



Team Lioness

American Servicewomen in Iraq

By Meg McLagan

In September 2003, the U.S. Army's 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, based at Fort Riley, Kansas, deployed to Iraq. The 1st BCT was stationed at Forward Operating Base Junction City, in the town of Ramadi, a city located west of Fallujah, in Al Anbar province. Among the units in the 1st BCT (which is part of the "Big Red One" and known as the "Devil Brigade") was 1st Engineer battalion, an armored combat engineer battalion commanded by LTC William D. Brinkley. It was the only gender-integrated battalion on the base, with 25 women and 800 male soldiers. The only other battalion in the 1st Brigade Combat Team allowed to have women was the Forward Support Battalion, which during this time period (2003-04) was located in Al Taqqadum. The women in Brinkley's battalion included medics, mechanics, heavy equipment operators, supply clerks, cooks, and chemical decontamination specialists, among others.

Building a functioning base with a secure infrastructure was the 1st Engineers' initial task when it arrived in Ramadi in late September 2003. After about ninety days the job was completed. By this point, Ramadi had become a focal point of resistance to the U.S. occupation and there were daily attacks on the base as well as on units who ventured "outside the wire." The 1st Engineers turned their attention to searching for insurgent weapons and explosive caches with the aim of disrupting the flow of materials that might be used for IEDs and other anti-US activities in the city. This kind of work brought Brinkley and his troops into close contact with Iraqi civilians, at traffic control points and in cordon and searches in densely populated neighborhoods. Tensions, which always ran high in these contexts, was exacerbated by the presence of Iraqi women. This is a result of Iraqi men wishing to protect their loved ones as well as the general prohibition against unrelated males interacting with or touching Iraqi women. Brinkley observed that the presence of female soldiers helped reduce tensions in these encounters.

One of the things we found out as we interfaced with the people is that...a male soldier with all of his battle regalia on is intimidating. And given their culture, if you need to clear the car to go through [a traffic control point] is getting the people out of the car will create a lot of tension. Well, if I had a female soldier at that TCP, all of a sudden there wasn't that same level of tension.

Once the utility of having Army women present in certain situations became clear, Brinkley began to talk with his fellow battalion commanders in the brigade, none of whom had women in their organization, about the possibility of lending out pairs of women to all-male artillery and infantry units. The logic was that women would be temporarily attached to those combat arms units for the duration of their mission, allowing commanders to circumvent the official ban on the assignment of women to units whose primary mission is direct ground combat.

Brinkley was assisted by his headquarters company commander Captain Kate Pendry, who knew the women well enough to select which ones would go out on which missions and with whom. Although it started on an ad hoc basis, the practice quickly became regularized. With such a small pool to choose from on the base, Pendry would end up sending out the same women on numerous missions over the course of the battalion's stay in Iraq.

Team Lioness

Brinkley coined the program "Team Lioness." Many of the first Lioness teams were drawn from the platoon responsible for base construction, the 568th Combat Support Equipment, whose heavy equipment operators had less to do now that they had completed their initial task of building the base. It is worth noting that the women all had regular jobs, known as MOS's, such as dozer drivers, mechanics, supply clerks, and that the work they did as Lionesses was in addition to these jobs and was voluntary.

Initially the Lioness work entailed travelling off the base with the 1-5 Field Artillery into the city for what the Army referred to as "knock and greets," meaning visits to the local university, primary schools, local government offices, and neighborhoods where they would go door to door. Over the course of the winter, as the insurgency gathered momentum, the women began accompanying all-male units on house raids.

By the spring, a full scale rebellion against U.S. forces was underway in the Sunni Triangle. In March, the 1st BCT fell under the 1st Marines, who had taken over combat operations in the area from the 82nd Airborne. When the Marines heard about the Lioness program, they asked if they could borrow some

women to accompany their male infantry units who were busy fighting in Fallujah. After the killing of Blackwater contractors that month, the fighting in Fallujah quickly spread to Ramadi and by April 2004 the 1st Engineers, along with the rest of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, and the 2-4 Marines, were involved in running street battles throughout the downtown area.

The Army's Lioness program was continued after Brinkley's battalion left Iraq in September 2004. The Army unit that replaced them in Ramadi had Lionesses and the practice of attaching women to all-male units soon spread to other areas of the country, including Baghdad, and across services. Inspired by their experiences with the Army women, the Marine Corps created its own Lioness program in 2005. American servicewomen continue to do this kind of work today in Iraq, supplemented by a recently formed program called "Daughters of Iraq," which is designed to have Iraqi women to conduct security searches to stem the growing tide of female suicide bombers.

LIONESS: The Documentary

LIONESS, a feature documentary film that I co-directed with Daria Sommers, tells the story of five of the original Lionesses who served in Ramadi in 2003-04. The film uses verite footage, interviews, journal excerpts, and archival material to explore this little-known chapter of U.S. military history. The grey zone of recognition these women operate in—both as soldiers and combat veterans—drives the narrative of the film forward. Their personal stories, variety in backgrounds, and post-Iraq challenges take viewers through the complex issues that female participation in combat provokes.

One of the things we learned during our three years of filming was that the nebulous policy area in which this first group and subsequent Lionesses groups operate can lead to serious consequences. The combat exclusion policy means women are not able to gain access to the same training as their combat arms counterparts. Excluding women from combat also

can invite disrespect in that it can lead to women not being treated as full members of the team and create conditions for harassment.

The practice of attaching women on a temporary basis to all male units is a convenient loophole that enables commanders on the ground to reduce violence without violating policy. But because it does not create a paper trail, it can limit a female soldier's chances of being officially recognized as a combatant. Proof of having served in combat is important for determining benefits available to veterans. Without documentation, it is harder for women to get the help they need for combat-related trauma. Lack of recognition of combatant status also inhibits a woman's ability to ascend to the highest ranks in the military where she can assume a meaningful leadership role and help shape national policy. One of our aims in making *LIONESS* was to contribute to a national conversation of these issues.

The Face of "Soft Power"

The women who participated in the Lioness program became an integral part of America's counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq. Their stories, and the larger film of which they are a part, are a testament to the growing recognition of the need for a national security strategy that focuses more on civilian protection and persuasion and less on coercive force. The Army has come to the conclusion that cultural knowledge is a critical part of this endeavor. Its use of American soldiers to interface with Iraqi women and children is one example of this kind of "soft power" strategy at work. It remains unclear how successful the military's recent embrace of social scientists and "cultural counselors" has been as it runs the risk of reifying culture and reducing it to simplistic stereotypes. Nevertheless, the need for commanders to understand complex local cultural and political forces remains clear

And it is from this that the Lioness program emerged.

For more information and to purchase a copy of the film, please visit our website: www.lionesthefilm.com.

Meg McLagan is a documentary filmmaker and cultural anthropologist. She is the co-director and co-producer with Daria Sommers of *LIONESS*, which won the Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award at Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in 2008, and was recently broadcast on the PBS series *Independent Lens*. Her short film *Tibet in Exile*, co-directed with Barbara Banks, aired on public television and was screened at festivals and museums in the U.S. and Europe. She began her film career working as a producer of the film *Paris is Burning* which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and both the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics Circle Award for Best Documentary.

Meg graduated from Yale with a BA in English Literature, and earned a doctorate in cultural anthropology from New York University.



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