

Status of Women Soldiers

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) continue to rage on although the faces of the war no longer dominate the headlines and media images. Politics and personal views on war aside, let's take a closer look on the toll the current war is taking on our men and women in uniform and their loved ones.

To date, there have been 4,820 casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan (at press time). Of those lives lost, approximately 80 percent of those deaths have been classified as hostile or are the result of an enemy attack.

According to the National Center on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 40 percent of OEF/OIF troops have/may acquire PTSD. Rates of this increasingly common disorder are on the rise for all soldiers, with women being disproportionately impacted. The effects of PTSD seem to have a delayed impact on OIF and OEF troops and impact them as they return home to family, friends and the workplace.

As we end the year, Business and Professional Women/USA (BPW/USA) wanted to check the status of women soldiers, a segment of working women who are often overlooked and under-appreciated. These brave women will become women veterans, a population that BPW/USA and BPW Foundation are dedicated to supporting through *Women Joining Forces* programming and research.

First, a bit of perspective:

There were 7,500 female troops in Vietnam; 41,000 in the Gulf War. Today, there are 160,500 female troops engaged in OEF/OIF. This is a 1 in 10 female-to-male soldier ratio. Currently, women comprise 15 percent of military troops.

From 2003 until August 2008, the deaths of 13 Army women and one Navy woman in Iraq and Afghanistan (including Kuwait and Bahrain) have been classified as suicides. Many argue that the lack of support for women soldiers suffering from PTSD and emotional impacts of sexual assault has contributed to these deaths.



Casualties

This July, a milestone was reached: 100 female service members died in Iraq since the start of OIF.

To date, 109 U.S. female soldiers have died in Iraq. As of Aug. 2008, 14 have been killed in Afghanistan or OEF.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Reasons for a disproportionate impact of PTSD on women include factors such as caregiving and employment pressures.

Research continues to show that U.S. women serving in Iraq suffer from more pronounced and debilitating

forms of PTSD than their male counterparts. The rate of female-to-male combat PTSD is 2 to 1. Eight percent to 10 percent of active-duty women and retired military women who served in Iraq suffer from PTSD.

Unfortunately two-thirds of troops meeting DoD criteria for PTSD felt stigmatized from seeking help.

Sexual Assault

VA-treated females noting rape/attempted rape while in service to their country: 4 in 10. In July 2008, an oversight hearing was held to investigate the military handling of sexual assault reports. Testimony revealed that 37 percent were raped multiple times: 14 percent were gang-raped. As Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) testified, "We have an epidemic here," she said. "Women serving in the U.S. military today are more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire in Iraq."

General Statistics

More than 17 percent of military women are officers; one percent higher than male counterparts. The growth in seniority of women veterans is expected to continue.

Homeless OEF/OIF veterans are estimated at 500-1,000. Women remain to be homeless at least 3 times likely as their non-military female counterparts.

What does it all mean? Our military sisters and brothers need our support, commitment and advocacy. Remember that these are U.S. citizens who answer the call to serve their country.

For more information, visit www.womenjoining-forces.org. 