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**The History, Contributions, and Milestones
of
Air Force Enlisted Women In Combat**

By

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Air Force Enlisted Women In Combat

How many of you have wondered why there is very little mentioned about Air Force enlisted women in combat? I have often pondered that specific question myself many times. My intention is to look at the historical involvement of Air Force enlisted women in combat and not to question the political, moral, or legal issue. I will initially look at the basic laws and policy of women in combat for purely edification reasons. I will then provide a momentary view, of just a few historically documented accounts of Air Force enlisted women in combat. My history will start with enlisted women's early involvement in the Army Air Corps during World War I. Moving forward, I will look at the Women's Air Corps in the Army Air Force during World War II; including some enlisted members of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots. I will then glance at their involvement during both the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts. I will then grasp some of the contributions and changes enlisted women endured during the 1970's and 1980's, while their roles in military were expanding; leading to the present authorizations concerning combat. I will conclude with their involvement in DESERT SHIELD, and the first Air Force enlisted women in combat during DESERT STORM. With those thoughts in mind let's move directly into the heart of our subject and begin exploring enlisted women's roles and contributions in combat.

Women have always played an important role in American history but, how important were some of those contributions? It would be appropriate to go back and look at some words and thoughts of a woman, who helped spur one of our great founding fathers of this country. The words and thoughts of Abigail Adams to John Adams in a letter written on 31 March 1776, from the book, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail*. Abigail Adams wrote, "In the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not consider ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation." (1:149) Perhaps, she did provide inspiration and foundation for our Constitution. I personally believe it was her fighting spirit as an American patriot, that helped form those words to her husband. That fighting spirit still lives in many American women today and is being expressed in their actions as it was by all those other brave women in our history. Remembering those thoughts we should move forward and look at the background, basic laws and policy for women in combat. In Article I of the United States Constitution, congress has the powers to "raise and support Armies," "provide and maintain a Navy," and "make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval forces." According to the *Presidential Commission On The Assignment Of Women In The Armed Forces*, Section 8549 of Title 10 of the United States Codes states: "Female members of the Air Force...may not be assigned to duty in aircraft

engaged in combat missions.” (15:28) Included in this report, the Air Force defined “combat missions” as those involving aircraft whose “main mission” is to deliver munitions or other “destructive materials.” The Air Force adapted this policy from the 1988 Department of Defense “Risk Rule.” The “Risk Rule” states: “Risks of direct combat, exposure too hostile, or capture are proper criteria for closing non-combat positions or units to women, when the type, degree, and duration of such risk are equal to or greater than the combat units with which they are normally associated within a theater of operations. If the risk of non-combat units or positions is less than comparable to land, air or sea combat units with which they are associated, they should be open to women.” (15:36). It should be noted, however, that while the original statutes dealing with the Air Force may have reflected the intent of Congress and the will of the American public, there was no public debate on the issue in 1948 and no discussion in Congress about the matter. Despite law and policy, women and more specifically enlisted women in the Air Force, have been involved directly or indirectly with combat missions through-out our history. Now armed with a general grasp on the law and policy I think we should begin our excursion of Air Force enlisted women in combat starting with World War I.

American women begin redefining their role in society by taking an active part in World War I. According to “History Of The United States Air Force From 1907-1956,” when the United States entered World War I in April 1917, just a little more than 13 years since the Wright Brothers made their successful flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; the aviation industry and the Aviation Section of the Army were little more than a name. (12:4) When the call to war came,

