

AIR FORCE AND WOMEN - A SHORT HISTORIC AND RESEARCH INSIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Women have proved their abilities both as combatants and soldiers, which also applies to women in aircraft, whence banning women from taking part in combat operations means violation of equality and opportunities for gaining military experience as which is a form of gender discrimination.

Women pilots display far superior characteristics compared to general female population, but it is also true that flying, especially military aircraft, considering specific challenges and risks involved, is a far more demanding job compared to most other professions, regardless of the gender performing it.

The author of the article aims to emphasize that, instead of gender criteria, pilots, as well as all other military specialties, should rather be selected primarily on the basis of precise standards of physical and psychological fitness established and valid in the airforce.

Women have taken part in the military in different ways throughout the history of conflict into this day. The example best known to us is women's taking on different duties in Croatian military during the Homeland Defence War.

Since the 1970 the militaries have opened more and more posts to women, although not to all segments. However, except for sporadic cases (such as collective assignment of women in the US Air Force during the WW II), they have not been provided equal systematic guidance and training for the duty. A worthy example of women's engagement in war was that of 1074 women pilots of the WASP, who piloted 12 560 planes of almost all types (smallest and training as well as heavy bomber aircraft), flew over 60 000 000 miles and were instructors for hundreds of other pilots. 38 of them lost their lives while on duty.

They were banned from direct combat deployment, but they were admitted into the military (transport) following the war too.

In the intervention forces deployed in Grenada in 1983 there were also 200 women, among whom 24 pilots, flight engineers and loading supervisors. Women were in crews of air tankers but were also piloting aircraft from the carriers during the counter-terrorist intervention campaign in Libya in 1986 (Schneider and Schneider, 1988).

Today in the US military, and some other militaries too, women take part in non-combat military operations (combat support - reconnaissance, transport and training).

Canada in 1987 lifted ban to women in Air Force, and they were sent for combat flight training and included into combat, tactical and anti-submarine helicopter crews (Enloe 1983, Stanley and Segal, 1988).

Norwegian Parliament in 1984 passed the law allowing women into military operations and different specialist duties (either as soldiers, NCOs or officers in the Army, Navy and Air Force). Denmark too in 1988 also lifted all limitations to women in the military.

In Belgium and the Netherlands women are allowed to serve at all duties in the Air Force including combat.

Germany, UK, Greece, Israel and Australia allow women in their military but exclude them from combat (Binkin and Bach, 1977; Enloe, 1988; Stanley and Segal, 1988 - more sources consulted)

Former Soviet Union was among the first countries to have many women in the military - in combat operations and in fighter aircraft regiments too. As many as 91 women earned the title of Heroes of the Soviet Union, among whom 23 women pilots (Griesse & Stites, 1982).

RESEARCH AND EXAMPLES

Research by military psychologists proved women in rear echelons and in combat support services as good soldiers, not a readiness impairing factor (Birkin & Bach, 1977; Johnson et. al. 1978).

In an experimental and controlled initiative in Canada women were assigned to posts in the Army, the Air Force and the Navy, and even in a Canadian base in Africa, which revealed no negative effects on unit effectiveness (Park, 1986). It was followed by a 2-year long controlled research known as "engaging women in combat operations". Very positive experiences in that regard led to lifting ban on deployment of women in combat operations, except for submariners.

Despite psychological studies findings, women in the military have worse prospects for career than men. Promotion demands as a rule are stricter for "female" posts, and exclusion from combat duties is a negative discrimination, as combat-related posts offer quicker promotion and largest compensation (Schneider & Schneider, 1988). In the US military, as in other militaries too, women officers hardly attain senior command levels (colonel rank and beyond).

The same is with the Air Force too. However, more and more research is done on women-pilots:

"Personality and behaviour of female pilots of US Air Force. "Right stuff" or "Pilot personality" refer to male functioning, whereas it is unknown what personality comes into cockpit with a woman-pilot.

