Women in the Canadian Forces: Past, Present and Future

A Critique

By Carl G. Jacobsen

The "views and opinions" presented here will cause no discomfort in the male locker-rooms of Canada's Armed Forces. The authors' reading of history appears selective and oblivious of history's many examples of women more than holding their own in combat. Israeli women distinguished themselves during the "War of Independence" and, although spared combat participation in recent wars, they remain subject to conscription and are provided weapons training.(1) A number of other countries have had female fighting units of distinction. During World War II, 800,000 women served with Soviet forces as "snipers, pilots, communications specialists, tank drivers, on air crews and in the medical services."(2) Although not as prominent in the peacetime Services, they can and do "volunteer as soldiers, sailors, sergeants and petty officers . . . they have the same rights as extended-duty servicemen;" Valentina Tereshkova, the cosmonaut, Valentina Zakoretskaya, the world record parachutist,and S. Svitskaya, the military test pilot and holder of eight world records, are but some of the better-known names.(3) Every partisan movement in Europe during the Second World War saw women employed in fighting as well as auxiliary roles; in fact, the same can be said of all successful partisan movements.(4) The memory of Margaret Corbin and other irregulars of the American Revolution served as one spur to the recent U.S. decision to extend women's access to combat roles. (5)

The statement that women's representation in the Canadian Forces, 5.9%, is "a larger percentage than any country but the United States" would be more persuasive if it read "a larger percentage than any North American country but the United States." All percentages of women in the Armed Services, as of other military categories, are of dubious worth for purposes of comparison. Even NATO countries differ widely in their definitions, of "combat," of "reserve," of "auxiliary," and of all too many other concepts. More to the point, then, is the fact that a recent German survey of "Women in Uniform" does not even find Canada's

record worthy of mention, drawing attention instead to the U.S., China, Zaire, Israel, Rhodesia, Cuba, India, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Rumania, Sweden, Turkey, the Soviet Union, West Germany and East Germany.(6)

The authors talk of the 1971 Defence Council directive that there should be "no limitation on the employment of women;" buried in later text is the information that 46 of 127 classifications remain closed to women. They say remaining limitations reflect the mores of Canadian society; are we not here talking rather of the mores of an establishment that was socialized during an earlier era? The assumption that the male focus constitutes a majority view is apparently seen to make the focus legitimate; is that not akin to saying that since the world's majority has been socialized to malnutrition, poverty and short life expectancy, then this must be acceptable? Yes, married military women might occasionally get pregnant; but single men might get more syphilis, and single-sex concentrations have been argued to encourage homosexuality and other perceived vices--is any of this relevant?

The Canadian Human Rights Act is quoted to the effect that discrimination can only be tolerated if based on "a bona fide occupational requirement," and it is suggested that "individual rights for equal opportunity could be in conflict with the collective good of society. . . the overall performance of a defence force." Surely that would be an opinion open to considerable challenge, and hence by no means an obvious "requirement."

It is also suggested that our NATO allies might "depreciate our contribution to the alliance if our combat forces were composed of women as well as men." Yet our presumed enemies, who we profess to fear, are precisely those who value women's combat potential higher than we tend to.(7) Is this suggestion not logically inconsistant?

The section on operational requirements presents the opinions of certain male commanders and soldiers, selective quotes by unnamed "experts," dubious historical assertions and a plethora of pessimistic maybes, coulds and mights; the moon could, might, maybe fall down tomorrow. Every "concern" is subjectively suggestive. Every "concern" is open to challenge on the basis of historical experience. The absence of such challenge invites the sad thought that the authors find the prejudices tolerable.

The statement "Another experience associated with the introduction of women into new occupations is the cost of material" sparked the following scribble in my margin: "the bottom cop-out line!" (In fact, the evidence does not support this fear: a recent American study found that "servicewomen cost the Government an average of $982 less

annually than their male counterparts.")(8) But worse is to come: "the alternatives (in times of low recruitment) are to recruit lower quality males or to increase our intake of high quality females." Although I am sure the authors meant no such thing, the implication that I am left with is that these two groups are both viewed as the dregs of society. Unfortunately the tone of preceding sections provides all-too-much support for that conclusion. History does not.

NOTES

1. E. Luttwak and D. Horowitz, The Israeli Army.(New York: Harper & Row,1975); see section on conscription.

2. H. Fast Scott & W.F. Scott, The Armed Forces of the USSR,(Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979); see Appendix A, Women in the Soviet Armed Forces, p. 389. L.N. Sevinova's "Zhenina Sovetskom Obshestva," Znanie, No. 4, Moscow, 1979 is representative of the very extensive Soviet literature on the topic.

3. Scott and Scott, ibid.

4. Recent T.V. coverage of the Sandinistas' offensive against the Samoza regime has been as eloquent on this point as were the newsreels from Vietnam during the 60s and early 70s; or see Mao Tse-tung's Selected Military Writings, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), Che Guevara's Guerilla Warfare (1961), or the writings of other revolutionary/People's War/partisan theorists and practitioners.

5. ABC evening news, 17 May, 1979.

6. Ariane Barth, "Women in Uniform, receding barriers to military service," Atlas, May 1979, p. 51. Ms. Barth is an editor of Der Spiegel, of Hamburg. The article first appeared in the 13 November, 1978 issue of that journal.

7. Scott and Scott, op. cit., p. 389.

8. Barth, op. cit., p. 51.