sacrifice is the extreme one of self-sacrifice. Here, at this point, comradeship reaches its peak, one soldier willing to give his or her life for another.

Gray also suggests that the element of self-sacrifice is the most important element (or essential attraction) of the concept of comradeship.(50) This is based upon the idea of seeing self-sacrifice as a form of immortality (or perhaps, the extreme form of loyalty). For example, although one soldier may die (Private Jones throws himself on a grenade), he lives on through the lives of his fellow soldiers or buddies (whose lives were saved by his self-sacrificing action).

This then, in rather abbreviated form, is Gray's notion of comradeship. Although there are certainly other acceptable definitions of comradeship, I believe that, based upon my own experience and study in the military, Gray's explanation is the most accurate. It recognizes the unique nature of soldiering, its volatile environment, and its special associated costs.

If we assume this is an accurate definition, we can next consider some of its implications for our second question: can men and women be comrades?

III

As noted earlier, one set of comradeship concerns focus on relationships between male and female soldiers in military units. Chief among these concerns are issues like physical ability (and compatibility), technical proficiency, and tactical expertise. Let us consider one of these concerns, perhaps the most significant one (or at least, the most easily discussed one) , that of physical ability, through the lens of Gray's definition of comradeship and see how it looks.

This concern often takes the form of asking whether female soldiers are physically capable of accomplishing the same tasks as male soldiers. Can Private Sue Jones lift

155mm artillery shells in the same manner as Specialist John Smith can? Can she march as far and as fast as he can with a full rucksack? Can she dig a fighting position as well as he can?

Taken on face value, the concern of physical ability appears important. It involves the notions of both equality and fairness; each soldier pulling his or her (fair) share of the unit's load. When, however, the concern is placed within the context of Gray's definition, its appearance changes.

For instance, a military commander (or leader) configures his assets, both strong and weak, to meet his assigned mission or task (Gray's #1). If an artillery section chief has four soldiers to man and maintain his howitzer, he assigns them tasks relative to their ability (mental and physical). Private Smith may be strong as an ox, and therefore is responsible for transloading ammunition, whereas Private Green is not and is assigned as the powder man. Or if he has no particularly strong soldiers, the chief may assign the task to two soldiers. In this way, both Privates Green and Brown work together to transload ammunition. In a similar manner, an ordnance company, which may also have to load, move, and unload ammunition, and may be composed of male and female soldiers, is able to accomplish its mission. The ordnance section chief assigns both Privates Sue Jones and Private Robert Green to work together to off-load an ammunition truck.

Additionally, the danger of the battlefield appears to play no favorites in regards to the physical abilities of soldiers. Danger (Gray's #2) applies on an equal basis to all. The chance of incoming artillery shells hitting a female soldier are as great as that of hitting a male soldier. Or a sniper may align his rifle scope on Private Jones in her helmet and TA-50 gear just as easily as Private Green in his gear.

Finally, there appears to be no correlation between one's physique and his or her willingness to sacrifice (Gray's #3). Underdeveloped (or physically weak) soldiers as well as developed (or physically strong) soldiers, be they male or female, may sacrifice for the fellow members of their unit. Consider the case of Audie Murphy. Audie Murphy was a physically small soldier and had been turned down by certain units because of his size, and yet he emerged from World War II as America's most decorated warrior.

Thus it would appear that concern for physical ability (and implied equality), when viewed through Gray's definition, doesn't preclude men and women from working together as comrades. Nor would it appear that other comrade concerns would do so.

IV

At this point, someone may argue that while Gray's definition of comradeship applies to military units in general, it may not apply to all military units. For instance, while it may be possible for men and women soldiers to be comrades in combat service and support units, it certainly is not possible in combat arms units (like the infantry). A soldier in this type of unit must be able to carry a sixty pound pack, a .50 caliber machine gun, or an 81mm mortar. The soldier might have to march twenty or thirty miles, in all types of terrain and weather, prepare a fighting position, and then conduct combat operations. Additionally, an infantry soldier might be in the position of having to rescue a wounded or injured buddy, which might entail dragging his buddy long distances across the battlefield.

