



DISCUSSION GUIDE

# 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.



[WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/LIONESS](http://WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/LIONESS)

INDEPENDENTLENS

## FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Five years ago, like all Americans, we watched reports of the invasion of Iraq. 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 serve 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. At the same time, the narrative needed to be powerful enough to create a space in the national cultural dialogue for the women's voices to be heard. 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 come from nonmilitary backgrounds, 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 touches on the universal horror of war, but 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 find themselves can lead to serious consequences (female support troops continue to assume this role in both Army and Marine units in Iraq). Without access to the specialized advance combat training, female soldiers are placed at greater risk than their male counterparts. Excluding women from combat also invites disrespect in that it leads to women not being treated as full members of the team and creates conditions for harassment.

The continuing practice of attaching women on a temporary basis to all-male units is a convenient loophole that enables commanders on the ground to reduce violence without violating policy. But because it does not create a paper trail, it limits the female soldier's trajectory into the highest echelons of military leadership. In effect, it creates a glass 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. It also reduces their ability to shape national policy. 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 reenter civilian life with the services they require is another important step in moving them out of the grey zone.

## Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers



## THE FILM

Although Department of Defense policy prohibits women from being assigned to units whose mission is direct ground combat, female soldiers serving in Iraq have found themselves in combat since the start of the war. Female soldiers who accompany male troops on patrols and house-to-house searches are known as Lionesses, and their participation has proven to be invaluable. Not only does their presence help to calm Iraqi women and children, Lionesses also are able to conduct searches of the women without violating cultural norms in this Muslim country. Inevitably, however, during search operations, women soldiers have been drawn into the fighting in a war where the battle lines are hazy at best.

LIONESS profiles five women who saw action in 2003/2004 during some of the fiercest fighting in Iraq's Sunni Triangle. As members of the U.S. Army's 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, the women went to Iraq as support troops: cooks, mechanics, supply clerks and heavy equipment operators. Once there, however, they found themselves going "outside the wire," fighting along with the Marines in the streets of Ramadi. The women discuss their experiences in Iraq—what they expected based on their military assignments, then their surprise and quick readjustment as the new role of combat soldier was thrust upon them. They describe putting their lives at risk along with their fellow soldiers, an action that has thus far gone unrecognized in public accounts of the battle.

The psychological and emotional effects of war are evident in the women's reflections on their work as Lionesses. As they describe taking fire from all directions, killing at close range, removing dead bodies, and forcibly searching Iraqi women during house-to-house searches, their faces and voices reveal the personal cost of combat and its horrors.

The film presents a picture of the five women, not only as soldiers, but also as wives, mothers and daughters. They have coped with the demands of military life, especially the sacrifices involved in leaving behind spouses and young children. Reflecting on their recent deployment, the Lionesses display strength and a refreshing candor. Their doubts about the mission in Iraq mingling with the acceptance of duty, these combat-tested women exemplify what it means to be a good soldier.

## SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN LIONESS

*Shannon Morgan: SPC, Mechanic*

*Rebecca Nava: SPC, Supply Clerk*

*Anastasia Breslow: CPT, Signal*

*Ranie Ruthig: SGT, Mechanic*

*Katherine Guttormsen: CAP, Company Commander*

All are members of the U. S. Army.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Should Women Fight?

Mythology and popular culture are replete with tales of women soldiers and female superheroes. Amazons, Valkyries and Wonder Woman are among the familiar figures of classical literature and modern media. The history of the world presents numerous instances of women disguising themselves as men in order to go into battle—Joan of Arc being perhaps the most well-known of them. In the United States, women have participated in all wars since the Revolutionary War, sometimes as soldiers (disguised as men), and most often as nurses or other support personnel.

In the American armed forces today, women can serve on combat ships, fly military aircraft and work as military police. Certain jobs and activities, however, are still officially off-limits to women. These include the Infantry, Armor and Field Artillery, Special Forces (including Navy Seals) and Forward Air Defense—in short, any direct combat role.

