

Military Womanpower:
Examining the Entry of US Women into the All-Volunteer Force

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my partner, Marissa, and my friends, Victoria, Holly, Elsie, Mila, and Mikayla for their aid, insights, and support.

Furthermore, this thesis is also dedicated to the American military women and scholars of women's military history, upon whose shoulders this thesis research stands.

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Introduction: Gender and the Military

In November 1994, as part of Operation Southern Watch, one F/A-18 Hornet taking off from the aircraft carrier USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* would quietly make history. It was Navy Lieutenant Kimberly 'Face' Dyson's first combat patrol, and, crucially, the first American combat action officially undertaken by a woman. Dyson, alongside other female Navy aviators stationed on the *Eisenhower* during its tour of duty for Southern Watch, had set into motion the entry of women into combat roles, an opportunity that had been denied military women for most of the 20th century.¹ Almost 80 years prior, the Marine Corps had produced a recruitment poster (Figure 1) trying to entice men to enter the Marines, depicting a woman in standard male marine combat attire, stating "If you want to Fight! Join the Marines." And before the century was over, this image of women in combat attire, once used to entice men to enter military service, had become an actual reality for American servicewomen, and by the turn of the century, they too would be allowed to fight. Though women had unofficially entered combat in previous wars on occasion, they had *de jure* been denied official entry to combat roles and combat operations, even as the military Women's Corps were integrated into the regular military in the late 1970s. Dyson's official entry into combat, the first time an American woman officially went into combat on orders of the US Military, came after the so-called 'risk rule' was rescinded. The 'risk rule', which had kept women from entering into combat roles in the US Military, found its origins in the end of the Second World War, based on sexist ideas of what a woman could and could not do. Through regulations such as the 'risk rule', the US Military attempted to restrict women to roles which were perceived as acceptable for a woman to perform. By the end of the century however, women in uniform

¹ "On Their Merit, The First American Women to Fly in Combat", Smithsonian American Women's History Museum, accessed April 9 2025, at <https://womenshistory.si.edu/blog/their-merit-first-american-women-fly-combat>.

achieved increasing visibility, primarily through the Gulf War, the first major deployment of American military women, though not in explicit combat roles.² While women were still prohibited from combat roles due to the ‘risk rule’, the Gulf War proved that keeping military women in the post-All Volunteer Force military away from the front lines proved harder in practice than in theory, as several servicewomen found themselves fighting and dying alongside their male counterparts. This then created momentum to allow women to officially enter combat roles and missions, of which Dyson and the other female Navy aviators aboard the *Eisenhower* would be the first.³ It is this the entry of women into the All-Volunteer Force, starting in the 1970s and ending in the early 2000s, which this thesis project seeks to discuss.

This thesis project will attempt to shine a light on women’s role in military history by focusing on the period between the 1970s and 2000s. Posing the following question: “why did US women enter the AVF between the 1970s and 2000s, and what did this entry signify for them and American society’s changing gender norms?” For military women who served before this period, military service was generally seen as a way to avoid the domestic life their typically patriarchal home environment would otherwise force them into.⁴ In essence, the question this thesis wants to answer is what the significance of servicewomen’s entry into the US military between the late 1970s and early 2000s is within broader women’s history and American society’s view on gender norms. This periodization has been chosen, as this period bore witness to some major changes around women’s roles in the US Military and saw both the full-scale gender integration of the military, as well as women’s entry into combat roles. Despite this, this period of women’s military history has not yet been the subject of much research. This thesis project will also attempt to answer the following sub-questions related to

² Tanya L. Roth, *Her Cold War: Women in the US Military 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2-3, 16-17.

³ Heather Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II* (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2019), 106-107.

⁴ Heather M. Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8-9.

this topic: “what economic factors motivated women to seek out work in the All-Volunteer Force?”, “how did family ties to the military influence women’s decision to enter the military?”, and “was the military opening up roles to women a significant factor for women to join up?” By focusing on the economic material conditions, familial ties and socio-cultural pushes which guided women’s entry into the military in this period, its significance for understanding women’s history in this period as a whole will become clear, as military women’s history is not yet fully appreciated within broader women’s history. The first chapter will dissect the economic motivations servicewomen cited for joining up, and specifically make note of their material conditions, as these hold interesting parallels to the material conditions facing civilian women. The second chapter will discuss the impact of familial exposure to the military, and familial military legacies, and their impact of servicewomen’s decision to serve. The third chapter will focus on the socio-cultural changes which influenced women to seek military service, specifically the opening of the military to women in the 1970s and the opening of combat roles to women in the 1990s, as here their desire to push against sexist gender barriers coincides with advances civilian women made in the civilian labor sector in those respective periods. This thesis project will employ the methodology and framework of ‘new military history’. ‘New military history’ is a historiographical framework through which military history is analyzed using an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from social, economic, and cultural history as well as military history. Furthermore, to answer the aforementioned research question, this project will utilize sources from various oral history archives. Chief among these are the *Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative* (MWAOHI) archive from the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, and the Military Women’s Memorial Oral Histories (MWMOH) archival projects. These primary sources have been selected for this research, as within them servicewomen make explicit mention of the factors which accompanied their entry into the military, and thus analyzing

these oral histories will yield fascinating insights and answers for the research question and will form the backbone of the methodology of this thesis. These sources have also not as of yet been utilized by scholars and thus hold untapped potential for the historiography of women's military history. This thesis project will also build upon the notable works of other scholars, such as Tanya Roth and Heather Stur. To understand this topic, it is worth discussing the broader women's military history of this period.

To understand the advances military women made between the 1970s and 2000s, we must first discuss military women in the 1960s and 1970s. As Betty Friedan and other prominent Second Wave feminist activists were pushing for women's equality on the homefront, primarily through efforts such as the push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), political and military leaders began to discuss how this would impact servicewomen specifically, and the military as a whole. The core issue was what shape the US Military would take on in a post-ERA United States. It was not just the emergence of Second Wave feminism and their push for the ERA, which made military leaders consider this, but also the looming end of the draft system in 1973, and the corresponding decrease in personnel.⁵ To this end, several committees had been established to find a solution to this issue, and as it happened, recruiting more women offered a convenient solution to decreasing personnel. One of the most notable products of these was the *Army 75 Personnel Concept Study*. The *Army 75* study, while having been written in the late 1960s and imagining the US Military in 1975 still being draft-based, nevertheless argued for women to perform more roles in a future form of the US Military.⁶ Besides *Army 75*, the Defense Department Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) was also busy devising a solution to how a post-ERA military

⁵ Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2009), 133-135 & Kara D. Vuic, "Gender, the Military, and War", in *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. David Kieran and Edwin A. Martin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 208-210.

⁶ Bailey, *America's Army*, 141-143.

would look like. DACOWITS, founded in the early 1950s, had already been preoccupied with mobilizing more women for military jobs in the Women's Corps and creating new job opportunities for said women.⁷ Yet, when Second Wave feminism, Betty Friedan, and the ERA emerged in the late 1960s, DACOWITS was ill-prepared to meet the moment. In part due to the more conservative nature of some of the women's services directors when compared to women's liberation activists, and in part due to the *laissez faire* attitude of DACOWITS, critics accused it of failing to achieve enough results and improvements for servicewomen. DACOWITS took these criticisms seriously and attempted to become more active for women's equality in the military as the 1970s went on. In the latter half of the 1970s, the proposals of feminist activist groups such as National Organization for Women often aligned with those of DACOWITS, even if no official link between the two groups existed. DACOWITS also became more proactive, realizing that the transition towards the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) created opportunities which could be exploited to improve the situation of current and future military women.⁸ In addition to *Army 75* and DACOWITS, the Army and Department of Defense (DOD) also established various committees devoted to figuring out what impact ERA would have on the Army's women, assuming that the ERA was bound to become law.⁹ Considerable effort went into preparing the military for the potential ratification of ERA, especially as the 1970s marked the transition away from the draft-based force and into the AVF.

At the same time however, actors both outside and inside of the US Military apparatus were keen to torpedo the integration of women into more military positions. The DOD, which was supposed to at the very least listen to the recommendations made by DACOWITS, often responded to their proposals by not responding at all or simply refusing to implement their

⁷ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 141-146 & Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II*, 70-71.

⁸ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 154-157.

⁹ Bailey, *America's Army*, 157 & Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II*, 95.

recommendations.¹⁰ On the civilian side, Phyllis Schlafly made the issue of women in the military one of her main points of attack against ERA. Schlafly's angle of attack, that the ERA would place American women in combat, proved especially effective. While Schlafly and others were successful in killing the ERA, the US Military eventually still went about integrating womanpower into the regular forces, as part of its transition to the AVF.¹¹ In order to make the military attractive to women, they coopted feminist language to compel women to join the military, most vocally citing equal pay for equal work. At the same time however, they ardently clung to heteronormative gender images in recruitment advertising, such as that women would still have time to be 'feminine'. When popular opinion turned against the ERA over the question of women in combat, they decreased the recruiting of women. Nevertheless, the integration of the Women's Services in the late 1970s and the opening of more roles to women led to an increase of women in the military.¹²

The 1980s, while being a time of regression in terms of gender norms, also saw servicewomen perform their newfound military roles in actual combat operations. During the invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, American military women were deployed, albeit in non-combat support units. However, some women did see combat in these operations. When Captain Linda Bray, commanding a Military Police unit in Panama, was fired upon and led her unit in the subsequent firefight, she had inadvertently become the first American woman to command troops in combat. This received attention from the press, and reignited discussions over military women and combat roles. This discussion gained more prominence when the First Gulf War commenced in 1990, as around 40'000 American women were deployed to the Persian Gulf, 15 of whom were killed in action. As much as

¹⁰ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 156-157.

¹¹ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 190-192, Bailey, *America's Army*, 164-170 & Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II*, 96-97.

¹² Vuic, "Gender, the Military, and War", 208-210 & Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II*, 101-104.

military and civilian leaders had attempted to keep American military women away from frontlines and combat, frontlines and combat would still find American military women. The very visible deployment of American military women in the Persian Gulf challenged gender norms both on the homefront and abroad. The Saudi Arabian government fully rejected the premise of women soldiers, dubbing them instead as “males with female features”. On the homefront, the war raised questions over the arbitrary gender norms-based ban on women entering combat roles.¹³ Following the Gulf War, the US Military abandoned its risk rule, which had barred women from combat roles, and slowly but surely began integrating women into combat roles, starting with Congressionally approved female combat aviators in 1993. Following this, American women were gradually granted access to more and more combat roles in the US Military, until in 2015 all combat restrictions on women were lifted.¹⁴ Yet, while so much progress has been achieved for American military women, the American right wing seems poised to strip back these strides. Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of Defense for Trump’s second term, has publicly denounced women in combat roles, and the military as a whole. His various comments on the matter, steeped in heteronormative and misogynist gender norms, range from saying that women in combat roles “has made fighting more complicated” to “We need moms. But not in the military, especially in combat units.”.¹⁵ He has also advocated for harsher traditional “gender-neutral” physical test requirements. This is despite the fact that studies have shown that these harsher traditional gender-neutral tests have little to no impact on the military readiness of both women and men and tend to shut women out of combat roles.¹⁶

¹³ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II*, 105-107.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 106-109, 112-113, .

¹⁵ Lolita C. Baldor, “Hegseth’s views on women in combat, infidelity and more – in his own words”, *Associated Press*, January 14, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/pete-hegseth-background-defense-secretary-confirmation-hearing-e160e10c86385a8beff110d9190fb34e>.

¹⁶ Sara Sneath, “Pete Hegseth’s disparagement of women soldiers factor into new test requirements”, *MSNBC*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/women-combat-pete-hegseth-fitness-test-rcna202804>.

