

WOMEN PILOTS IN COMBAT: ATTITUDES OF MALE AND FEMALE PILOTS

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Esprit-de-corp, cohesion, and discipline are values that unite the fabric of effective combat units. Successful integration of women into this role rests in part upon their acceptance by male combatants. Much of the literature on women in combat discusses combat as hand to hand armed struggle. (Devilbliss, 1985; Moskos, 1985; Partlow, 1984; Witherspoon, 1988) Pup tents, mud, fox holes, blood and guts are common combat images.

The fighter pilot (a modern knight in shining armor) and other combat pilots are yet other modern combatants. When flying over enemy territory, they risk injury, death and capture. These highly educated, fighter aviators work in disciplined teams dropping bombs or paratroopers and firing missiles. They are surrounded by high technology and elaborate, complex support systems. In addition, when flying large multi-engine aircraft (dropping paratroopers) they are crew leaders. These pilots give orders and demand a disciplined response.

Currently women pilots are restricted from combat missions and aircraft. Over the last decade restrictions on women's role in military operations has changed. Increasingly, women are taking on jobs and responsibilities which move them closer to the combat arena. In addition our NATO allies have broken the ice and employ females in combat cockpits. (MINERVA, 1987:45)

It would be helpful to address some unanswered questions if women pilots are to become combatants. For example, are women pilots ready to fly combat missions and aircraft? Male pilot acceptance of women as fighter pilots is important if women are to become members and leaders of effective fighter squadrons. What are the attitudes of male pilots toward women aviators as combatants? How do the attitudes of male and female pilots compare on this issue? These questions will be addressed in this study.

Women and Combat

The military is an institution with roots in time honored masculine traditions. The uniforms, authoritarian structure and rituals that permeate military life help transform boys into soldiers. Historically, men in the armed forces have resisted and been hostile toward female integration. The need to use women is usually recognized at the top of the command structure and then undermined by the rank and file who resisted and obstructed gender integration even when women were assigned to traditional tasks such as typing or filing (Holm,1982; Rogan,1981; Rustad,1982). Today, women are well integrated into most aspects of military life. Yet, they are officially restricted from the last bastion of male exclusiveness--combat.

Paradoxically, the combat restriction policy is more symbolic than real. The integration of women is so systemic that significant numbers face exposure to combat. This is even acknowledged by high level Pentagon officials. In 1986, Lawrence Korb, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, told reporters that males could not realistically be substituted for females in units preparing for combat. "Under many circumstances you just don't have that much warning. Women are an integral part of units" (Proxmire, 1986:106).

Combat policy is symbolic, because women will probably face the hazards of combat in proportion to their numbers (Proxmire, 1986). The symbolism fades, however, as women are restricted from specific military occupational specialities, missions or duties. For example, women pilots are restricted from combat missions and aircraft. By limiting opportunities this policy has real negative consequences which undermine career advancement.

It is hard to neatly classify reasons for the combat exclusion. Emotions run high on both sides of the issue. For those who support the notion of women in combat it is an equal opportunity/civil rights issue. Only when women are given the same responsibility and risks as men can they truly enjoy equal rights. On the other hand, supporters of the combat exclusion see it as a symbol of military tradition and strength.

The source of the combat exclusion policy is found in law and tradition. "Combat is regarded as men's work, much too arduous and hazardous for women. The physical and mental demands of combat, and the horrors of war and death, are still believed not to be the domain of women" (Witherspoon, 1988:8). Reasons appear to be based on beliefs about women and the nature of effective combat units (Witherspoon, 1988:8).

Witherspoon identifies woman's reduced upper body strength (*vis a vis men*) as the most cited reason for exclusion. He maintains that this notion stems from the tendency of people to generalize from the average. The average man, is stronger and faster than the average woman because they have proportionally more bone mass and muscle. Clearly there are many women whose strength and stamina is greater than the average man. It is possible, therefore, to develop minimum performance standards which would exclude those physically unable to perform combat. If gender is the decision rule to distinguish combatants from noncombatants, many individuals with sufficient physical abilities will be excluded (Witherspoon, 1988: 9).

