

The New York Times<https://nyti.ms/2r40o5P>

For Army Infantry's 1st Women, Heavy Packs and the Weight of History

The Army has sought to play down the significance of the mixed-gender milestone. But female grunts see it as monumental and revolutionary.

By DAVE PHILIPPS MAY 26, 2017

FORT BENNING, Ga. — The first group of women graduated from United States Army infantry training last week, but with soldiers obscured by body armor, camouflage face paint and smoke grenades, it was almost impossible to distinguish the mixed-gender squads in the steamy woods from those of earlier generations.

That's just how the Army wants it.

After the Obama administration ordered the military in 2013 to open all combat positions to women, the Army developed gender-neutral performance standards to ensure that recruits entering the infantry were all treated the same. Still smarting over accusations that it had lowered standards to help the first women graduate from its elite Ranger School in 2015, the Army has taken pains to avoid making any exceptions for infantry boot camp. To the pound, men and women lug the same rucksacks, throw the same grenades and shoulder the same machine guns.

The Army has also sought to play down the significance of the new female infantrymen — as they are still known — not mentioning, when families gathered last week for their graduation, that the 18 women who made it through would be the first in more than two centuries for the American infantry.

“It’s business as usual,” the battalion commander overseeing the first class, Lt. Col. Sam Edwards, said as he watched a squad of soldiers run past — including one with French braids and a grenade launcher. “I’ve tried to not change a thing.”

Female grunts in the battalion see things differently. In interviews during a series of visits to observe training, many said the fact that they could finally pursue a combat career, and have it treated as no big deal, was for them revolutionary. Now many who dreamed of going into the infantry are no longer barred from the core combat positions that are the clearest career routes to senior leadership.

Just before graduation, one female drill sergeant pulled aside a group of female privates, who ranged from high school athletes to a single mother with a culinary degree, and gave them her unofficial assessment out of officers’ earshot.

“This is a big deal,” she said as she looked into one recruit’s eyes. She said they were making history.

‘Misery is a great equalizer’

Rain pounded the roughly 150 troops of Alpha Company, who ranged in age from 17 to 34, as they stood in formation during a tornado warning, waiting to hear if it was too stormy to train.

If the downpour let up, they would practice rushing out of armored vehicles. If not, they would tramp back to the foxholes where they had slept the night before and bail out the standing brown water with canteen cups.

Either way, by day's end they would be wet, tired, hungry and cold: the four pillars of misery the Army has long relied on to help whip recruits into cohesive fighting teams.

"Misery is a great equalizer," one male recruit said with a resigned grin.

The rain eventually let up and the sergeants ran the platoons through repeated ambush drills. By the end, while some of the troops had buzz cuts and some had their hair in buns, they all shared the drooping weariness that grunts have worn for as long as there's been an infantry.

'She's a hoss'

In the woods, after hours of mock raids, Pvt. Kayla Padgett rested her rifle against her rucksack and turned to her platoon, assembling them in three neat rows.

It was 90 degrees. A tick crawled along the back of her shirt. The night before, the platoon had slept in the dirt. Everyone was dog tired. Many were covered in ant bites. But as platoon guide, it was her job to make them ready.

"All right, hustle it up, let's count off," she said.

One by one the platoon of mostly men each shouted until all were accounted for.

“O.K., good,” Private Padgett said, scanning the group with her blue eyes. “If you haven’t done so, keep loading up ammo, all your magazines.”

Over the years, countless voices have warned that women could never handle the demands of the infantry, and would destroy its all-male esprit de corps. None of the recruits or drill sergeants interviewed at Fort Benning shared that fear. They all pointed to women like Private Padgett.

The 23-year-old track champion from North Carolina could throw a 20-pound hammer more than 60 meters while on the team at East Carolina University, and showed up at basic training in better shape than many of the men. She is now on her way to Airborne School, and wants to eventually become a Ranger.

“She’s a hoss,” her drill sergeant, Joseph Sapp, said as he watched her. After a tour in Iraq and four in Afghanistan, he has served with his share of soldiers. “Forget male-female; she’s one of the best in the company. She’s one you’re happy to have.”

