

Book Reviews

BAND OF SISTERS: AMERICAN WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR TYESHA E. LOWERY²

I. Introduction

“There’s no change of policy as far as I’m concerned. *No women in combat.*”³ Those are the words spoken by our Commander-in-Chief, President Bush, in January 2005, but reality tells a far different story. Reality is that in today’s fight, servicewomen are just as intimately engaged in, relied upon, and as critical to mission success as their male counterparts.⁴ Since 2003, over 155,000 servicewomen have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ Over 430 servicewomen have been injured, and at least 70 have been killed.⁶

Without overtly debating the ever-controversial combat exclusion policy⁷ or touting the tenets of feminism,⁸ author Kirsten Holmstedt attempts to “get real” with her readers in *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*. By featuring the real-life stories of twelve women from all services and with a variety of backgrounds, Holmstedt alerts her readers that “[t]here are no front lines out there.”⁹ In today’s military, women are not only being engaged by the enemy but are also successfully engaging the enemy. Though Holmstedt strays from her stated goal of “tak[ing] a close look at how the experiment of women in combat is playing out,”¹⁰ and though her work fails to substantiate her conclusion that the experiment has been a success,¹¹ *Band of Sisters* is, nevertheless, worthy of reading. Readers cannot help but be captivated, enlightened, and inspired in reading *Band of Sisters*.

II. Background

Holmstedt, a graduate of the Drake University School of Journalism,¹² wrote *Band of Sisters* as part of her degree requirement for a master of fine arts in creative nonfiction from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington.¹³ Holmstedt, who lived close to the Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, saw the large number of women going off to war.¹⁴ She wondered what these women were feeling. Were they scared? Were they mentally and physically equipped?¹⁵

¹ KIRSTEN HOLMSTEDT, *BAND OF SISTERS: AMERICAN WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ* (2007).

² U.S. Army. Student, 56th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Ctr. and Sch., U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Va.

³ Martha McSally, *Women in Combat: Is the Current Policy Obsolete?*, 14 DUKE J. GENDER L. & POL’Y 1011, 1012 (2007) (quoting Rowan Scarborough & Joseph Curl, *Despite Pressure, Bush Pledges “No Women in Combat,”* WASH. TIMES, Jan. 12, 2005, at A01) (emphasis added).

⁴ See HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at 309.

⁵ *Id.* at inside front cover.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ See *id.* at xxii.

⁸ See The Happy Feminist, *Women in Combat: Arguments that Don’t Matter to Me*, Nov. 14, 2005, http://happyfeminist.typepad.com/happyfeminist/2005/11/women_in_combat.html.

⁹ HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at xvii (quoting Marine Captain Amy McGrath).

¹⁰ See *id.*

¹¹ See *id.* at 312.

¹² *Id.* at inside back cover.

¹³ Drake University, E-Blue Alumni Newsletter, *Drake Grad Covers Women at War*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.drake.edu/news/dbletter/eblue/archive.php?mode=nay&year=2007&offset=&newsletter=100&article=1914> [hereinafter Drake University, E-Blue Alumni Newsletter].

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at xii–xiii.

One of Holmstedt's friends once told her, "Some people are interested in how a clock works, but you're more interested in what makes the clockmaker tick."¹⁶ Keeping in mind Holmstedt's nature and her primary purpose in writing the book (i.e., to be creative) will help readers understand why Holmstedt relies more on perceptions, emotions, and feelings,¹⁷ rather than empirical data or other sources in reaching her ultimate conclusion that the experiment has been a success.¹⁸

III. Organization and Content

With its vivid imagery and frank collection of events, *Band of Sisters* is well-organized and easy-to-read. Each chapter chronicles the experiences of different women serving in Iraq in varying services and roles with varying reactions. Yet, these women share the common band of "courage, pride, and physical, mental, and emotional strength."¹⁹

First, Holmstedt masterfully captivates and holds the attention of readers with her word choice and vivid imagery. For example, she begins the first chapter profiling the combat experiences of Marine Lance Corporals Carrie Blais and Priscilla Kispetik who were involved in a firefight with insurgents while patrolling the city of Haditha with other Marines.²⁰ Holmstedt writes,

Without hesitation, Blais fired two shots, hitting her target in the right leg. His leg jerked and he fell. . . .
The Iraqi started crawling toward his weapon.
"Finish it," the staff sergeant yelled.
Blais fired two more shots. The Iraqi stopped moving as his white robe turned red²¹

Similarly, Holmstedt makes readers see, through her words, the horrific explosion that Marine Gunnery Sergeant Yolanda Mayo encountered:

The explosion had catapulted vehicle parts in every direction. Human remains were scattered on the ground. Mayo saw a leg in one area, still attached to a shoe, and the rest of the body was lying somewhere else. . . . Blood was splattered everywhere. Rivaling the horrifying sight were the odors of charred flesh and burning oil.²²

It is vivid imagery like this that grabs the reader's attention and holds it until the very end.

