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Review by Norma Caamal

Beyond the Call: Three Women on the Front Lines of Afghanistan

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Beyond the Call: Three Women on the Front Lines in Afghanistan, recounts the stories of three US military service women who served in various capacities in Afghanistan. Each service woman led a female engagement team (FET) on missions with the potential to acquire Taliban intelligence from Afghan women, to help these women start businesses to obtain financial independence, and to educate women and girls. However, the original FET leaders met resistance from their commanding officers, who did not allow service women to leave the forward operating bases unless accompanied by male infantry members thereby hindering FET mission execution. Even when the female warriors got permission to catch a ride with a convoy, the service men persistently limited the amount of combat engagement in which the FETs could participate, restricting the FET's planned missions. Although many of the missions they engaged in involved combat fire and enemy raids, the US government did not recognize the accomplishments of these FET leaders as combat veterans. Having actually engaged in military combat was a significant determinant in eligibility of military promotions, health and retirement benefits for service women and veterans. Military policy prohibited combat engagement by women but many FET service women fought, sustained injuries, and died in combat. Without any proof, service women could not claim their well-earned benefits during or after military service as veterans, driving them to sue the military forces.

The author, Eileen Rivers, is an US Army veteran who served in Kuwait shortly after Operation Desert Strike in 1996. The author's assignment included collecting intelligence as an Arabic linguist in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Rivers attended gender-integrated US Army basic training in 1995 where, for the first time, male and female service members would learn basic combat tactics together. With over 15 years of journalism experience, she is currently an editor and a member of the editorial board at *USA Today*, and previously wrote for the *Washington Post*. Rivers reported on the Iraq and Afghan Wars with which she had great familiarity.

The goal of *Beyond the Call* is to tell the stories of three US service women who were instrumental in the success of the FETs working missions to gather intelligence and search Afghan women during the Afghanistan conflict. However, the ultimate objective is to collect the necessary evidence so these courageous women can receive the recognition from the US government as combat veterans. During and after their military service, these warrior women and veterans fought for the right to the same benefits as male combatants and veterans, such as medical and retirement benefits.

Beyond the Call is arranged into several sections. "The Chronology: A History of Women in the Military" section, summarizes the countless accomplishments of military women starting with the Revolutionary War through the Afghanistan conflict. In "Preface: Finding Women's Stories of War," the author discusses the effectiveness of FET members collecting intelligence in Middle Eastern combat zones. Rivers describes her efforts to reveal military members' combat involvement through their lenses and not through those of journalists lacking military experience. The author asked all *Military Times* newspapers to run a promotion inviting military members to share combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan by uploading pictures and words to a designated website. As an additional vehicle, Rivers altered an active online tool where service members could easily submit their pictures for prompt publication on the web. She notes especially how submissions from female combatants

were few in number. The “Prologue” introduces the actions of service woman Mary Rodriguez, and three FET members as they helped US soldiers find a suspected Taliban terrorist during a 2011 raid in an Afghan house.

Two major parts divide this book from “Part One: Battle,” containing five sections. The first section, “Jamila Abbas” (chapters 1 and 2), describes the Taliban’s 1996 invasion of Kabul, followed by Abbas’s story. Abbas is an Afghan schoolteacher forced by the Taliban to abandon her profession and town to avoid constant violence against her family. In the second section, “The Women of Team Lioness” (chapters 3 and 4), US Army women faced combat fire in 2004 Iraq, although their mission was limited to searching residences and intelligence gathering. By 2006, the Marines had created the Iraqi Women’s Engagement Program and continued using Team Lioness’ assistance during the Afghanistan conflict. The third section, “Sheena Adams” (chapters 5 and 6), recounts how the Marine Corps mechanic (for whom the chapter is titled) got her first opportunity in 2010, to volunteer for an Afghanistan FET mission that met resistance from the infantrymen, whose priorities overwrote those of the FET. It was in this seven-month mission that Adams experienced a traumatic head injury after surviving an IED explosion that blew up her military vehicle.

