

Women On the Front Lines

Spiritual practices among soldiers in combat require an unconventional approach. But Christian military women find unique ways to make their faith known.

Cpl. Jodi Rund is blonde, fresh-faced and not hard to imagine as a campus head-turner. In fact, not too many months ago that is exactly what she was. Back then she was studying sociology at the University of Illinois. It seems a lifetime ago, in the sunny days before her National Guard unit was called up.

Now she finds herself stationed at Camp Seitz in Iraq with the 1544th Transportation Company. Her job is to protect convoys that traverse some of the most dangerous roads in the world; and she does it well. One of the men in her company described her as “Osama bin Laden’s worst nightmare: a pretty woman who prays to Jesus and fights as well as any man.”

Rund is part of a new tribe of modern warriors: American women who serve their country on the front lines of war. It is a surprising development. Military regulations require that women may only serve in “non-direct combat units.” This means that the more than 20,000 servicewomen in Afghanistan and Iraq today—nearly one in every seven members of the U.S. armed services—are supposed to be in support positions, roles that do not bring them into direct contact with the enemy.

But the swirling nature of the modern battlefield makes it hard to keep those in such positions from danger. This means that Rund and thousands of women like her are not only serving in harm’s way but also are being given the opportunity to prove themselves equal to the challenge. It means that women are bringing their unique gifts and spirituality onto the battlefield in a way that is new in American military history.

America’s New Warriors Most Americans first became aware of

how women are being exposed to the dangers of war when Jessica Lynch, a 19-year-old private from Palestine, West Virginia, was taken captive near Nassiriya, Iraq. Her dramatic rescue from an Iraqi hospital by U.S. Special Forces and her victorious return home brought the challenges of America's female warriors into national view.

Stories of other women at war have also filled the headlines. Gen. Janis Karpinski was the commander of Abu Ghraib prison when the prisoner abuse scandals came to light and made her name a household word. More recently, Kayla Williams has received wide attention for her book, *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* (Norton), the gritty tale of one woman's odyssey on the modern battlefield.

What has not received much attention is how women on the front lines are relying on their faith to get them through the experience of war. Like their male counterparts, women often find that war is a time of religious transformation.

In the manner of warriors throughout history, women who step upon the battlefield today are quickly confronted by matters of faith: the possibility of their own deaths, the deaths of comrades and even the need for a moral rationale for the war itself. All of these press religious questions into the lives of women at war and make the battlefield a place of intense religious searching. Many find a brand of faith while at war that eluded them in the comforts of home.

For Rund, the path to a deeper faith began with her sense of the importance of the land she was fighting on. Raised Roman Catholic, she was vaguely aware that modern Iraq stands on the site of ancient Babylon, and that somehow this must heighten the importance of the war she was being asked to fight.

Yearning to know more, she researched Babylon on the Internet, and this brought her to Christian Web sites that fed her spirit. When she shared her discoveries with Christian friends

at home they began to send her e-mails that drew her into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Soon, Rund began to connect with other believers in her unit. They began to pray together before going into the field, and they encouraged each other by quoting Psalms and listening to sermons from home. With what little time they had, they often read Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Zondervan) together. Their faith grew, and they learned to pray for each other. Sometimes they prayed for those wounded in battle, and reported that many were helped by their prayers.

Wartime Spirituality Many of this generation of soldiers are passionately nontraditional in their faith. Often called "Millennials" or "Generation X," they tend to distance themselves from religious forms and structures to focus more on experiencing the presence of God and the feeling of community with other believers. As one expert has said, "Millennials are more likely to be sitting at Starbucks over a copy of *The Purpose-Driven Life* with five of their friends than they are to darken the door of a church."

Rund is a product of her generation. "Religious services don't help," she insists. "Conventional, organized religion doesn't meet our needs. I find that e-mails keep me strong, and the Psalms I put on my walls. Some of us get together before going out and pray. This is what keeps me going spiritually. Praying and surviving is the heart of my faith."

As this new generation at war moves away from traditional religion—which means military chaplains and official chapel services—many of them are evolving their own rituals of faith. It is not uncommon for a squad of Marines to quote Scripture together in their Humvee as they race into battle, or for a band of soldiers to recite the Lord's Prayer or sing a hymn as they don their gear. Spirituality in war is done on the move, in meaningful snippets and in rituals that take on deeper meaning with repetition. Women are often the leaders of these

rituals.

