



LIONESS

BY MEG MCLAGAN AND DARIA SOMMERS

HOW DID FIVE FEMALE ARMY SOLDIERS END UP FIGHTING ALONGSIDE THE MARINES IN SOME OF THE BLOODIEST BATTLES OF THE IRAQ WAR?

They went to Iraq as cooks, clerks and mechanics and returned a year later as part of America's first generation of female combat veterans. In *Lioness*, Directors Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers give an intimate look at war through the eyes of women and the U.S. military policy that bans them from combat.



FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

When the war in Iraq started, like all Americans, we watched reports of the invasion of Iraq. As the conflict unfolded, we were struck by a recurring footnote that emerged in the press. It wasn't just young men who were fighting; it was young women too – wives, mothers, sisters, daughters.

It soon became clear to us that a turning point had been reached. The rise of the insurgency had obliterated the notion of a front line and the support units in which women served were increasingly finding themselves in the line of fire. As a result, the official U.S. policy banning female soldiers from serving in direct ground combat was being severely tested, if not violated, on a regular basis. The face of America's combat warrior had changed; it was no longer exclusively male.

Intrigued, we wondered: Who were these women serving in our name? What was it like for them to be on the cutting edge of history in the midst of such a complex and unpopular war? While the reality of the changing role of female soldiers was playing itself out on the ground in Iraq, here at home the image of the female soldier stagnated in the public imagination, polarized between Jessica Lynch at one extreme and Lynndie England at the other. Recognizing this disconnect, our goal as filmmakers was to find a story that would capture the provocative nature of this historic shift. After doing some research, we learned about a group of female support soldiers, members of "Team Lioness," who by any reckoning were breaking new ground and rewriting the rules.

When we first met up with the Lioness women, they had already been back in the U.S. for over a year and it was clear that what they had experienced in Iraq was only part of the story. The rest was unfolding in their lives as they confronted the reality that they had been called upon to do the one thing they were told they could never do: engage in direct combat. And they were asked to do so precisely because they were female.

Because neither of us comes from a military background, we approached our subjects with an attitude of discovery. We did not assume that we knew what life was like for them and remained open to understanding their world and its logic. As we listened to their combat stories, what emerged was a tale that touched on the universal horror of war, one told from a female perspective.

One of the things we learned during the three years it took to make the film was that the grey zone in which this first group – and subsequent Lionesses – found themselves could lead to serious consequences. Without access to the same combat training that all-male infantry troops receive, female soldiers are placed at greater risk than their male counterparts. Excluding women from combat training also invites disrespect in that it leads to women not being treated as full members of the team and also creates conditions for harassment.

The practice of attaching women on a temporary basis to all-male combat units – from the ad hoc Lioness program in Iraq to the more formalized Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan – provides a convenient loophole that enables commanders on the ground to more effectively combat enemy violence without violating policy. But because no official paper trail is created – as it is for male combat soldiers – the female soldier's trajectory into the highest echelons of military leadership is limited. In effect, this practice creates a "brass" ceiling. Without combat medals and official recognition as combatants, women are prevented from advancing up the ranks and assuming meaningful leadership roles within the military hierarchy. Their ability to shape national policy is also reduced. In a post-9/11 world, credibility on military and national security issues is increasingly necessary for those who hope to succeed in public positions, especially elected offices.

Our hope is that the film will be taken up as part of an emergent movement that seeks to recognize and take care of this first generation of female combat veterans. Veteran services for soldiers who have experienced the extremes of war are based on the model of a male combat veteran. Much primary research needs to be done on the gender-specific needs of female veterans, especially in the area of mental health. Acknowledging and supporting women veterans when they return home and helping them reenter civilian life with the services they require is an important step in moving them out of the grey zone.

Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers



Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers, Producers/Directors

THE FILM AND ITS IMPACT

Lioness tells the story of a group of women support soldiers who went to Iraq in 2003 as clerks, mechanics, and engineers and returned home a year later as part of this country's first generation of female combat veterans.

While based in the Sunni Triangle, the women in our film were regularly attached to all-male combat units, with the mission of defusing tensions with Iraqi women and children as part of an ad hoc Army program called "Team Lioness." With the rise of the insurgency in the spring of 2004, they ended up fighting in some of the bloodiest counterinsurgency battles of the Iraq War. Yet these women's stories were never mentioned in news accounts of the battles.

Through intimate vérité scenes, journal excerpts, archival footage, and interviews with commanders, the film follows this original group of Lionesses as they resume their lives back home and confront the reality that they were called upon to do the one thing they were told they would never do: engage in direct ground combat. Both the Army and the Marines continued and expanded the practice of assigning women to all-male combat units over the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, because the combat exclusion policy remained in place, these women – and those who followed as Lionesses or FET members – returned to a society that did not fully understand or acknowledge their experiences.