Rigorous team sports are another combat analogy. Here, players fight to the death to win. Winning is paramount because the winner takes all. The image of a winning team is one of strength. It has the strongest, toughest, biggest, smartest players. It is also well fed, equipped, coached, trained, and disciplined. Using this metaphor, the winning team would probably look something like a pro football team. It would be all male.

This image, however, has many flaws when applied to the armed forces. First the armed forces draws a large number of players from society. It is filled with citizen soldiers not elite fighters. Furthermore, in the United States, the armed forces relies primarily on advertising and a wage and benefit package to attract young people. Military wages are relatively low compared to those in other occupations (especially for the biggest, brightest and strongest-- the best players). Hence, the military recruitment rules limit its ability to get the "best" players. Ironically, since women's civilian opportunities are fewer than men's, the military wage and benefit package is relatively more attractive to women (Shields, 1988). In addition, the military restricts the proportion of women within its ranks. Not surprisingly, throughout the history of the volunteer military, women on average, have scored higher on measures of ability such as education and intelligence. Hence, many of the "teams" smartest players are female.

Also, the game is far from a contact sport. Rather the players are increasingly surrounded by high technology. The instruments of violence and their successful implementation require brains versus brawn. This is a playing field where men and women are more clearly equivalent. Are the facts that men can run faster and lift more weight relevant to whether women should be on combat units?

The image of a woman falling apart in a crisis (emotional instability) is another concern identified by those opposed to

women in combat. If true, women would be less capable of performing under the psychological stress of combat (Witherspoon, 1988:10). Here there is empirical data to dispute the claim. Army studies, (Johnson et al, 1978; U.S. Army Research Institute, 1977) of women nurses performance under combat conditions, women's reaction to imprisonment during WWII (Philippine islands) and the ability of American policewomen to cope with physical violence (Block and Anderson, 1974) all demonstrate that women can cope with crisis.

Another belief identified by Witherspoon concerns women's ability to perform as a member of a combat unit. According to this line of reasoning, male bonding forms the glue which holds units together. Further the male bond is in part defined by exclusion of women. The absence of women and the need to rely on one another for survival define the fabric of cohesion. Hence, the presence of women, by definition, dilutes combat effectiveness. Studies examining female integration under rigorous and dangerous field conditions fail to substantiate this belief (Moskos, 1985 and Devilbliss, 1985). Field success and survival depend, in large part, on unit cohesion which is fostered through values such as fellowship, trust, and esprit de corps. Both studies concluded that men and women worked well together. Over the course of field training, women were increasingly judged as individuals. Buddy or brother sister relationships were the norm, not romantic attachments. Men and women built cohesion through shared experiences. The distinction between insiders (those within the unit) and outsiders was more important than that between the two sexes. Individuals were judged by how effectively they performed tasks and were prized for their knowledge (Devilbliss, 1985: 542-544).

The influence of women on unit cohesion literature usually focuses upon the bonds that unite groups of combatants. Leadership is a concept often absent from the discussion. Battles are won when these fighting bands of brothers, filled with unit cohesion and esprit de corps are effectively led. Combatants follow orders. As members of the infantry move up the ranks they inevitably take on leadership responsibilities. If women enter the combat arena they too would take on leadership roles. An obvious and often unspoken concern is whether men would be willing to take orders from women. Would a soldier be more likely to break rank and run if led by a woman? Thus, today's combat restrictions expose women to physical danger but forbid them from shooting or ordering others to shoot.

The case of pilots is intriguing because it leaves behind the historic image of foot soldiers and moves into the modern world of high technology. In addition, for some missions and aircraft (large bombers), pilots are leaders. When the aloft combat crew works effectively, it is a disciplined team (co-pilot, navigator, etc.) which quickly and competently follows the pilot's orders. Lifting the combat restriction for women pilots would immediately place them in combat/leadership roles. It should be noted that during World War II soviet women flew combat missions. They, however, were in all female crews.