American men and women answered that call. The Adjutant General of The War Department, Major General Robert C. Davis in his "Questionnaire on Women Employees," stated, "the lowest estimate of women serving with the United States Army overseas and in this country is 90,000; this includes welfare workers, clerks, telephone and telegraph operators, dietitians, cooks, waitresses, laundresses, matrons, tailors, post exchange workers and women employed in the Reclamation Service. (16:1) In her book, *Women In World War II*, author Doris Weatherford estimated, "Approximately 13,000 women served in World War I in direct combat support serving along-side in some cases with men." (20:29) The exact number of women or even enlisted women who served during World War I is not known. In the "War Department Release, Number 1, 13 March 1923, World War Nurses Awarded Distinguished Service Medal," it indicated many of the women were employed in the service of three major organizations; the Army Nurses Corps, Women of the American Expeditionary Forces, and the American Red Cross. There were several other organizations mentioned however, those were the prominent organizations. (18:1-7) Even after World War I had ended, the contributions of women were still being praised and recognized. Lets look at just a few of those comments and some of the praise women received. Major General John L. Hines, Chief of Staff War Department, made the following remarks in a speech on 23 February 1925. "Woman has always been a defender. She has fought for the integrity of the home and the family. She has been interested in the security of her community both for her own and for following generations. She has been uniformly loyal to her country and interested in its preservation. She has upon occasion served on the battlefield,

with sword and lance like heroic Joan of Arc, beside a cannon like Moll Pitcher, or as an agent of mercy like Clara Barton and Florence Nightingale. Woman has always felt a deep responsibility for preservation of the nation. Now with her new public position and civic duties; she has greater opportunities than ever before in dealing with national progress and security.” (7:3) General Hines went on to attest to the enormous contributions' women made during the war. He lauded their efforts in shouldering tasks, to release men for heavier and more dangerous duties and their desire to help in every possible way. General Hines told his audience, “I am engaged in a study of our ‘womanpower’ and of women’s possibilities for future support in the military.” (7:3-4) General Hines concluded his study with the War Department and indeed expanded the role of women in the military. What were the results of that expansion? Let’s continue catapulting through history and go directly to World War II.

America answers her call to arms and goes to war. On 7 December 1941, the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor, and the United States was now directly involved in World War II. America needed support; men and women by the scores answered America’s call and entered all branches of the military. According to the “History of the United States Air Force From 1907-1956,” that blow by the Japanese resulted in the greatest expansion the Air Force had ever seen. (12:9) In Ms. Weatherford’s book, *American Women and World War II*, she inferred, most women were not accepted into the services unless, they met more stringent requirements than the men. “Women had to be at least 21 years of age, high school graduates at minimum and in some

cases (the Navy) have two years of college. They must not be shorter than 5 feet nor taller than 5 feet 9 inches and weigh no more than 165 pounds and be proportionate to their height.” (20: 4)

Most women who joined the Army were enlisted. After completion of training, those who received assignment to the Women’s Air Corps were immediately assigned to jobs such as; aircraft spotting stations, translators, telephone operators, clerical work, dog trainers, chemists, cartographers, inspectors, cooks, weather forecasters, air traffic controllers, teletypists and mail clerks. (20:28-65) In the War Department Release, dated 9 July 1943 titled, “155 Women’s Army Corps (WAC) Jobs,” the following positions opened as the war progressed; “mechanics, sheet-metal workers, electricians, parachute packers, bomb-sight-maintenance specialists, carpenters, plumbers, maintenance of any type, motor pool sergeants, and airplane electrical, airplane instruments, and airplane engine mechanics. (19:1-6) One particular job that became “exclusively a woman’s domain” was war photography, according to Ms. Weatherford. (20:65)

A particular point of interest was the fact, initially WAC’s never saw the inside of an airplane, however, a test was conducted of the entire flight line with WAC mechanics. The test proved women were capable of anything and more than 600 of those women mechanics were classified as aviation specialists and by wars end more than 2,000 enlisted women were fixing airplanes.

(20:67) Now that we know some the jobs enlisted women had during World War II, lets look at some the places they served as well as their involvement with the Women’s Air Service Pilots.