PHOTO: DARIA SOMMERS



In the ongoing debate about the role of women in combat, these are the main arguments:

#### Arguments Against:

- Women are physically weaker than men, putting them at a disadvantage.
- Potentially disruptive romantic relationships may develop between military men and women.
- Women lack the aggressive mentality necessary for combat.
- It is unacceptable to put women at risk of being captured and sexually assaulted.
- Military and social tradition dictates that women not engage in combat.

#### Arguments For:

- Keeping women out of combat roles is unwarranted sexual discrimination.
- Women have already proved to be capable fighters.
- The armed forces need the additional troop strength supplied by women.
- Women in non-combat roles also risk capture and assault.
- Men are also subject to capture and sexual abuse.

In spite of Pentagon rules that exclude women from ground combat units, women have increasingly been involved in ground fighting in modern wars. Iraq especially presents a different kind of warfare. U.S. forces have confronted a guerrilla insurgency fought with non-traditional weapons and techniques—improvised explosive devices, mortar attacks, suicide bombs and rocket-propelled grenades on a nonlinear battlefield where there is no front line and no safe areas in the rear. The lack of clearly-drawn battle lines has made it difficult for commanders on the ground to adhere to policies written for a different kind of conflict. As a result, women must sometimes engage in ground fighting even as they carry out their main support roles. As of September 2008, 102 military women have been killed in Iraq since 2003.

#### Iraq's Sunni Triangle and Anbar Province

The Sunni Triangle is the area of central Iraq, with Baghdad in the eastern corner of the triangle, Tikrit in the northern corner and Ramadi in the western corner. The area also contains the city of Fallujah, where a major siege took place in 2004. Ramadi is the capital of Anbar, Iraq's largest province, which was a center of strong support for former president Saddam Hussein and a stronghold of armed opposition to Coalition forces.

In the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2004, Army and Marine battalions fought the insurgency for control of Anbar province. While most of the Marines' resources were engaged in Fallujah, the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine unit was, along with the Army's 1st Brigade Combat Team, focused on controlling Ramadi. The fighting in these two areas was especially fierce and bloody, with running battles in the streets for much of the month of April.

Fierce opposition to American forces continued in Anbar until 2007, when Sunnis who resented the Islamist fundamentalists of Al-Qaeda in Iraq sought American help to drive AQI out. Modest pay, weapons and a promise of eventual employment in the army or national police attracted thousands of former insurgents to join "awakening councils."

This new coalition, known as the Sahawa al Anbar (Anbar Awakening) and led by tribal sheikhs and Coalition commanders, has helped to greatly reduce the level of violence in Ramadi which is now considered one of the safest areas in the country.

As violence levels have plunged across Iraq, the number of attacks by female suicide bombers has increased. Although such attacks are not new to Iraq, they were relatively rare until last year when eight female bombers struck. In 2008, the number has jumped to 30, according to U.S. military records. To counter the threat of female bombers, Iraqi women have been recruited to search other Iraqi women for explosives and weapons at schools, hospitals, banks and government offices. Known as the "Daughters of Iraq" or the "Sahwa," these female searchers can detect explosive belts or vests covered by abayas (traditional Islamic gowns) without violating cultural prohibitions that do not allow men to search women.

#### Battle Scars

Physical injuries are not the only type of casualty that fighting forces can incur. Some soldiers returning from battle suffer a more invisible but equally debilitating injury requiring a long period of treatment and healing. These soldiers may exhibit signs of emotional and psychic trauma, which can turn into post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. This condition can be brought on when a person either experiences directly or witnesses a traumatic event. Although some five million Americans suffer from PTSD at any given time, it is particularly common among individuals who have participated in combat and is sometimes referred to as "shell shock" or "battle fatigue."