These arguments, while simply restatements of the physical ability argument, lend themselves to at least three responses.

First, while it may be granted that infantry units do place specific, unique demands on their soldiers, they are still organized as units. On the modern battlefield, fighting is accomplished by units: by platoons, squads, and fire teams, not by individual soldiers. Therefore, how one soldier matches up against another is relatively

unimportant. Rather, it is how units match up against each other that matters, and this is influenced by how a unit is organized for combat (or Gray's #1 - a common goal).

Second, another condition of the modern battlefield concerns the nature of contemporary arms and weapons. Many, if not all, of our weapon systems, simply involve identifying an enemy target and initiating a weapons system. For example, we point an anti-tank missile (e.g., a LAW) at an enemy tank, pull the trigger, and watch the missile fly towards the target. This action involves very little physical ability or effort. Any soldier, male or female, can do it.

Third, while male soldiers may be (generally) physically stronger, that alone doesn't ensure a willingness to sacrifice or imbue a sense of loyalty. While Private Jones may be six feet, six inches tall and weigh two hundred fifty pounds, if he is unwilling to get out of his foxhole due to shell-shock, his size isn't going to help that wounded soldier on the battlefield.

Finally, although it is generally considered a cultural concern, something might be said about the issue of fraternization and comradeship. An argument might be made that by putting both male and female soldiers in the same foxhole, there will be a breakdown in unit discipline and readiness due to excessive fraternization. Aside from questions of appearance and attraction (e.g., how attractive can two sweaty, smelly, and dirty soldiers be to

each other after several weeks in the field?), this issue also has two responses.

First, this is not a new issue; it is not unique or unusual. Integrated military units are found throughout combat support and service branches. Male and female soldiers work side by side in such diverse military units as LANCE missile batteries, tactical signal platoons, and transportation companies. Therefore, this issue is really a leadership responsibility, and one which has a wealth of experience upon which to draw. In fact, fraternization in this regard appears analogous to the issue of drug abuse in units. Specific standards have been established in the military and these standards must be met. Failure to do so results in specific consequences (which are a command responsibility).

Second, the problem of integrating females into a traditional male field has been addressed in other areas, specifically in civilian police forces. Male police officers initially balked at the notion that they could work together (as partners) with female police officers. Many of their worries, including working one-on-one, and in close quarters, have been voiced here already. And yet, after a period of time, these worries proved unfounded. Across the nation, male and female police officers work together on a daily basis, in a dangerous profession with few apparent problems.

V

Some final comments may be appropriate concerning the notion of comradeship discussed in this paper. First, the general arguments against continuing (or completing) the integration of female and male soldiers in the military, sound quite similar to arguments once raised against racially integrating the military. Rather than look towards ways of successfully integrating the military, arguments are continually provided as why it should not occur. The idea that females are not physically capable of performing in certain units appears to be logically unfounded and instead, grounded in some type of prejudice.

Second, male and female soldiers are already members of many military units, ranging across the spectrum from artillery to supply activities, in the armed forces. As such, males and females find themselves working, training, and socializing together. They are, in most cases, organized for specific missions or operations. Thus we find in these integrated units, the basic elements of comradeship waiting only to be actualized by the experience of war. On the battlefield these units will discover the element of danger, and with it, the opportunity for sacrifice. The true test of comradeship among male and female soldiers can only be validated by combat.

In conclusion, it appears that there are no legitimate reasons or motives that preclude men and women from being comrades in military units in combat. The importance of such a finding is that it shifts the focus of future questions of the legitimacy of women's participation in the military, from the military to society at large. In other words, the issue of whether men and women soldiers can be comrades is not one for the military but for the public at large.

CPT John D. Becker
Department of English
United States Military Academy
West Point, NY 10996