

WOMEN AT WAR: CHANGING ROLES IN THE U.S. MILITARY

by Lisa Schreibersdorf

LIONESS. 82 mins. (56-min. version also available). 2008 (deluxe edition DVD, 2010). Directed by Meg McLagan & Daria Sommers. Room 11 Productions. DVD. \$24.00–\$295.00 depending on type of use. More information at <http://lionessthefilm.com/>.

WOMEN IN THE MILITARY: WILLING, ABLE, ESSENTIAL. 59 mins. 2009. Directed by Susan Sherwood. Distributed by Pennsylvania Veterans Museum. DVD. \$15.00 (less for Pennsylvania educators). More information at <http://www.paveteransmuseum.org/home/education-women.php>.

“WOMEN AT ARMS.” Produced by Kassie Bracken & Diana Oliva Cave, *New York Times*, August–December 2009. Free to stream at http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/us/series/women_at_arms/index.html?ref=us

“ON THE FRONT LINES: WOMEN IN WAR.” *Morning Edition*, NPR, February 2011. Free to stream or download at <http://www.npr.org/series/133869535/women-in-combat>.

Kayla Williams, **“LOVE MY RIFLE MORE THAN YOU.”** Interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, August 25, 2005. Free to stream or download at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4814647>.

Abby Pickett, **“A WOMAN SOLDIER’S BATTLES ON THE FRONT LINES.”** Interview by Alex Chadwick, *Day to Day*, NPR, May 19, 2005. Free to stream or download at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4658361>

Abby Pickett, **“A WOMAN GUARD MEMBER’S STRUGGLES WITH PTSD.”** Interview by Joseph Shapiro, *Morning Edition*, NPR, June 2, 2005. Free to stream or download at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4676372>.

WOMEN AND WAR. Helen Benedict et al. Blog posts, PBS, 2010. See <http://www.pbs.org/pov/regardingwar/conversations/women-and-war>.

WOMEN, WAR AND PEACE. Five-part special series, PBS, 2011. See <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/>.

Specialist Shannon Morgan, a soldier featured in the documentary film *Lioness*, returned from Iraq with combat-induced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to a country unaware that women were fighting in direct combat at all. Current U.S. military rules ban women from serving in units that have direct ground combat as a primary mission. However, in a war with no clear front lines, this rule does not keep women away from mortars or out of firefights. And increasingly, female support soldiers are being attached to all-male combat units, completing missions with those units without technically being assigned to them. Early in 2011, the Military Leadership Diversity Committee, a group of current and retired officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians created by Congress, recommended that all remaining restrictions on women’s assignments be eliminated. Congressional response was to order further study by the Department of Defense; the report was expected in October but has been stalled. Many believe that the hesitation to end

restrictions stems from the lack of awareness of what female soldiers are already doing on the ground. Shannon’s own assessment: “America needs to know what’s going on over there, that we’re over there and we’re doing this.”

The general lack of understanding of female soldiers’ experiences causes a range of problems, both for soldiers and for veterans. For the first women attached to combat units, it meant entering firefights without the necessary training. As awareness of women’s service has grown, the military has made changes in how female soldiers are trained as well as how veteran services prepare to work with women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. And U.S. media sources have begun to recognize women’s military roles more widely. Yet returning soldiers continue to face disbelief when they explain their experiences to those at home; they also face problems obtaining appropriate health services, benefits, and promotions. Often, when women’s studies texts cover the military, they focus on women’s anti-war efforts or on mili-

tary sexual assault. These are very important issues that do need attention; however, if these are the only issues we address, we risk repeating these failures to recognize the experiences of female veterans. We also miss the opportunity to examine the possible connections between these issues and the conflict between military policy and practice regarding female soldiers' roles.

A number of highly accessible interviews and documentaries detail the realities of women's service in today's military. Any of these could be incorporated into women's studies courses on their own or in combination with print sources.

In 2003, the U.S. army began sending female support soldiers out with all-male units to do home searches and other work directly with infantry. These soldiers, dubbed lionesses, could enter female spaces and conduct body searches on Iraqi women, which male soldiers could not do. *Lioness* tells the story of five female soldiers who served at the beginning of the Lioness program and became the first U.S. women to be sent into direct ground combat. Their service was a turning point for the military's deployment of female soldiers, and their experiences have since prompted changes in training to prepare women for combat.