The past 50 years have seen tremendous strides being made by women in uniform to gain equality with their male counterparts. But, as women's military history of the 1970s and 1980s and recent events show, this progress did not come easily and could all too easily be stripped back again. It is within this context, of these victories being on the verge of being stripped back, that this history, examining how American military women challenged gender norms in the post-AVF military, will be written. But it is also worth quickly examining the historiography of women's military history, as this paper stands on the shoulders of the existing historiography to examine this period.

Women's military history occupies an odd position within both the fields of women's history and of military history. Pop culture depictions of women's military history have recently become more common, such as the recent Netflix film *The Six Triple Eight* (2024), about the Second World War era all-female, all-African American 6888th Central Postal Battalion. However, scholarly discussions of women's military history remain somewhat scarce in both women's studies and military history studies, especially regarding the period after 1980. There are some works which discuss this period of women's military history, such as Heather Stur's *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II* from 2019, but post-1980 women's military history is not the sole focus of that work. Yet, this is not to say there have not been notable historiographical works on women's military history. One of the first major history books on this subject was General Jeanne Holm's book *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, in which she tracked American women's military history, and argued about the roles American military women could, should, and eventually would play in the at the time new AVF. Holm, having been one of the first female Generals in the US Military and having overseen the integration of the Women's Corps into the regular armed forces as part of the transition to the AVF, was in a prime position to write about this history, as she had been a witness to a substantial chunk of it. As she contends in her introduction to

the revised edition of *Women in the Military*, “Women’s participation in the military is not, as many believe, of recent origin; it goes back to our nation’s beginnings.”.¹⁷ Yet, despite this long history of American military women, truly academic research into this topic is a more recent phenomenon in the historiographical field. For the purposes of this research, I will be specifically discussing Cold War era women’s military history, though there has also been notable work done in researching World War II and pre-WWII women’s military history.

Thanks in part due to the rise of ‘new military history’ as a historiographical discipline, there has been an increase in scholarship on the topic of women’s military history over the past 10-15 years. One of the most recent works on women’s military history is the historian Tanya L. Roth’s *Her Cold War* from 2021, which focuses on the period between 1945-1980, and is thus one of the most all-encompassing works on the subject. Her book discusses the postwar situation of the various Women’s Corps and into the transition into the AVF and subsequent integration of the Women’s Corps into the regular forces. As Roth argues in the introduction to her book, we must understand women’s military history not just within the realms of military history, but also as an important aspect of postwar women’s and labor history. As she notes, while women’s wartime contributions were temporary, it did have some permanent effects on postwar military positions for women. Chief amongst these being equal pay to their male counterparts, essentially making military service one of the first employers in the United States to offer American women true economic citizenship. For this reason, as Roth argues, we must include the military and its approach to women’s roles in the military in our discussions of postwar feminism and the fight for gender equality.¹⁸ Despite the presence of equal pay for equal ranks however, Roth is also quick to point out that military leaders strove to ensure that the military remained a “fundamentally masculine institution”, and that we must also discuss preconceived notions of gender in how it

¹⁷ Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, rev. ed. (Novato, Presidio Press, 1992), xiv.

¹⁸ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 3-6.

influenced both the male military leadership as well as the female military leadership.¹⁹ All in all, Roth's work is an impressive effort in tracing a large swath of modern American women's military history. Her impressive work is also accompanied by other impressive works on this topic.

When discussing this topic, we must also note the way in which military women disrupted the heteronormative gender norms of Cold War American society at large, as well as those of the military itself. One work which discusses this topic in detail is historian Heather M. Stur's book, *Beyond Combat*, from 2011. While her book is not strictly about American women and their experiences in the military in the Vietnam War period, also including the experiences of Vietnamese women, it still provides ample and valuable insight into American women's military history of this period. In *Beyond Combat*, Stur discusses how the American domestic Cold War ideals and conflicts of manhood and womanhood replicated themselves on and off military bases in Vietnam. Military women found themselves being depreciatingly viewed as ladies rather than soldiers in the best cases, as sex workers in the worst cases, the latter of which was an especially common experience for Asian American servicewomen.²⁰ As Stur argues, gendered conceptions of war, women, men and non-Americans played a significant role in the American war effort in Vietnam, especially for those whose boots were on the ground in Vietnam.²¹ One such example is how women were expected to remain traditionally feminine, but, as Army Nurses such as Lynda Van Devanter found out, this would prove nigh impossible between the muck and the stress of operating on wounded GIs. As Van Devanter noted in an interview, "staying feminine became an impossible task".²² For this reason, Stur's work also plays quite some influence for this history, as women in the military found themselves both confronted by and subsequently

¹⁹ Ibidem, 6-9.

²⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 2-3.

²¹ Ibidem, 15-16.

²² Ibidem, 105-106.

challenging the dominant Cold War gender norms. Another work of importance for discussing this topic is historian Kara D. Vuic's *Officer, Nurse, Woman* from 2010, which specifically traces the history of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) in Vietnam, and how they found themselves contending with these gender norms while having to take care of wounded servicemen. Like with Stur's work, Vuic places an emphasis on the disruptive nature of women serving in the military in the Vietnam war period. As she contends, the military's traditional views of gender, specifically in the way they viewed nurses as a women's role, clashed with the reality of Army nursing, already before the Vietnam War. And, as she goes on to note, the rise of Second Wave feminism then further ignited these gender clashes.²³ In this, the works of Vuic and Stur show how Cold War gender ideals, Second Wave Feminism, and military women clashed both on military bases at home and in Europe, as well as Vietnam. Vuic and Stur also make explicit note of how American military women enjoyed the relative freedom afforded them by military life, as for many it was the first time they were away from home and somewhat independent. For several, as they note, they explicitly chose military service to pursue this level of independence they would not be able to find at home.²⁴ Roth makes an explicit note of this dynamic as well, once more drawing on the connection between women's military history and postwar labor history. As she writes, "as workers in the military, women found independence and autonomy, participating even more fully in a capitalist, democratic society", and in this position they would find "a women's world of opportunities."²⁵ Both standard Military and ANC recruitment ads even played into this aspect, while attempting not to challenge the military's gender hierarchy, as Roth and Vuic make note of.²⁶ Besides them, historian Beth Bailey, in her book *America's Army* from 2009,

²³ Kara D. Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: the Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 47- 50, 53-57.

²⁴ Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 43-44, 59-60 & Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 8-9.

²⁵ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 82-83.

²⁶ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 57-59, 82 & Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*, 27-28.

about the US Military's transition to the AVF, also makes note of this. As Bailey shows, while the Women's Corps did their best to appeal to women, they were also strict in enforcing the heteronormative gender ideals, and shamed women who stepped outside those lines.²⁷ Thus, as we can see, historians have aptly noted how the US Military, in spite of being one of the most male-dominated organizations within American society, gave women a way to attain economic citizenship that civilian society generally did not allow for. Yet, as these scholars also point out, the clashes over gender ideals, the place of women in the military, and feminism in civil society, took place in all facets of American military life and organization, from the barracks all the way to the recruiting ads. The military of the 1960s and 1970s were host to both a wealth of opportunities for women, yet at the same time also enforced a strict gender hierarchy and binary, and the crossing of those lines came with severe consequences.

One form which these gender clashes took on, which the aforementioned historians also make note of, is the way in which homophobic and sexist rumors affected women's military service and the standing of the Women's Corps. As Bailey notes, members of the various Women's Corps would often be labelled either "Promiscuous, prostitute, lesbian, Amazon", and a variety of other demeaning labels and rumors. These rumors were at their strongest during World War II, when the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was accused of sheltering "dens of lesbians", or sending "boatloads of pregnant WACs" home, in addition to other sordid and sexually demeaning accusations. These rumors affected the WAC leadership, the WACs themselves, and the family and parents of WACs. As Bailey notes, this is also one of the reasons why the Women's Corps leadership strove to uphold the Cold War gender ideals, in attempt to repair the reputation of the Women's Corps, and, as Bailey notes, the directors of the Women's Corps were sometimes at odds with the civilian feminist movement because of this adherence to the military's gender hierarchy.²⁸ As Roth writes about the extent

²⁷ Bailey, *America's Army*, 146-147, 150-151.

²⁸ Bailey, *America's Army*, 143-145.

of these rumors, women interested in pursuing a military career would quickly be told that they were either “a whore, a lesbian, or looking for a husband”. The military leadership began to actively and strictly police military women’s behavior, sexual or otherwise, because of these rumors, rather than seek to debunk them.²⁹ Historians, such as Bailey and Roth, have gone to great lengths to demonstrate how these rumors adversely affected military women, and thus discussing these rumors and their frequent homophobic and outlandish nature, is an important aspect of discussing women’s military history. As Bailey and Roth note, despite the fact that these rumors had little basis in reality, they still influenced military policy at large, as well as the attitudes of the Women’s Corps leaders.

The aforementioned gender clashes were not the only way in which the discussions of civil rights in the civilian sphere influenced the US military. While the interactions, dynamic and tensions between the burgeoning Second Wave feminist movement and the military had a significant influence on the experiences of most military women, this was especially the case for African American military women. Their military service in the Cold War period, understood as serving to protect democracy and freedom from communist threats, was sharply contrasted by the African American civil rights movement exposing and confronting racism and racist laws and practices on the homefront. As historian Charissa J. Threat argues in *Nursing Civil Rights*, in our discussions of women’s military service, we must also incorporate the postwar African American civil rights movement in these histories. As she contends, there is a long history between the ANC and social justice movements, and thus discussing the ANC (a vital part of understanding women’s military history) requires understanding and discussing this interaction.³⁰ One such example she notes, is how the Korean War formed the first flashpoint of racial integration in the Military, wherein the ANC

²⁹ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 53, 121-126.

³⁰ Charissa J. Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2015), 1-5.

was chosen to be the first Military branch to undergo desegregation. Despite this integration, the African American officers of the ANC still experienced a deluge of racism from both civilian and fellow soldier alike, in addition to the sexism they were also confronted with.³¹ Threat's work is one of the most impressive works on women's military history, as it discusses and connects the intersection between African American civil rights and women's military history to the wider tensions and clashes over gender norms in the military and civilian spheres of American society. Her work was also built upon slightly by Roth, who incorporated this intersectionality in her broader Cold War history of military women, noting and discussing how the Women's Corps went about desegregation. As she notes, Women's Corps had fully desegregated their basic training and boot camp programs by the early 1950s, yet the number of African American women taking up military service remained somewhat small until the 1970s. However, Roth shows the importance of analyzing these stories, however few they may be, by connecting her broader point of the interplay between postwar labor history and women's military history to these histories of African American military women.³² By analyzing women's military history not just from a gender perspective, but also from a race perspective, Threat and Roth show us how women's military service, Second Wave feminism and the African American civil rights movement all intertwined, and how they did so more than it may seem at a first glance.

Beside the works of historians, it is also worth briefly noting how other fields have analyzed the role and impact of women in the US military. One such example is International Relations scholar Jennifer Greenburg's *At War With Women* from 2023, in which she discusses what she dubs "imperial feminism", and the labor which military women perform as part of that. As she contends, "Gender operates here and across imperial encounters in relation to constructions of racial difference. (...) servicewomen contrasted their positions as icons of

³¹ Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights*, 97-99.

