

Who Are the Women Who Have Broken Through the Military's "Brass" Ceiling?

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Abstract

Those who rise to the top ranks in the military must have a dedication, loyalty and determination that distinguish them from their peers. The vast majority of these positions are held by white men. In the past this was due to discriminatory government policies, protectionist legislation, and social constructs favoring them based on their assumed leadership capabilities. Historically, women have been excluded from senior military positions because it is a social institution that favors men as the ideal worker, it requires a work schedule based on an assumption of unlimited availability, and it has an opportunity structure which hinders women's ability to rise past a certain level.

However, women are a growing part of this elite group. This article describes the demographic and professional backgrounds of the military women who have broken through the structural impediments of the "brass" ceiling and become General and Flag officers. Data were collected through a content analysis of their military biographies and other sources, in addition to survey data, and were analyzed from a demographic perspective. Results varied only by cohort, and they indicate that women are participating in our nation's defense while pursuing a fulfilling personal life.

Introduction

The military is not commonly perceived as a career that women would voluntarily pursue. And yet, women have voluntarily served in all of America's wars and in the military since the beginning of our history. For most of this time they served as temporary or auxiliary workers, or in a separate but unequal corps, such as the Army and Navy nurse corps. It was not until after World War II, with the Army-Navy Nurse Act of 1947 and the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948, that women had a permanent place in the U.S. military. Although there were many restrictions, one of the most enlightened aspects was that due to the military's rank structure, women were paid equally to men of the same rank, which is still unusual for most working women. Today, military women have opportunities that 30 years ago were not possible, such as leading troops in a combat zone, commanding sailors at sea, or flying combat air strikes. The demands of a military career, including long hours, geographic relocation, separation from loved ones, and participating in military conflicts, are not seen as conducive to the social expectations of women, especially if they wish to pursue marriage and family.¹ Yet, some women have been able to maintain a fulfilling personal life and still thrive in a military career.

This article is part of a larger sociological study of the women who have broken through the "brass" ceiling to achieve the rank of General or Flag Officer (GFO). This paper focuses on the demographic trends for women GFOs, including retirees, reservists and active duty women, by year group cohort (in decades), specialty area, branch of service and rank achieved, as well as some biographical comparisons including family background, and marital and child-bearing status. The primary research question of this article asks: "Who are the women who achieved career success in the U.S. military?"

Military executive or military elite is defined in this paper as a person who has risen to the upper ranks of the military, to General or Flag Officer (GFO). The men and women who have achieved this status are a very rare group of individuals. There are only about 900 regular GFOs on active duty in the Department of Defense (DoD),² out of an officer corps of about

¹Segal, "Greedy Institutions."

² Which includes Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps and their reserve components.

220,000.³ The Coast Guard, under the Department of Homeland Security, has about 40 Flag officers. The officers at this level of the military are equivalent to corporate CEOs or company presidents and have responsibility for millions of dollars and thousands of people. Very few of those who have dedicated themselves to a military career make it into these elite ranks, and even fewer of those are women.

Table 1
GFOs by Branch of Service, Gender, and Status⁴

| Status | Army | | Navy | | Air Force | | Marine Corps | | Coast Guard | | ANG | | ARNG | | Total | |
|---------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|----------|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| Regular % | 94 | 6 | 94 | 6 | 91 | 9 | 96 | 4 | 88 | 12 | - | - | - | - | 93 | 7 |
| Ready reserve % | 88 | 12 | 83 | 17 | 90 | 10 | 90 | 10 | 100 | 0 | 91 | 9 | 95 | 5 | 91 | 9 |
| Total % | 93 | 7 | 92 | 8 | 90 | 10 | 98 | 2 | 88 | 12 | 91 | 9 | 95 | 5 | 92 | 8 |

Of the 1538 GFOs currently on active duty in both the regular and reserve components, only 121 (8%) are women. Table 1 shows the variation in percentages of women GFOs between the different branches, and the regular and reserve components, with the Marine Corps having the lowest and the Coast Guard having the highest percentage overall, while the Navy reserve has the highest percent of women GFOs of any branch or component. It is not surprising that the reserve forces generally have a higher percentage of women, as the reserves have traditionally been seen as an alternative to remaining on full-time active duty, as discussed below.

Requirements of a career in the military

The military as a career is very demanding. It is a closed labor force, meaning a person starts at the bottom of the hierarchy and works their way up. Officers enter at pay grade O-1 and the first four years are spent becoming experts in their specialty areas. Career advancement depends on a combination of their military/naval skills, organizational skills, leadership skills, understanding of the national security environment, and military experience.⁵

The military is an “up or out” system; if an officer fails to promote within certain time constraints, then that officer must leave the service. There are also requirements for fulfilling certain job positions with greater responsibility as one rises in rank, and there are requirements for professional education and achievement. There are frequent relocations and possible deployment to operational or combat zones. One may lose his or her life, or limbs, under the rubric of national security. All of these requirements make it especially difficult for a woman to

³ OSD, “Military Personnel.”

⁴ Office of Secretary of Defense: Population Representation in the Military Services, FY 2005.