During World War II, WAC units sprang up all over the United States. Some of the more

noteworthy bases were; Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas; Lockbourne Army Air Base in Columbus, Ohio; and the Army Air Force Tactical Center in Orlando, Florida. The first two bases named are famed for their training of the Women's Air Service Pilots (WASP). In a report titled, *Historical Data Of The Women's Army Corps Staff Director, Army Air Force Tactical Center, Orlando, Florida* dated 19 February 1944, the staff director, Captain Kathryn Gilbert writes, "Employment of WACs has developed over the period of time... they have been found satisfactory instructors, aircraft warning service, and plotters in the Wing Operations Center. The demand... in the Army is greater than the supply and women are being sent to military installations throughout the country and to overseas duty locations." (8:9-10) Enlisted women in the WAC now found themselves serving in locations such as the Philippines, Alaska, Hawaii, Panama, China, Africa, Corregidor, Guadalcanal, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Burma, Italy, England, France, and Bataan just to name a few. (20:3-12) I don't know about you but, those places certainly ring of familiarity, especially that of a battlefield. Despite my efforts I could not find any detailed information specifically, regarding enlisted women in combat during World War II, just their generalized roles and contributions. Another particularly interesting fact I ran across in my research, according to Ms. Weatherford's book, *Women and World War II*, "when women failed out of the Women's Air Service Pilot Training, they were afforded the opportunity to stay on as enlisted clerical or mechanic support. Many of those who failed the training, did in fact remain with the WASP units." (20:67) The close of World War II and the waning years after brought on many changes. Allow me to push ahead and glance at one significant change for women and then shift to the Korean Conflict.

Women will receive some special recognition and then take a back-seat in most areas for almost the next 25 years. Skipping many aviation milestones, I would like to jump to 1948 and a significant milestone in Air Force history for women. The National Security Act of 1947 was already signed and the United States Air Force was now a separate operating agency on equal status with the Army and Navy. On 18 June 1948, the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act gave permanent status to women in the Air Force. In the Air Force Speech series titled, "Women In The United States Air Force, Aerospace Speech Number Eighteen," the author states, "They are not organized as a separate corps—but form an integral part of the U.S. Air Force. Policies and career management procedures are the same for both men and women. They compete for promotion on an equal basis in all airmen and officer grades...." (21:2) Shortly after World War II, during the formation of the Air Force as a separate operating agency and despite giving permanent status to women the role of women shrank. In her book, *The Enlisted Experience: A Conversation with Chief Master Sergeants Of The Air Force*, author Janet R. Benarek stated, "The Air Force's restriction of professional opportunities for women imposed after the war depleted the ranks of what had become the Women's Air Force." (2:84F) The role of women would not expand again until the early 1970's. Having this insight and knowing the prevailing thought that most American's believed a women's place was in the home certainly sets the stage for our view of the Korean Conflict and even later on the Vietnam Conflict.

Many American's thought we had no business involving ourselves in the affairs of Korea and the lack of supporting material certainly gave credence to that thought. The Air Force History on the Korean War said, "On 27 June 1950, President Truman made the decision to use U.S. Air and Naval forces to carry out the United Nations Security Council mandate against Korea." (12:17) Before the official involvement of America in the conflict, the Far East Air Forces had been conducting passive air evacuations of non-essential personnel, which included all women except nurses and doctors. It appears the small numbers of enlisted women who were assigned in Korea before our official entry, were transferred to Japan and the Philippines. Enlisted women served in limited supporting roles throughout the Korean Conflict, and were not directly involved in any type of combat. The Air Force did increase the number of women assigned during the conflict from approximately 4,000 in 1950 to approximately 12,000 by 1952. (12:17-22) In a report titled, *Women's Air Force Program*, dated 8 March 1955, it indicated that "The strength of the Women's Air Force is 8711, and expected to be 8155 by end of fiscal year." (17:2) The report went on to indicate that the 25% reduction was chiefly attributed to raising the enlistment criteria and the high attrition rate following the end of the war. (17:1) The remainder of the 1950's remained relatively calm and no significant changes occurred for enlisted women in the Air Force. The climate in America was changing and so was the military's role in detaining the spread of communism. With Korea behind us, our involvement in Vietnam looked certain.

