

The Girls Come Marching Home: Stories of Women Warriors Returning from the War in Iraq¹

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The United States Code prohibits women soldiers from participating in most combat roles,³ but, in modern warfare, it often seems as though the prohibition has little practical effect.⁴ The number of women serving in Iraq, and the nature of the conflict there, has more drastically eroded the combat prohibition than any legislative, judicial, or administrative action. Author Kirsten Holmstedt recorded those combat experiences in *Band of Sisters*, her previous collection of narratives from women serving in the war in Iraq.⁵ Her current work, *The Girls Come Marching Home: Stories of Women Warriors Returning from the War in Iraq*, is a nonfiction collection of narrative accounts intended to show both the contribution that women have made to the war effort in Iraq and the effect of the war on those women soldiers when they return home.

Holmstedt's collection of narratives sharply contrasts with the traditional viewpoint on women in combat, that "[w]ar is man's work" and that we "have to protect the manliness

¹ KIRSTEN HOLMSTEDT, *THE GIRLS COME MARCHING HOME: STORIES OF WOMEN WARRIORS RETURNING FROM THE WAR IN IRAQ* (2009) [hereinafter *THE GIRLS COME MARCHING HOME*].

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³ See 10 U.S.C. § 652 (2006) (requiring the Secretary of Defense to give Congress thirty days to respond before enacting any changes to the combat exclusion for women). The prohibition was formerly explicitly codified under 10 U.S.C. § 6015 and 10 U.S.C. § 8549. 10 U.S.C. § 6015 (1988) (repealed 1993); 10 U.S.C. § 8549 (1988) (repealed 1991). For further information, see Linda Strite Murnane, *Legal Impediments to Service: Women in the Military and the Rule of Law*, 14 DUKE J. GENDER L. & POL'Y 1061 (2007) (generally discussing women and barriers to service).

⁴ WILLIAM N. ESKRIDGE, JR., & NAN D. HUNTER, *SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND THE LAW* 692 n.i (2d ed. 2004) (explaining that, historically, American women have served as combat soldiers since the Revolutionary War by posing as men and have been exposed to combat during service in combat zones since World War II).

⁵ KIRSTEN HOLMSTEDT, *BAND OF SISTERS: AMERICAN WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ* (2007).

of war,”⁶ by highlighting a common theme running through all her subjects’ recollections: war is not fought by men or women, but by soldiers. In the introduction, Holmstedt quotes a female U.S. Marine drill instructor who served in Iraq.⁷ Her convoy was pinned down, and she gave the order to her unit to open fire.⁸ She remembers being proud that her soldiers all responded exactly as they had been trained to do.⁹ Holmstedt recalls that “[w]hen [the female drill instructor] finished telling the story, she said, ‘Oh, and by the way, they were all women.’”¹⁰ We have commonly assumed that war is where sex differences matter most, but instead, when hearing these stories, the reader is struck by the characterization of gender as mere afterthought.

The Girls Come Marching Home includes twelve full-length and six shorter narratives, as well as a series of photos of women soldiers, both in service and in civilian life. The author states that her purpose was to chronicle the experiences of women soldiers returning home from Iraq.¹¹ She explains that women returning from Iraq “keep quiet and do their jobs until someone else turns the spotlight on them. This book is that spotlight.”¹² The narratives begin with the experiences the women soldiers had in Iraq and then turn to detailed descriptions of their experiences of adjusting to life back at home.

Holmstedt’s style is informal and colloquial, and her stylistic choices ultimately serve to draw the reader into the story presented by the soldier being profiled. The reader walks away with a profound understanding of what service and recovery

⁶ See Kenneth L. Karst, *The Pursuit of Manhood and the Desegregation of the Armed Forces*, 38 UCLA L. REV. 499, 534 (1991) (quoting General Robert H. Barrow, Commandant of the Marine Corps).

⁷ THE GIRLS COME MARCHING HOME, *supra* note 1, at ix.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

from service in the Iraq War is like, both for soldiers generally, and for women in particular. In reliving the trauma these women experienced, and their reactions to that trauma, it can be all too easy to empathize with the emotional responses of the subjects Holmstedt ultimately required psychological treatment for secondary trauma as a result of researching and writing this book, a subject she discusses in detail in the postscript.¹³

Trauma is the overriding theme of this collection of stories, especially trauma more often than not caused by an undiscovered improvised explosive device (“IED”), as well as trauma resulting in traumatic brain injury (“TBI”) or posttraumatic stress disorder (“PTSD”).¹⁴ The stories narrated by Holmstedt provide a picture of a war where the enemy is frequently unseen and tragedy can strike with barely a moment’s notice. Holmstedt’s subjects are career soldiers who had no illusions about the immediate dangers they would face in an active war zone. When the enemy can be seen, too often the enemy is a teenager or even a child. For example, Army Sergeant Stacy Blackburn was the only female

¹³ *Id.* at 309-14.