Sien and Murray showed that of 5 main characteristics determining successful pilots (neuroticism - emotional stability, extroversion, openness to new experiences, agreement-mindedness and commitment) experienced pilots prioritize commitment or responsibility. The research revealed higher extroversion, agreement-mindedness and commitment, and even more of the positive of "pilot personality" in women. Attitude questionnaire on crew functioning did not detect significant differences between men and women.

Research on cognitive abilities and personality characteristics in pilot school attendants - showed women performing well above average on intelligence tests and also better than men on encoding and memory tests, whereas their male colleagues did psychomotor tests too. Women cadets showed more ambition, decisiveness and openness to new experiences, as well as above average intellectual capability than the rest of female population. Gender differences were found to affect performance in cognitive tests and in personality variables too, although the impact on duty performance still is unknown.

4) Research on intellectual abilities of men and women in the US Air Force -

Between intellectual abilities of men and women only moderate differences were found. Men's abilities are variable and hence dense along the IQ distribution. There were no significant differences found between male and female IQ in this research. Pilot population evinces on average high and very high IQ, as a result of manifold selection and self-selection.

- Women pilots in US Air Force - equal or different from men pilots - (King, Collister, Retzhalf, Flynn & James) - according to this research psychological structure of women pilots still has not been studied enough, and for reason of small sample compared to men pilots. Novello & Youssef, however found in their research on 87 women pilots that their psychological characteristics are closer to men pilots' than to the rest of female population. Stress tolerance and emotion control (psychological endurance) make a decisive factor for military pilots, regardless of their gender.

Jerrie (Geraldine) Cobb (7000 flight hours and 3 world records) was the first woman to take all the three stages of the US Mercury astronaut program in 1961. Major Jacquelyn (Jackie) S. Parker was the first American woman member of the F-16 combat squadron. She had dreamed of becoming a pilot, and had learned to pilot aircraft before she passed her driving test, and as a result she made 3000 flight hours on over 25 types of aircraft, encompassing F-16, F-111, F-4, C-141 and KC-135 up to T-38 and UH-60 Blackhawk.

Colonel Patricia (Trish) L. Beckman was the first woman in the world trained and qualified to be a F-15E crew member. By 1999, when she retired, she made a 28-year long career in Air Force and aeronautic industry, with over 3000 flight hours on 66 types of aircraft, the 2-hour supersonic flight episode on F-111 D, and co-piloting the Italian GR-1 Tornado on the honorary flight over Pope's Palace. She wrote in 1995: "Piloting a military aircraft is the most exciting form of aviation. My desire to fly it stemmed from my warrior-like nature".

The name of the first woman selected as a space aircraft member was lieutenant Eileen Marie Collins, previously an Air Force flight instructor on T-38 and commander of C-141. She married a pilot too, and had a daughter.

Asked by a journalist on how she handled being a woman in a prevailing male surrounding, Diana Doboš, lieutenant and flight instructor on Pilatus PC-9 of the Croatian Air Force, said; "The military maybe isn't a natural setting for a woman, who might deviate from the classical and expected female behaviour seeking male protection. But what a woman can learn in the military is to become independent, to make decisions by herself and to think in a practical and creative way. But she can absolutely learn to do the job equally as well as any male pilot".

People choose pilot training for many reasons, primarily because of inclination towards aviation and the intention to use their talents and be respected for that, but they above all cherish the sense of belonging to the aviation family.

In Croatian Air Force there are five women pilots at the moment, two of them pilot MI-8 and MTV-1 helicopters, and the rest are flight instructors (on U-75 aircraft, on Bell-206 helicopter and on PC-9 Pilatus respectively). There is no restriction in Croatian Armed Forces in engaging women pilots, and female cadets undergo the same selection as male cadets do.

To conclude we may claim that women have during the war too proven to be worthy combatants and soldiers, and that applies to women in the Air Force too. Therefore, to ban women from combat operations means discriminating them in the sense of getting military experience too. Also, women pilots stand out from the general female population, as does flying

(and especially in Air Force) itself stand out from other professions for its specific demands and risks for human organism regardless of gender. The author aimed to suggest that the best practice for each military specialty, and the Air Force too, would be to take established physical and psychological standards and not gender as criteria for selecting pilot candidates.