The United States involvement in Vietnam was not supported by the American public. The air of the public felt we didn't belong in this conflict and it was somebody else's war. There was racial tension in the country and radical activists were prominent in all major cities throughout the country. The greatest frustration the Air Force felt during this period was the erosion of public support. The enlisted force itself increasingly mirrored the discord and contention that swept the nation. In her book, *In The Combat Zone*, author Kathryn Marshall discussed the role of women in the Vietnam Conflict. "According to the Department of Defense, between 1962 and 1973, some 7,500 American women served on active military duty in Vietnam." (14:4) Ms. Marshall goes on to indicate that the Veterans' Administration, however, puts the number of military women at more than 11,000. "The apparent lack of data on the part of the Department of Defense and State Department both serves as a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War." (14:4) The best documented group of women consists of those who served in the military. Ms Marshall said, "According to a 1984 study by the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, there were 771 Air Force women who served in country during Vietnam." Of that number 143 were enlisted, most working at casualty staging facilities, or evacuation hospitals, in Danang and Cam Ranh. Those who were not assigned at the staging facility worked as clerks, photographers, and cartographers, who were assigned to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam in Saigon. (14:4-7) Ms. Marshall, attempted to interview many of the enlisted women whom she could locate. All the enlisted women refused

to discuss their roles and involvement during the Vietnam Conflict. I can echo the sentiments of Ms. Marshall, when I say there is very little first hand documentation discussing our involvement. There certainly is documentation of the war, don't misunderstand me, it's just very limited and wrapped in lots of bureaucratic red tape and time did not permit me to pursue those avenues. I grew up with the Vietnam Conflict, and watched friends, neighbors and relatives go off to war. Some returned and some didn't. Those who returned were changed and don't talk much about the war. The war itself took its toll on my family. We lost one relative and watched another, Lt William Mayhew, who was shot down and captured, being paraded around the streets by his captors on national news three years after we were told he died. Bill, to this day still refuses to discuss his six years as prisoner of war. It was not until years later did I finally understand that the great war machine of the United States did not lose the war, it was lost by the politicians. Politicians don't like to discuss defeat so, there is little wonder why the documentation is limited. The Vietnam Conflict and the political strife in the country during those years caused many changes. Lets look at what some of the changes were and what those changes brought about for women.

The 1970's became a decade of changes for women in the military. Lets glance at just a few of those changes and see what they did for enlisted women. According to Major General Jeanne Holm, in her book, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, "During most of the 1960s, the Air Force limited women, officers and enlisted, to a narrow range of specialties, predominately in the clerical, administrative, personnel, information, and medical fields. Women were no longer allowed to serve in intelligence, weather, flight attendant, equipment

maintenance, and control tower activities, even though they had done so during World War II and into the 1950's." (13:175-176) The roles played by women in the Air Force, expanded with their numbers in the 1970s. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution pushed the services into offering women more equal opportunities. (13:246-288) "The Air Force opened many hard-to-fill technical fields to women. Although women remained barred from combat roles, in 1975 the Air Force began training its first women pilots since World War II." (13:333-334) The report titled, *History of Air Force Military Training Center*, for the period of July 1972-June 1973 said, "In October 1972, a new course in marksmanship training including, for the first time instruction to women trainees, was started." (9:14) In another report titled, *History Of Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana*, Volume I, for the period of 1 July 1972-30 June 1973 said, "A pilot program was launched to integrate WAF Security Policewomen into the law enforcement program. Throughout the Air Force, twelve WAFs received such assignments; three were in SAC. The conclusions of the test program....women were not utilized in the program as required; supervisors were reluctant to give them all the responsibilities of their male counterparts. By June 1973, however, personnel managers conceded that all problems could be solved and the program was expected to flourish." (10:186-187) Moving on into the 1970s saw even more sweeping changes for enlisted women. On 22 February 1977, Grand Forks AFB, North Dakota, welcomed the first nine women security specialists to have completed Security Police, Security Specialist Technical Training School. According to a report titled, *History Of 321st Strategic*

Missile Wing, dated January-March 1977. (11:18) Grand Forks appeared to be at the forefront of providing or receiving first-time events for women. In March 1977, Grand Forks saw the first ever four person Titan II missile crews. (11:21) One other significant milestone that occurred in the 1970's was in 1978, when "Non-combat aircrew positions opened to women." This is according to Julie Bird, an *Air Force Times* staff writer, in her article, "Second Thoughts." (2:13) As you can tell there were sweeping changes made for women in the 1970s. However, those changes didn't stop there, they continued on into the next decade.