⁵ Harrell, et al. *Aligning the Stars*.

make the military a career if she also wishes to marry and raise a family. While the military does allow a certain period of leave after childbirth, there is little flexibility in unit or individual schedules, or a unit's requirements to complete its mission.

Women primarily serve in the military as support personnel, in "combat support" functions like logistics, transportation, administration, communication, personnel management and the like. Other women serve in the health care community as doctors, nurses, dentists, or in other professional communities like the Judge Advocate General corps, Chaplain corps, or as Civil Engineers.

The "line" communities are perceived as the backbone of the military organization. For the purposes of this article, they are defined as the combat arms of the military (infantry, armor, artillery in the Army and Marine Corps; surface, submarine, aviator in the Navy; surface and aviator in the Coast Guard; pilots and navigators in the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force). They command at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of the military. Women have been able to join the line community only since 1978, and then only in a non-combatant status. This changed in 1992, after the first Persian Gulf War, when Congress authorized women to fly combat aircraft, and a year later, to combat ships. Women are still prohibited from serving in ground combat, such as Special Forces, infantry, tanks, and artillery, as well as submarines.⁶

Service Status—Regular and Reserve Components

The Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard each have a regular component and an associated reserve component. The National Guard is in a special category explained below. Simply speaking, the traditional difference between regular and reserve personnel is their permanent versus temporary status and full-time versus part-time work requirements. Many officers enter the military as full-time reservists, then "augment" into the regular forces after a probationary period of 2 to 3 years. This indicates that the individual intends to make the military a career, and thus becomes eligible for certain career incentives. A reservist is one who is in the military on a temporary or stand-by status, ready to support the regular forces during times of conflict or national emergency. Traditional or "ready" reservists are part-time, required to "drill" one weekend a month and two weeks during the year. Many women find that this is a beneficial option for work-family balance. They can remain affiliated with the military on a part-time basis, accruing retirement credits, while concurrently being able to take care of family issues on a full time basis. Alternatively, some women opt to use the reserves as a supplemental source of monthly income and future retirement savings, while pursuing a more lucrative civilian career.

The "traditional" pattern of reserve service has changed almost completely due to the War on Terror, with reservists being called up (activated) by unit, or as an individual augmentee (IA), for an extended period of time over and above their expectations. There are additional benefits associated with Regular status as compared to Reserve status, and with the current operational environment, those differences are becoming more pronounced. These include differences in retirement and health care benefits for members and their families, availability of on-base services such as commissary privileges, as well as family support and educational services. There are also additional career opportunities to being in the regular force; all of the four-star GFOs are in the regular component.

The National Guard (NG or simply The Guard), which consists of the Army National

⁶ Ibid.

Guard (ARNG) and the Air National Guard (ANG), is a related but separate entity of DoD. The Guard has its roots in the states' militias of the colonial era, but was also used for federal service. The Guard continues to be a dual state-federal force. It is the Governor's military arm, and since 1903, is considered a reserve force for the Army. The Guard has participated in all of our nation's wars, including the current War on Terror.⁷

Selection to General/Flag Officer

Selection to GFO requires a combination of events, not unlike that of promotion in a corporate organization. The military promotion process depends on a combination of meritorious service as well as time in service. Since it is a hierarchical organization, a person is usually promoted one rank at a time, and must have a minimum amount of time in that rank before being eligible for the next rank. Thus, for GFOs, there is a minimum requirement of 20 to 25 years of service and the rank of O-6. A stellar performance record is a must, as well as a combination of skills, job experience, leadership experience in command, post-graduate education, attendance at professional military schools, such as one of the War Colleges or General and Staff College, and cross-branch assignments (known as "joint" assignments).

Combat experience and combat awards are also highly rated and important for selection to GFO rank.⁸ The latter had been an opportunity only for men prior to 1993, when the combat exclusion laws for women in the Navy and Air Force were repealed. Congress limits the number of GFOs who can serve, so less than one percent of career officers will ever be promoted to GFO. A very small percentage will be promoted to O-10 and become one of the Unified Commanders,⁹ Chiefs of Staff of the Army or Air Force, Chief of Naval Operations, Commandant of the Marine Corps, or Chairman or Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Since the vast majority of women in the military do not serve in the line communities, no woman has yet been promoted to the four-star rank.¹⁰

Methodology

The data for this paper were compiled through two primary methods. I conducted a content analysis of the individual biographies to determine their basic military information such as rank, branch of service, occupational specialty, education, awards and cohort. Other biographical data were derived from self-administered surveys. Rather than conduct a random sample, the surveys were provided to as many active duty, reserve, and retired GFOs as could be found and contacted. Surveys were sent to 207 women GFOs, and the survey results are based on the receipt of 153 completed questionnaires (74% return rate), 95 from the regular component (out of 135, a 70% return), and 59 from the reserve component (out of 73, an 81% return). The survey data were compiled and analyzed by branch of service, status of service (i.e. regular or reserve), and cohort (year entered the military) by decade.

⁷ National Guard Bureau, "About the National Guard."

⁸ Holm, *Women in the Military*: 277.