¹⁴ A brief review of the index illustrates the point: there are fifty-nine page references under the topic “IEDs” and twenty-eight page references under “post-traumatic stress disorder.” *Id.* at 323-24. Nine of the female veterans profiled have sought treatment for PTSD. *Id.* at 10, 43, 93, 105, 187, 214, 221, 268, 288. Two of the female veterans profiled suffer from both PTSD and TBI. *Id.* at 43, 104-05. One has been diagnosed with TBI only. *Id.* at 76. The Department of Defense estimates that as many as 360,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may have suffered TBIs. Greg Zoroya, *360,000 Vets May Have Brain Injuries*, USA TODAY (McLean, Virginia), Mar. 5, 2009, at 4A. TBI ranges from mild to severe and can affect all aspects of mental functioning, including thinking, sensation, language, and emotion. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Injury Prevention and Control: Traumatic Brain Injury, <http://www.cdc.gov/TraumaticBrainInjury/outcomes.html> (last visited August 9, 2010) (listing the possible long-term effects of TBI and providing recovery advice). With regard to the last category, people who suffer from TBI may show symptoms of depression, anxiety, personality changes, aggression, acting out, and social inappropriateness. *Id.* Furthermore, even mild repeated TBIs can cause cumulative defects or be fatal. *Id.* PTSD, on the other hand, involves the development of certain characteristic symptoms following direct, personal exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor. AM. PSYCHIATRIC ASS’N, DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS 463 (4th ed., text rev., 2000) (defining the “essential feature” of PTSD). These stressors generally involve the threat of death or serious injury and evoke a response of “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” *Id.*

in a group of forty who regularly traveled in the convoy between Tikrit and Ramadi.¹⁵ She ultimately went on over two hundred convoys during her period of active service in Iraq.¹⁶ She experienced IED attacks on twenty of them.¹⁷ On one particular occasion, when Blackburn found herself facing the enemy, she was surprised to see a young boy who appeared to be about seven years old and was firing at her convoy from an overpass.¹⁸ First, she froze. Then, she intentionally shot over his shoulder.¹⁹ Conversely, Sergeant Michelle Barefield was surprised at her lack of empathy.²⁰ In her story, she relates that “[m]ost people think that . . . women would feel sorry for the women and children in Iraq. But all I felt was anger and almost hatred. I was surprised. There were twelve-year-old children threatening us with IEDs and [rocket-propelled grenades].”²¹

However, the book also reminds us that, although the training and character of the women may have carried them through the bombings and firefights, it did not prepare them for dealing with the emotional and mental toll of repeated trauma upon returning home. The story of Army Master Sergeant C.J. Robison is particularly moving. Holmstedt seems to have formed a special bond with this particular soldier and, in the postscript, relates how she herself grieved for Robison’s losses in the course of documenting her story.²² Robison has the intrinsic toughness of a career soldier, but when she returned home, that same toughness interfered with her ability to recognize and seek treatment for her injuries.²³ She survived six IED explosions in Iraq and, as a result

¹⁵ THE GIRLS COME MARCHING HOME, *supra* note 1, at 4.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 1-2.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 2.

²⁰ *Id.* at 79.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 311.

²³ *See id.* at 31-33 (explaining that Robison refused to seek treatment for TBI after falling from a heavy equipment truck, despite experiencing memory loss).

of her service, suffers from TBI and PTSD.²⁴ The effects were gradual but severe.²⁵ She experienced survivor's guilt, repressed emotion, and became agitated in crowds.²⁶ Holmstedt writes that, upon return to the United States in 2005, "Robison felt like she had entered some kind of fantasy land. Iraq had become her reality."²⁷ As time passed, Robison and her family realized that she could not adjust to being home and just wanted to return to military service.²⁸ Robison's mother was married to a Vietnam veteran, and she remarked on the differences between Vietnam veterans and the veterans of the current conflict in Iraq: "This is so different from Vietnam When those soldiers came home, they just wanted to be here and be accepted. The soldiers from this war all want to go back to Iraq."²⁹ Later, in 2008, Robison began to experience increased symptoms of TBI, including slowed speech, poor balance, increased perspiration, and loss of sensation.³⁰