The fourth section, “Maria Rodriguez,” consists of chapters 7 to 12. In chapter 7, the Army Major explained how Afghan leaders marginalized their female police officers and the Major, similar to the way the US commanders hindered the progress of FET missions. Chapter 8 highlights the resistance and suspicion that Major Rodriguez endured when attempting to reach out to the Afghan policewomen to ask how the FET could help. In chapter 9, the Major recounted how the FET missions suffered because US service women were not allowed to drive off base unless accompanied by a man, and how she had to wait, and rely on males to make room for her in their convoys. Notwithstanding numerous setbacks, the Major’s patience paid off when the Afghan policewomen slowly opened up to the FET and accepted support, as expounded upon in chapter 10. In chapter 11, Major Rodriguez conducted a joint training exercise with the Romanian FET and the Afghan Female Police (AFP). The AFP lacked resources, but the Major made progress when her request for AFP police uniforms materialized. Finally, in chapter 12, the Major moved near a different village where she tried to encourage Afghan women to attend FET sponsored workshops. The Afghan women longed for financial empowerment and voting rights without fear of Taliban reprisal.

The fifth section, “Johanna Smoke” (chapters 13 to 18), details the experiences of an Army intelligence officer. In chapter 13, the Captain received orders to join a Woman in the Army (WITA) program to study how women performed during combat missions. In the following chapter, Captain Smoke’s 2013 arrival in Afghanistan found the women’s center bombed by insurgents. She ensured the center received the needed repairs so the director, Jamila, could continue helping Afghan women and girls to escape Taliban extremist values. The next chapter details how the AFP had made little progress since Major Rodriguez left in 2012. Nevertheless, Captain Smoke’s FETs were more independent to make mission decisions, and received more military support than the Major did, which enabled Jamila to carry out her secret voter registration efforts for Afghan women. In chapter 16, Captain Smoke convinced her military unit to give Jamila a slot on a local radio station for the first-ever female talk show urging Afghan women to oppose Taliban rule. Chapter 17 describes Captain Smoke’s encounter during an all-male community meeting with a suspected Taliban operative from whom she attained information to help US intelligence agents track his potentially nefarious activities. The last chapter in the section describes the Captain’s realization on her last day in Afghanistan, that none of the improvements the US military forces made to the Afghan women’s center, schools, and infrastructure were sustainable, and neither was progress.

“Part Two: The Wars at Home” consists of chapters 19 to 23. The first chapter explains how Sheena Adams, now stationed in California with disorders stemming from combat activity, molded

combat missions at home, strove to keep FET programs alive, and reflected on protective methods for Afghan girls. The next chapter describes a 2012 battle against the Pentagon by four service women who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union and Service Women's Action Network (SWAN). The lawsuit demanded the government to eliminate policies forbidding women from participating in combat based on discrimination and unconstitutionality.

Chapter 21 explains the challenges that Major Rodriguez encountered when she arrived from Afghanistan and moved to Kansas for officer training. Her ex-husband, father of their two children and confidante, died unexpectedly, exacerbating her mental and physical challenges. In chapter 22, the president declared his support for FETs during the 2013 State of the Union address. Various high-ranking military officials and prominent politicians supported repealing the direct combat exclusion rule for women. Chapter 23 reveals Captain Smoke's frustration that combat roles were not available to women until early 2016. However, the government mandate marked the beginning of breaking the brass or Kevlar ceiling for women. The author concludes the book with an "Epilogue," which recounts two of 19 service women's experiences—a helicopter-pilot and a military police officer—who graduated from the rigorous Army Ranger School.

Beyond the Call effectively captures the lived experiences of three exemplary female warriors and FET members who fought in combat missions during the Afghanistan War. Their contributions are proof of their combat action alongside male soldiers in combat environments, even though US military forces never addressed their participation. This denial justified the female warriors' determination to achieve recognition. According to Rivers (2018):

In May 2012 two female Army reservists, Command Sergeant Major Jane Baldwin and Colonel Ellen Haring, who had each served more than twenty years, sued the Department of Defense, stating that the policy of combat exclusion hindered advancement and retirement benefits. (p. 135)

Health and retirement benefits are essential for the wellbeing of military and veteran women. For many of them "injuries and mental health issues affected their military experience, also making it difficult to maintain employment postdischarge. Sexual and gender harassment compounded these issues" (Mankowski, Tower, Brandt, & Mattocks, 2015, p. 320). Therefore, recognizing the combat activities of these women is imperative so they can get these essential benefits.

