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# The History of Women in Combat

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### The History of women in combat.

In this chapter I hope to briefly outline examples of women in combat from the nineteenth century through the two world wars to the present day. I will examine the role of women in major and regional conventional conflicts, and their role in terrorism and low intensity conflict. I will also examine the case of Cumann na mBan. The decision to choose Cumann na mBan as an example of women in combat is based on my grandmother's membership of this organisation, and subsequent access to Cumann na mBan files in Military archives. This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive 'history' but merely to highlight examples of women in combat to put the views of sex difference 'ideologists' into perspective. The purpose of this chapter is two fold. It is intended to establish beyond doubt for the reader the precedent of female combatants – in uniform – as a widespread phenomenon. It is also intended that this chapter serve as a context setter for the following chapters on the PDF giving them a wider perspective.

#### 4.1 Historical Background:

How wise you were to bring your women into your Military and into your labour force. Had we done that initially, as you did, it could well have affected the whole course of the war. We would have found out as you did that women were equally effective, and for some skills superior to males.  
(Binkin, 1977: 8-9)

This statement was made by Albrecht Speer, Hitler's Production Minister and reflects the main argument of this thesis, that in an age of 'Totenkampf' or total war, in mobilising for war, one must mobilise all of one's assets – both male and female.

In the nineteen thirties, thirty seven per cent of Germany's pre-war work force was female. Initially, the Nazis, in accordance with patriarchal Aryan philosophy, sought to reduce these numbers. A "marriage voucher" for 1,000 DM (the weekly wage was on average 27 DM) was introduced in the mid nineteen thirties to lure women back into the home. According to Nazism, there was no place on the front, or on the assembly line in the Fatherland for women. Their job was as Hausfrauen to produce offspring for war.

By 1942 the female workforce had dropped to 2.58% (Lucas, 1989: 61-79). The Soviets on the other hand had mobilised their female population for industrial and military service. As

the war progressed, Nazi patriarchy gave way to reality and in 1942 the women's 'Deutsche Arbeits Front' was established, with the threat of conscription by 1944. This 'U' turn in policy demonstrates the main thrust of this study – that in time of conflict, women cannot be relegated to a lesser or secondary role in society. This lesson, learned perhaps too late by the Nazis, has been all but erased from the pages of history. Women's contribution to the war effort, both in the military (in full combat) and in heavy industry has been largely ignored. Many feminists (Oakley 1984, Faludi, 1992) would argue that their vital and crucial contribution to the allied victory is subsumed by a patriarchal re-telling of events. They would argue that the efforts of these women, reduced to a historical footnote, have gone unrecognised. This lack of recognition exists despite the track record of women in combat.

From the Old Testament, all the way down to the Spanish Rebellion against Napoleon, rare has been the uprising in which women did not play a prominent if not decisive part.  
...the story of Judith killing Holofernes may be apocryphal, but it is also archetypal.  
(Von Creveld, 1991: 180)

As discussed in chapter three, the truth of this participation in conflict has been suppressed. Despite the evidence, we do not automatically associate women with the use of force or organised violence. Through the masculine iconography of historians, the arts and popular culture, an *idée fixe* has evolved firmly linking military service and maleness. In order to preserve this myth of the male warrior, combative females have been considered as very much 'exceptions to the rule', perhaps even deviant.

The only type of historical accounts available are short sketches of the unusual, striking, fighting exploits of a few exceptional women, rather than the more ordinary participation of great numbers of women in fighting; these depictions reflect a pattern familiar in eras and societies in which the 'non-feminine' behaviours of women must be explained away as unique and extraordinary events.  
(Goldman, 1982: 165)

Contrary therefore to the arguments of some anthropologists such as Tiger (1969), Tiger and Fox (1974) and Wright (1994) fighting and war would appear not to have been an exclusively male province. Their views may be Amerocentric/Eurocentric in their focus, with the authors having no direct experience or observation of combat. To claim that warfare is an 'all male' activity is a value judgement and not a statement of fact, and stems from a belief that women in society are inferior, "... that this inferiority began in nature and was therefore unalterable".  
(Oakley, 1981: 12)

One has to search very carefully for an explication of women's role in war and combat. Their experiences and actions are ignored by most historians and their past is silenced. There is a mechanism at work here which serves to bury the truth of women's participation in combat. It is an ideology or value system associated with patriarchy. It is a 'social construction of reality' based on a prejudiced perception.