³² Roth, *Her Cold War*, 53-54, 71, 90-91.

modern women's liberation with that of Afghan women, whom military trainings framed as universally oppressed by "backwards" cultural practices that could be modernized through military occupation.³³ Similarly, Security Studies scholar Stéphanie Von Hlatky discusses the role gender plays in NATO operations in her book *Deploying Feminism*, from 2022. As she writes, "paying attention to gender roles both within the armed forces and across theaters of operation became a military asset for NATO and coalition forces...". She goes on to discuss how campaigns to advance gender equality became militarized and wrapped up in the Global War on Terror.³⁴ Cultural scholars have also gone on to discuss the relationship and tensions between feminist soldiers and feminist antimilitary activists, most notably Ilene R. Feinman in her book *Citizenship Rites* from 2000. As she notes, there is a distinct tension notable between feminist female military personnel and liberal feminists, and antimilitarist feminists. As she notes, the former camp believes that women's entry to combat roles served to advance women's equality and challenging the masculine culture of the military, and the latter believed that female participation in the military would do more harm than good, connecting their analyses to the environmental and gender-based harms the military perpetuates.³⁵ Thus, as we see here, other fields have also made interesting analyses of the relationship dynamics between women, the military, and social justice movements.

The 'new military history' approach to Cold War era women's military has resulted in a better understanding of the intertwined dynamics and relationships of gender, race, women's labor, and the military. And this focus on analyzing military women has also spread to other fields of study. As Vuic writes in her article *Gender, the Military, and War*, "To analyze these relationships, we must begin with an understanding that the study of gender investigates the

³³ Jennifer Greenburg, *At War with Women: Military Humanitarianism and Imperial Feminism in an Era of Permanent War* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2023), 2-3.

³⁴ Stéphanie Von Hlatky, *Deploying Feminism: The Role of Gender in NATO Military Operations* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2022), 1-3.

³⁵ Ilene Rose Feinman, *Citizenship Rites: Feminist Soldiers and Feminist Antimilitarists* (New York, New York University Press, 2000), 1-3.

ways that societies and cultures have defined women's and men's expected roles and behaviors and thus, in turn, shape how women and men understand their experiences.”.³⁶ In this, we can see the importance of these new approaches to women's military history, which help to trace how the definitions and expectations of women's roles transformed during the Cold War.

What this thesis aims to add to this historiography is twofold. For one, this research aims at a period of women's military history which has not received much scholarly attention yet, namely that of the post-AVF period, which as I will contend, was a watershed moment in both women's military history as women's history, starting in the early 1970s and ending in the early 2000s. Secondly, this research will analyze military women's own views of military service and why they decided to serve, and what trends and themes are found among these views, and in doing so, establish why the stories of these women in the AVF matter to both military history and women's history. By integrating the approach of 'new military history' with the views and opinions of the servicewomen themselves, which they expressed in oral histories or dairies or other sources, we can distinctly tie their stories not just to women's military history, but also within the larger frame of women's history. As such, this will be the methodology this thesis will employ, by looking at the views of servicewomen in the AVF themselves.

While in 1945 women's roles in the military were strictly relegated to the ANC and the Women's Services, the transition to the AVF in the 1970s and 1980s would allow them to enter more roles in a gender-integrated military, within the same decade in which the ERA had failed. Similarly, around the time of the AVF, women started to gain entry to more prominent positions in civilian society. And before the century ended, women would finally be allowed to enter combat roles in the 1990s, albeit still with gender-based restrictions. As

³⁶ Vuic, "Gender, the Military, and War", 196.

this historiography shows and this thesis project will show, women's contribution to the US military is long and storied, filled with stories of challenges to and struggles with the masculine heteronormative structures and desires for political change. And as the period from 1970s to the 2000s saw such strides forwards for military women, it is important for military and women's history to truly understand this period, and the women who entered the AVF.



(Figure 1: USMC recruiting poster showing a woman in Marine combat attire, made by Howard Chandler Christy in 1915. While not made with the intention of actually encouraging women to enter military roles, within the 100 years after being produced, women would enter military roles and combat roles. From the Library of Congress archives.)

Chapter I: Women's Material Conditions and Military Service

As noted in the introduction, the history of women in the military prior to the 1980s must be understood in relation to both women's civilian and labor history in this period. The lack of career opportunities in the civilian labor market prior to the 1980s made the military an attractive alternative through which to gain economic independence.³⁷ The military had even proudly advertised the fact it offered equal pay for equal work, and the US Military was one of the first labor sectors in the United States to do so.³⁸ Compare this to the civilian labor market, where by 1979, women on average only earned around 62 percent of what their male counterparts earned.³⁹ In addition to this, the jobs and careers open to women prior to the 1980s were very limited. In 1973, only a small percentage of women in the labor force were in skilled professions, and most of those were concentrated only in the traditionally feminine career paths open to them at the time, in teaching and nursing.⁴⁰ Because of this, achieving economic independence was almost impossible for women in this period. With these material conditions, it is not surprising that some women would seek out military service in order to attain economic citizenship or a non-traditionally feminine career on their own. And as noted by scholars such as Roth and Stur, this was one of the primary reasons why women sought out military careers prior to the transition to the AVF.

What this chapter will seek to examine is whether military women's economic motivations to join the pre-AVF military, as analyzed by scholars such as Roth, continued into the late 1970s and into the 2000s. This economic motivation is important to dissect, because it will inform us of the changing, or not changing, material conditions women faced

³⁷ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 3-6 & Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 8.

³⁸ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 2, 5-6, 66-67.

³⁹ "Women's-to-men's earnings ratio, 1979-2008", The Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed 13 December 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2009/jul/wk4/art05.htm>.

⁴⁰ Mary D. Keyserling, "The Economic Status of Women in the United States", *The American Economic Review* 66, no. 2 (1976): 207-210, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1817222>.

in American society between the 1970s and 2000s. As Tracey Deutsch and Nan Enstad argue in their article in *A Companion to American Women's History*, "The roots of women's and gender history lie in explicit engagement with capitalism. (...) Historians have shown that we cannot truly understand capitalism or any part of it without a gender analysis, and, conversely, we cannot understand gender in the United States without understanding capitalism."⁴¹ Akin to Deutsch and Enstad, and as noted in the introduction, Roth contends that military women's history must be analyzed within the context of labor history. After all, the capitalist structure of American society distinctly excluded women from the professional or skilled labor market for most of its history, which only began to slowly change in the first half of the twentieth century. And as Roth contends, the drive to attain full economic citizenship was one of the major motivations to join the pre-AVF military for women. Therefore, to fully understand the history of women in the AVF, we must analyze military women's history within the context of American capitalism and labor history. As Feinman argues, "... to understand women's entry to the military (...) we are much better able to do so by understanding the conditions of that entry."⁴² As such, we must examine these stories of women who distinctly noted that their economic situation or desires played a role in deciding to seek out military service, as this tells us of their material conditions. In analyzing this, the relevance of women's military history in the AVF as part of women's history in general becomes clear, as it reveals how the material conditions of American women evolved or stayed the same between the 1970s and 2000s.

For the first women to join the post-AVF military in the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s, the fact that military service brought with it a path towards economic citizenship and independence remained a prevalent motivation to join. As Navy Captain Lucy Young

⁴¹ Tracey Deutsch and Nan Enstad, "Capitalism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries", in *A Companion to American Women's History*, 2nd ED, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Anne M. Valk (Hoboken: Wiley, 2021). 261.

⁴² Feinman, *Citizenship Rites*, 44.

explained in her interview with the Smithsonian's MWAOHI program, the fact that military service brought with it career opportunities and equal pay was one of the major reasons for her to apply to the Navy's flight training program in 1976. "Well, I was gravitating toward the military, because every time we had a career day, I'd listen to all these different presentations, and the only thing that really excited me was the military, because I knew I could get equal pay for equal work, and I would be able to advance in a reasonable manner and rank..."⁴³ In Captain Young's motivation, it is easy to see how the material conditions women faced in the 1970s would drive women who wanted economic independence towards a military career. In Captain Young's story, this drive to achieve economic independence can be seen in her mentioning that the military had equal pay and how that was a central part of her motivation. Furthermore, she also notes that she would be able to advance her career more easily in the military than in a military career. For Marine Corps Master Gunnery Sergeant Rosemarie Weber, her economic situation was also part of her reason to seek out a military career. "I did not graduate [high school], it just happened to be at the time that I enlisted that women, not men, just women, could enlist if they had 12 years of high school, whether or not they had a diploma. (...) I had run away from home, and I was staying with a friend (...) and she said, "you're gonna get off that couch, and I'm gonna take you downtown, and you're gonna find a job today and I don't care what it is"..."⁴⁴ For Weber and Young, the military offered a route to earn money and improve their socioeconomic status. As Stur, Roth and other scholars of the pre-AVF period noted, this was not an uncommon motivation for military women before the 1980s. For other women who joined the post-AVF military in this early period, the fact that the military offered routes through which they could advance their career goals was a primary reason why they joined. As Air Force Colonel Lorry Fenner explained: "So I joined

⁴³ Cpt. Lucy Young, Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative (hereafter shortened to MWAOHI), interview by Lt. Col. Monica Smith, 03:21-06:45.

⁴⁴ MGySgt. Rosemarie Weber, Military Women's Memorial Oral Histories (hereafter shortened to MWMOH), interview by Kate Scott and LeeAnn Ghajar, 07:05-08:00.

the Air Force, and one of my goals in the Air Force was eventually to get a master's degree and a PhD. I was told by my mentors that there was no reason to get a PhD in the military, and that if I did (...) the only places I could be assigned would be at the Air Force Academy or in Washington DC, both of which seemed very attractive to me, so I kind of put that advice aside a little bit. When I went to squadron officer school as a First Lieutenant in 1983 (...) the Air Force would sponsor people for advanced degrees (...) So I put in the application (...) and they decided they would take me..." Colonel Fenner also made note of the low pay she received as a teacher being part of her motivation to get into a military career. "I started teaching high school in the Phoenix area (...) I thought because the jobs were relatively low paying at the time (...) I decided that I would join the reserves (...) when I went to talk to the recruiters, I ended up on active duty..."⁴⁵ In Colonel Fenner's story, we can once again note how careers which were traditionally held by women paying poorly was a major reason that led women to seek out the military. Navy Yeoman Gina Green-Spivey had a similar experience when she joined the military in the early 1980s. "I went to University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh, and I was a chemical engineering major (...) Things weren't going to well for me, so I went home (...) and then I decided to go to the Navy (...) you know to actually have a career and make some money. (...) so I went to the Navy, because I needed some money, to own my own way."⁴⁶ As we can tell with the stories of Captain Young, Sergeant Weber, Colonel Fenner and Yeoman Green-Spivey, the theme established by Stur and other scholars, of women joining the military to achieve economic independence and a career on their own terms, still loomed large during the first years of the AVF. All four women also make explicit mention of how their material conditions influenced their choice to enter the military. For Colonel Fenner, she was a teacher but received a low wage. Her story shows how even women that did attain skilled labor positions received inadequate wages,

⁴⁵ Col. Lorry M. Fenner, MWMOH, interview by Kate M. Scott, 07:10-09:10.

⁴⁶ YN Gina M. Green-Spivey, MWMOH, interview by Marcy Reborchick, 06:20-07:20.

making a military career all the more attractive as an alternative. As such, it is clear that there is a continuity to be found between women who joined the military prior to the AVF, and those who joined afterwards. When we look to the stories of women who joined the military in the latter half of the 1980s and the 1990s, we can see that this theme, of women's material conditions within the capitalist system of the United States influencing some women to seek out military careers, stays a consistent presence in the experiences and motivations of military women.

When Army Major Mary Krueger graduated from Houghton College in 1991, she wanted to pursue medical school, but she and her family lacked the funds to do so. As she recalls, "I had no income at all, so that was one way I got interested in the military, because a military scholarship would help me pay for medical school (...) so I applied for the military scholarship (...) The day that I applied for the scholarship was the day that I saw how much the loans would cost if I took out loans for medical school..."⁴⁷ Major Krueger was one of many women from a working-class background to join the military throughout its history, to break away from a poorer background, but it is in the 1990s when we see a new economic motivation begin to emerge. This motivation can also be seen with several other women veterans who joined in this period. Army Private Terri Souder sought out recruiters for this reason as well in the late 1980s. "I spent about two years going to recruiters. I knew that I was not a good student, and I seriously doubted my ability to thrive if I went to college right out of high school, so I was looking for the opportunity to earn some money, get a skill, and get college money for when I was better prepared to go. The Army offered the GI Bill, gave me the opportunity to pick the job I wanted ..."⁴⁸ Akin to the aforementioned women, Army Private Kimberly Taylor also went into the military for GI Bill benefits in 1990. "I joined the

⁴⁷ Maj. Mary V. Krueger, MWMOH, interview by Kate M. Scott, 05:00-06:05.