Since its release in 2008, *Lioness* has contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of the movement to recognize and respond to the needs of American servicewomen returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. As a catalyst for military-civilian dialogue, the film has led to tangible change in a number of arenas by framing an important but largely invisible issues in meaningful human terms. Among the film's notable accomplishments is the activation of policy discussions between the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the House Armed Services Committee over how to document the service of women soldiers in operational missions outside their military occupations. This is crucial because it affects women's ability to establish "service connection" for conditions related to their military service and thus their ability to receive appropriate VA benefits.

The film has also played an important role in support of recent legislation affecting health care for women veterans, namely the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2009, which was signed into law by President Obama on May 5, 2010. Other significant changes resulting from our outreach are the adoption of *Lioness* as a training tool nationwide within the VA health care infrastructure and its use in an innovative pilot program in North Carolina designed to support rural veterans by offering evidence-based, best-practice behavioral health training to non-VA mental health and primary care doctors.



SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN *LIONESS*

Shannon Morgan, SPC, Mechanic
 Rebecca Nava, SPC, Supply Clerk
 Anastasia Breslow, CPT, Signal
 Ranie Ruthig, SGT, Mechanic
 Katherine Guttormsen, MAJ, Company Commander

All are members of the U.S. Army.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What inspiration do you take away from watching the women portrayed in the film?
2. Why is defining a combat job in the military today not so easy?
3. Why have women been banned from units that engage in directground combat? What ideas about women's roles in society come into play in discussions about the combat exclusion policy?
4. As you watched the women viewing the History Channel video about the fighting in Ramadi, what thoughts did you have? How do you think they felt? If Shannon is right – “They [the narrators] went out of their way not to mention us” – why would the narrators have done that?
5. Based on the various statements made by the women in the film, how do you think women react differently than men to the experience of participating in combat? How are men's and women's reactions the same?
6. What signs of potential post-traumatic stress disorder do the various women exhibit?
7. What are some of the particular stresses that military families experience when one or more members are sent to another part of the world, particularly a war zone? How can government policies ease the personal costs of deployment?
8. What is the feeling or idea conveyed by the closing scene (a shot of the road behind as the camera moves forward)?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Talk with your representatives in Congress about your concerns regarding the level of benefits available to veterans today, especially benefits for survivors of combat and of military sexual trauma (MST).
- Find out about issues facing returning servicewomen and how you can support them at the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) website: www.servicewomen.org.
- Hire a veteran – one of the best ways to help a former soldier make the transition to civilian life.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved – the website of the Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



RESOURCES

<http://www.lionessfilm.com> – This is Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers's website devoted to *Lioness* and contains additional resources, links, and information.

Military Women and Women Veteran Websites:

<http://www1.va.gov/WOMENVET/> – This is the website for the Center for Women Veterans, which is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs. It is the place to check for information on all issues relating to women veterans including health care, mental health, and military sexual trauma.

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp> – This is a website with extensive information on post-traumatic stress disorder, its symptoms and treatments, along with links to support services for veterans and their families.

<http://www.wrei.org/MilitaryWomen.htm> – The Women in the Military project at the Women's Research and Education Institute provides nonpartisan legal and policy analysis and statistics relating to military women and women veterans. This website also has an excellent links page.

<http://www.4militarywomen.org/> – This is a website devoted to providing factual information on military personnel issues, including the role of women in combat and the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

<http://www.sapr.mil/> – This is the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response website.

<http://www.dav.org/> – Disabled American Veterans (DAV) is an organization of disabled veterans who are focused on building better lives for disabled veterans and their families. DAV's Stand Up 4 Vets campaign (<http://standup4vets.org/>) includes advocacy for legislation that seeks to improve health care for women veterans.

<http://www.swan.org/> – Service Women's Action Network (SWAN). SWAN supports, defends, and empowers today's servicewomen and women veterans of all eras, through advocacy initiatives and healing community programs.

Military Women and Women Veteran History:

www.womensmemorial.org – This website contains a chronology of women's participation in wars, from the Revolutionary War through the first Gulf War and other conflicts in the 1990s.

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/> – The Veterans History Project (VHP) collects and preserves the remembrances of American war veterans and the civilian workers who supported them. These collections of first-hand accounts are archived in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress for use by researchers and to serve as an inspiration for generations to come.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp> – This is a website with extensive information on post-traumatic stress disorder, its symptoms and treatments, along with links to support services for veterans and their families.



LIONESS WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON DECEMBER 15, 2011. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

Lioness was produced by Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers. The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS Community is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and to create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS Community, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved.