There is a cultural ideal in most societies that men are the warriors. This ideal persists despite the fact that women in many nations have participated in military operations... and warfare... Public discourse and other forms of social life are socially constructed to support a perception that women are not combatants. The steadfastness of this belief demonstrates the social construction of reality. (Howes, Stevenson, 1993: 81)

In more recent times, women's participation in violent struggle and in warfare has grown to unprecedented levels.

## 4.2 The nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In more recent times women have followed on the example of their ancestors and continued to be active participants in all forms of organised violent confrontation from rebellion to all-out warfare. Throughout Europe during the urban rebellions of the mid 1800's, women played a decisive role in the fighting.

In the urban revolutions of 1848 which erupted in Paris, Vienna, Milan, Rome, Berlin and other European cities and towns, women continued to initiate and join demonstrations and fighting. They defended these short lived republics and were drawn wearing improvised uniforms and carrying weapons. (Zinsser, 1990: 279).

These rebellions posed a challenge to the old order, the European monarchy, the 'Rights of Kings' and shocked and appalled the establishment across Europe. In illustrations from 'Punch' and similar publications of the time, the participants were portrayed as drunken, blood-thirsty rabble bent on anarchy. In fact these people represented the cutting edge of the age of Enlightenment, those who believed in the radical new ideas of 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité'. Women, often stereotyped as inherently conservative, were very active in these protest movements.

Women took action and participated in the opening events of the French Revolution of 1789-1795, the revolutions of 1848 and the uprising of the Paris Commune in

1871... where witnesses saw "detachments of women coming up from every direction, armed with broomsticks, lances, pitchforks, swords, pistols and muskets". (Ibid: 279)

Women shared the privations of men on the battlefield during the Napoleonic wars. Eyewitness accounts of the period report women accompanying the troops into battle and being subject to the fortunes of war. Some, pregnant and others nursing small children, were often exposed in a retreat to the enemy or simply the elements. Rifleman Harris' description of these women as "most persevering in such cases", (Hibbert, 1996: 88) gives the lie to the notion of women as 'frail' or 'weak'. Often, however, these women, referred to as 'camp followers', paid the ultimate price for their dependence on soldier husbands:

About this period I remember another sight which I shall not to my dying day forget; and it causes me a sore heart even now as I remember it... the screams of a child caught my ear and drew my attention to one of our women who was endeavouring to drag along a little boy of about 7 or 8 years of age... It was a pitiable sight and wonderful to behold the efforts the poor woman made to keep the boy among us... until both sank down to rise no more... far behind amongst the dead or dying in the road.  
(Ibid: 88-89)

Women on the continent who sought to bear arms and challenge the might of monarchy and empire were joined by their sisters in America. Although women were not allowed to fight in the Revolutionary Army in any official capacity, many served covertly. Before intimate medical examinations became commonplace for service personnel, a number of women served in the army posing as men.

One of them, Deborah Sampson, served in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment under the name of Robert Shirtliffe. During her three year enlistment period, she fought in combat several times and was wounded severely when a ball became lodged in her leg. She removed the ball herself with a penknife while at a Military Hospital fearing that her secret otherwise might be revealed.  
(Mummert, 1996: 1)

Two Union nurses, Mary Tepe and Anna Etheridge were awarded the Kearney Cross for bravery at the Battle of Chancellorsville. Sally Louisa Thompkins was commissioned as a Captain for the Confederacy by Jefferson Davis. In addition to serving as nurses, women such as Belle Boyd, Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Pauline Cushman served as spies. Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist, also served as a nurse, spy, scout, and guide for the Union. In June 1863, she led a raid up the Combahee River in South Carolina, destroying millions of dollars of confederate property and freeing more than seven hundred slaves. Another famous example was "Mad Ann Bailey", (Maginnis, 1992: 25), scout and spy. It is estimated that

roughly four hundred women fought during the American Civil War. They included some colourful characters such as Mrs. L.M. Blalock (1862) of the 29<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Militia who posed as her husband's brother; Sarah Taylor, the Tennessee Joan of Arc; "La Belle" Morgan, Molly Pitchers, Michigan Bridget, Nancy Slaughter Walker, Captain Molly, Loreta Velasquez and Mary Lovell, Captain of the Union Ship "Moonraker" which captured the confederate ship "JP Ellicott" in 1863. (Jones 1997).