⁴⁸ PV2 Terri L. Souder, MWMOH, interview by Dennis Gill, 03:35-04:25.

Delayed Entry Program in High School and went in for the college benefits.”⁴⁹ Army Sergeant First Class Stacy Vasquez sought out a career in the military for much the same reason as Major Krueger had when she enlisted into the Army in 1991. “... money was really tight with my mom, and I had done alright in school, but I hadn’t done wonderfully, and so scholarships weren’t really, like, they weren’t beating down our doors to give me money for college, and so I decided that I would look into the services because I had seen the men in my family be so successful in the service (...)”⁵⁰ While the motivations of Sergeant Vasquez to seek a military career were shared by a great deal of men and women, her career, and those of many other queer women in the 1990s and 2000s, was cut short by *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell* (DADT), when her sexuality was revealed. “Anyways, so, his wife was not happy with me, so she decided to go to my commander and tell my commander that she had seen me kiss a girl in a gay bar.” What followed was a nine-month long investigation and eventual discharge, all the while Sergeant Vasquez had to face homophobic abuse. On top of that, she also lost the very benefits she had joined the military for. “And I lost my job, and I lost my retirement. And not only did I lose my retirement, but then I applied for my disability and got awarded my disability, but then the severance pay they’d given me when they discharged me, they decided to take that back for 26 years and my medical disability, to collect back the money they’d given me. So now I have 26 years’ worth of debt to the government to pay for the discharge of losing my pension.”⁵¹ Despite being a good soldier, as admitted by her commander, the military decided to punish Sergeant Vasquez over who she loved, and in so doing, take back all the economic benefits she had joined the military for, and place her in immense debt. As we can see with these stories, is that the economic motivation to seek out military careers and achieve economic independence remained well into the 1990s, but the

⁴⁹ PFC Kimberly L. Taylor, MWMOH, interview by Dennis Gill, 00:38-00:52.

⁵⁰ SFC Stacy Vasquez, MWMOH, interview by Kate M. Scott, 05:30-06:15.

⁵¹ SFC Vasquez, MWMOH, 38:00-42:55.

details mildly changed. Specifically, we can note that more women in this period saw the military as an avenue to pay for higher education through the GI Bill benefits. We can also see that these economic motivations were a double edged sword, as being discharged for your queer identity under DADT meant it would all be stripped from you, placing queer women in dire financial straits.

When we look at the experiences of women who joined the military in the early 2000s, we see this same economic motivation remain prevalent when looking specifically at economic motivations for joining. For Army Sergeant Major Evelyn Mayoral, daughter of Mexican immigrants, her story is much the same as the women discussed previously. As she recalls about joining the military in 2002, “My story is a little interesting. So initially I planned to go to college, I was an honor roll student, and unfortunately could not afford college for me. So I did get accepted into various universities, but because of the financial situation my parents were in, I decided to join the military (...) I fell in love with the Army, and never left...”⁵² The experience of Sergeant Major Mayoral has a lot of similarities to the experiences of the women who joined in the 1990s, and thus we can see that joining the military to pay for higher education or as an alternative to it remains a motivation as we look at the experiences of women who joined the military in the 2000s. First Sergeant Tiffany Myrick joined the US Army in 2002 for a similar reason. “But the main reason that I joined was, I was at Norfolk State, wasn’t doing too well in school, had my daughter young, I had her at 16, so I said I was gonna join the military for the GI Bill, come back to Norfolk State, and I chose MP [Military Police] for the security clearance, because it looks good on a resumé.”⁵³ As with Sergeant Major Mayoral and some of the other women previously discussed, First Sergeant Myrick came from a disadvantaged background, and saw the military as a way to pay for college, and through joining the military have a way to attain a

⁵² SGM Evelyn Mayoral, MWMOH, interview by Dennis Gill, 01:14-01:50.

⁵³ 1SG Tiffany Myrick, MWMOH, interview by Dennis Gill, 01:48-02:10.

career. As we can see in her testimony, this was an especially significant reason for Myrick to join up, being a young mother. The theme of using military service as an avenue to break away from a disadvantaged or poor background can also be found among transgender military women. For Navy Electrician's Mate JaeLee Waldschmidt, this was explicitly the case. "I joined the service in 2003, from my hometown Mason City, Iowa (...) Anyway I joined the service to get out, see the world, get an education..."⁵⁴ What connects the stories of these three women, and the women who joined the service in the 1990s, is seeking military employment as a way to break away from their poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, and thus achieving economic independence from their background. This is most prevalent in the stories of Sergeant Major Mayoral and First Sergeant Myrick but also returns in the story of Electrician's Mate Waldschmitt, for whom the economic opportunities of a military career allowed her to move away from her small town and discover herself. We can also see that GI Bill Benefits were also a factor in seeking out a military career for these women, in a more prominent way than for women who joined the pre-AVF military, and those in the first waves of women to join the AVF. What we can gather from this is that while economic motivations still played a role for some women to seek out military service, the fact that American society gradually opened more civilian careers to women gradually led to a decrease of pre-military university educated servicewomen, and an increase of working class and lower educated women seeking out military careers. Figures from the US Army Recruiting Command back this up as well. For the fiscal year of 2024, only 11.4% of Army recruits had gone to university for at least one semester prior to enlisting, compared to 94.5% of recruits having at least a high school diploma.⁵⁵ While this is a more recent figure, and only for the US Army, it does show that for the past thirty years, both women and men from working class

⁵⁴ EM JaeLee Waldschmitt, Library of Congress' Serving in Silence oral history archive, interview by Rebecca Katz, Wendy Fan and Donna Javellana, 03:45-04:30.

⁵⁵ "Facts and Figures", Recruiting Challenges, U.S. Army Recruiting Command, accessed 8 October 2025, https://recruiting.army.mil/pao/facts_figures/.

backgrounds, with a lack of access to other ways of achieving economic independence, saw and continue to see the military as a pathway towards future career opportunities. Thus, this history of women in the AVF cannot be separated from labor history.

In this, we can find some continuity of the analysis of Stur, Roth, and Vuic made of the economic motivations of pre-AVF military women to seek out military careers. For women prior to the AVF, the military offered a career civilian society generally could not, and this would continue into the period of the AVF, especially for working class women. The phenomenon that the transition to the AVF model of enlistment caused the majority of new recruits to be from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds has also long been established among male recruits, such as in the 2010 study *Pathways to the All-Volunteer Military*. As noted in that study, working class young men viewing the military as a bridge to greater career opportunities is a well-established trend and experience.⁵⁶ Based on the experiences of the women cited above, I would contend that we can see the same trend and experiences appear in young women who joined the AVF, especially after the latter half of the 1980s, when wealth inequality in the United States began to increase. Thus, the benefits military service offers have seemingly turned the AVF model into one of the main ways working class and disadvantaged women and men seek to escape poverty. This theme has also been noted by other scholars, such as Jennifer Mittelstadt in her book *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. As she notes in her introduction, benefits such as dental care and college pay makes up roughly 50% of the DOD's budget, and such benefits have become a major motivation for young people from disadvantaged background to seek out the military.⁵⁷ We can see with women such as Major Krueger and Sergeant Major Mayoral that they explicitly joined the military for such benefits. The fact that the military offers equal pay across the

⁵⁶ Glen H. Elder et al., “Pathways to the All-Volunteer Military”, *Social Science Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2010): 455-458, 469-471, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42956411>.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Mittelstadt, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015), 1-4.

gender lines must also be remembered for this factor. In 1980, women earned 60.2 percent of what men earned, by 2020 the gender wage gap in the civilian labor market was slightly closer, but it still persisted, with women earning 80.4 percent of what men earned in the first quarter of that year.⁵⁸ Thus, when we look at how the rate of women from working class backgrounds increased between the 1970s into the 2000s, we must also include the persistence of the gender wage gap in our analysis, as that is one of the premier material conditions of American society for women. And, as Feinman points out, through analyzing these material conditions that existed at the time that women increasingly sought out military service, we can better understand the conditions of their entry. First Sergeant Myrick's story is also important to note for this subject, and for the intersection of women's military and labor history more broadly, as she represents a small, but nevertheless important, and underdiscussed aspect of modern women's labor history, namely that of young and usually single mothers. As noted by a 2025 Congress report, teen pregnancy was around 3.9% of all births in 2023. But this low percentage still represents thousands of young women and girls, many of whom will likely be forced to enter the labor market to take care of their children.⁵⁹ The Bureau of Labor Statistics also found that the percentage of mothers who actively participated in the labor market and labor force increased between 1975 and 2003. In 1975, 47 percent of mothers were also working while recovering from pregnancy. By 2007, this had increased by 26 percent, reaching a peak of 73 percent in 2003, before slightly decreasing to 71 percent by 2007.⁶⁰ Thus, it can safely be assumed that First Sergeant Myrick was neither

⁵⁸ "Women had median weekly earnings of \$857, or 80.4 percent of men's earnings, first quarter 2020", The Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed 13 December 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/women-had-median-weekly-earnings-of-857-or-80-point-4-percent-of-mens-earnings-first-quarter-2020.htm>.

⁵⁹ "Teen Births in the United States: Overview and Recent Trends", CRS Products (Library of Congress), United States Congress, accessed 8 October 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45184>.

⁶⁰ "Labor force participation rate of mothers, 1975-2007", The Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed 13 December 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2009/jan/wk1/art04.htm>.

the first, nor will be the last of teen mothers to seek out a military career in order to ensure job security and provide for their children.

All in all, we can clearly see that Roth's argument to include women's military history within the larger field of both military history and labor history is as relevant when discussing the experiences of women in the AVF as it is to discuss the experiences of women in the pre-AVF women's corps. This argument becomes especially relevant when we analyze the experiences of women who joined the AVF in the 1990s and 2000s, where we can note a distinct shift in how many women from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds joined the military. The women of this period sought out a military job, potentially placing themselves at significant risk of death, grave injury, or mental trauma, all to pay for higher education or to escape poverty, and reap the benefits given by military service, such as access to healthcare. And these benefits could all too easily be stripped away if you were a queer woman, as happened to Sergeant Vasquez. Furthermore, through the stories of these women and the material conditions that drove or influenced them to seek out a military career, we can better understand the significance of their stories for both military history, and women's history. Their entry into the military was both rooted in explicit engagement with capitalism, and in the material conditions they hailed from. Thus, we can see that the argument made by Deutsch and Enstad is not just relevant for civilian women's history, but also for military women's history, as this engagement with capitalism was one of the primary reason for some of the military women who entered the AVF in this period, in a bid to attain economic citizenship, a trend which we can assume has continued into the current day. Furthermore, some military advertising explicitly played into the economic motivations women might have to seek out military careers. For instance, in the early 1990s, the Marine Corps had a recruitment advertisement (Figure 2) stating "In many companies it takes years to prove you're management material... We'll give you 10 weeks.", explicitly playing into fears

women might have about not being able to find career advancements in the civilian labor sector. Similarly, an Army recruitment ad from 1990 (Figure 3) also plays into these economic motivations, showing a female pilot with the text “What some of the most successful women are wearing this year. Army. Be all you can be.” As seen in the experience Colonel Fenner, the fact that even skilled civilian labor did not provide enough opportunities to advance for women was a major economic motivation for women to sign up. These ads also tie well into Feinmans argument that to understand women’s entry into the military, one must study the material conditions that accompanied this entry, as the US military itself clearly did understand these material conditions facing women when producing these recruitment materials. Whether women entered the military to advance their academic or professional career goals, such as Colonel Fenner or Major Krueger, or to escape a disadvantaged background and attain economic citizenship, as can be seen in the stories of First Sergeant Myrick or Electricians Mate Waldschmitt, all show that their respective material conditions guided their entry into the military. It is clear then, that the trends established by the scholars of the pre-AVF military like Roth remain relevant well into the history of the AVF, even if small details changed. Furthermore, analyzing how material conditions influenced women to seek out military employment is strengthened by utilizing the analytical lens of Deutsch, Enstad and Feinman, as there is a clear link between capitalism and women seeking out military service. While not the sole reason women sought out military careers after the transition to the AVF, we cannot ignore the significance of their material conditions for their entries, and that it tells us a not insignificant number of women entered the military because the occupational segregation in the civilian labor market or their disadvantaged backgrounds made it hard for them to attain economic citizenship outside of the paths the military offered more easily.



