

Crossing the Lines

Though barred from combat, female troops who have been deployed to Iraq often find themselves in full-fledged battle. An intimate look at the lives of the real G.I. Janes

By **TIM MCGIRK**

FOR CAPTAIN SHONNEL MAKWAKWA, IT WAS a rare assignment “outside the wire”: a chance to break the monotony of life on the base and get out onto the streets of Baghdad. But it didn’t take long to realize

that this was no routine mission. Minutes after Makwakwa’s hum-vee pulled out of Camp Liberty last December, bad news crackled over the radio: a supply convoy of six 18-wheel trucks was ambushed at Checkpoint 50, a freeway cloverleaf that is a notorious shooting alley for insurgents. Makwakwa, a bright, fit native of New Orleans, handles medical logistics for the U.S. 10th Mountain Division—the kind of deskbound job often assigned to women G.I.s. Now she found herself wearing a first-aid kit on her belt, gripping an M-4 rifle and crawling on her stomach as enemy fire rained down. “I could hear the rounds pinging all around me,” she says. “It was surreal.” The scene was horrific. Flies were everywhere, and so was blood. “I’d dealt with people dying in the hospital, but it was nothing like this,” she says. Makwakwa and another soldier kicked in the bullet-shattered windshield of the lead vehicle, but the driver was already dead. The driver of the second vehicle was screaming in agony from his wounds; he later died. Makwakwa and the patrol were able to save three other wounded drivers, but the memories of Checkpoint 50 are hard to erase—a constant reminder that while the military officially bars women from combat, the insurgency makes no such distinctions. “In Iraq, female soldiers are in combat,” she says. “We’re out there.”

Given the strains on the military, the need for women to take on expanded roles is likely to grow.

American women have served in every U.S. military conflict since the Revolution, usually as nurses or spies, but the country has never been comfortable with sending them into harm’s way. Congress bars women from engaging in offensive warfare with the enemy. In response to dwindling military-recruiting numbers and demands by

women’s groups for more equality between the sexes, the Pentagon in 1994 loosened the ban and allowed women to take on “supporting” combat roles. In Iraq, that can involve anything from piloting combat helicopters to accompanying infantrymen and Marines on house-to-house raids and searching Iraqi women suspects for pistols and

suicide belts. As the insurgency has grown more diffuse, increasing numbers of women are finding themselves in the teeth of combat.

■ IN THE LINE OF FIRE

THEY ARE ALSO SUFFERING SUBSTANTIAL CASUALTIES. Women troops make up nearly 15% of active-duty service members. Since 2003, 48 women have died in Iraq—just 2% of the total number of U.S. troops killed but far more than the 8 nurses killed out of 7,500 servicewomen in the Vietnam War. Three hundred have been wounded in Iraq. Few female troops are out of the line of fire. While military police patrol Baghdad with Iraqi cops who skirmish almost daily with insurgents, women clerks and cooks inside U.S. camps are vulnerable to rocket and mortar attacks by militants. Such hazards underscore the threats to life and limb that still confront all U.S. troops in Iraq, even as the military attempts to turn over more combat responsibility to Iraqi forces.

To get an idea of how much the lines dividing male and female roles have blurred—or vanished—TIME joined a unit of U.S. military police from the 10th Mountain's 1st Brigade on patrol along the reedy canals and palm groves outside Baghdad. This is a favorite route for insurgents streaming in from Fallujah. As the troops load into their humvees, Sergeant Lenore Swenson, 25, from Colorado Springs, Colorado, who dreams of leaving the Army someday and buying a horse ranch, tucks her flaxen hair under her helmet. Her friendly grin vanishes beneath a black fire-retardant mask with goggles. She trained as a driver, but her superiors switched her to gunner. "We need maturity behind the gun," says squad leader Darren Horve. "And she's got it."

As the humvee leaves camp, Horve yells out to her, "Hey, Swenson! Keep an eye open for

door open for a female, and a woman is expected to carry as much and to shoot as well as a man. (Swenson's full gear weighs 115 pounds.) Military officers say that the performance of female soldiers in Iraq offers little evidence to back a common argument against the use of women in combat: that they are more likely than men to panic under fire.

Still, the exposure of women to combat isn't going entirely unchallenged by those who oppose the military's drift toward "co-location" of male and female troops. Led by Representative Duncan Hunter, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Republicans won passage of an amendment to last year's defense-spending bill that requires the Pentagon to issue a report this year showing that the military is following congressional restrictions on women in combat.

48 Number of women troops who have died in Iraq since 2003

300 Number who have been wounded

15% Proportion of active-duty service members who are women

triggermen hiding along the road." She nods. In the gunner's hatch, she is armed with a 240 Bravo machine gun that fires 950 rounds a minute, but she is more vulnerable than the men inside the humvee's armored shell to sniper bullets and shrapnel from roadside bombs. As the convoy rolls down the back roads, Swenson and the guys in her humvee keep up an easy, comradely banter, joking about the Iraqi kids they see along their patrol: one boy moves like a hip-hop dancer, another like a ninja fighter. Swenson says, "What I'll remember isn't threatening Iraqis with my machine gun but seeing the children wave as we go by," and then adds that "sometimes they do throw rocks." And so she remains vigilant.

■ CLOSING THE GENDER GAP

THE COMMON DANGERS FACING SERVICE MEMBERS in Iraq have helped close the gender gap. In today's Army, nobody gallantly holds the humvee

But given the strains on the military, the need for women to take on expanded roles is likely to grow. In Iraq's danger zones, officers say, female MPs, medics and pilots have earned the right to be treated as equals. Major Tim Parker of the 10th Mountain Division says it's still hard for men to conceive of sharing a foxhole with their women comrades, but he acknowledges that change is inevitable. "There still needs to be a line," he says. "But in the future, I'm sure we'll cross that." Many women in Iraq would say they already have. ■

Questions

1. Where does Congress stand on allowing women to serve in combat? How does this position differ from that of the Pentagon?
2. According to military personnel, what common argument against using women in combat is being proved false by the war in Iraq?