This book successfully relays its message to its target audience: US government officials, policy makers, and organizations willing to support combat recognition of US service women. Fortunately, organizations like SWAN fight for the recognition of marginalized women by the military institution. Ali (2014) declared, "In the era of the War on Terror, female US service members and veterans have successfully advocated for formal recognition of their combat service" (p. 160). Additionally,

SWAN have effectively utilized their digital presence to force the recognition of women's participation in US combat operations on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, and argue successfully for changes to military policy in regards to women's participation in the military. It is War on Terror militarism that has enlisted the service of women on the front lines, ultimately forcing the US Department of Defense to rescind The Combat Exclusion Policy in 2013. (Ali, 2014, p. 161)

Rivers calls attention to her achievement of personal goals after departing military service through *Beyond the Call* when she states, "I left the military holding on to one of my childhood goals of investigating political corruption, exposing wrongdoers, and bringing the stories of hard-working Americans to life as a journalist" (2018, p. xxiii). Rivers effectively captures the lived stories of just three of the many female soldiers in order to document their engagements and challenges in combat environments.

Chapters 3, 9, and 13 were probably the most significant and informative. The value of Chapter 3 lies in the historical background of the Army's Lioness (2003-2004) and the Marine's FET (2009) programs. Rivers describes how participating women, in addition to gathering intelligence and searching Afghan women for dangerous artifacts, often fought bravely in combat missions with male soldiers. Ali (2014) has also explained that the use of these groups by the military "give[s] women specific ways of documenting their combat experience, contributing to SWAN's ability to gain visibility and pursue changes in law and policy" (p. 160).

Chapter 9 details the challenges that Major Rodriguez faced before the FETs could perform their missions. At times, the Major had to wait for weeks before obtaining permission to join convoys that would take the FET to villages where the members could collect intelligence and provide help to Afghan women. Rivers made an analogy between American female soldiers and Afghan women:

The Army stipulated that no American military female was allowed to leave the base without a male combat soldier. Taliban law stated that no Afghan was allowed to leave her home without being overseen by a male family member at all times. And although the Army practice was intended to protect and ensure safety, it hindered FET independence. (p. 86)

The value of this chapter is that the lack of FET mission support delayed female combat participation, although the women got some chances to fight. The longer the recognition of female military combat engagement took, the longer it would take women to get the same benefits male soldiers and veterans enjoyed.

Chapter 13 was significant because in 2013, the Captain got a WITA program assignment where the study assessed the performance of servicewomen exposed to combat action. The WITA program conducted studies for many years to evaluate results before permanently implementing policy changes. Interestingly, female soldiers had been fighting beside their male counterparts in combat environments for years. Convincing the US government to change combat rules set against women required drastic measures, such as a lawsuit. The fact that WITA was in the process of investigating female combat engagement, suggested that if military women fared positively in combat situations, they would finally get the recognition needed to receive the same benefits to which male soldiers and veterans were already entitled. Sanfilippo (2017) acknowledged the important role that military women play and the challenges they still encounter:

Although women are now essential to the functioning of the US military, public recognition of their service remains limited. This has profound consequences for their physical and mental wellbeing, as their relative invisibility hampers access to medical treatment, political representation, and legal redress. (p. 226)

Also notable, this book included 16 pages of illustrations for readers to visualize the everyday lived experiences of US military women during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.

Beyond the Call successfully recounts the experiences of the three US military women whose mission in Afghanistan was to interrogate Afghan women to collect intelligence about the Taliban. Just as important, Rivers is able to justify to the reading audience why these brave military women have rights and deserve the same health, retirement, and other benefits enjoyed by military men and veterans. The lessons learned from this book can help to encourage policy makers in supporting the cause of military servicewomen and female veterans getting the benefits they have earned. Changing the policies and laws that concern female warrior rights has been a slow process, and more work remains ahead.

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