IN MANY COMPANIES
IT TAKES YEARS TO PROVE YOU'RE
MANAGEMENT MATERIAL...

WE'LL GIVE YOU 10 WEEKS.

Ten weeks may not seem like much time to prove you're capable of being a leader. But if you're tough, smart and determined, ten weeks and a lot of hard work could make you an Officer of Marines. And Officer Candidates School (OCS) is where you'll get the chance to prove you've got what it takes to lead a life full of excitement, full of challenge, full of honor. Anyone can say they've got what it takes to be a leader, we'll give you ten weeks to prove it. Call 1-800-MARINES for more information.

Marines
The Few. The Proud. The Marines.
MARINE OFFICER

(Figure 2. Recruiting ads like this play into the fears of highly educated women that civilian companies do not appreciate their labor and will not provide and entice them to seek out a military career instead. From the Recruiting Women Marines page of the Women Marines Association website.)



(Figure 3. An Army recruitment poster playing into the economic anxieties and motivations women might have to seek out a military career. From the National Archives and Records Administration's U.S. Army Recruiting Posters series.)

Chapter II: Family Ties and Women's Military Service

Beyond the economic motivation to join the US Military, another theme that we can see reoccur in the stories of women who joined the AVF is that of family members being in the military or having a family military legacy being a motivation to seek out the military. Joining the military because of family military history, as with joining for the economic and career opportunities, is a fairly common motivation for servicemembers of all genders. According to the US Army Recruiting Command, around 80% of recruits had at least one relative who served in the US military at one point or another.⁶¹ While the exact number of military women who hail from military families is not known, with the statistic cited above, as well as the amount of American families with veterans in them, it can be safely assumed that women who joined the military to uphold family legacy is at least a somewhat significant number. The reason for analyzing these family ties and their influence for servicewomen to join the AVF is because it gives us an insight into women's military service which is generally not focused upon as much compared to male servicemembers. Furthermore, it can tell us how familial military heritage influenced the decisions of military women to join the AVF. While this lens of analysis isn't as deep as the economic lens of analysis when looking at military women's history, it can still tell us something about military women and the post-1980 American society, primarily how their relationship with and decision to enter the military was influenced by these familial military ties. This, in turn, can tell us somewhat about the status of military women in society at any given time, such as when looking at the reactions of family to their daughters joining the military. As noted by Roth, the postwar and pre-AVF military had made an explicit point of producing recruiting materials aimed at calming the

⁶¹ "Military Recruiting is a Family Affair", U.S. Army Recruiting News, U.S. Army Recruiting Command, accessed 8 October 2025, <https://recruiting.army.mil/News/Article/2904478/military-recruiting-is-a-family-affair/>.

worries of parents whose daughters had expressed interest in military service. As she notes, in the postwar period, these recruiting materials espoused heteronormative views on what military service women would do for women who joined up, namely, to prepare them for marriage, among others. The idea that women could join the military as a serious career, or to follow in the footsteps of their military brothers and fathers was not entertained or even presented as a possibility by these pre-AVF recruiting materials.⁶² Nevertheless, as we will see in the oral histories of some of the women who joined the All-Volunteer Force, their family's military heritage would play a significant role in their decision to seek out military service, just as it has for male servicemembers. Yet, this motivation is still not really widely displayed or used in recruiting materials. As such, and as mentioned, there are no specific studies outside of the oral history initiatives which have set out to ask military women whether their family's military heritage played a role in their decision to seek military service. Even in the barely existing historiography of women in the AVF, this theme is not mentioned much, if at all, in favor of analyzing solely the economic and cultural motivations to serve. This makes some sense of course, as this motivation is harder to pin down and draw conclusions about the relation between women's military history and generalized women's history. Be that as it may, this motivation is still of import to study and analyze, as it may show an increasing acceptance among military families to let women enter the 'family business', as it were, and how that relates to society's increasing acceptance of women in uniform.

For Air National Guard Major General Larita Aragon, she joined up in 1979 explicitly because her family ties exposed her to the possibilities of a military career. "Well, what actually really influenced me to go in the military was I had an uncle who was in the Army (...) I visited him in Germany, and I thought 'wow isn't that exciting, isn't that neat' ..." ⁶³

⁶² Roth, *Her Cold War*, 46-50.

⁶³ Maj. Gen. Larita A. Aragon, MWMOH, interview by Shirley Chase, 02:20-03:20.

While not a story of living up to family legacy, it does show that as has long been established among male recruits, exposure to military life via a family member can also motivate women recruits. Similarly, being exposed to military life via a family member is what influenced Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Olga Custodio to join the Air Force in 1980. “I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1953, and my father was in the Army at the time. (...) he married my mom, and then, you know, we had a military life with him. (...) And that’s where my thoughts of joining the military began, as an Army brat. (...) One of the things that I did see there was that I had an opportunity to see how the Air Force military were, versus the Army that I had known my whole life. And I thought that the Air Force was much better.” Here we can see again the influence that familial military history had on some women joining the AFV. When Lieutenant Colonel Custodio got into Officer training school in late December 1979, she recalls her parents having differing reactions to her entry to the military. “My mom thought I was crazy. The same lady who called me to tell me to go to school, to make sure that I finish my degree, is now telling me: what are you doing? I said this is something I’ve always wanted to do. (...) He [Lt. Col. Custodio’s father] was on the fence, but he was supportive. You know? My dad and I, we’ve always been close. So he was okay.”⁶⁴ While like Major General Aragon, Custodio did not explicitly join the military to live up to a legacy of military service, exposure to military service via family ties also played a major motivating role for her to join the Air Force. What is interesting to note in Lieutenant Colonel Custodio’s experience is that her father was supportive, and her mother was not supportive, of her decision to join the ‘family business’. When Navy Counselor Petty Officer First Class Stacey Young and her sister joined the US Navy in 1999, she had a similar experience with her parents. “My father laughed. He didn’t think we’d do it. (...) He thought we’d back out or something. (...) He was so proud though when we got it done. (...) She [NC1 Stacey Young’s

⁶⁴ Lt. Col. Olga E. N. Custodio, MWAHOI, interview by Lt. Col. Monica Smith, 02:35-06:35, 37:25-37:55.

mother] was excited for us. (...) When her and my dad split up and everything she didn't have any kind of skills or anything, so therefore she couldn't get a good job, because she had been married to my father for twenty years (...) So she was excited that her girls were gonna go out to the military and learn some skills..."⁶⁵ In the experiences of both Lieutenant Colonel Custodio and NC1 Young, we can see how societal expectations of women clashed with their desire to join the military. For Lieutenant Colonel Custodio's mother and NC1 Young's father, it was seen as a negative and as something a little ridiculous, likely in part due to the fact that women seeking military careers was not taken as seriously in that period. Yet at the same time, we can see how their military fathers did come to be supportive of their decision to enter military careers. This is especially interesting, as one would expect that men who had served in such a patriarchally charged institution like the military to not want their daughters to seek out military careers and shows an acceptance of women continuing the military legacy by family members who had served themselves. This can be seen most clearly with Captain Young's family, who even right as women were allowed to enter the AVF were proud of her for going into a military career. On the other hand, Lieutenant Colonel Custodio's mother's disapproval of Custodio joining the military shows that mothers might show less acceptance for their daughters to seek out military careers. It could prove interesting for future studies into servicewomen and their family's military ties to look into which parent was more likely to approve or disapprove of their daughter's decision to seek out a military career, and whether the approving or disapproving parent had also served. Conversely, NC1 Young's mother's excitement at her daughters joining the military to learn skills and be able to get good jobs (and thusly economic independence) she was not able to get because she herself had not gotten the opportunity to train such skills tells us of the successes which feminism had achieved between those generations for women entering the labor market. Within almost a

⁶⁵ NC1(AW/SW) Stacey R. Young, MWMOH, interview by Robbie Fee, 06:14-07:38.

single generation, daughters could fulfill the dreams of economic independence their mothers may have had.

There are also women who joined the military who explicitly called upon their family history as part of their reason for entering the military. Army Major Christina Helferich-Polosky is one such servicewoman who explicitly cited her family's military legacy as their reason for joining up. "Well, actually, my mom was an Army nurse during the Vietnam era, and after my first year of school, I needed to find a way to pay for college (...) it's funny, (...), because my grandmother was cadet nurse during World War Two, and she got into the Cadet Nurse Corps because it paid for her nursing school, and my mom she paid for her last year of nursing school going into the Army during the Vietnam era, and so I was like, well, if my mom could do it, it's the first thing I thought of..."⁶⁶ Major Helferich-Polosky's story is interesting to note for this research for two reasons. For one, it strengthens the argument of Roth and other scholars of women seeking out military careers before the AVF for economic opportunities, such as paying off college, and this papers argument that this trend continued after the AVF. Furthermore, it also shows us that some women did see the military as a viable career path if their parents were in it as well and saw it as a way to continue family military legacy. Major Helferich-Polosky's family's military legacy is also especially interesting to note, as it was her mother who had served and inspired her to do so, instead of a male family member as one would almost expect. While one of the primary reasons Navy Captain Young joined was because of economic motivations, as discussed in the previous chapter, her family's history with the military was also a major factor. "But my brother and I were the only military siblings. My father was a naval officer in World War II, (...) I was very moved by his naval service. And he stayed in the Reserves, (...) I just thought that was super. Great way to serve your country. (...) Well, I was gravitating toward the military (...) because my

⁶⁶ Maj. Christina A. Helferich-Polosky, MWMOH, interview by Dennis Gill, 01:35-02:33.

dad had been in, and my brother, of course, was serving.” She then goes on to note that her family was excited about her decision to enter the military, in the footsteps of her father and brother.⁶⁷ Similarly to Major Helperich-Polosky and Captain Young, Army National Guard Sergeant Keri-Lynn Pajer also sought out the military because of family legacy. As she recalls after being asked why she went to the Military, “So I come from a line of military, both of my grandfathers were in the service (...) my parents met in ROTC (...) they met at a military ball, my older sister, had a little bit of a trouble outside of high school trying to find her way (...) and then she came home one day literally and said “I’m leaving for basic training” (...) I was so proud of her...”⁶⁸ In Sergeant Pajer’s story, as with Major Helperich-Polosky, we can see how the military service of family members influenced them to seek out a military career. These family ties are a relatively important aspect of why someone would join the military, as demonstrated by the statistics of the Army Recruiting Command, and thus any research into the topic would be remiss to not mention it. Yet, there is still so little research into this topic for servicewomen. Future studies into exactly how many servicewomen cite family military legacy as a major motivation to seek out a military career could prove quite interesting. A facet of this which could prove especially interesting is to discover the exact numbers for is the difference between how many women sought out military service because of male veterans in their family as opposed to because of female veterans in the family, as was the case for Major Helperich-Polosky. It is relatively safe to assume that male recruits who seek out the military because of family legacy are inspired by primarily male veteran relatives and thus would be interesting to examine whether the same holds true for female recruits and female veteran relatives. Furthermore, while this phenomenon is often noted with male soldiers, it has not yet been so clearly established with female soldiers, and further research

⁶⁷ Cpt. Young, MWAOHI, interview by Lt. Col. Smith, 03:21-06:45.