Along with footage from Iraq, *Lioness* includes interviews with the soldiers and their families. In addition to exposing the realities of female soldiers on the ground, the film focuses on the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life, tensions between family responsibilities and deployment, pride in service to country, and struggles with PTSD. Some of the struggles result directly from the public's failure to recognize what female soldiers have gone through. One particularly poignant scene shows the women watching a History Channel documentary that focuses on a mission in which they took part. The documentary excludes images of female soldiers and doesn't mention

their participation. The filmmakers show the women's faces as they hear the narrator describe "the weary men of the 240" and the story "told by the men who were there." One of the lionesses explains, "In that video, it's like they went out of their way to make sure that they didn't mention us because all of those events that took place in that video, we were there." In another interview, an officer explains that the inconsistency between Lioness missions and government policy regarding combat roles was hushed politically in order to avoid having to pull female soldiers out of necessary roles. The film also focuses on the biggest problem caused by failing to recognize what female soldiers would need to do — the lack of combat training for female soldiers.

Lioness, a compelling documentary, has actually been used in training military professionals who work with female veterans. Interviews with officers illuminate policy decisions as well as how these women ended up in combat. The film's personal focus on the five soldiers demonstrates both the highly capable service of female soldiers and the traumatic emotional effects of participating in warfare. *Lioness* doesn't shy away from violence. It faces the moral ambiguity felt by the soldiers, particularly as one woman suffering from PTSD talks about how it felt to shoot and kill. Footage from Iraq includes images of shooting and of bodies, both U.S. soldiers and Iraqis killed.

Extras on the DVD include a brief history of how women's service has changed since World War II, interviews with other female soldiers, including Marines Lionesses, and



footage of the Lionesses' testimony in Washington, DC. The film also has a companion website housed on PBS's Independent Lens that is currently active, and *Lioness* is scheduled to be rebroadcast on Independent Lens during the 2011–2012 television season. The film is 82 minutes, but selected scenes could be shown to a class, and a 56-minute version is also available. Students in my introductory women's studies courses have gotten a good deal from the pieces I have shown, and they've found it one of the most memorable parts of the course.

Women in the Military: Willing, Able, Essential is a documentary produced by the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum. It presents a history of women's military service, and as the title implies, the film focuses on women's fitness for service and demonstrates this by emphasizing how women *have* served in all of the nation's wars. It follows women's increasingly diversified roles in the military, from unofficial support and fighting in disguise in the Revolutionary war to today's roles that are bringing women into combat. While it does demonstrate the horrors of war, this film is largely uncritical of the U.S. military or of U.S. military action in any of the wars covered. And while it does demonstrate some of the resistance to women's growing roles within military leadership, as well as the fact that women's roles have expanded primarily because of the need for personnel, it elides the issues of sexual harassment and assault, disparate recognition, and training differences that are reported in other documentaries and interviews. One interviewee even states that in today's military, "gender and race don't matter."

Women in the Military has an educational documentary feel in its narration, its early re-enactments, and its use of period music with the images from each war. What it does provide is a valuable overview of both the persistence of women's contributions and the changes in women's roles and official policy. Highlights are the historical footage and photos from earlier wars as well as interviews with veterans from World War II on, including Marcia Putney, who talks about segregation during World War II; Captain Vernice Armour, the first African American female combat pilot; and Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, who had been a prisoner of war during the Gulf War.

In addition to the two full-length documentaries, there are a number of resources online that offer overviews of women's service, snapshots of individual soldiers, and introductions to specific issues faced by female soldiers. The *New York Times* series "Women at Arms" is a set of short videos streaming on their website. This four-episode, monthly series was initially posted in 2009. Like *Lioness*, this series focuses on the idea that there is no distinct front line and that wom-

en are in combat even if they are not in infantry positions. The first video focuses on the roles in base camp and some of the missions that typically take women "beyond the wire." The next two focus on PTSD, with a specific focus in one on the effects on a single mother. She explains how she expected deployment to be hard, but didn't expect the difficulties she's had relating to her children since she's come home. The final segment focuses on on-base sexual harassment and assault. The rates of assault on base are high — significantly higher than rates for civilians — and a number of on-base dynamics prevent women from reporting. Women are more likely to have PTSD from sexual assault than as a result of combat, and one study showed that among those reporting PTSD, 70% had been assaulted. The *New York Times* video focuses on one woman's story to indicate the wider problem.

This series raises a good range of issues, and for that reason could be very useful in providing an overview of the situations faced by female soldiers. Also, the short, discrete segments could be easily inserted into classes. One small problem I have with watching these as a series is that while the stories differ, the footage used as background in each story is often repeated; this has the unfortunate effect, for me, of making it seem like they were stretching for material, which statistics and other coverage show shouldn't be the case. It also seems surprising that the August report opens with the statement that all women on base get typed as either bitches or sluts, but then the problem of stereotyping drops out of the report as it presents the ways in which women and men are working with one another. This inescapable, on-base stereotyping is reported by women serving throughout the military. I would have appreciated more discussion of how those two things — the intense stereotyping and the ways in which soldiers work together as soldiers — compete and intersect. Overall, while this resource is easy to access online and can be used to introduce issues, it offers the least in-depth exploration of the resources reviewed here.

