

The few and proud can certainly be female

By TERENCE L. KINDLON

First published: Tuesday, April 10, 2007

Kathleen Parker's Easter Sunday column castigating the English Navy for sending a female sailor to war is a caveman's delight. Turning a blind eye to mountains of contrary evidence, Ms. Parker insists that military women, like Leading Seaman Faye Turney, recently famous because of her capture and release by Iran, don't belong in combat because they're just girls. She props up her antiquated sexist prejudices with a selection of Neanderthal talking points that were thrown in the trash a generation ago.

Ms. Parker, like most "patriotic" right-wing columnists, has never actually served in the military. Too bad, because if she had ever worn the uniform, she would know that contemporary American women competently work alongside American men, officers and enlisted, in virtually every military specialty, on land and sea and in the air. Women drive trucks, they fire weapons and sail ships. As a female fighter jock recently observed, an F-18 doesn't care whether it's being flown by a man or a woman. And like so many of our brave men sent in harm's way, brave American women sometimes give the "last, true measure of devotion" for our beloved country.

Consider, for example, 2nd Lt. Emily S.J. Perez, a 2005 graduate of West Point, where she distinguished herself as command sergeant major. A member of the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Lt. Perez became the 40th West Point graduate to die in combat since 9/11 when an IED obliterated her Humvee on Sept. 12, 2006. She was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

Or take the case of Marine Capt. Jennifer Jean Harris, a top-ranked scholar-athlete in the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 2000. Capt. Harris, an aviator, died when the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter she was piloting went down in flames after being struck by a missile over Anbar Province last February. Perhaps Ms. Parker would like to send a little note to the commandant suggesting that, as far as she's concerned, now that he's letting women fly his helicopters into combat, America's Marines have turned into a bunch of pansies.

If she remains unconvinced that women can fight alongside men, I'd be happy to tell her about a slender Viet Cong lady with an AK-47 I met under difficult circumstances in Quang Tri Province 40 years ago. And if the combat records of American soldiers, Marine pilots and VC guerrillas can't convince Ms. Parker that women have what it takes, then how about Jeanne d'Arc?

Not only did she lead soldiers in the Hundred Years' War, but in the fullness of time, after encountering some determined conservative opposition, she was beatified for her combat skills.

Given Ms. Parker's belief that women should leave war to men, it was surprising she focused her criticism on one brave British woman who actually went to sea while ignoring the hypocrisy of a generation of conservative young American men who thump their chests, loudly proclaim support for President Bush's wars and then stand back and let the girls do their fighting.

Now, more than ever, these young men can redeem themselves because deployments are up, enlistments are down, and America's armed forces desperately need all the new recruits they can muster. Perhaps Ms. Parker should try to convince them that, even if they have "other priorities" like Dick Cheney's during Vietnam, it's not too late to prove their true patriotism by enlisting today.

After all, the Marines already have a lot of really good women, but they are always looking for a few more good men.

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Mothers in arms become pawns

First published: Sunday, April 8, 2007

On any given day, one isn't likely to find common cause with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He's a dangerous, lying, Holocaust-denying, Jew-hating cutthroat thug -- not to put too fine a point on it.

But he was dead-on when he wondered why a once-great power such as Britain sends mothers of toddlers to fight its battles.

Ahmadinejad characterized the release of 15 British sailors and marines, including one woman, seized at sea last month as a gift to Britain. In reality, the hostages were the West's gift to Ahmadinejad.

When a pretender to sanity like Ahmadinejad gets to lecture the West about how it treats its women, we've effectively handed him a free pass to the end zone and made the world his cheerleaders.

Not only does the Iranian president get to look magnanimous in releasing the hostages, but he gets to look wise. And we in the West get to look humiliated, foolish and weak.

Just because we may not "feel" humiliated, doesn't mean we're not. In the eyes of Iran and other Muslim nations, we're wimps. While the West puts mothers in boats with rough men, Islamic men "rescue" women and drape them in floral hijabs.

We can debate whether they're right until all our boys wear aprons, but it won't change the way we're perceived. The propaganda value Iran gained from its lone female hostage, the mother of a 3-year-old, was incalculable.

It is not fashionable these days to suggest that women don't belong in or near combat, or that children need their mothers. Yes, they need their fathers, too, but children in their tender years are dependent on their mothers in unique ways.

There's not enough space here to go into all the ways this is true, but children (and good parents) know the difference, even if some adults are too dim, brainwashed or ideologically driven to see what's obvious.

Why the West has seen it necessary to diminish motherhood so that women can pretend to be men remains a mystery to sane adults. It should be unnecessary to say the military is not a proper vehicle for social experimentation, but a machine dedicated to fighting and, if necessary, killing.

Women may be able to push buttons as well as men, but the door-to-door combat in Fallujah proved the irrelevance of that argument. Meanwhile, no one can look at photos of the 15 British marines and sailors and argue convincingly that the British Navy is stronger for the presence of Leading Seaman Faye Turney -- no matter how lovely and brave she may be.

But let's assume for the sake of argument that women, despite all evidence

to the contrary, are as capable as men in any battle. If our goal is to prevail, then shouldn't we also consider other ramifications of putting women in combat and/or in positions of risk?

Those ramifications include women's unequal vulnerability to rape and injury, as well as cultural attitudes toward women that may enhance their exposure to punishment or, alternatively, to make them useful to our enemies.

Iran wasted no time dressing up Turney in Islamic garb and parading her before television cameras. More than her fellow male captives, Turney was required to confess repeatedly, to apologize for trespassing in Iranian waters and write letters of contrition.

This was not, needless to say, Churchill's Navy.

Rape, though not a likely risk in this case, is a consistent argument against putting women in or near combat. While advocates for women in combat argue that men are also raped, there is an important difference. Women are raped by men, which, given the inherent power differential between the sexes, raises women's rape to another level of terror.

What kind of man, one shudders to wonder, is willing to allow his country's women to be raped and tortured by other men of enemy nations? None that I know, but our military is gradually weaning men of their intuitive inclination to protect women -- which, by extrapolation, means ignoring the screams of women being assaulted.

At the point when our men can stand by unfazed while American servicewomen are raped and tortured, then we will have no cause to fight any war. We will have already lost.

Positioning women to become pawns of propaganda, meanwhile, is called aiding and abetting the enemy.

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