The roles of the enlisted women continued to dramatically change through the 1980s and were expanded beyond what some thought imaginable. Ms. Bird went on to elaborate some of the most significant changes for women in the 1980s. In 1982, the E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft was opened to all women. In 1984, the KC-10 Extender aircrew was opened to all women. In 1985, C-23 Sherpa and EC-130 Compass Call aircraft crews, forward air control posts, munitions storage sites and two persons Minuteman II missile crews opened to women. 1986, saw the RC-135 strategic reconnaissance aircraft opened to all women. (2:13) Congressional Editor, Brian Green writes in his article, "Women in Combat," "In 1987, the Defense Department undertook a major policy review. The Task Force on Women in the Military recommended that combat missions be explicitly defined and made specific recommendations as to which positions should be opened to women." (6:78) The recommendations made included; incorporating women into Red Horse Teams, Mobile Aerial Port Squadrons, and tactical

reconnaissance units. All in all the task force recommended more than 31,000 positions opened to women in the Department of Defense. “The Air Force not only opened all recommended positions, but cleared the way for women serving aboard aircraft to participate in possible future combat airdrops.” (6:76-78) Captain Robyn A. Chumley, in her article, “Breaking the Combat Barrier,” profiles some of the Air Force women who are breaking the molds. (4:20-33) There are a few enlisted women out there who helped break the mold and became standard bearers for other women. First there is SSgt Joan Young, a Combat Aerial Videographer, the first woman ever to assigned that position. “She flies back seat in some of the fastest aircraft in the world providing combat documentation.” (4:33) Another trendsetter is SrA Jessica Birdsley, who became the first woman survival instructor. Despite her five feet and 110 pounds, she was the only woman to complete the six months of training in water, arctic, desert, jungle, and mountain survival becoming certified as survival instructor. (4:28-29) Those were just two enlisted women who have expanded the role of women in combat and made significant contributions along with setting milestones. However, women continued to break the combat barrier in 1990, shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait and OPERATION DESERT SHIELD came into swing.

In August 1990, Iraq under the orders of Saddam Hussein invaded the tiny country of Kuwait. The Iraqi Army soon began probing the borders of Saudi Arabia and America was invited to help defend their country. We quickly took up the call and began mustering our troops, equipment and aircraft for deployment. Women took their place in line, right along side the men and went off to do their part in support of the Saudi Arabian country. According to the

Interim Report to Congress, titled, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf Conflict*, “Women served in almost all of the hundreds of occupations open to them with their male counterparts, enduring all of the same hardships under the same harsh conditions.” (5:10.1) During OPERATION DESERT SHIELD, women were administrators, air traffic controllers, logisticians, engineers, equipment mechanics, ammo operators, ordnance specialists, communicators, radio operators, drivers, law enforcement specialists and guards. They flew in helicopters, reconnaissance aircraft, refueling aircraft, airborne warning and control aircraft, electronic control aircraft and cargo aircraft. They not only flew in those aircraft, but enlisted women repaired and maintained those aircraft, as well as loading ordnance and maintaining fighter aircraft. (5:10.1-10.2) As the United Nations deadline to Iraq for withdrawal of all forces from Kuwait drew near in early January 1991, so did another historical moment for enlisted women.