In Russia in the 1800's, women played an active role in agitating for change and fomenting revolution and dissidence. They participated in the Cossack Revolt of 1819 and the Uprising in Sebastopol in 1830 (French, 1988: 237). Three hundred and seventy-five women were sentenced to be executed by the Czar after Sebastopol. Russian women at the time overcame cultural taboos by becoming concerned with matters 'outside the home'. They were a crucial force in the gathering momentum for revolution.

In 1878, Vera Zasulich, a revolutionary, shot the Governor General of St. Petersburg for ordering the beating of a political prisoner who had not removed his cap in the Governor's presence... women made up a third of the "People's Will" (a terrorist organisation), (which)... planned and executed six assassination attempts against Alexander II. One member... Sofia Perovskaia... was hanged, becoming the first woman in Russia to suffer capital punishment for a political crime. (French, 1988: 238-239)

Many Russian women out of patriotic fervour joined the Czar's Army during World War One. These women formed "Battalions of Death". They fought alongside the men in vicious trench warfare. One woman, Marie Baktscharow (Yashka) recalled:

I found myself next to a German, ran him through with a bayonet, shot him and took his helmet as a souvenir. (Jones, 1997: 123).

Women also fought during the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 in Russia. They fought on both sides of the conflict, some organised into fighting battalions. (Zinsser, 1990: 299). The effect of women fighting was much remarked upon at the time. From accounts at that time:

The poor women of Petrograd swarmed into the streets along with boys and men armed only with shovels. The women were physically deformed from overwork, malnutrition and abuse; they lacked weapons... women ran straight into the fire... it was terrifying to see them... the Cossacks seemed superstitious about it. They began to retreat. On November 7 1917, the Bolsheviks began to rule. (French, 1988: 240).

Lenin recognised the potential of women as agitators, leaders and combatants, and women fought during the bloody civil war which followed the October Revolution.

During the Civil War which lasted from 1917 to 1921 women fought for and supported every faction. Lenin appointed Alexandra Kollontai... as commissar for public welfare... she arranged for the First Congress of Women Workers and Peasants... Lenin addressed the Congress and emphasised the need for women's participation. "Root out old habits, every cook must learn to rule the state". (Zinsser, 1990: 299)

Women were utilised during the mass struggle of the Civil War in many non-traditional areas. These included combat assignments, armed and in uniform.

During the struggle, women acted as soldiers and scouts, cavalry, machine gunners, commanders and drove armoured trains. (French, 1988, p 240)

Women were also mobilised in the Balkans. One woman, Flora Sandes, left Suffolk in England in 1914 to join the Serb army. She was involved in fighting with Bulgars on Mount Chukus, and later with Germans and Austrians. Originally a nurse, her fighting skills were recognised by the Serbs who commissioned her as an officer in the Serb army. She retired a Serb captain in 1922. (Jones, 1997: 134).

In China at this time a similar mobilisation of women was taking place. Many women were moved by Chinese Nationalist fervour to join the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang, (KMT) One member,

Ch'iu Chin... established the first feminist newspaper, the Chinese Women's Journal... for her participation in an assassination attempt she was captured... tortured... she was beheaded at the age of thirty-three. (French, 1988: 246)

As is almost always the case, when the pressing demands of struggle and conflict recede, women are the first to be demobilised and oppressed by the newly formed elite. The reaction of Chinese women to this sudden reversal of fortune was similar to that of Irish women in Cumann na mBan in 1922.

Women members of the Revolutionary Party were expelled or forced to submit to the new Government. Deprived of legal political expression women again resorted to

military action and joined the National Army or the Assassination Corps. As they had in the previous revolution, they dressed and equipped themselves like men. (French, 1988: 247)

From a very cursory look at the 19th and early 20th centuries, one can only conclude that women certainly played a role in some of the most traumatic and significant conflicts of the era. These conflicts had a profound effect on societal change, but whilst change took place for some of the men who fought, there was universally a return to oppression for women. The status and roles assigned women in all of these new regimes, whether in Revolutionary France, Russia or China bore no relation to their contribution to liberation. Two facts emerge:

1. Women are capable of using force when given the power and opportunity to do so. (Howes and Stevenson, 1993: 8)
2. Although women... contributing greatly to the success of every major political and religious revolution that has occurred in the West (and in Islam) in the past millennium, you would not know this either from the present leadership of such political groups or from history books... women are as capable of heroism as men, but they are never equally rewarded. (French, 1988: 270)

These features are examined in the following section as they apply to women's role in the liberation of the Irish state in ever greater numbers in conventional operations, or "Total War".