⁹ There are nine Unified Commanders, four with worldwide responsibility (Transportation Command, Strategic Command, Joint Forces Command and Special Operations Command), and five with geographical responsibility (Northern Command, Southern Command, European Command, Central Command and Pacific Command). They are the direct link from the President and the Secretary of Defense to the military forces (Department of Defense. "DoD 101").

¹⁰ The first woman, Lt General Ann Dunwoody, has recently (2008) been nominated for her fourth star to command the Army Materiel Command. She is a logistics expert, not in the line community. As of this writing, her promotion has not been confirmed by the Senate.

The Results

Year Group Cohorts and Occupations

The nurse corps has had the most enduring legacy for women in the military, 1901 in the Army Nurse Corps and 1908 in the Navy Nurse Corps. There were many structural impediments to women's service in the years after World War II until the mid-1970s. There were laws and policies prohibiting women from serving in certain occupational specialties, promoting past a certain level, supervising men, and getting married or having children. Occupationally, women were limited to either being nurses, or serving in limited support roles, primarily in administrative positions. As a result of intermittent changes to these laws and policies, women began to be promoted to General or Flag officer ranks in 1970. The few women who were deemed "suitable" to be the first women GFOs were appointed by senior leaders in their respective services, and did not require Congressional approval, as they do now. Many of these women also served during World War II, and were part of the group of women who were retained in order to maintain a basic core of experience for women in the military. During the 1950s and 1960s, few women joined the military,¹¹ and this is reflected in the subsequent GFO numbers. Women could not join the National Guard until 1957.¹²

Starting in the 1970s, women began to serve in greater numbers, especially after the United States converted to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973. The 1970s were times of greater opportunity for women in the military, as a variety of career positions were opened. While some professional options, such as JAG and Chaplain Corps, opened to military women in the 1960s,¹³ the 1970s saw openings in medical fields besides nursing, technical support such as chemical, ordnance, and signal corps, and in the line community, aviation and surface ships. However, this was also a time of turmoil for the military as a result of gender integration. There was ignorance and pessimism about the changing roles of women, and how they could or could not contribute to military readiness. In the thirty-plus years since the AVF began, women have performed to the standards required without decreasing military effectiveness, but there still are some who challenge this premise.¹⁴

As a result of the occupational closures of the 1940s through 1960s, the earliest cohorts of women show a higher percentage of nurses and support GFOs. This is especially true in the reserve components, as there were far greater restrictions for women in the reserves and National Guard than there were for women in the regular military. Opportunity for women to become a GFO in the regular forces in other than nursing and support occupations was non-existent until the 1990s, when women in professional occupations began to be promoted. It was not until the 2000s that any operational line officers were promoted to GFO. Neither professional nor line officers were promoted to GFO in the reserve forces until the 2000s. This is due to the structure of opportunity impediments that women faced during the pre-All Volunteer Force era when women could not be promoted to GFO ranks.

Once that structural impediment was lifted, there were still opportunity restrictions due to the limited number of GFO billets for women. For women who would become GFOs in the 1970s, there could only be one Chief Nurse or Head of Women's Programs for each of the services, and these opportunities came only once every two to three years. As more job

¹¹ During that time women were less than two percent of total military personnel.

¹² Listman "Women in Army National Guard."

¹³ DEOMI "Multiculturalism in the Armed Forces."

¹⁴ Iskra "Expanding Roles for Navy Women" for a history of arguments for and against expanded roles for women in the Navy.

opportunities opened, such as JAG, Medical Officer and Chaplain, women in the professional fields began to be promoted. Women’s roles in the support fields continued to expand, especially in the Army where women remain ineligible for direct combat positions. Women line officers promoted in the 2000s were primarily aviators (12 out of 14), and were commissioned in year groups 1973 to 1982. Only 9% of women GFOs in the regular active force are in the line community, but it is growing.

Table 2
Women General and Flag Officers by Year Group (Cohort) and Branch of Service

| | 1940s | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | Total | Percent |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| USA | 6 | 3 | 8 | 20 | 7 | 44 | 17.8% |
| USAR | 0 | 0 | 3 | 18 | 4 | 25 | 10.1% |
| USN | 1 | 5 | 6 | 25 | 3 | 40 | 16.2% |
| USNR | 1 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 16 | 6.5% |
| USAF | 3 | 6 | 8 | 26 | 17 | 60 | 24.3% |
| USAFR | 0 | 2 | 3 | 10 | 1 | 16 | 6.5% |
| USMC | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 2.4% |
| USMCR | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | <1% |
| USCG | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 2% |
| USCGR | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | <1% |
| ANG | 0 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 8 | 21 | 8.5% |
| ARNG | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 12 | 4.9% |
| TOTAL | 11 | 17 | 38 | 132 | 49 | 247 | ~100% |

Table 2 shows the breakdown of women GFOs by year group cohort and branch of service.¹⁵ It also indicates that the Air Force has had the largest percentage of women general officers of all the services, with the Coast Guard Reserve and the Marine Corps Reserve with the smallest. The large numbers of respondents who entered the military in the 1970s reflect the increase in opportunities for women that began during that period. The full impact of the growing numbers of women entering the military, and the increase in occupational opportunity is still to be seen in the GFO ranks. As the opportunities for women increase, most recently with the opening of combat aircraft and ships in the line communities in 1993, more women will become eligible for the elite GFO ranks, since the majority of GFO billets are for combat designated line officers.