⁶⁸ Sgt. Keri-Lynn Pajer, MWMOH, interview by Robbie Fee, 08:15-10:02.

into this topic could establish how prevalent this trend is for both military women and men. Of course, we should also not portray this topic uncritically, as there are also stories of parents who rightfully were not in favor of their daughters going to the military.

When Marine Corps Colonel Sarah Deal initially attempted to join the Army in 1990, her parents reacted very negatively. “I was going to enlist in the Army. And I’d taken the ASVAB⁶⁹ and everything, and I went home and told my parents, and ugh, they had a fit. One cried, one was upset. They didn’t want their kids to go in the military. (...) after that’s when I started secretly going behind my parents’ back and joined the Marine Corps. (...) My dad worked in a factory. He was a Marine.” When she was asked whether her father was an influence on her entering service, she replied, “Not initially, because he wouldn’t talk about it. We only knew it because we saw his picture, his bootcamp picture, (...) And he never talked about it because he was in the Marine Corps back in the day (...) our DIs [Drill Instructor], you know, got drunk, and they marched a bunch of recruits out into the lake, and some of them drowned. (...) the boot camp experience was awful, and he did not want any of his kids to go through it.”⁷⁰ Colonel Deal’s parents’ reactions to her entry to the military are also worth noting for this research. While the military may want to provide a different image with military families that it displays, it shows the other side of having family history with the military, namely the traumatic side. This too is important to note for this topic, as it is far too easy to let narratives about children from military families entering the ‘family business’ become uncritical glorifications of military service.

As is fairly evident, examining the stories of women who cited family military history as a major factor for seeking out military service provides us with interesting insights. While culturally the idea of sons stepping into the footsteps of their male military relatives is widely

⁶⁹ ASVAB is the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, a test to help the military ascertain whether a candidate is fit for a specific branch and/or role.

⁷⁰ Lt. Col. Sarah M. Deal, MWAQHI, interview by Lt. Col. Monica Smith, 01:20-02:00, 05:10-06:05.

accepted, what we can see here is that this phenomenon is also prevalent among servicewomen. While as noted earlier, exact statistics of women who join the military because of these family ties are not available, these various stories do show it to be at least somewhat a prevalent motivating factor, and perhaps as widespread as for male recruits. What it also shows us that in addition to the well-established routes of analyzing women's military history from the economic and cultural angles, as done by scholars such as Roth, Vuic and Stur, studying these family ties may give us interesting insights into how military families react to women in uniform, as compared to society at large. After all, at the same time that Captain Young entered the Navy in the late 1970s and received laurels from her family for doing so, American politics and society had just buried the ERA over the mere idea of women in uniform potentially getting into combat. The generally positive reactions that Captain Young, Lieutenant Colonel Custodio and NC1 Young received from their families over their entry into the military contrast sharply with the rhetoric of Schlafly and other conservative activists who had fervently fought to kill the ERA on the grounds of women going into a gender-integrated military. Thus, it could prove very interesting for future research, especially in the current discourses around women in uniform, to look further into this topic. Furthermore, this topic could prove especially interesting when looking at the reactions of mothers to their daughters entering the military. The difference between how Lieutenant Colonel Custodio's mother and NC1 Young's mother reacted to their daughters entering the military shows us especially that this factor of women's military history is underexamined. The former's distaste and the latter's elation to the news, provide much context for how women of the pre-AVF generation viewed women in uniform. It could be argued that mothers who wanted their daughters to achieve success in the civilian labor market or traditionally female skilled labor, such as Lieutenant Colonel Custodio's mother, would react more poorly, as opposed to NC1 Young's mother, who did not have the chance to learn professional skills and thus achieve

economic citizenship on their own, would react more positively. But, to definitively confirm these trends, more research and statistics are necessary. Another aspect of researching this specific factor of motivations to seek out military service for servicewomen which could prove interesting is whether having female relatives in the military or male relatives in the military is more impactful for this motivation. As American women have served in various military roles such as the Women's Army Corps or Army Nurse Corps since the Second World War, and continuing to the modern day in the AVF, it can be somewhat safely inferred that while most families will have men with military service, a decent chunk will also have had women with military service. One such example is Major Helferich-Polosky, whose grandmother and mother had served as military nurses in the Second World War and Vietnam war respectively. These matrilineal ties to military service could prove, with further research and statistics, to be as influential for women to seek out military service as patrilineal ties to military service for male recruits.

In conclusion, while there are few existing statistics and research into this topic, an analysis of the correlation between family ties, family legacies and enlistment clearly does hold the potential for compelling insights in the ways in which servicewomen interact with society. The ways that the views of military families contrast to the views of American society at large about military women is also compelling, as one would expect that men who served in such a masculine dominated institution as the military would not hold such positive views of women in uniform. Furthermore, the fact that so many women cited military legacies as a reason to join up also shows that, as with economic motivations to join up, servicewomen and servicemen likely share a lot of common reasons to join up, and shows that future research into this topic should survey both to see to what degrees this is shared, as existing statistics on this take either a gender-neutral or male-only view. In any case, plenty of ground for future research to uncover.

Chapter III: Military Women and Contemporary US Society

Beside the major themes of family ties and economic motivations to join the military, another theme we can see reoccur in several histories of military women is that of seeking military service to fight against societal pressure to enter traditionally feminine careers, or expressly because the military opened up roles to women. The reason for examining this is because it provides us with an insight into whether the patriarchal pressures of society motivated women to join the AVF as they had done prior to the AVF, and whether the opening of military roles to women motivated women to join up. In doing so, we can establish a continuity (or a lack thereof) with the motivations women had for seeking military service before the AVF, as established by other scholars. For instance, Stur and Vuic note that some women sought out a military career prior to the AVF to escape the domestic lives their patriarchal home environments would otherwise have pushed them to.⁷¹ Thus, through examining this topic, we can establish to which degree patriarchal societal pressures motivated women to seek out service in the AVF. It is also worth examining whether two pivotal societal events around female soldiers played a role in these motivations. The first of these is the push for the ERA in the 1960s and 1970s, which had the effect of influencing the Pentagon to open military roles to women. The other major societal event worth noting here is the entry of women into combat roles in the 1990s. These two events represented the most major shifts for military policy around women since the Second World War and thus must have had some impact on American servicewomen and their motivations to seek military service. To understand the full significance of these two events for American women's history and why they have been chosen for this chapter, it is worth quickly examining the conservative backlash against the topics of women in uniform and women in combat. Conservatives from the 1970s onwards

⁷¹ Vuic, *Officer; Nurse, Woman*, 55-56 & Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 8-9.

attempted to reverse the evolution of gender roles which had occurred in the postwar United States and thus rallied against the ERA. Schlafly, Reagan, and other conservatives did not wish for the ERA to have influence on the military. Publicly, this was out of fear that training standards would have to be lowered for women, worsening military readiness. As scholars have noted however, given their stances on the ERA, this stance was likely influenced by the desire to reverse the progress made against heteronormative gender roles by Second Wave feminism.⁷² The question over women in combat roles had been a controversial theme floating in the discourses in American society over military women since the Second World War. It was also one of the reasons why the ERA failed to be ratified, after Schlafly, Reagan, and other conservatives had weaponized the question of women in combat in their crusade against the ERA.⁷³ As such, when the Clinton administration lifted the ‘risk rule’ in the early 1990s, and subsequently allowed women to seek out combat roles, it was truly a major break from the policies which had dictated the careers of military women since the creation of the women’s corps in the Second World War.⁷⁴ Thus, through analyzing whether these two events had an effect on servicewomen’s decision to seek military service, we can establish a continuity with what scholars noted about servicewomen prior to the AVF. Through analyzing these themes present in military women’s histories, we can also ascertain their importance within the wider context of American women’s history. In doing so however, we must also note a complicating factor in analyzing this theme. As noted in the first chapter, civilian society became more accepting of women in white collar workplaces, which meant that women became less likely to see a military career as an option to escape patriarchal domestic environments. Thus, we may have to read between the lines in the testimonies of military women of the AVF to see whether or not there is a continuity between the motivations of pre-

⁷² Françoise Coste, “‘Women, Ladies, Girls, Gals...’: Ronald Reagan and the Evolution of Gender Roles in the United States”, *Miranda* 12 (2016): 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8602>.

⁷³ Roth, *Her Cold War*, 190-191.

⁷⁴ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 107-108.

and post-AVF military women. Nevertheless, there is still value in analyzing whether the aforementioned societal pressures and events motivated women to seek out careers in the AVF, as it gives us a more complete picture of the circumstances which led to women seeking out military careers in this period, through which future research will then be able to establish further analyses on.

The ERA campaign, while it ultimately failed to be ratified, still managed to push the military into preparing to integrate women into the ranks, all while it was preparing to transition into the AVF. One such military program that was being opened up to women was the Naval Flight Training Program, in 1972. One of the women to be allowed to enter the Navy's Flight Training Program was Navy Reserves Captain Joellen Oslund, as she recalled, before entering, she had no real idea of what she was going to do with her life. "I was coming up on graduation, and you know, I just had no idea what I was going to do with my life. (...) I had kind of had this idea that I wanted to do something very different. (...) I didn't see myself as a secretary, a nurse. You know, those were the traditional career paths that were open to women at the time. (...) And I was, had a friend in the Naval Reserves at the time. We were dating, and he came to me one day in early November and handed a Naval message to me and said: I think you should go for this. (...) But it was the Naval Operations message from Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, and he had, in August, he had opened up a lot of ratings and specialties to women in the Navy that had previously been closed to them. But in November, he opened up the Naval Flight Training Program to women (...) And he said: I think you should go for this. (...) You should go for this. And that was all it took." Despite Admiral Zumwalt having opened up the program, Oslund was still met with some sexist ridicule when she went to a Naval recruiting office. "And you know, it was kind of the typical reaction; hello, little girl, what can we do for you? And I said: I'm here to apply for the Flight Training Program. And I mean, literally, they collapsed in gales of laughter. (...) And the rest is

history. (...) So, our class was the last class to be gender segregated.”⁷⁵ As Captain Oslund’s story shows, the military slowly opening up to women not just gave more career options to women, but also inspired women to seek out military service to do something different than the traditional gender roles would otherwise have allowed them. Air Force Lieutenant General Stayce Harris had a similar trajectory. “So, at the same time that I was getting that “Congratulations, you’ve got an engineering scholarship”, at the same time, the [ROTC] instructor said, “Have you ever thought about flying?” (...) and he goes, “I mean as a pilot.” And I had not. So, I knew of Bessie Coleman, and I knew of Amelia Earhart, and I knew that women were just starting to enter the commercial airlines as pilots, but I never thought about me being a pilot. And this was the first year, which was 1977, that the Air Force started allowing women in college to apply for pilot training. Women had been successful on active duty applying, and so the Air Force expanded the career field (...) And I thought, “Why be a passenger, when I can have the best window seat on the plane as a pilot?” And so, I competed for that scholarship and was accepted.”⁷⁶ As with Captain Oslund, the opening up of military opportunities to women was one of the factors which inspired Lieutenant General Harris to enter the military. Akin to Oslund and Harris, Army Captain Marene Allison was also one of the first women to enter the newly gender desegregated military opportunities when she applied to military academies in the mid-1970s. “And how I found out about the academies accepting women was, the most liberal paper in the world, the *Boston Globe*, had an article about the academies were opening up for women, and if you wanted to apply, you know, send a letter, call this number, and that’s what I did. And so basically it was a news article, and I started through the process, and at the time, the academy, people from the academy didn’t know what to do with us, so I did my physical, I did my physical fitness test... (...) And Margaret Heckler decided that instead of going to the Air Force Academy, she would give me

⁷⁵ Cpt. Joellen D Oslund, MWAOHI, interview by Lt. Col. Monica Smith, 13:50-18:10.