Pilots are also interesting because they are older, more educated and highly trained than foot soldiers. They have met stringent entrance requirements and successfully completed rigorous pilot training. Pilots are an elite within all service branches.

Given the unique status of pilots, their first reference group (within the military organization) may be other pilots rather than gender. Dunivin (1988: 83) found this to be true for women pilots. Dunivan compared male and female officers within specific occupational categories (e.g. personnel, administration, pilots). She found that female pilots (unlike women officers in other occupational specialities) had attitudes about their job environment (organizational affiliation, opportunity structure, power structure) similar to male pilots. The author speculated that "these women are pilots and they receive recognition and reward based on their skill as pilots, not as women. Consequently, the women perceive the work organization and job from a pilot perspective rather than from a gender perspective" (p.84).

Shared values and norms are the underpinnings of cohesive combat units. These are shaped by the institution and the larger culture. Ultimately the issues concerning women in combat can never be resolved in peace. Effectiveness can only be tested under the stress of enemy fire.

Methodology

This study compares the attitudes of male and female pilots toward women pilots in combat. Hence, groups of both male and female pilots were given questionnaires measuring these attitudes.

Female Pilot Sample

The data on women pilots were obtained through an existing study performed by Capt. Theresa Peterson. Peterson's survey instrument was sent to all U.S. Air Force women pilots on active duty in mid November of 1987 as part of an Air Command and

Staff College research project. Its purpose was to determine women pilots' thoughts and concerns about their potential integration into combat aircraft and missions. A total of 322 surveys were mailed. The response rate was 70 percent (224 questionnaires were returned) (Peterson, 1988:7).

Male Pilot Sample

Questionnaires were sent to male members of the Order of Daedalians. The Order of Daedalians is composed primarily of active duty or retired rated pilots (person who has graduated from a U.S. military pilot training course).

The order is divided into chapters called Flights. There are 96 Flights located at U.S. military bases throughout the world. For purposes of this study, questionnaires were sent to Stinson Flight, Number Two located in San Antonio, Texas. This Flight was chosen because it's 700 members make it the largest of all the individual flights. In addition, Capt. Nichols membership in this flight helped guarantee a larger response rate. In March of 1988, 200 questionnaires were sent to a randomly selected group of males in the Stinson Flight. Of the 200 questionnaires, 162 were returned for an excellent response rate of 81 percent. Over one in five of the Daedalians surveyed were retired (83 percent). All branches of the armed forces were represented in the sample. However, the overwhelming majority were air force pilots (95 percent). The respondents had a wealth of combat experience. Over 90 percent were combat veterans. Several of the respondents (28) fought in more than one war. Although it was not asked, three of the respondents identified themselves as prisoners of war. (For a more detailed discussion of sample demographics See Nichols, 1988:26-32.)

It should be noted that we are comparing a group with significant combat experience (Males) with a group restricted from combat (Females). Further, there is reason to believe that the Daedelions are more conservative on women's issues and thus, less likely to accept women as fighter pilots than their younger active duty counterparts. This is a group whose wives watched the kids, volunteered on base and were told (ordered?) to make their men breakfast each morning. Acceptance of women as colleagues is generally higher among younger men who have experience working with women. Hence, if the Daedalians accept women as combat pilots it might actually be a stronger test of their potential acceptance.

Findings

Women Air Force pilots are excluded from combat through Air Force regulation 35-60 (Jan. 1986). This regulation prohibits assigning women to aircraft whose principal mission includes aerial combat, bombing and/or flight over hostile territory where the risk of enemy fire and capture is substantial. The threat of attack alone does not prohibit the assignment of women. The proximity to enemy territory and the enemy's ability to take prisoners are the key elements. Both criteria must be met to preclude assigning women.