Race

Racial diversity is a rarity in the female GFO ranks. Even with the large strides that women have made towards equality in the military, women of color are under-represented at the upper echelons. According to the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI),

¹⁵ USA = U.S. Army; USAR = U.S. Army Reserve; USN = U.S. Navy; USNR = U.S. Naval Reserve; USAF = U.S. Air Force; USAFR = U.S. Air Force Reserve; USMC = U.S. Marine Corps; USMCR = U.S. Marine Corps Reserve; USCG = U.S. Coast Guard; USCGR = U.S. Coast Guard Reserve; ANG = Air National Guard; ARNG = Army National Guard.

in the total Department of Defense and Coast Guard, the breakdown by race for women officers is: white women 68.6%, black women 16.7% and other races 14.7%. Hispanic women are 5.4% of the total women officers in DoD and Coast Guard.¹⁶ About 87% of the women GFOs are white, 9% are Black, and only 4% are women of any other race or ethnicity. The statistics show an even lower representation of racial and ethnic minorities when the currently active regular and reserve components are examined. In the currently active regular forces, Black women are 16.7% of all women officers, but only 5% of women GFOs. Similarly, in the reserve forces, Black women comprise 17.8% of all women officers, but only 7% of reserve women GFOs.¹⁷ This indicates that women of color are not promoting to the elite military ranks in proportion to their representation in the officer corps. With diversity in the enlisted forces and in the junior officer ranks at or higher than the civilian demographic profile of the United States,¹⁸ the GFO female leadership neither reflects the diversity of the military nor of the nation.

Commissioning Source

Until the 1970s, women entered the officer corps after completion of college primarily through direct commissioning or Officer Candidate/Training Schools (OCS/OTS). Most medical and other professional personnel still enter through direct commissioning. Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) opened in the mid-1970s and the Federal service Academies opened for women in 1976, but there were limits as to the number of women who were selected for the Academies and ROTC. Both of these programs are scholarship programs in which the officer candidate or midshipman attend four years of college at government expense in exchange for 5 years of obligated service upon commissioning as a new officer.

Women who were commissioned in the 1980s are now eligible for promotion to GFO. This includes the first women who graduated from the Military Academy at West Point, the Naval Academy in Annapolis, the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and the Coast Guard Academy in New London. The GFOs who were promoted in the 2000s primarily were commissioned through OCS/OTS, but the number of ROTC and Academy graduates is rising.

For example, thirteen of the 17 Academy graduates promoted to GFO in the 2000s are in the Air Force. Apparently, the Air Force has a culture of early promotions, and therefore the earliest women graduates of the Air Force Academy were screened for GFO well before their peers at the Military, Naval and Coast Guard Academies. So far, there have been no Coast Guard or Marine Corps female GFOs promoted whose commissioning source was an academy. There has always been a perception that officers commissioned through a federal military academy had an unfair advantage for promotion. If the early selection of female Air Force Generals is any indication, it appears to be the case, at least for Air Force Academy women.

Graduate Education and Joint Professional Military Education (JPME)

Graduate level educational attainment is one of the key elements for civilian women who aspire to compete with their male peers for executive positions. In the military, a Master's degree is all but required in order to promote to the senior ranks, as is the completion of JPME.¹⁹ The accomplishment of these requirements varies by service, however. The Navy has the lowest completion rate of JPME, at 62% for regular female Navy Admirals and only 11% for reserve

¹⁶ DEOMI, *Annual Demographic Profile FY 2005*.

¹⁷ Manning, *Women in the Military*: 14, 24.

¹⁸ According to the 2000 census, racial diversity in the United States was 74% white, 12% black, and 14% other.

¹⁹ Hosek, et al. *Minority and Gender Differences*: 22.

Navy GFOs. This is in comparison to 100% of Army Generals, 77% of Air Force Generals and 100% of Marine Corps Generals. Even in the Coast Guard, where it is not required, 80% of the female Admirals have completed JPME.

Since the advanced educational requirements were not in place until relatively recently, one would assume that few of the earlier cohorts had advanced degrees or JPME. It is surprising, however, that the majority of those women (73%) did accomplish those milestones. It is also worthwhile to note that there is a higher percentage of Doctorate-level accomplishment in the reserves (23%) than in the regular component (12%). I attribute this to the ability of the reservists to pursue this degree while not on active duty. The women on active duty who had doctorate-level degrees were primarily physicians and lawyers.

Wartime Service

For men, combat service has been considered the pinnacle of a military career, and successful leadership in a combat zone is an important factor in selection for promotion.²⁰ For women, the opportunity to serve in a combat arena has been, and still is, limited. Nevertheless, there are a number of women who have participated in a combat theater, though primarily in a support role rather than direct combat. A majority (7 of 11, 63%) of the women GFOs who came into the military in the 1940s participated in either the European or Pacific combat theaters of World War II, and 5 of 7 were nurses. For the 1950s cohort, 66% participated either in Korea or Vietnam, 6 of 10 who deployed to the combat theater were nurses. A similar pattern can be seen in the reserve cohort of the 1960s, 4 of the 6 who deployed in support of the Vietnam War were nurses. The trend for nurses to participate in a combat theater dates back to the American Revolution, and especially became entrenched in our social fabric during the Civil War. Many argue that women should not go to war, but nurses are excluded from this socially constructed requirement. Thus, it seems likely, at least for nurses eventually selected for GFO, that participation in the combat theater was noted and rewarded.