⁷⁶ Lt. Gen. Stayce D. Harris MWAOHI, interview by Lt. Col. Monica Smith, 07:00-07:55.

her principal nomination to West Point... (...) We showed up on July 7th, 1976, with 119 women. (...) I think at the time we were around 1200, 1300 cadets. (...) 63 of us [women] graduated, four years later.⁷⁷ Similar to the other stories mentioned, Captain Allison saw that the government was opening up military opportunities for women, which helped push her to seek a military career. However, as with Oslund, she too experienced some difficulties from being one of the first women to go into the gender desegregated military. “The superintendent basically said: “women aren’t going to be here”, and then the cadets laughed, and then when they came back, of course, we were there. It was very evident they had not prepared, simple things, like the bathroom were not done, they had not decided how to do the uniforms, they had not properly instructed some of the cadets on how to treat women, so it was very evident, going through with that, these people didn’t really think we were supposed to be here.”⁷⁸ Despite these challenges however, women like Captain Oslund, Lieutenant General Harris and Captain Allison paved the way for women who would join up after the official transition into the All-Volunteer Force. Military women persevering despite the odds and challenges would also inspire women who joined later. Army Colonel Abigail Linnington was one such woman who was inspired by the women who had gone before her, when she entered West Point in 1991. “I received a message in the mail, based on my PSAT scores, from West Point. I received them from a couple of schools, but West Point had a summer program, between your junior and senior year, that they referred to as like a leadership week. And it’s really a recruiting mechanism. (...) I signed up for it, and I went. It was run by cadets. And I was fascinated by the women that I met there in particular. (...) They seemed very confident. They had a vision for what their future was. They were very excited about being in the military. And the military has always been a part of my family’s background, although it was never expected of me that I do that. And they just seemed like a lot of, they seemed like they were

⁷⁷ Cpt. Marene N. Allison, MWMOH, interview by Marcy Reborchick, 06:30-09:00.

⁷⁸ Cpt. Allison, MWMOH, 09:50-11:00.

having fun in the midst of having a very strong vision for what they wanted to do in their future careers.”⁷⁹ What Colonel Linnington’s story displays quite well is the importance of trailblazers like Oslund, Harris, and Allison, as through their hardships with the initial integration of women into the military, they paved the way for later women to attain careers in the military.

As seen in the stories of Captain Oslund and Captain Allison, when they entered the military world in the 1970s, female soldiers were met by sexist ridicule and exclusion when male superiors were confronted with the new reality that women too would be part of the AVF. Nevertheless, they persevered, and by the time that the next generations of female soldiers entered the military academies such as West Point, female cadets and soldiers gradually became accepted, so that by the 1990s female cadets were actively involved in recruitment events, inspiring women such as Colonel Linnington to enter military service. These testimonies also demonstrate quite aptly how the government’s opening of military careers to women was seen by women, such as Captain Oslund, as a way to break away from traditional gender roles and traditionally ‘female’ careers. Hence, the military opening up to women in the 1970s must be seen as a vital piece to understand the evolution of gender dynamics in modern American history. The stories of Captain Oslund, Lieutenant General Harris, and Captain Allison must therefore also be seen as an essential part of not just American women’s military history, but also of American women’s history in general. It could also be argued that the integration of women into the regular military was one of the major victories Second Wave feminism achieved, as while the ERA died a slow death after failing to be ratified, the ERA campaign had succeeded in fundamentally challenging the gender dynamics in an institution as male-dominated and sexist as the military and ensured that the All-Volunteer Force would truly be open to all volunteers.

⁷⁹ Col. Abigail T. Linnington, MWAOHI, interview by Col. Monica Smith, 05:50-08:33.

Similar to how the push towards the ERA made the AVF possible and thus enticed women to seek out military service shortly after that, the opening of combat roles to women enticed some women to seek out military service. As Air National Guard Brigadier General Bobbi Doorenbos recalled about when she entered the military in this period, “Well, in I think the spring of 1992, (...) President Clinton was in office, and was making a big push to try to change the law that would allow women to fly fighters. And I heard about that, and as soon as I heard about it, I marched down to my local recruiter’s officer in Des Moines, (...). At the time that I interviewed, the law had not changed yet, so I had to wait until the law actually changed before I could be actually hired by the Military.”⁸⁰ As we can see from Brigadier General Doorenbos’s story, when the military finally officially allowed women to enter combat roles, it was initially unprepared to actually do so. In this, there is a clear continuity between her experience, and that of when Captain Allison and other women first entered the military academies in the 1970s. What we can also clearly see is how the military opening up new roles to women, in this case combat roles, enticed women to seek out military service, much as the integration of women into the AVF had done almost two decades prior. It even had such an effect on women who had not joined the military for that exact reason. Army National Guard Lieutenant Colonel (and current Democratic Illinois Senator) Tammy Duckworth entered the military because of her family ties to it, but when choosing a branch, explicitly sought out placement in a branch which would give her the chance to enter a combat role. “Actually, I got into aviation because it was the only combat job for women. At the time when I was being commissioned, the male cadets out of their top five choices of branches had to include at least three that were combat arms (...). As a female, I was not required to do that, and I thought that was really pretty unfair. So I chose the only two combat arms branches that accepted women, which were aviation and air defense artillery. So I

⁸⁰ Brig. Gen. Bobbi J. Doorenbos, MWMOH, interview by Kate M. Scott, 06:25-07:52.

included both of those in my top three, and I said, “well if I’m gonna do this, I might as well go all the way.” So, I requested aviation as my first choice, and that’s how I got into it. Once I went to flight school, I just fell in love with it. It’s just the idea that my country trusts me to fly this giant powerful machine in its defense is amazing...”⁸¹ In Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth’s story we can see not just that the opening of combat roles was a motivation to join up, but also an explicit disagreement over how the military leadership treated military women and men differently. In Duckworth’s story, we can also note a similar patriotic fervor for military service, which is so commonly found among male servicemembers. Women who, like Doorenbos and Duckworth, challenged and broke the military’s gender barriers around women in combat by explicitly wanting to be assigned to combat roles, also inspired some women who were looking at going into the military. One such woman is Air Force Major Katie Fabri. “And right around the time I was in high school and applying, was when we had some of the first women in combat, in the A-10s if you remember, and there were those big stories, about like, look at, like women are pushing the ground, pushing things forward, and so to me it was just, I wanted to go to the academy and that was it.”⁸² As Major Fabri’s story highlights, akin Colonel Linnington’s story, women entering military roles previously denied to them was just as much a motivation to enter military service as opening the AVF to women was. The drive to enter combat roles should thus be considered an important aspect of women seeking military careers in the AVF, especially after 1993, when the military officially began assigning women to combat roles and operations. The importance of this theme lies in how it gives us an insight into the women who most directly challenged the generally sexist rules around women in combat, as can be prominently seen with Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth’s oral history. Through explicitly seeking out military roles, they can be seen as the ones who would break the long-standing idea that women could not perform combat roles, which was

⁸¹ Lt. Col. Ladda Tammy Duckworth, MWMOH, interview by Kate M. Scott, 01:15-02:20.

⁸² Maj. Katie R. Fabri, MWMOH, interview by Amy B. Poe and Jessie Henn, 02:30-03:00.

one of the weapons used to kill the ERA campaign in the 1970s by Schlafly and other conservatives. While Brigadier General Doorenbos and Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth may not have seen their desire to seek out service in combat roles as being in opposition to the conservative rhetoric of Schlafly and others, their motivation clearly did exist in part because they found the difference in how the military treated men and women hypocritical, which itself came about because of the aforementioned rhetoric and conservative desire to turn back the evolution of gender roles. Other women also noted they were glad to have served in combat roles, to prove said idea wrong. Master Gunnery Sergeant Weber had been one of the first military women in Iraq, being deployed there in June 2003 as part of the Marine Corps and saw combat as part of her deployment there. Looking back on her deployment, she mentioned being glad to have done her part to prove the idea wrong. “But as a woman, looking back now (...), it was an opportunity to prove ourselves right. For years we have been hearing, “can women go to combat? Oh absolutely not, you know all the naysayers in the country, all the moms of America would never allow that, women break under the pressure, the men wouldn’t respond accordingly” well, we proved them wrong. We are there, we are doing it, we’re doing it alongside the men, with very few male-female issues going on. So to all the naysayers, we’re doing it. So I think that’s very important.”⁸³ It becomes clear, through these stories, how important the entry of women into combat roles was for military women, both those who had joined before 1993, such as Master Gunnery Sergeant Weber, and those who joined afterwards, such as Brigadier General Doorenbos. It also reveals how society’s gradual acceptance of women in combat roles emboldened some women to seek out such roles, as in the case of Major Fabri. Through this, they also proved Schlafly, Reagan and other conservatives wrong, and showed that women could serve well in combat, just as well as their male counterparts.

⁸³ MGySgt Rosemarie Weber, MWMOH, 01:00-02:10.

In the existing oral history archives however, there are few servicewomen explicitly talking about this motivation to seek out military service. This is because there are relatively few military oral history archives and projects focusing solely on military women, and even less which include post-AVF military women. As such, it is even more of an issue when trying to research servicewomen and the drive for women to enter combat roles. Nevertheless, it is clear from these relatively few sources that the opening of military roles to women was seen as a big deal to military women, and that their clashes with both sexist military leadership and conservative ideas about women in uniform happened at the same time as civilian women pushed the evolution of gender roles in this period of the 1990s, just as civilian and military women had done in the 1970s. The desire to enter combat roles is especially worth noting here, as it is one of the most interesting and most prominent ways in which women's ambitions and military sexist gender barriers would and likely continue to clash in the AVF, as demonstrated by the histories of Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth, Brigadier General Doorenbos, and Master Gunnery Sergeant Weber, and whose struggles and victories would inspire other women, such as Major Fabri. As is obvious, there is ample ground for future research of this specific theme, all that remains to do for this is for oral histories to be recorded and then analyzed.

At the same time, we must also avoid oversimplifying the story of these trailblazing women, as the modern military, despite the struggles and victories of these women and their peers, is by no means a paragon of gender equality. As scholars like Vuic point out, while it is tempting to view the history of women in the military in the latter half of the twentieth century as a single, linear march to the breakdown of heteronormative gender norms, the reality is more complex. The gender desegregation in the early 1970s allowed the careers of Captain Oslund, Lieutenant General Harris and Captain Allison to flourish as the first women in the AVF, but by the 1980s the US Military leadership did decrease recruitment of women

and close positions for women, as conservatives like Reagan managed to steer American culture towards a cultural revival of heteronormative ideals of masculinity, and a backlash against feminism.⁸⁴ Furthermore, while the rescinding of the risk rule in the early 1990s allowed women such as Lieutenant Duckworth and Major Fabri to seek out and serve in combat roles, proving conservative ideas about women in uniform wrong, a different policy was actively ending the careers of queer servicewomen and men. Between the 1990s and late 2000s, the regime of Don't Ask Don't Tell ruined and ended the careers of thousands of queer servicewomen and servicemen, many of whom were suspended with often nothing more than whispers and rumors.⁸⁵ In the time since Vuic's article *Gender, the Military and War* was published in 2018, conservatives are once more attempting to revive the traditional heteronormative ideals of masculinity, with the current Secretary of Defense openly arguing against the very idea of women in uniform being equal to their male peers. He is doing so by ordering a new review of women in combat roles and new 'equal' training standards, 10 years after all combat positions were opened to women.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the stories of these trailblazing women remain a vital and yet understudied part of American women's history and labor history, as they reveal to us how women were received when they entered previously male-exclusive workplaces, such as the military academies, and how their perseverance in establishing their right to be part of the All-Volunteer Force led to more women seeing it as a possible career. Thus, when we discuss women's history of the late twentieth century, we must also include the opening of the AVF to women in the 1970s and the opening of combat roles to women in the 1990s as important parts of this history. While the histories of civilian and military women may seem worlds apart, they both struggled against the same or similar

⁸⁴ Vuic, *Gender, the Military, and War*, 209-210.

