

Afterword

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The U.S. Marines command seemed quite proud to announce this ‘first’. In August, 2018, it promoted its first woman to lead a infantry platoon, a combat unit of sixteen male marines (Gibbons-Neff 2018). The news story showed First Lieutenant Marina A. Hierl, directing a training operation of camouflage fatigues-wearing, rifle-carrying American men in the scrubby outback of Australia.

‘Firsts’ are always interesting to investigate, not necessarily because they demonstrate ‘progress’, but, rather, because they prompt one to ask: “Why now, why not earlier?” Then to pose the follow-up questions: “Is this an institution’s tokenist gesture or is it a straw in the wind of a more fundamental transformation?”

While these queries are crucial for the curious feminist to pose when charting change (or sustained patriarchy) in any organization – a bank, a political party, a social media company – they are particularly important queries to pose when tracking contemporary

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militaries. Precisely because in so many countries today the state's military has out-of-scale political influence and symbolic significance – so often being made to represent patriotism, citizenship, national identity, heroism, security, belonging, manliness – any apparent dilution of its historically masculinized culture and structure is treated by elites, media, ordinary citizens and (perhaps) women's rights advocates as worthy of special attention.

Seeming gender shifts in the U.S. military now attract disproportionate attention internationally because of that military's size, its cultural footprint and its global operational reach, from the Australian outback to northern Sweden (Vine 2015).

So let us take a brief look at what a feminist might interrogate in trying to make sense of this particular American militarized gendered 'first'. We will take this deeper look not because we imagine the US military to be more interesting – more worthy of feminist investigation – than any other military, but, instead, because these added lines of inquiry suggest what we should be digging into whenever we try to expose the complex, dynamic gendered politics inside *any* military – the Liberian, the Pakistani, or the Danish militaries (see, for instance Vastapuu 2018; Daughberg and Sørensen 2017; Siddiq 2007).

What made Marina Hierl's promotion to platoon leader newsworthy was that it was within the US Marines, arguably the most masculinized of the US military's four service branches. According to the latest personnel data from the U.S. Department of Defense, the Marines account for the smallest of the four branches: only 14.2 percent of the total uniformed active duty personnel (the Army accounts for 36.6 percent of the total, the Air Force and Navy each 24 percent) (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018). That smallness has enabled the Marines for decades to portray itself as an "elite" service. Thus, allegedly, any change in the Marines should attract special attention from the civilian public.

What would be the cultural and political equivalent of the marines' special status in any other state military – the presidential guard? Fighter pilots? The special forces? The paratroops? It deserves our feminist questioning.

Further cultural frisson was added to the recent marines news story by the fact that the US marines are so closely associated in many civilians' minds with wartime combat. Combat, militaries, elite status, and masculinity has been in many societies a heady political brew (Mackenzie 2015).

Enhancing the US Marines' special status in current American patriarchally racialized, militarized culture is the branch's particular gender and racial profile: Compared to the US Army, Navy and Air Force, the Marines today have proportionately the fewest women and the fewest African Americans. Only 10 percent of active duty marines are women; the navy, by comparison, is 24 percent women (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018).

Opening our investigatory lens wider, as we must when investigating women inside any state's military, we might notice several contextual conditions that potentially shape our ultimate feminist analysis of this marines 'first'. Over the past fifteen years, the US state's active duty military has sharply cut its number of total uniformed personnel. In 2005, in the throes of waging wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan (and anti-terrorism operations in the Philippines, and sub-Saharan African countries), it amounted to 2.1 million people in uniform. By 2018, that total had dropped to 'just' 1.3 million (that equals less than 0.5 percent of the US population) (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018).

What are the analogous personnel trends in the Chinese and the Indonesian militaries, with what consequences for commanders' and civilian superiors' recruitment gendered preferences?

These American figures might suggest that the US military in general and the ma-

rines, its self-style most 'selective' branch, might not need to make any compromises in its favored racialized gendered personnel formula. However, the civilian economic trends – about which every country's military recruitment commands are always sensitive – have been working against such a perhaps comforting preference. With American civilian unemployment rates dropping below 4 percent by 2018, a rate often thought of by economists as virtually 'full employment', on-the-ground recruiters were having a harder time meeting their quotas.

This was exacerbated by intensifying quality demands: as technology and strategy changes called for more skilled personnel even among lower ranking soldiers than a generation ago, all branches were needing secondary school graduates equipped with higher literacy and numeracy skills. Moreover, the Defense Department's civilian legislative funders and overseers, specifically elected members of the Congressional Armed Services Committees – especially their women members – were publicly pressing the Defense Department to make up these numerical and quality deficits by explicitly targeting their recruitment efforts on high school and college girls and women (Werner 2018).

This, though, might be a tough sell. Since about 2012, there have been repeated headlines and Congressional hearings exposing long-overlooked sexual assaults by American military men on their American women uniformed colleagues. A documentary film on these assaults and the masculinized command's apparent refusal to take them seriously was nominated in 2012 for a Hollywood Oscar.¹

Are these recruitment pressures also now ratcheting up for the recruiters of young people into the increasingly powerful Mexican military? Into the more and more ambitious Japanese Defense Force?²

Widening one's feminist investigatory lens when analyzing any state's military also

should spur us to pose explicitly intersectional questions.

In 2016, of all the men in the active duty ranks of the US Army, a notable 43 percent were Latino American, African American or Asian American (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018). This comes at a time when the demographic profile of the total American male population is approximately 35 percent people of color. Since the 1980s, when the US military was directly engaged in wars in Central America and when the US Hispanic population began growing significantly, the Defense Department began directing its recruitment efforts on Latino teenagers and their parents (especially their mothers) (Enloe 2010).

Even more striking: in that same year, 2016, 56 percent of all women in the active duty US Army were Latino American, African American or Asian American. Fifty-six percent is even more disproportionate to the roughly 35 percent of all American women who identify with those three communities (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018).

The relationships of any country's particular ethnic and racial communities to that country's state military do not stand still. To be a feminist researcher is to be consciously historical. Militarized gendered ethnicized and racialized tensions, opportunities, alienations, exploitations, inclusions, rewards and hopes are trackable. This is true, of course, not only for the US military – and each of its service branches will have its own gendered racialized, ethnicized history – but is true for the militaries in both those societies which have long been multi-ethnic or multi-racial, and for militaries in those societies which currently are becoming more distinctly (often uncomfortably) diverse.

This realization should effect our feminist investigations into women's relationships to the state militaries of South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Britain, Turkey, Syria, Israel, Malaysia, and Russia. Think ethnic Indian women, ethnic Bengladeshi women,

ethnic Kurdish women, ethnic Tamil women; think ethnic Chinese women, ethnic Druze women, ethnic Chechen women. Each ethnic or racial community is deeply gendered not only internally, but in its past and current relationships to the central government's military.

First Lieutenant Marina Hierl, consequently, is analytically interesting to a feminist investigator. So is the US Marine Corps. Yet the attractions of 'firsts' and of the militaries of present global state powers are dangerously tantalizing. They are only as intellectually valuable as the deeper and wider feminist questions about patriarchy and militarization they prompt us to pursue.

NOTES

1. "The Invisible War," documentary film directed by Dick Kirby, produced by Amy Ziering, Chain Camera Pictures, 2012.
2. For an innovative study of the conflicting tendencies in Japan now shaping mothers' and fathers' and girls' and boys' relationships to the Japanese Defense Force – relationships that affect recruitment into the military, see Fruhstuck, 2017.

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