Are Air Force women pilots ready to forgo these restriction and enter the world of aerial combat? The survey data indeed reveal that female pilots want the challenge of combat (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Perceptions About Each Other
(Percent Distribution)

Female ^c	Male ^a	Female ^a	Male ^b	Female ^b Male ^c
	Combat career	I am receptive to restrictions on combat aircraft	Male Pilots are receptive to women flying combat aircraft	Women want to fly combat aircraft
Strongly Agree	17	2	14	60 11 42
Agree	30	17	37	21 28 27
Undecided	8	13	40	8 16 9
Disagree	23	47	4	7 30 18
Strongly Disagree	4	22	21	5 4 15
Total (%)	100	100	100	100 100 100
Sample Size	(159)	(224)	(151)	(224)(158)(224)
Mean Score ^d	.03	1.68	.61	1.26-.101.85

a For the exact question see item #7 appendix A

b For the exact question see item #8 appendix A

c For the exact question see item #6 appendix A.

d The range is from 2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree). The scoring for item 7 was reversed for compatibility

Female pilots voiced strong support for a combat role for women. Fully sixty percent of female pilots strongly agreed that they should be allowed fly combat air craft. Over eighty percent of female pilots believed that women aviators deserve the opportunity to fly in combat roles.

Men pilots were generally in agreement that female pilots want to be combat pilots. Over half of the male pilots indicated that they felt "women want the opportunity to fly combat aircraft." So, even though male pilots apparently underestimate the extent to which female pilots seek a combat role, the valence of their attitudes is the same: a majority of both male and female pilots agree that female pilots want a combat role.

Given that women desire the opportunity to fly combat missions, would this create gender-based animosities among male pilots? Would formal and informal institutional pressures create resistance to the integration of female pilots into the male-only job of flying combat aircraft?

Female pilots do not feel that male combat pilots will receive them well. Sixty-eight percent of female pilots indicated that they anticipated discrimination from male pilots if women were allowed to fly in combat roles. Male pilots, for their part, were surprisingly willing to voice support for female combat pilots. Though the median responses of men pilots indicates neutrality on this issue, the modal response was one of support. Certainly attitudes do not determine behavior, but the attitudinal foundations which will underlie the behaviors of male aviators towards females do not seem to be profoundly negative, as one might expect.

Why would women seek to fly a combat air plane? The responses "why not?" or "because it's there" may well be sufficient but fail to include a more fundamental reason: career advancement and leadership opportunities. In terms of formal authority, status, or prestige, combat pilots are well cared for. In addition, many non-combat positions involving the management and deployment of combat aircraft can only be secured by prior service in combat roles. Restricting women to non-combat roles in effect restricts them from holding the higher-prestige positions that are presently held by men who have been promoted out of the combat cockpit.

The data indicate that male pilots are neutral on the proposition that combat restrictions on women hinder their careers. This finding may be conditioned by the nature of the question. Certainly all ranks are open to women. The male pilots may be responding to the reality of women colonels and generals and not the the fact that, e.g., a wing commander carries more weight than

a base commander, even though their ranks may be identical. Thus here the responses of male pilots may be artificially weak.

The female pilots, perhaps more sensitive to their own blocked opportunities, agree that combat restrictions hinder their careers. Their modal response indicates strong agreement that their career opportunities are hampered by the current policy.

Overall, men pilots underestimate the extent to which women seek a combat role; they are marginally positive or accepting of female combat pilots; and they are neutral on the extent to which combat restrictions limit the career opportunities of female pilots. These results are surprising because they are not negative. The attitudes of current and former combat pilots are reflective of the social and institutional milieu within which female combat pilots would operate. Hence, gaining acceptance by male pilots may require demonstrating competence more than overcoming gender-based discrimination.