Not ‘treated special’

In the new integrated infantry companies, women and men train together in mixed-gender squads from before dawn until after dusk: practicing the same raids, kicking in the same doors, doing the same push-ups when their squad messes up. No one gets out of a rotation serving chow.

At night, they sleep in rooms separated by gender, in identical metal bunks with identically scratchy green blankets. To graduate, all must pass tests of the same infantry skills, including hurling a grenade 35 meters, dragging a 268-pound dummy 15 meters, running five miles in less than 45 minutes and completing a 12-mile march carrying 68 pounds.

Hair is one of the few places where standards still diverge. All men get their

heads shaved on arrival. Women don't. Not wanting to be held to a different standard, though, many of the women decided a few weeks into training to shave in solidarity. They would earn back their hair, just like the men.

"I loved my hair, but didn't want anyone to look at me and think I was being treated special," said Pvt. Irelynn Donovan.

'I wanted to make history'

Private Donovan, 20, grew up outside Philadelphia with five older brothers. She was the only girl on her junior high football team. When assigned to write an essay about an adult she admired, she chose her grandfather, who had served two tours in Vietnam.

"She's just always been a badass," said her mother, Cristine Zalewski.

She always wanted to join the infantry, despite a ban on women. On her forearm is a tattoo of flowers wrapped around a saying uttered by her single mother, who sometimes had to scrounge for change in the house to pay bills: "We'll find a way"

As soon as the ban was lifted in 2016, Irelynn Donovan went to a local recruiter.

"I wanted to make history," she said. "Pave the way, if not for me, then for others."

During training, she wrote home complaining that she was exhausted and tired of being yelled at. "Everything is chafing," she wrote. But she became a standout, nailing the physical tests for both men and women when she did 79 push-ups in two minutes.

'Hey, the infantry's tough, man'

Afghanistan and Iraq were turning points for the Army's thinking on women in combat. The wars forced thousands of women who were not technically combat troops into fire fights. Nearly 14,000 women were awarded the Combat Action Badge for engaging with the enemy. Today most of the men leading the Army have served with women in combat for years.

"We saw it can work," said Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Snow, who heads Army Recruiting Command at Fort Knox, Ky. "And now we have a generation that just wants to accomplish the mission and have the most talented people to do it."

The Army is determined not to sacrifice performance for the sake of inclusion, and many women have not been able to meet the standard. Of the 32 who showed up at infantry boot camp in February, 44 percent dropped out. For the 148 men in the company, the dropout rate was just 20 percent.

Commanders say the higher dropout rate among females is in line with other demanding boot camps for military police and combat engineers, which have been open to women for years. In part, they say, it is a consequence of size. A 5-foot-2 woman has to carry the same weight and perform the same tasks as a man who stands a foot taller, and is more likely to be injured.

Why did so many more women fail? One female recruit summed it up by saying simply, "Hey, the infantry's tough, man."

"Is it fair?" said the brigade commander overseeing gender-integrated infantry training at Fort Benning, Col. Kelly Kendrick. "I don't care about fair. I care if you can meet the standard."

Male soldiers acknowledged in interviews that the women who remain, like Chonell Morgan, 18, are some of the toughest soldiers in the company. During a punishment run the platoons were ordered to undertake on a hot afternoon, Private Morgan, who is from Apple Valley, Calif., was near the front of the pack.

The daughter of a NASA engineer, she postponed plans for college when she heard the infantry was opening to women. Her mother is still upset about the decision,

but her father, Lorenzo Morgan, who served in the Army in the 1980s, said, “You have to let your children be who they want to be.”

An unspoken accomplishment

This month, after 14 weeks of running and crawling in the dirt, Alpha Company marched onto the parade grounds in crisp dress uniforms and carefully creased berets.

The company commander’s voice booming over loudspeakers welcomed them to the infantry, but he gave no nod to the women now joining the ranks.

The women appeared to take it in stride. Private Donovan, who had won the award for the highest female fitness score in the company, finishing just behind the top man, pushed through the crowd toward her family, then shrank in embarrassment when her mother greeted her with a bouquet of flowers.

“Mom,” she muttered, looking to see if anyone noticed, “you don’t bring flowers to infantry graduation.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 27, 2017, on Page A12 of the New York edition with the headline: Infantry’s First Women Shoulder Heavy Gear And Weight of History.

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