⁸⁵ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 132-138.

⁸⁶ Tanya Noury, "Female troops bristle at Pentagon's review of combat roles", Military Times, January 15, 2026, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2026/01/15/female-troops-bristle-at-pentagons-review-of-combat-roles/>.

sexist foes, at the same time. While the first chapter highlights how the AVF turned into a poverty draft of sorts, with some working-class women seeking military service to escape poverty, we must also recognize that without the efforts of Captain Oslund, Brigadier General Doorenbos, Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth and their peers, this avenue to escape poverty might not have existed for working class women. At the same time however, we must also recognize that the progress they made was anything but linear, and was still reversed at times, and avoid narratives which would whitewash the military's continuing issues with gender-based harassment and exclusion.

With the second Trump administration seemingly primed to crack down on the progress military women have made since the 1970s, it is more important than ever to record these successes of recent women's military history.

Conclusion

Let us return to the 1915 recruitment poster discussed in the introduction. Within 30 years of its creation, various women's military branches would be established, and women started entering into military careers. Within 60 years, the military would integrate the women's branches into the rest of the military with the transition to the All-Volunteer Force. Within 100 years, women would be allowed to enter all possible combat positions. And now, 110 years after its creation, the Secretary of Defense has publicly turned against the idea of women in uniform. What this shows us is that progress is often slow to achieve victories and yet, those hard-won victories can be quickly undone. Thus, in the current moment, it becomes ever more important to record the history of servicewomen, especially the period between the 1970s and 2000s, as they achieved the most progress for their position in this period. This period is still understudied in the historiography and yet holds so much potential for the intersection between labor history, women's history, and military history. As we saw, both the transition into the AVF and the women who served in it were deeply connected to the changing gender norms in American society, as well as the old and new challenges that came with it, even if neither party expressly acknowledged it. The fact that in the same decade as the death of the ERA women would serve as equals alongside men in a gender-integrated military, as American society itself was slowly becoming more gender-integrated and replacing old gender norms, cannot be ignored. As shown, the struggles of military and civilian women in this period were more alike than is commonly understood, and the entry of women into the AVF and eventually combat roles challenged sexist and heteronormative norms of gender, while their civilian sisters were doing the same by entering white collar work, among other progress civilian women made. It is clear then, that the transition into the AVF in the 1970s and the eventual entry of women into combat roles in the 1990s and 2000s

were watershed moments for gender norms in American society, and should be examined and studied as such. As part of studying this period, we must first research and understand why women sought out military careers after the transition to the All-Volunteer Force, as previous scholars have done for the pre-AVF period.

The reasons why women sought out careers in the AVF are as diverse as the women themselves. Economic motivations ranged from single mothers seeking stability, such as First Sergeant Myrick, to women seeking to pay for college, as was the case for Major Krueger, to women simply wanting to advance their careers in the patriarchal civilian society of the late 1970s and early 1980s like Colonel Fenner. These stories strengthen the arguments of scholars who studied the pre-AVF women's corps, such as Roth, who contend that women's military history must be considered part of broader women's labor history. They also strengthen Feinman's argument that women's entry into the military must be analyzed in combination with their individual material conditions which accompanied that entry. What is most interesting to note is while the economic motivations of the first wave of women to enter the AVF generally aligned with the motivations established by Roth and other scholars, we see a distinct shift in the economic motivations of military women roughly halfway through the 1980s. This shift can be primarily seen with how many women cited wanting to pay off student debts, escape poverty or to access the benefits military service brings. As such, because these generally working-class women put their lives, bodies and mental health on the line for military career bonuses like the GI Bill benefits, it could be argued the AVF model became a form of a poverty draft of sorts. In this we see the value of the intersectional approach for studying women's military history. This shift in the economic motivations of military women to sign up shows us that the economic reality for lower class women became more dire, leading them to consider the military more and more in order to escape poverty and enjoy the GI Bill benefits, in essence becoming poverty draftees. Furthermore, the fact that

the military is one of the only employers to offer equal pay for equal work across the genders also played a significant role. Even women who prior to their military employment were able to attain positions of skilled civilian labor would find themselves looking towards the military because they would often face the gender wage gap in civilian workplaces or not be able to advance as quickly as their male counterparts. The military itself also clearly knew that this factor of women's material conditions drove them to consider military employment, as seen in the 1990s Marine Corps recruitment ad, almost explicitly aimed at women who felt they would not be able to attain promotions as quickly as their male peers in the civilian labor market. Similarly, the 1990 Army ad also plays into many of the same economic anxieties and material conditions facing women in the last decades of the 20th century, which can be safely assumed to have continued well into the 21st century, with the gender wage gap still a prominent issue for women's material conditions. Evidently, future research into women's military history in the AVF would do well to look at the intersection of women's labor history when discussing the increasing prominence of women in the military after the transition to the AVF.

At the same time, we can also see that being exposed to the military through family members was a significant motivating factor as well. What we can infer from this is that being exposed to the military from a young age influences women to seek out military career in roughly equal rates to their male counterparts. This idea has been largely understood for servicemen, and yet thus far there have been no similar studies into whether the same holds true for servicewomen. But, as seen in the stories of women such as Major General Aragon and Lieutenant Colonel Custodio, exposure to military service was a major motivating factor for women to seek out careers in the military. Similarly, while sons stepping into the footsteps of their familial military legacy has long been a culturally understood phenomenon, we can see that the same is also the case for the motivation of women such as Major Helferich-

Polosky and Captain Young to enter military life. Major Helperich-Polosky's story is especially interesting, as her familial military ties are matrilineal rather than patrilineal, and she explicitly cited that as her reason for joining the Army. Future studies exploring this topic would do well to research these family ties in relation to servicewomen's reasons for entering the AVF. Another aspect which makes this understudied phenomenon fascinating is the ways in which the views of the military families these women hail from contrast sharply to civilian society. As noted, at the same time that Captain Young's family was proud of her for joining the Navy, the ERA had only recently been defeated and buried because American society at large was not ready for the idea of women in uniform serving alongside and as equals to men and potentially seeing combat. This too is fertile ground for future research to dig into, as this sharp contrast reveals potential interesting insights into the differences of how military families view women in uniform compared to civilian society at large. Thus, this is an interesting aspect of modern women's military history also worth noting and analyzing, especially as the share of women in the military keeps slowly increasing as time goes on. However, there are still too few specific statistics and studies on this specific motivation for women to seek military careers to draw any real, large-scale conclusions from, and thus future research is especially direly needed for this factor of women's military history in the AVF.

And of course, we must also note women who sought out military careers specifically to attain careers outside of the traditionally female fields or to enter combat roles. It is this motivation which gives us the clearest insight into how women's entry into the AVF challenged and broke down the military's gender barriers. For Captain Oslund, Lieutenant General Harris and Captain Allison, the military opening up roles and positions previously denied to women was the reason they went in. Being part of the first wave of women to enter the gender-integrated AVF also meant they had to deal with sexism from male superiors and peers. Nevertheless, the fact they'd been given the chance to prove the importance of

womanpower as part of the military clearly motivated them to persevere, and through this they paved the way for other women to be inspired to seek out military careers, such as Colonel Linnington. As for women signing up to enter combat roles, this becomes most prominent after the early 1990s, when the battles around the sexist military gender barriers reached national politics once more after the push for the ERA in the 1970s, a rematch military women would end up winning. The stories of these pioneers, such as Brigadier General Doorenbos and Lieutenant Colonel Duckworth are an important aspect of the ways in which women's entry into the AVF challenged and broke down military gender barriers, and yet as noted, are relatively few and far between in the existing oral history archives. Future research into this topic and scholars who will interview women who joined after 1990 would do well to analyze this fascinating and as of yet relatively small subject, as it is one of the clearest frontiers in which women in the AVF challenged the military's gender barriers, and ended up winning. Examining and understanding this specific motivation of women to join up has gained increased importance in the face of this victory being undone by the second Trump administration. This subject, of women joining the AVF to challenge the military's gender barriers, intersects with women's history in general as well, as the clash to enter the AVF and the clash to enter combat roles coincide with both second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, and third wave feminism in the 1990s. Future research that specifically focuses on this theme could further illustrate the ways in which civilian's women's push to break down gender barriers in civilian society aligned with the ways in which servicewomen did the same inside the military. As the second Trump administration seems poised to forcefully push American society back to patriarchal and heteronormative gender ideals, the ways in which women in one of the most masculine-dominated institutions clashed with sexist barriers and superiors, and ended up overcoming them, may prove invaluable to study and understand for the immediate future.

All in all, women's motivations to join the AVF span from economic necessity to family legacies, to wanting to challenge sexist rules. All of these are fascinating and important to note for women's military history, as they reveal fascinating intersections hitherto ignored or simply not studied. They also reveal ways in which the issues and gender-based clashes civilian women faced were shared by their military counterparts, and yet the latter is still woefully underrepresented in women's history. Women's entry into the All-Volunteer Force between the 1970s and early 2000s is thus vitally important for recent women's history in general, as it shows that the ways in which military women had to deal with adverse material conditions, familial legacies, and sexist rules and superiors closely echoes and sometimes contrasts that of civilian women. The importance of the intersection between women's history, labor history and military history is thus fairly clear, and 'new military history' scholars of the present and future will find this period and this topic to be rich in possibilities, and fascinating insights about the relationship between servicewomen and society at large, especially once more oral history interviews with post-AVF servicewomen are conducted and published. One aspect of this which could prove fascinating for instance, is to also look at race or queer identity in relation to servicewomen in the AVF. After all, while the struggles of servicewomen in the AVF aligns well with those of their civilian counterparts, the same could also hold true for servicewomen of color, who likely also had to battle racism in addition to sexism from superiors and peers. Threat's work on the history of pre-AVF servicewomen of color already shows this to have been a major issue prior to the AVF, and it can be assumed this likely continued once the transition into the AVF model was done. Or consider the struggles of lesbian and transgender servicewomen, such as Sergeant Vasquez, as the advent of *Don't Ask Don't Tell* in the 1990's and Trump's trans military ban in the 2010s and 2020s harken back to when the WAC was accused of hiding "dens of lesbians" based on nothing more than queerphobic assumptions and hatred in the Second World War, not to mention the

discrimination they faced in civilian life. As can thus be plainly seen, women's history in the AVF holds much potential for scholars to uncover and examine.

The integration of women into the AVF, much like the entry of women into more civilian labor sectors around the same time, allowed women to use a military career as a way to climb the economic ladder and escape disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, they still had to battle sexism and discrimination, both from the homefront and from the military itself, and could still find themselves placed back into that disadvantaged place if they were queer. This integration was undoubtedly a major step forward for women's rights and the breaking of heteronormative gender norms, but this victory must be understood with its full complexity, and that its progress can all too quickly be undone. As Vuic argued in *Gender, the Military, and War*, while this progress is tempting to see as linear and clean-cut, the reality is complex, nuanced, and deserving of further research.

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