Physical Ability and Emotional Stability

Justification for the combat restriction often rests on beliefs about women's physical ability and emotional stability. In Table 2 male and female attitudes are compared on these issues. Both male

TABLE 2

		Women Pilots Have the Ability To Fly Combat Aircraft (Percent Distribution)					
		Hand/Eye Coordination ^a		Physical Ability ^b		Emotional Stability ^c	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Strongly Agree		37	96	20	86	20	79
Agree	47	4	38	12	36	19	
Undecided	8	-	18	1	23	1	
Disagree	4	-	18	1	13	1	
Strongly Disagree		3	-	7	-	8	-
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Sample Size	(156)	(224)	(159)	(224)	(160)	(224)	
Mean Score ^d	1.08	1.96	0.49	1.83	0.47	1.77	

a For the exact question see item #1 appendix A

b For the exact question see item #2 appendix A

c For the exact question see item #3 appendix A

d The range is from 2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree).

and female pilots agree that women possess the required dexterity. Eighty-four percent of male pilots and all female pilots are in agreement on this point. Female pilots are far more emphatic, however, with 96 percent indicating strong agreement as compared to 37 percent of the male pilots.

In the case of strength and stamina, men continue to agree but with less uniformity. Fifty-eight percent of male pilots agree that female pilots are physically able to fly combat aircraft, while 25% disagree. Of the female pilots, 98% agree and only one percent felt that physical ability should limit them to non-combat roles.

Fifty-six percent of male pilots and 98 percent of female pilots agree that female pilots are emotionally prepared to fly combat missions. This finding is interesting in two respects. First, one might expect male pilots to voice greater disagreement concerning the emotional stability of female pilots. However, the modal response of male pilots was one of agreement. Second, it is interesting that the responses concerning physical and emotional strength were statistically quite similar, for both groups of pilots. One might expect differences between the responses concerning physical and emotional strength. On average, men are clearly physically stronger than women. But men are not clearly stronger than women emotionally. The performance gap between male and female athletes seems to reflect differences in physical not emotional strength. It is curious, therefore, that both male and female pilots treat physical and emotional preparedness similarly.

Overall, both male and female pilots agree that women would be able combat pilots. With an average mean score of 0.68, male pilots are solidly in agreement on this point, while female pilots are almost unanimous in their strong agreement concerning their abilities to fill a combat role. The average mean score for female pilots of 1.85 reflects 99+ percent agreement that women can perform to standards while in combat.

The finding that male pilots generally agree that women would make able combat pilots is surprising. Given the nature of the sample of male pilots, one could expect far less support for female combat pilots. This sample which includes retirees with significant combat experience, is older, more conservative, and less familiar with women pilots than their active duty counterparts. Therefore, one is likely to find even greater agreement concerning the abilities of female pilots to fill combat roles among active duty combat pilots. This finding is important because it indicates that the social and institutional barriers to women flying in combat reflect merely the institutional extension of a fading belief system and not any real inability. What is most surprising is that this

institutional mythology is believed neither by those in the cockpits nor those who are promoted out of them and serve as the institutional functionaries who have sustained the policy.

Policy Proposals

The respondents were asked about women and specific combat roles (See Table 3). In the first question the group was asked whether female pilots should be allowed to fly all missions in aircraft they are currently allowed to operate. This reform would allow women to fly in combat, but only in the aircraft for which they are presently certified. Women could drop cargo in a combat zone, but would remain restricted from flying high-status aircraft such as the F-16 and F-14 fighters.

TABLE 3
Women Pilots Role In Combat
(Percent Distribution)
All Missions in Present Aircraft^a All Missions and All Aircraft^b

Male	All Missions in Present Aircraft ^a		All Missions and All Aircraft ^b	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Strongly Agree	29		78	18
Agree	42		12	18
Undecided	6		4	10
Disagree	16		4	25
Strongly Disagree	7		1	29
Total (%)	100		100	100
Sample Size	(160)		(224)	(158)
Mean Score ^c	0.70		1.59-	2.91-5.8

a For the exact question see item #4 appendix A

b For the exact question see item #5 appendix A

c The range is from 2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree).