National Public Radio has done several series on women's roles in today's military; these are available as podcasts that can be streamed or downloaded. There is no video, though transcripts and photos appear on the website. The most recent series is *Morning Edition's* "On the Front Lines," which examines women's roles and the changes over generations in women's service. This 2011 series was recorded while the Military Leadership Diversity Commission was developing its recommendations to Congress, so the stories continually reflect back on military policy and what a change might mean.

The first piece in this NPR series, titled "Women in War: 'I've Lived Out There With The Guys,'" provides a good overview of the conflict between women's actual ser-

vice and official roles. It also presents the arguments for and against including women in direct combat positions. The title comes from an interchange during hearings regarding a possible rule change. In response to a retired Marine Lt. General's assertion that women wouldn't sign up to live under the harsh conditions of combat soldiers, Tammy Duckworth speaks out: "I've lived like that. I've lived out there with the guys, and I would do it. It's about the job." The second episode, "Silver Star Recipient a Reluctant Hero," presents an interview with Leigh Ann Hester, the first woman to receive a silver star since World War II. "General Remembers Her 'Different' Military Days" focuses on Retired Brig. Wilma Vaught, who joined the Air Force in 1957 and became the first woman to deploy with an Air Force bomber wing. She was also the primary force behind the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. Vaught remembers her Air Force training, which included how to sit and put on makeup but not how to fire a weapon, and she compares this with women's service today. "A Soldier's Life for a Mother and Her Daughter" also reflects on generational difference in service expectations. A daughter on the verge of graduating from West Point describes training from the perspective of a soldier at an elite military institution, providing a different viewpoint than many of the other documentaries and reports. But even though combat seems somewhat distant in this interview as she is heading next to medical school, she faces this danger in ways that her mother, working at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., did not. The final segment, "A Lonely Club for Women in Top Army Jobs," focuses on the issue of promotions. Women hit a glass ceiling in the military because the usual route to promotion is combat leadership experience, and this ceiling is one argument for expanding the ways women's service is defined.

Related, noteworthy podcasts that were not a part of this 2011 series include interviews from 2005 with Kayla Williams, author of *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, and with Abbie Pickett of the Wisconsin National Guard. Kayla Williams's interview may provide the best overview of the issues female soldiers are regularly facing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Williams served in the Middle East as an Arabic interpreter in the U.S. Army. In a 2005 interview on *Fresh Air*, Williams describes a deployed soldier's daily life: constantly carrying a weapon, feelings of aggression as well as of camaraderie, the situation that enabled her to point her gun at a child, and her experience in intelligence being brought in to sexually humiliate prisoners. Near the end of the interview, she also talks about her husband, who was severely wounded, and his struggle with coming home and with accessing health benefits. A highlight of this interview is Williams's nuanced discussion of

interactions among male and female soldiers. She describes harassment and stereotyping and explains how the dynamic between men and women are situational. The responses she got from male soldiers depended on whether she was on a mission or on base; men who got to see her doing a job that was helpful for them remembered her for her job, while those who didn't have the opportunity to see her do a useful job focused on her gender. She sees restrictions on women's service contributing to harassment rather than helping. Williams's experience as both soldier and writer make her interview particularly valuable.

Abbie Pickett's interviews cover her experience in Iraq as well as her struggles with PTSD after her return. These interviews are brief, and the issues covered here are dealt with more extensively elsewhere, but Pickett's interviews, conducted while she was a student at Madison Area Technical College, provide a story close to home for Wisconsin students.

PBS's POV hosted a blog called *Regarding War* from February to June 2010, which includes a section on "Women and War." While the blog is no longer being updated, it is still accessible and is valuable for the range of viewpoints expressed by contributors. The bloggers are journalists Erin Solaro and Helen Benedict, authors of two prominent books on women serving in recent conflicts; Army First Lieutenant Jessica Scott; Marine Corps veteran and Executive Director of the Service Women's Action Network Anu Bhagwati; and Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers, the filmmakers behind *Lioness*. These writers repeatedly point to the diversity of military women's experiences and at times disagree with one another, which I think is the most valuable aspect of this blog as a teaching resource. While much of the information is the same as that presented in the *New York Times* videos and NPR podcasts, the blog format seems to offer the most freedom to express strong opinions on these issues. Some highlights are the critiques of how other sources represent female soldiers. Jessica Scott's may be the voice most missing from other reportage, as she criticizes what she sees as media representation of military women as victims and is more supportive of military policies. Anu Bhagwati offers a related account of media sensationalizing, but, unlike Scott, she condemns the pervasive institutionalized sexism she experienced. Erin Solaro, who introduces herself as an "unabashed feminist," critiques "organized feminism's" presentation of the military — and its more recent failure to represent military women. Besides these issues of misrepresentation, topics covered include the combat ban, motherhood as a soldier, sexual assault in the military, women's achievements and reasons for enlisting, and what it means to these writers to document war.