Sadaam Hussein fails to abide by the United Nations Security Council mandate of withdrawing all forces from Kuwait. Hussein’s refusal to comply with the mandate, and with the approval of Congress, President Bush orders the military to action and OPERATION DESERT STORM kicks off. On 16-17 January 1991, while serving with the 41st Electronic Combat Squadron, as an aircrew member, SrA Lisa Wilson became the first enlisted woman to fly in a combat situation. The EC-130, that SrA Wilson was flying aboard left out of Bateen Air Base, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates and flew over Iraq, conducting electronic jamming missions for approximately four hours. (Note: the source and remainder of the information concerning this mission are classified. The excerpt is available at the Air Force Historical Research Agency,

call #K-SQ-EC-41-HI, Volumes 1-6.) By February 1991, there were over 35,000 military women in the Persian Gulf. The Air Force had 5,300 women assigned and 4,754 of them were enlisted. (5:10.1) Many other enlisted women went on to serve in combat related missions during the Persian Gulf War and breaking that age old barrier of women can't be in combat. Although, sparsely scattered throughout history the role, contributions, and milestones of enlisted women in combat will live on for they have forever changed the way we think.

This has been a cursory view of enlisted women's role, contributions, and milestones in combat. We began with Abigail Adams' letter to her husband John, warning him to pay heed to future roles and laws concerning women. We then looked at the law and policies concerning women in combat, including the Department of Defense "Risk Rule" and the Air Force's interpretation of that rule. Women took an active role in World War I, over 90,000 of them served in various roles. Many of those women were recognized and awarded for their efforts. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, America responded in overwhelming numbers. Women enlisted by the scores and began filling positions such as, aircraft spotters, translators, telephone operators, cartographers, inspectors, cooks, weather forecasters, and air traffic controllers. They served all over the world and as the war progressed their roles expanded to mechanics, sheet-metal workers, electricians, parachute packers, bomb-sight-maintenance specialists, carpenters, plumbers, maintenance of any type, motor pool sergeants, and all types of aircraft repair. One particular job that became "exclusively a woman's domain" was war photography. We then reviewed the Women's Armed Forces Integration Act, which gave

permanent status to women in the Air Force. Before the United States' entry into the Korean conflict, most women were evacuated to Japan or the Philippines by the Far East Air Forces, and only served in a supporting role during the conflict. America was not content with our involvement in the Vietnam Conflict. The role of the enlisted women was extremely limited with only 143 enlisted women serving there during the 11 years of the conflict. Most of them worked at casualty staging facilities or evacuation hospitals. Those who were not assigned at the staging facility worked as clerks, photographers, and cartographers, who were assigned to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam. The 1970s started significant changes for enlisted women. They began receiving marksmanship training, they entered the security police career field, and non-combat aircrew positions were opened to them. When the 1980s rolled in, so did the changes and almost every aircraft position was opened to women. Women were allowed in Red Horse and Aerial Port units because of the recommendations by the Task Force on Women in the Military. We saw SSgt Joan Young become the first woman combat aerial videographer and SrA Jessica Birdsley, become the first woman survival instructor. Women then took their place in line alongside the men and went off to support Saudi Arabia in OPERATION DESERT SHIELD. They served in every facet from ground support to flying. Then on 16-17 January 1991, while serving with the 41st Electronic Combat Squadron, as an aircrew member, SrA Lisa Wilson became the first enlisted woman to fly in a combat situation. By the end of the Persian Gulf War, the Air Force had 4,754 enlisted women assigned. Many of those enlisted women went on to serve in combat related missions during the Persian Gulf War and broke those age old barriers of women in combat.

Throughout our history women have served with honor and distinction in whatever role we offered or thrust upon them. They have always answered the call and they will always be there when we need them. The role of women will continue to expand as it should, based solely on ability and qualifications not gender. If the best person for the job is a woman, then she should be selected. Women have demonstrated the ability to defend our nation throughout history and I salute the efforts of those gallant warriors. Although, we have not documented the roles, contributions, and milestones of the enlisted women in combat as well as we should have. Their contributions, perseverance, and dedication has not gone unnoticed. I hope that in the future we will continue to document the contributions of not only enlisted women, but all enlisted members. It is our responsibility to carry-on the traditions of the Air Force, for we enlisted are the backbone of the Air Force. Do me favor, would you please; the next time somebody does something important, make sure you document it and ensure it gets in your unit history report. You never know--they may be making history.

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