Participation in the combat theater decreases over the cohorts, with the highest percentage of non-deployers from the cohorts of the 1960s and 1970s, during Vietnam, where few women participated, except for nurses. Although a great percentage of women participated in the first Gulf War, that conflict was over so quickly that few of the GFOs selected from the 1970s and 1980s cohorts participated (15%).

Now that the country is engaged in the War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, women from the cohorts of the late 1970s and 1980s are again deploying to the combat theater, with 54% of the 1980s cohort deploying. It is apparent that, as for men, as women begin to take on operational roles in the line community, their participation in combat deployments is expected and rewarded. Of the 11 active duty women in the 1980s cohort who participated in the War on Terror overseas, 6 of them were aviators, only 1 was a nurse, the rest were support personnel. Even though the reservists are participating in the current war on terror, this is not reflected in their selection to GFO.

Command Experience

Having command is considered one of the pinnacles of a military career. There are levels of command based on one's rank and experience. Successful leadership in command is a requirement to be competitive for promotion, even at a junior level. Historically for women,

²⁰ Holm, *Women in the Military*.

there were many structural impediments to this goal, especially for the early cohorts, the reserve forces, and for medical personnel. Until 1968, women could only command other women. The first service to put women in command of mixed-gender units was the Air Force in 1972, followed by the Navy, also in 1972, and the Army in 1973.²¹ It was not until 1990s that nurses could command at all.

Command usually requires a selection process, either by a Board or other means, and is given to those officers who have exhibited the highest performance. That is not to say that all those in command are good leaders. But up to the point they were selected, their performance records indicated that they met or exceeded the military's standards, and they had shown the appropriate good judgment and leadership traits. Command can be the difference between a successful career and a non-successful career, and is a very important part of being or becoming a GFO. Overall, over 86% of all female GFOs have had at least one command, and many have had multiple successful command positions at various levels of rank and responsibility.

One may wonder why, if command is so important, some GFOs did not have command. In some cases, it was because their specialty area was such that they did not have the opportunity or requirement to do so. In other cases, especially with reserve nurses, the highest job to which they could be assigned was as the reserve coordinator or mobilization assistant to the Head of the Nurse Corps, who would always be an active duty regular. These jobs were important, but could not be considered independent command. Still others were honorarily promoted to GFO, such as with Grace Hopper, who neither had command nor a joint specialty billet, yet her work with computers was vitally important to the Navy.²²

Family Background

Family background as a variable is important because of the opportunity structures available to those from a socio-economic background that would be considered "upper or middle class" rather than "working class." The socio-economic status (SES) of the family is either a structural impediment or enhancement that influences the ability to pursue one's goals, and even what one chooses as one's goals. It is based on both the economic and educational achievement of one's parents, and it determines where one lives, goes to school, what one eats, what activities one pursues, and even what health care one receives. Necessary life skills are learned, such as knowing how to dress, speak, and behave. This learned behavior infers privilege, with a greater potential for mobility to those who fit in.²³

Although the American family is changing from the stereotypical "nuclear family" ideal of the 1950s, many of the women GFOs in this study came from such a family. Given that the majority of women GFOs entered the military in the 1970s, when they were between 20 and 25 years old, their parents probably would have married in the 1950s. Coupled households for both white and black families were quite high in the 1960s, with almost 90% of white household and 77% of black households of the "nuclear" type.²⁴

The vast majority of both regular and reserve component GFOs came from intact families (94% and 90%, respectively. Most had stay-at-home moms (56% and 61% respectively). For the regulars, 69% said their fathers had served in the military, and about a third indicated it had influenced their decision to join. Only about 26% of fathers were of

²¹ Morden, *Women's Army Corps*.

²² Billings, *Grace Hopper*.

²³ Landry, *Black Working Wives*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

sufficient rank to assume they were career military. Only 5 (5%) said their mothers had been military, only one of whom said it influenced her decision to join. A large majority (94%) had siblings, 41% were the eldest child, and 6% of respondents were only children.

As with the regular respondents, many of the female reserve GFOs came from families with a military background. Thirty-eight (64%) indicated their fathers had been in the military, 32% of whom indicated it influenced their decision to join. Twenty percent of the fathers were of sufficient rank to assume they were career military, as compared to 26% of regular respondents. A few (7%) said their mothers had been military, half of those said it influenced their decision to join. Like the regular respondents, virtually all (97%) had siblings, 43% of whom were the eldest child, and two (4%) were the only child.

For both the Regular and the Reserve GFOs, almost 50% were the eldest or the only child in their family. Single children have many of the general traits of first-born children. In general, first or only children have a tendency towards high achievement, they often pursue positions of leadership, and they often follow in their father's professional footsteps.²⁵ This has interesting implications for the women GFO respondents. Being the de facto leader of siblings may have given many of the respondent's skills they were later to use effectively in their work.