Seventy-one percent of male pilots and 90 percent of female pilots agree that the roles of female pilots should be expanded to include combat duty. The modal response of the male pilot is one of agreement; the modal response of the female pilots is one of strong agreement. These responses seem to indicate an attitude that if women can fly the air plane, they can fly the air plane in combat. This finding is significant because it means that the logical first step for integrating female pilots into combat roles would be widely accepted by their male counterparts.

Men and women were sharply divided over the possibility of women flying all missions in all aircraft. The modal response of male pilots was strong disagreement while for female pilots it was strong agreement. However, the modes mask significant differences of opinion within the sample of male pilots. The mean score for the male pilots (-0.29) indicates indecision, or at worst only marginal disagreement, while the mean score for the female pilots (1.58) sustains their strong belief that no barriers should exist.

These findings show a limited bias against female pilots. Although there is significant variation in responses, in general, the men are ready to have female colleagues drop bombs but not be fire missels from sleek aircraft. The differences in attitudes between the two samples may reflect an uncertainty on the part of the male pilots that females can meet the demands required of supersonic fighter pilots. The findings may also reflect an over enthusiastic judgement among the female pilots that they can meet such demands. If this is the case, then the question of extending the role of female pilots to all aircraft is appropriately an empirical one, a question of physiological abilities. The attitudes of male pilots largely reflect uncertainty. As women prove themselves able or unable to perform in the most demanding of aircraft in the most demanding of situations, one could expect those attitudes to crystalize. Given the indecision of the male pilots and the overwhelming willingness of female pilots to fill these new roles, some attempt to test the hypothesis that female pilots are fully capable seems justified. It is important to recognize that such a test would meet with little if any resistance from male pilots.

Conclusion

This research effort addressed several questions about women pilots in combat. We asked whether today's female pilot was ready to take on this role. The results of the survey were a resounding YES. The modal response on all questions dealing with willingness to fly and ability to perform was strongly agree. The strength of the conviction is profound and nearly unanimous.

The second set of questions addressed deal with male pilot attitudes toward their sister aviators entering the combat arena. The results demonstrate that men have confidence in female physical and emotional ability. For example, only 7 percent of the men believed that women lacked sufficient hand/eye coordination to fly combat aircraft. The men also believed that women should be allowed to fly their current aircraft under combat conditions(70 percent). Most of the aircraft flown by women are large multi-

engine machines with crews. The male response indicates their acceptance of women pilots in combat leadership roles. The men, however were unenthusiastic about women flying the fast, high prestige aircraft such as the F-16. Only 36 percent agreed to the idea.

Overall, the men were more accepting of women pilots in combat than we expected. The male pilots are older and have significantly more combat experience than today's active duty pilot. We expected this group to be more conservative. The results suggest that men would be willing to accept female pilots in additional combat roles.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Items Used in this Study

Scale: A. - Strongly agree D. - Disagree
 B. - Agree E. - Strongly disagree
 C. - Undecided

1. Women pilots have the flying ability (hand/eye coordination) to fly any combat aircraft.
 A B C D E

2. Women pilots have the physical ability (stamina and strength) to fly any combat aircraft.
 A B C D E

3. Women pilots have the emotional stability to fly and combat aircraft.
 A B C D E

4. If the Air Force policy on Title 10 is not lifted altogether, women should be allowed to perform all missions in those aircraft they are presently allowed to fly (ex. C-141 Airdrop, C-130 TAC Airlift).
 A B C D E

5. All Air Force aircraft and missions should be open to women pilots.

A B C D E

6. Not being able to fly combat aircraft hinders my military career and stops upward progression.

A B C D E

6*. Not being able to fly combat aircraft hinders women pilots' military careers and stops their upward progression.

A B C D E

7. Male pilots are receptive toward women flying combat aircraft

A B C D E

7.* I am receptive toward women flying combat aircraft.

A B C D E

8. I want the opportunity to fly combat aircraft.

A B C D E

8.* Women want the opportunity to fly any combat aircraft.

A B C D E

* Questions as modified for the male sample.