

Area woman battles against women in combat

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

A deeply divided federal commission favors some use of women in combat.

Dissenting on the 10-5 vote was Elaine Donnelly, Livonia writer and conservative Republican activist.

"President Bush said nothing. I hoped he would say 'women have been historically exempt (from combat), and I wish to leave it that way.' He didn't say anything," Donnelly said in an interview.

"(President-elect) Clinton is for ERA (equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution). Women in combat is part of that. He has telegraphed his intentions on the homosexual issue; he has embraced equal opportunity as a primary value."

As conservatives see it, the majority ignored a basic military consideration — "what is best for the unit and the military as a whole" — in advocating equal opportunity for some individual women in combat.

"The proponents of assigning women to combat have not made their case," Donnelly's group said. "The commission heard no compelling evidence that the military needs women to fight its wars. Demographically, the military does not face a manpower shortage that would demand a radical change in settled American law, policy and custom."

Gulf War product
The Persian Gulf war of 1990-1 gave birth to the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces.

Of 500,000 military personnel sent to Arabia and Iraq, 40,000 were women, of whom 13 were killed and two taken captive. (Donnelly said she received mail berating her for asking witnesses about sexual abuse of female prisoners — as if it were a taboo subject.)

The commission was a byproduct of Congress' 1991 Defense Authorization Act. That act repealed prohibitions on female Naval aviation and Air Force officers in combat.

"U.S. law still prohibits (1) use of women in ground combat and (2) Naval and Marine Corps use of women on combat vessels (except hospital ships).

"Although the topic was hotly debated in 1991, media interest waned. By the time the final report was released last Nov. 15,

newsmagazines and national newspapers virtually ignored it. Donnelly, 46, campaigned for the commission and a place on it. Her interest goes back to the pre-1980 days when she fought ERA. "At first I thought it meant equal pay for equal work. Then I talked to (then U.S. Rep.) Martha Griffiths, who said it meant the draft. I had young daughters," she recalled.

"It's consistent with the feminist philosophy," Donnelly said of the people wanting women in combat. "They say there is no difference between women and men. You can't prove that except in war."

"I'm supportive of women in the military. Their performances have been outstanding." But not in combat.

Neither Elaine nor husband Terry Donnelly has been in the military, but Elaine made herself a recognized expert. She testified in congressional hearings against women in combat and served in 1984-6 on the Pentagon's Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services.

Her articles have appeared in such conservative magazines as

National Review and Human Events as well as metropolitan daily papers. Her candidacy was endorsed by Gov. John Engler, then-U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, and the National Federation of Republican Women.

Three-way split
Donnelly said she attended every meeting, read all the news material, undergoing a flight in a combat jet, and even taking a dose of prisoner-of-war training.

The commission was chaired by retired Air Force Gen. Robert T. Herres and included nine military and six civilian persons. Best known personality was Newton Minow, the Federal Communications Commission chair in the 1950s famed for calling television "a vast wasteland."

There were 10 men and five women. Three of the five women were among the dissenters.

There were clear battle lines. Two of the pro-combat members accused the dissenters of having "a pre-determined agenda" and a conservative bias.

Donnelly's rebuttal: The chair wouldn't even allow a discussion of a clear statement on women in combat; another member had a

daughter who wanted to advance her career; others wouldn't listen to arguments about women's physical limitations.

In the end there was a three-way split. One group wanted women in combat. Donnelly's dissenters didn't. A swing group bounced back and forth, depending on the specific issue.

Others' views

A seven-member minority bashed the recommendation that women not serve in air combat as "watermarking and antiquated."

"We found no evidence... that these physical differences affect performance in the cockpits of combat aircraft, just as they now do not affect performance in support aircraft."

Donnelly cited testimony, however, that flying combat aircraft and flying them in combat were two different things. On tour of Nellis Air Force Base, she snapped up a general's invitation to ride in an F-15 Eagle.

"The first hard turn — registering 7.8 Gz (forces of gravity) — pinned me to the canopy without the strength to move," she wrote.



Boarding: Elaine Donnelly, a member of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, boards an F-15 Eagle.

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