Almost half of the regular component GFOs had parents who attended college. Of 98 regular GFO respondents, 49% of their fathers attended college, with 90% completing their degree. Mothers were only slightly less likely to attend college than their husbands (45%) but only 70% received a degree. Mothers of the regular GFO respondents were almost as likely to attend college as their husbands, but were less likely to complete a degree.

Most of the reserve GFO respondents had parents who did not attend college. Of 59 reserve respondents, 39% of their fathers attended college, 95% of whom received their degree. Mothers were less likely to attend college (29%); 81% of those who attended completed a degree. As compared to the regular respondents, reserve respondents' parents were less likely to attend college, but more likely to complete college than the regular respondents' parents.

Spain and Bianchi found that the more highly educated the parents, the more highly educated their children are likely to be, and the mother's educational attainment has a particularly strong effect for women.²⁶ Completion of college for women has increased from 5.8% in 1960 to 12.9% in 1980. For women who were between the ages of 25 to 34 in 1980, the percentage of college completion increased to 20.7%.²⁷ That would have been the age group of most of the currently active regular or reserve female GFOs. So it is not so surprising that in this group, the female GFOs have a far higher educational attainment than their parents. However, the respondents' parents are still in the highest quartile of educational attainment, according to Spain and Bianchi. Although parental education would indicate that many respondents came from a high SES family, father's occupation, and a higher percentage of enlisted fathers, especially in the reserves, indicates a more working class background. Thus I would characterize the average female GFO as coming from families of a middle class SES.

Spain and Bianchi note that it is widely understood that education is the key to one's ability to compete in America's economy. As a result, even those whose parents did not attend college probably valued education knowing it was a way for their children to get ahead, i.e. increase their human capital. Even so, the rates for women earning their college degree lag behind men. In 1980, 12.9% of women compared to 20.4% of men completed 16 years of

²⁵ University of Maine, "Birth Order."

²⁶ Spain and Bianchi, *Balancing Act*, 64

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

education.²⁸ Some of this difference may have been due to structural barriers, such as the unequal access to attend many of our nation's colleges, which affected the earlier cohorts of this study, until Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was passed, which prohibited sex discrimination in public and private institutions that accept federal funding.

However, the ability to attend college was also highly dependent on the economic and cultural forces women faced. In 1980, 13.6% of white women aged 25 and over were college graduates, compared to 8.3% of black women and 6.0% of Hispanic women,²⁹ and it is only slowly increasing for racial minorities. One's racial and ethnic status influences high school and college graduation rates. One's gender influences the type of occupation to which one aspires, and women are more likely than men to interrupt their education by early marriage or early family formation.³⁰ Thus, the respondents can be characterized as women who had the ability, if not the means, to attend college, aspired to a non-traditional lifestyle in the military, and persevered under the gendered norms of marriage versus education versus family background.

Being physically active as children, a "tomboy," certainly helped once embarked on a military career. About half of the regular GFO respondents were active as children (52%); of those, 78% indicated they had participated in individual sports, 81% were active in team sports, and 42% said they participated in other activities or hobbies. Once they entered the military, even those who were not active as children became so. This is probably due to the physical fitness requirement levied on all personnel in the military. Ninety-Five percent of respondents, active and retired, indicated they are currently physically active. Activities include walking, jogging, weight lifting, golf, yoga or Pilates, and other mostly individual activities.

Thus, the women who joined the military and forged highly successful careers are a self-selected group. Most of them are white, most of them are from middle-class, intact families, and a higher than average percent came from families in which one or both parents attended college. A small majority were physically active even before they joined the military, indicating that they were not averse to the rigors of military service. They were privileged and able to benefit from the structural opportunities afforded by their family's SES status.

Marriage & Family

Marriage was banned in the Nurse Corps until World War II, and cause for dishonorable discharge in the Army Nurse Corps. However, even though marriage was not banned in the other branches, the work structure and culture discouraged the early cohorts of women from marrying. Pregnancy, on the other hand was cause for discharge and in some cases punitive action if the woman was unmarried. The women's branches, especially the Nurse Corps, wanted women of high moral integrity. Furthermore, if a woman married and her new husband had children, she was discharged. This was in keeping with the social mores of the time that dictated that women belonged at home taking care of their families, and that marriage and family for women were incompatible with military service.³¹ Many women in the early cohorts indicated that marriage and family were grounds for dismissal; some had to choose between having marriage and family or pursuing a career. It sometimes was a difficult choice to make.

Marital Status

²⁸ Ibid., 55.

²⁹ Ibid., 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Holm, *Women in the Military*.