Second, Holmstedt frankly recounts the experiences of heroic women. Most of the women featured in *Band of Sisters* had some type of contact with the enemy (i.e., engaged the enemy or were engaged by the enemy). In addition to the experiences already referenced, Holmstedt recounts the story of U.S. Army Captain Robin Brown, the first female pilot to be shot down in combat and survive.²³ When insurgents shot down her helicopter over Fallujah with a heat-seeking missile, Brown and her co-pilot remained amazingly calm and relied on their tactical training to land the helicopter safely and to protect them on the ground until rescued.²⁴ Holmstedt also recounted the inspiring story of Marine Captain Vernice Armour, the first black female combat pilot.²⁵ For Armour, it was not about being first.²⁶ "It was about not wanting to be average."²⁷

¹⁶ Drake University, E-Blue Alumni Newsletter, *supra* note 13.

¹⁷ See HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at xvi–xvii.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 312.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 314.

²⁰ *Id.* at 1–25.

²¹ *Id.* at 20.

²² *Id.* at 246.

²³ *Id.* at 27–51, inside back cover.

²⁴ *Id.* at 32–42, 46, inside back cover.

²⁵ *Id.* at 155–83.

Holmstedt profiles several other women like Captain Armor, such as Lieutenant Colonel Polly Montgomery, “the first female commander of a combat squadron in the Air Force”²⁸ and Marine Lance Corporal Chrissy DeCaprio, a .50 cal gunner of a scout vehicle.²⁹ Simply put, Holmstedt featured stories essentially about “not wanting to be average.”³⁰

IV. Analysis

Holmstedt met her ancillary goal of acknowledging the contributions that women are making in Iraq³¹ but deviated somewhat from her stated goal of “taking a close look at how the experiment of women in combat is playing out.”³² Though Holmstedt failed to define “in combat,” she led readers to believe that the experiment involved more than simply looking at women in a war zone. In her introduction, she states that many servicewomen have “found themselves in vicious fire fights, under attack by mortar and rockets, and taking hostile fire in the air.”³³ This intimates that the experiment would involve taking a look at servicewomen who are conducting missions that make enemy contact highly probable. After all, what is experimental about women simply being in a combat zone? Holmstedt herself acknowledges that thousands of servicewomen served in the combat zones of War World I, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and other conflicts.³⁴ The majority of Americans realize that the countless servicewomen who have deployed to Iraq have provided invaluable support. It is the fact that servicewomen are now conducting missions where enemy contact is likely that is “experimental.”³⁵

For the most part, Holmstedt focused on the truly experimental by profiling servicewomen who either engaged the enemy or were engaged by the enemy.³⁶ However, Holmstedt deviated from her stated goal by including “The Little Bird that Could,” the story of Petty Officer Third Class Marcia Lillie, U.S. Navy.³⁷ Holmstedt uses this story to lend credence to her conclusion that the experiment has been a success,³⁸ but Lillie’s experience was not experimental and does not support Holmstedt’s conclusion.

In March 2003, Lillie deployed to the Mediterranean Sea in support of operations in Iraq.³⁹ As a member of the flight deck crew of the carrier USS *Truman*, Lillie operated the carrier’s elevators and was responsible for transporting items such as munitions from hangar bays to aircraft.⁴⁰ During her second deployment, Lillie served as a “tractor king,” towing aircraft about the carrier.⁴¹ Though Holmstedt recounts several close calls, like the time that the wind picked Lillie up and tossed

²⁶ *Id.* at 183.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 187, 185–215.

²⁹ *Id.* at 139–53.

³⁰ Major L. Tammy Duckworth, *Foreword* to HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at x (referring to Marine Captain Vernice Armour’s story).

³¹ *Id.* at 314.

³² *Id.* at xvii.

³³ *Id.* at xx.

³⁴ *Id.* at xviii–xix.

³⁵ See Ann Scott Tyson, *For Female GIs, Combat Is a Fact*, WASH. POST, May 13, 2005, at A01, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/12/AR2005051202002.html>.

³⁶ See *supra* Sec. III, Organization and Content (discussing the profiles of these servicewomen).

³⁷ *Id.* at 115–37.

³⁸ See HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at 312.

³⁹ *Id.* at 117.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 119–20.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 129.

her⁴² and the time that one of the aircrafts that Lillie was towing jack-knifed,⁴³ there is nothing experimental about Lillie's story. At the time of Lillie's first deployment, "women had been serving on ships for nearly a decade."⁴⁴ Lillie experienced the same occupational hazards that she would have experienced in garrison or in a non-deployed environment. While Lillie's contributions were vital in combating the enemy, her story adds little credence to Holmstedt's ultimate conclusion that the experiment is a success.⁴⁵ Holmstedt likely included Lillie's story in the interests of fair coverage to all the services.