Some of the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder are:

- Flashbacks to the traumatic event
- Feelings of guilt
- Trouble sleeping
- Being easily startled or frightened
- Emotional numbness
- Irritability or anger

If these and other symptoms interfere with normal daily activities and last longer than a month, treatment that includes medication and psychotherapy may be required to help a person cope with the traumatic event and return to a normal life.

The women profiled in LIONESS have all been affected deeply by their combat experiences in Iraq. Although PTSD is not mentioned in the film, indications are that at least two of the women show signs of, or are receiving treatment for, battle-related stress. Not everyone who has experienced a traumatic event develops PTSD. Being able to talk about the experience and having the support of family and friends are two factors that can greatly reduce the risk and speed up the healing process.

## 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 direct ground 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 went out of their way not to mention us"—why would they have done that?
5. To change regulations concerning women in combat, the Army is supposed to get approval from the Pentagon and Congress. Why do you think this procedure was not followed in the Iraq war?
6. Based on the various statements made by the women in the film, how do you think women react differently from men to the experience of participating in combat? How are men's and women's reactions the same?
7. What signs of potential post-traumatic stress disorder do the various women exhibit?

8. 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 lessen some of personal costs of deployment?

9. 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 gender-specific care for female veterans.

Volunteer at a rehabilitation center for wounded veterans or with the Wounded Warrior Project. Find information at [www.woundedwarrior-project.org](http://www.woundedwarrior-project.org).

Staff Sgt. Raine Ruthie, left, and Sgt. Patricia Moreno, right, are both members of Team Lioness, a group of women who participate in joint military operations and raids with US Marines.  
PHOTO: LLOYD FRANCIS/ARMY TIMES



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION CONT'D.

Organize a community forum led by local military recruiters to discuss the current contributions of military women in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Convene a dialogue with other citizens to discuss the role of the military in our democracy and national security. See [www.allianceforpeace-building.org](http://www.allianceforpeace-building.org) to download "A Woman's Guide to Talking about War and Peace" by Lorelei Kelly and Lt. Col. Dana Eyre, USAR.

Find out about issues facing returning veterans and how you can support troops who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Visit the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America web site at [www.iava.org](http://www.iava.org).

Help to provide moral support to children, spouses and other family members of deployed troops. The National Military Family Association Web site provides many suggestions and opportunities for extending a hand. See [www.nmfa.org/site/PageServer](http://www.nmfa.org/site/PageServer).

Organize community members and your local media to pay tribute to female soldiers in your community. Create "recognition" ceremonies that recognize women's contributions to their country through military service, from WWII to Iraq veterans.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/get-involved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/get-involved) the Web site of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the Web site of your PBS station.

## RESOURCES

<http://www.lionesthefilm.com> – Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers' website devoted to LIONESS. 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> – A Web site 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. Also has an excellent links page.

[http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND\\_MG590-1.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG590-1.pdf) – Link to full pdf of authoritative review of current Department of Defense and Army policies governing the assignment of women to combat units. The report, "Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women" was published by the National Defense Research Institute at the Rand Corporation in August 2007.

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

<http://www.sapr.mil/> – United States Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response website.

Military Women and Women Veteran History:

<http://www.womensmemorial.org> – 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 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> – A Web site 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.mayoclinic.com/health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/DS00246> – The Web site of the Mayo Clinic provides explanations of PTSD and treatments for the condition.

Iraq

<http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/001514.html> – In his Middle East Journal, Michael J. Totten, a blogger whose work also appears in mainstream publications, provides a vivid description, along with photos, of the extreme dangers of Ramadi and the fighting there in 2006.

Service Organizations:

<http://www.legion-aux.org/> – The American Legion Auxiliary supports women veterans and their families through a range of programs and volunteer activities.

<http://www.dav.org/> – Disabled American Veterans 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 includes advocacy for legislation that seeks to improve health care for women veterans.

LIONESS WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON NOVEMBER 13, 2008. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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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 create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved).