Because of the rigors of a military career, one would expect that fewer women GFOs would be married than their male counterparts, and that more of the reserve women would be married than their regular counterparts. Segal and Segal note that “Military women are less likely than military men to be married or to have children. In 2002, 51 percent of women officers and 42 percent of enlisted women were married. In contrast, one-half of enlisted men and nearly three-fourths of male officers were married. Among civilians ages 18 to 44—the prime military ages— about one-half of men and women are married.”³² The respondents in this study echo these statistics. Of the regular respondents, 59% are married, 11% are divorced not remarried, and 6% are widowed. Of those ever married, 26 (35%) have been married more than once; of those, 16 (61%) are currently married. Of the 75 regular respondents ever married, I was able to learn spousal military information from 50 of them. Of the 50, 41 (82%) were or had been married to men who were, or had been, in the military. This is consistent with literature that notes, “In a substantial number of military couples, both husband and wife are in the service.”³³

In contrast, of the 62 Reserve GFOs for whom I have marital data, 74% are married, 18% are divorced, and 1 was widowed. Of those ever married, 11 (21%) have been married more than once, but 8 of them (72%) are currently unmarried. Of the 54 reserve GFOs for whom I was able to get spousal military information, 36 (67%) were or had been married to men who were, or had been, in the military/ reserves.

The literature on military women has documented that they are less likely to marry than their male peers.³⁴ My data suggest that this is true only for those women who remained in the regular forces on active duty. I found that 23% of female GFOs in the regular component never married compared to only 6% in the reserve component. Women who remained unmarried through their military career did not necessarily do so because they did not want to get married. Many never found a suitable mate, or they felt they needed to abide by the unspoken norm, especially in the older cohorts, that working women should not be married and have children. Many felt that as they rose in rank, the cadre of available mates decreased because of rank differences and the intimidation factor.

Many of the divorced GFO women report that their spouses became jealous of their success and were unsupportive. Respondents who remained married, or re-married after divorce, indicated that spousal support was extremely important in their ability to navigate the challenges of a military career. Single respondents had to rely on other avenues of social support to succeed in their military careers. For most, this included mentors, friends, or other family members.

Family Formation

More than half 52% (39) of the ever-married regular GFOs did not have any children, by birth, marriage, or adoption. Of 98 respondents, only 27 had birth children (28%), while 9 had step-children, and 3 had both. Many see the reserves as an option for those who wish to remain affiliated with the military, but do not wish to continue on a full-time basis. Of the 79 GFO reservists, 50 (63%) entered the military as active duty officers and transferred to the reserves later in their careers. Even when marriage and motherhood became authorized, military norms were the antithesis of motherhood in the military. Many of the women in the reserves (59%) transferred from active duty due to this attitude and the unwillingness to “give up” this most basic of human desires—companionship—and, for some, motherhood.

³² Segal and Segal, *America's Military Population*: 31.

³³ Segal and Segal, *America's Military Population*: 31.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

There are striking differences in marital status and parenthood status between GFOs in the regular forces and the reservists. In the cohorts of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, 27 (31.4%) regular respondent GFOs had birth children as compared to 32 (61.5%) reserve respondent GFOs. In other words, half as many regular GFO respondents had birth children as reserve GFO respondents. Being a parent in the military can be a daunting task as these women must balance both the military and family, and for many reservists, a full-time civilian job.

For those who had no children, 56% regular GFO respondents said either they or their husband did not want children, 33% wanted to concentrate on their career, and 23% could not have children, while 16% of Reservists could not have children and 13% never wanted children. The percentage of both reserve and regular GFO respondents who reported that they could not have children is very high as compared to the general population. According to the Department of Health and Human Services in 1995, 7.1% of married couples could not have children. It is unclear if career devotion for these women is a result of the inability to have children. For those who never married, or who did not have children, career devotion became a way for them to be able to take care of themselves or feel that they were making a difference in the world. Some did not have children because they were never married, were married too late in life, acquired step-children, or wanted to focus on career.

The Work-Family Dilemma

Military women have faced similar work-family dilemmas as their civilian peers. In a study using the Current Population Surveys, National Longitudinal Surveys, and archival data, Goldin found that in the 20th century the experiences of college women differed depending on when they graduated from college. It is likely, although this is not specified, that the majority of these women (at least in the first three cohorts) were white, upper or middle class women.³⁵

For Cohort 1, those who graduated from college in the first two decades of the 20th century, they had to choose between a family or career. If married, they did not work. Women in this cohort could not have joined the military as officers, other than nurses.³⁶ If they enlisted during World War I, they were forced out of the military at the end of that conflict. Cohort 2, those who graduated from college between the first and second world wars, began a trend that can be seen more vividly in the later cohorts. They worked when young and married; however, they usually left the work force once pregnant with their first child.³⁷ The first women officers in the military would have been at the latter end of this cohort. Of course, if they stayed in the military, they would have been in the group of women who, even if married, had no children.

Cohort 3 graduated from college at the peak of the baby boom. They married and had children at an exceptionally high rate. These women returned to work after they started their family, as evidenced by the increase in working married women from age 30 to age 45. However, family came first in terms of priority and timing. This cohort became increasingly frustrated with their opportunities within the labor force,³⁸ and probably contributed to the start of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The first women to become GFOs would have been in this cohort. They would now be retired from the military.

Cohort 4 graduated during the beginning of the women's movement of the 1970s and were able to take advantage of new opportunities. They delayed marriage for several years after

³⁵ Goldin, "Career and Family": 24

³⁶ Nurses at this time were neither officer nor enlisted. They had a totally separate rank system.

³⁷ Ibid.:24.