Second, even if Holmstedt had stayed the course and only featured women whose positions frequently encounter enemy contact, it still would have been impossible to conclude that the experiment has been a success based solely on the lives of twelve servicewomen. In her closing remarks Holmstedt asked, "What more evidence do the American people need to prove that the experiment of women in combat has been a success?"⁴⁶ For starters, her work should have included more interviews, quotes, and opinions from the men that these women fought alongside. Undoubtedly, Holmstedt talked with many men⁴⁷ in researching the lives of the women profiled. Yet, their thoughts and opinions are not adequately represented.⁴⁸

In a recent interview with Judy Woodruff of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Holmstedt discussed servicemen's opinions of women in combat.⁴⁹ Holmstedt acknowledged that not all servicemen (including junior-ranking and senior-ranking) accept women in combat⁵⁰ and that even some servicemen who believe in women in combat, refuse to show their support openly.⁵¹

Well, I [Holmstedt] talked to one general on the phone, and he said that, at a cocktail party, he might say that he's opposed to women in combat and doesn't like it, but, really, he does believe in women in combat and he thinks they're doing wonderful things.

So there is an outward support or lack of support. There's a contradiction right now. I just think people are really—some men, and the ones who have been around for a while in the military, the older echelon—I think that they're more resistant to supporting women openly. And I think that that reflects all the way down, because women are still, I believe, treated like second-class citizens because of that male mentality.⁵²

The "male mentality" is exactly what Holmstedt failed to adequately address in *Band of Sisters*. She should have given readers the thoughts of those young male corporals that Lance Corporals Carrie Blais and Priscilla Kispetik patrolled the streets of Haditha with.⁵³ Why not tell Captain Robin Brown's story of the "Shoot Down" through the eyes of her male co-

⁴² *Id.* at 128–29.

⁴³ *Id.* at 130–31.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 122.

⁴⁵ *See id.* at 312.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.* at xv.

⁴⁸ While Holmstedt mentions the thoughts of servicemen on occasion, she fails to cite her sources in most instances. Her work contains very few quotations or references that are directly attributed to the men she interviewed.

⁴⁹ *Newshour: Women's Combat Roles Evolving in Iraq, Afghanistan* (PBS television broadcast July 5, 2007) (interview of Kirsten Holmstedt by Judy Woodruff), available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec07/women_07-05.html.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *See HOLMSTEDT, supra* note 1, at 1.

pilot Chief Warrant Officer Two Jeff Sumner?⁵⁴ Did Captain Amy McGrath actually get into the “domain, fraternity, and team”⁵⁵ of the male-dominated Green Knights like she thought? The questions go on and on.

As admonished earlier, readers should keep in mind that Holmstedt wrote *Band of Sisters* to be creative. *Band of Sisters* was not written to be controversial, debatable, or dicey. Without commentary from males lending support to the women’s beliefs that males perceived them as equals, readers are essentially left with self-serving stories of women’s perceptions of successful integration into the non-existent front lines. Because Holmstedt relied primarily on self-serving stories, her conclusion that the experiment has been a success⁵⁶ remains unsubstantiated.

V. Modern Day Applicability

Despite the criticism, *Band of Sisters* merits reading. For American society in general, for servicemen in particular, and for women especially, *Band of Sisters* has great modern day applicability. The debate over the combat exclusion policy is alive and well, and many Americans are unaware that, despite the policy, the nature of the fight in Iraq leaves us no choice.⁵⁷ Women are in combat, and Americans should know this. For servicemen in particular, if the experiment of women in combat is truly to be a success, servicemen need to be educated. While many servicemen readily admit that there are many men that are physically, mentally, and emotionally incapable of fighting on the front lines, they are reluctant, if not recalcitrant, in admitting that the converse is also true. Perhaps, in reading *Band of Sisters*, these servicemen will see that there are many servicewomen who are physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of fighting in combat. For women especially, whether young or old, military or civilian, who wants to be average⁵⁸ when you are capable of doing the extraordinary?

VI. Conclusion

Nothing in this review should be construed to minimize the invaluable contributions that servicewomen are making in Iraq. Servicewomen are being called to do, and are doing, extraordinary heroic things in Iraq.⁵⁹ Many serve as part of the brave “lioness teams”⁶⁰ that accompany infantrymen onto the dangerous streets of cities like Ramadi and Talil in Iraq. Stories like those shared in *Band of Sisters* are real and *Band of Sisters* merits reading if for no other reason than to applaud the efforts of servicewomen, who like their male counterparts, are proudly and willingly answering the call to make the ultimate sacrifice in support of freedom.

⁵⁴ See *id.* at 27–51.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 101.

⁵⁶ See *id.* at 312.

⁵⁷ See Tyson, *supra* note 35.

⁵⁸ See HOLMSTEDT, *supra* note 1, at x.

⁵⁹ Major Tyessa E. Lowery served as the Brigade Judge Advocate for the Second Brigade Combat Team, Second Infantry Division, Ramadi, Iraq from August 2004–August 2005.

⁶⁰ “Lioness teams” were teams of females who were operationally tasked to conduct missions with our infantrymen.