Holmstedt emphasizes the tragedy of Robison's story through repetition of the theme that trauma changes people. Today, Robison and her family are doing their best to adjust to the changes in her abilities and personality.³¹ Robison admits that she has trouble putting her children before her soldiers but also says that she "didn't think [she] was capable of being a mom again [Her] kids loved [her] back into being a mom."³²

Holmstedt never directly argues that the combat restriction should be lifted, but the premises are there to lead the reader to that conclusion. She presents the soldiers in this collection of

²⁴ See *id.* at 31, 42-43.

²⁵ *Id.* at 31-33 (describing her symptoms in service).

²⁶ *Id.* at 47.

²⁷ *Id.* at 33.

²⁸ *Id.* at 38-39.

²⁹ *Id.* at 39.

³⁰ *Id.* at 47-48.

³¹ *Id.* at 53-55.

³² See *id.* at 55.

narratives as tough, dedicated, and effective. They are cool under fire and brave in the face of danger. In short, they display the same virtues we praise in male soldiers, but they suffer the same effects of combat, with the same symptoms.³³ The story of Army Sergeant Michelle Wilmont illustrates this point. She returned from the war with symptoms of PTSD caused by the death and injury of soldiers in her unit and by her experiences with racial and sexual harassment in service.³⁴ She was obsessively focused on revenge against the soldiers who had harassed her, compiled personal information about them, and fantasized about revenge.³⁵ She finally sought refuge in her faith, and a priest recognized her symptoms of PTSD from his past experiences counseling Vietnam veterans.³⁶ Significantly, although women in the population are more likely to suffer from PTSD, this difference does not exist in the population of combat veterans.³⁷

Much of the debate on women in combat has been speculative. There have been speculations about the emotional and physical abilities of women soldiers to handle the horrors of combat and about the reactions of male soldiers to serving with female soldiers in combat.³⁸ Some have argued that putting women on the front lines with men would weaken the national resolve by putting the ones the men are fighting for in danger alongside them.³⁹ Others argue that women are temperamentally

³³ *But see, e.g.*, Laura Fitzpatrick, *How We Fail Our Female Vets*, TIME, July 12, 2010, at 42, 42-45 (detailing the differing treatment needs of female veterans upon returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan and the efforts being undertaken by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide them with appropriate care).

³⁴ THE GIRLS COME MARCHING HOME, *supra* note 1, at 212-13.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 213-14.

³⁷ Edna B. Foa and David F. Tollen, *Sex Differences in Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Quantitative Review of 25 Years of Research*, 132 PSYCHOL. BULL. 959, 963-69 (2006).

³⁸ *See* Heather S. Ingrum Gipson, *The Fight for the Right to Fight: Equal Protection and the United States Military*, 74 UMKC L. REV. 383, 402-03 (providing a comprehensive review of the reasons historically given for excluding women from combat).

³⁹ S. REP. NO. 96-826, at 157 (1980), *reprinted in* 1980 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2612, 2647 (speculating that allowing women to serve in combat roles would weaken the national resolve).

unsuitable for combat. It has even been argued that allowing women to serve downgrades the profound commitment that a soldier makes to the country and would turn military service into a mere occupation instead of a “calling.”⁴⁰

In *The Girls Come Marching Home*, the author reminds us that, although the debate continues, women are already in the field answering the questions being raised. According to early 2009 statistics, approximately 190,000 women have served in a military aspect in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.⁴¹ Holmstedt provides real accounts of life on the ground through the stories of these women by telling the reader about the call to service that they felt and the honor with which they served, and she suggests that, contrary to the cultural assumptions about the role of women in the military, gender is merely an afterthought on the battlefield.

⁴⁰ See Kingsley Brown, *Women at War: An Evolutionary Perspective*, 49 BUFF. L. REV. 51, 61-62 (2001) (arguing that women may be less likely to possess the personality characteristics of a “warrior” and that integration in combat units would have a negative impact on the cohesiveness of the military and would encourage military service to be viewed as a mere occupation instead of as a “calling” as it has been traditionally viewed).

⁴¹ Bari Walsh, *When Mommy Comes Marching Home*, B.U. TODAY, Jan. 7, 2009, <http://www.bu.edu/today/2009/01/06/when-mommy-comes-marching-home>.