³⁸ Ibid., 25.

college, but only 12% remained single by their mid-forties.³⁹ Women who are at the end of their careers, or retired GFOs would likely belong in this cohort.

Finally, the last cohort is of women who are currently in the labor force, graduating from college between 1980-1990. Women in the early years of this cohort in the military would be those who are now being selected for GFO. This also includes those women who were the first to graduate from the various military academies. The data Goldin collected was from 1997, so the childlessness and work at age 45 rates were not yet available. However, her data show that 80% of them remained in the work force at age 30, and appear to be pursuing career and family simultaneously.⁴⁰ Women in this group rely on their husbands, other family, and “outsourcing” to help with the caregiving and household responsibilities. The work-family balance in this case is aided by the ability of pay for others to cook, clean, and perform childcare duties. Also, the ideology of an egalitarian marriage is an important one, since military women are working an executive schedule. In the earlier cohorts this ideology was problematic because both the women and the men were raised under an expectation of traditional marital roles. The career expectations and aspirations of these women challenged those ideals and many opted to forego marriage and/or children. Those in the last cohort joined the labor force after many of the legal changes had become institutionalized in the public realm and egalitarian ideologies had grown more acceptable in public opinion.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 23

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Blair-Loy *Competing Devotions*.

| Table 3 | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| A Comparison Between Female Civilian Cohorts and Female GFO Cohorts ⁴² | | | | | | | |
| *College Grad Years (Civilian) | *Family/ Career Path | *Non-marriage (by age 50) | *No child (by age 40) | Commissioning Years (Military) | Family/ Career Path | Never Married | No Birth Children |
| Cohort 1, 1900-1919 | Family or Career | >30% | >50% | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Cohort 2, 1920-1945 | Job then Family | 15%-20% | 30%-35% | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Cohort 3, 1946-1965 | Family then Job | 8% | 17% | 1942-1965 (N=28) | Career, no family | 54% | 88% |
| Cohort 4, 1966-1979 | Career then Family | 12% | 28% | 1966-1979 (N=105) | Career and Marriage | 9% | 56% |
| Cohort 5, 1980-1990 | Career and Family | ** | 26% | 1980-1986 (N=29) | Career and Family** * | 7% | 46% |

The respondent data on marital, family, and career echoes the civilian cohort trends only for the last cohort. Table 3 shows how the marital and family relationships compare with the cohorts from Goldin’s study. Starting with Cohort 3, women in the military still had to choose between career and family. In Cohort 4, women were married, but still delayed or forewent family formation. Only 9% never married, but about 56% never had children. Finally, in the last cohort, we are beginning to see a trend in which fewer women never marry, and more women are having children, similar to the trend for civilian college graduates.

Conclusions

The women who have broken through the “brass” ceiling in the military have managed to rise to the top in an organization that is historically a masculine enclave. They are not equally distributed through the different services, which is reflective of women’s percentages in those service branches as a whole. Most are in the lowest GFO category, Brigadier General or Rear Admiral. A few women, only 10, have reached the highest level women have achieved yet, three star Lieutenant General or Vice Admiral.

The women are mostly white, with minority women underrepresented as a proportion to their percentages in the greater force. They come from a variety of commissioning sources, but

⁴² *Goldin (2004: 22-23); ** Too young at time of analysis; ***A possible trend, premature to definitively conclude.

it appears that, at least in the Air Force, those women who attended a service academy have an edge for promotion. As more Academy women come into the promotion zone for General, we will be able to better note if this is a common trend. Women GFOs are primarily in the support fields, but the number in the line community is growing. They are highly educated, have had joint service experience, and have commanded troops, some many times. And a growing number of them are participating in our nation's conflicts, even though some do not have the opportunity to compete for the highest levels of command at the O-10 level (General or Admiral). This should change in future years as the line officers of the 1980s cohort of the Navy and Air Force rise in rank.

Many of the women come from a middle class background, or at least a family that appears to value education, even for their daughters. The women have an adventurous streak, as evidenced by their selection of a career. Many of them were physically active as children, and about half were single or the eldest child, which provided them with both the stamina to engage in military activities, and the potential leadership skills to hold their own in a military environment.

Even though there is a perception that senior women do not marry and have children, this was not the case. Only about 23% of regular GFOs and 6% of reserve GFOs never married. More women GFOs in the reserves had children than in the regular force, but there were a substantial minority (31%) of regular GFOs who managed to have a successful family relationship as well as a successful military career. This happens through a combination of supportive spouses and family, and lots of hard work even as they had additional political and personal impediments to overcome.

Women have served successfully in the military for generations. A few elite women, less than 250 total, managed to find success as leaders in the masculine, hierarchical institution that we know as the United States military. The executive schedule, the devotion to duty and country that requires separation from family, risk of death or injury, and many other sacrifices, is difficult to reconcile with the gendered norms of family caregiving. Yet, a majority of the respondents married, a substantial minority had children, and they still were able to exceed expectations for the career goals they, and others, had set. They overcame public policy obstacles, social norms, and personal challenges to succeed in the mostly male environment of the military. The trends noted within this paper appear to indicate that the successful attainment of Flag and General Officer rank by women will only continue to grow.

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