In fact, it is not uncommon to find women setting the pace for many of the alternative religious expressions that fill the U.S. military camps of Afghanistan and Iraq. Soldiers and Marines gather in tents and trailers to discuss a viewing of The Passion of the Christ or to watch DVDs of a T.D. Jakes conference. There are Bible studies, Purpose-Driven Life study groups and prayer meetings; many led by women whose gifts and spiritual passion move them into positions of leadership.

“I really didn’t think about it before I got here,” says one Christian lieutenant who found herself virtually pastoring a gathering of soldiers, “but I suppose my strong Christian upbringing and my sense of a soldier’s soul has put me in a position to do some good. I’m not saying I can do it better than a man, but perhaps I offer a depth of Christian teaching and a capacity for nurturing that is rare on the battlefield. I can’t really explain it. All I know is that I have a lot of soldiers coming to me for help.”

In Search of Real Power Clearly, soldiers tend to rally to those who seem to possess spiritual power. Sometimes this takes on a humorous form. Not long ago, a reporter for a major American newspaper sat in a Humvee waiting for the driver to start the engine and join his convoy.

Finally, the reporter impatiently asked the driver why he wouldn’t get started. The driver, a Baptist from Virginia, explained that he was waiting for “Sgt. Reyes to do her thing.”

Confused, the reporter asked what he meant. It turned out that Reyes was a devout Catholic who routinely made the sign of the cross and prayed over each of the Humvees in her unit before they went out on mission. Since all of the Humvees she had prayed for had come back safely with crews unharmed, no driver would start off on a mission until she had prayed and formed a

large cross in the air with her fingers.

The reporter understood, but then said to the driver, "You're Baptist, though, not a Catholic. What would your pastor back home think of you waiting for someone to make the sign of the cross over your vehicle?" The driver looked intently at the reporter and said, "Sir, my pastor ain't here. Sgt. Reyes is here, and what she does works!"

It is this gravitational pull of "what works" that transforms the religious experience of many on the battlefield. In Iraq and Afghanistan today, soldiers are boiling down faith into an experience-oriented passion for the reality of God and spiritual power.

"We just don't have the luxury of keeping all our differences," one female officer explained. "Here, we face the possibility of dying and all the misery around us. We have to find something that gets us through and, frankly, we pretty quickly get to the point where we don't care where it comes from. Just like medicine, if it works, we take it."

The Impact of Battlefield Faith This practical spirituality of war sometimes returns a soldier to her spiritual roots. A physician's assistant at Camp Seitz, Kathleen Burke insists she is an agnostic about matters of faith but also admits that when a soldier is dying on her gurney, she prays the "Hail Mary" that she learned in Roman Catholic grade school. Another soldier volunteers that when she is truly afraid she finds herself singing quietly the songs of her childhood Methodist Sunday school.

Soldiers normally return to their spiritual roots or gravitate to the most dynamic spirituality around them. Often that dynamic spirituality is exhibited by women of faith, who are willing to lead out in the face of war.

It has long been a maxim among students of military history that the nature of soldiers in war anticipates the nature of

the society that will arise after the war. In other words, the culture of soldiers at war symbolizes the culture of the nation to come. If this is true, then the tales of faith that are arising from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan today promise a great age of faith to come.

Perhaps as interesting, the role of women in that age of faith is a thrilling possibility, as well. For on the battlefield today, along with their spiritual passion, women are shaping the lives of their fellow soldiers with warrior skill. It may be that both will shape the American society of the near future. ?

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GOD OF OUR FATHERS
(UNITED STATES ARMY HYMN)

Lyrics by Daniel C. Roberts Music by George W. Warren

God of our fathers,
whose almighty hand
Leads forth in beauty
all the starry band
Of shining worlds in splendor
through the skies
Our grateful songs before
Thy throne arise.
Thy love divine
hath led us in the past,
In this free land by Thee
our lot is cast,
Be Thou our Ruler,
Guardian, Guide and Stay,
Thy Word our law,
Thy paths our chosen way. From war's alarms,
from deadly pestilence,

Be Thy strong arm our
ever sure defense;
Thy true religion
in our hearts increase,
Thy bounteous goodness
nourish us in peace.
Refresh Thy people
on their toilsome way,
Lead us from night
to never ending day;
Fill all our lives
with love and grace divine,
And glory, laud, and praise
be ever Thine.