### 4.3 Total war and conventional operations.

Modern conventional warfare is non-selective. The use of the term 'conventional' is a euphemism for total war. Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons know no international or territorial boundaries. They do not discriminate on the basis of race, nationality or sex. Conventional dedicated armaments and electronically enhanced delivery systems render men, women and children de-facto targets. Total war defines civilian populations as "collateral", (e.g. Manual of Land Operations, M.O.D. restricted).

During the Second World War, women fought in all theatres and on all sides. Women, for example, comprised 8% of Stalin's Red Army. Some combat formations were comprised entirely of female troops such as the 586th Women's Aircraft Fighter Regiment, the 46<sup>th</sup> Night Bomber Regiment and the 125<sup>th</sup> Day Bomber Regiment. (Binkin, 1977: 9).



Stalin realised very quickly what Hitler had missed: the potential of 51% of the available labour resource i.e.: women. In order to win a modern war, one has to mobilise all of one's resources. To this end cultural taboos about appropriate roles for women and 'social constructs of reality' give way to objective reality, a non gendered reality which is the fight for survival.

The Germans invaded the U.S.S.R. in 1941 forcing mobilisation... by 1945 they (women) comprised 56% of the labour force, a majority of miners and a third of the workers in the Baku Oil fields. They worked fourteen to eighteen hours a day... the nation was fighting for survival.  
(French, 1988: 242-243)

It is worth noting that while women (the "weaker sex") comprised 56% of the labour force and therefore the majority of the heavy industrial workforce, all production records were broken and industrial output in 1945 was higher than it had ever been in the history of the Soviet Union. This was an industrial phenomenon driven by the need to survive but principally sustained by the usage of female labour. It refutes any notion of women being somehow 'unsuited to' or 'unable for' the lucrative manual occupations so often closed to them.

Eight hundred thousand women served in the Red Army during the war. Over one hundred thousand Soviet women won military honours. Eighty six women were made "Hero of the Soviet Union", the highest award attainable for bravery in battle. (Zinsser 1990: 312).  
(D'Ann Campbell 1993: 318)

The female Soviet Air formations flew 4,419 operations, participated in 125 air combats, and scored 38 aerial victories. Some women pilots achieved notoriety as 'air aces'. Lily Litvak was known as the "White Rose of Stalingrad".

She shot down twelve German planes... She returned to the front after recovering from a leg wound only to be shot down herself in 1943.  
(Zinsser, 1990: 313)

One of the all female night bomber regiments, the 588th Night Bomber Regiment, was particularly feared by the Germans.

The 588th Night Bombers who proved so effective at hitting their targets were nicknamed by the Germans the 'night witches'. According to one veteran German pilot, "I would rather fly ten times over the skies of Tobruk (over all male British Ack Ack) than to pass once through the fire of Russian flak sent up by female gunners.  
(D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 319).

The enlistment of Soviet women was widespread. They served in the combat support corps in signals, logistics and engineering battalions. They also served in their thousands in Artillery units, and Tank squadrons.

There would appear to have been no morale or 'male bonding' problems with these gender integrated units.

Russian women... served with ground combat units, as tank crew members. Moreover, about one of every ten partisans was a woman, many of whom served as scouts, snipers and saboteurs.  
(Binkin, 1977: 9)

Unit cohesion was obviously achieved as these units managed to engage the German Wehrmacht, the most well equipped and battle-hardened force at that time. The Soviets employed this 'social experiment' involving female troops against Hitler's most fanatical units; special SS formations, and the Einsatzgruppen. The Germans waged total war in the fullest sense against the Soviets. Operation Barbarossa brought with it a 'scorched earth' policy, and a rolling front followed by detachments of the aforementioned SS and liquidation groups. Women fought and bonded with their male colleagues in these difficult conditions in a climate of great fear and desperation. Women fought hand to hand in the bitter street fighting of Stalingrad, the turning point of German fortunes in Russia, leading to the collapse of Von Paulus' army.

When the battle reached the city itself, women fought alongside the men outside the tractor and metallurgical plants of the Mamai Barrow, and on the streets.  
(Zinsser, 1990: 312)

Other women fought hard against Von Paulus' counter-offensives. Captain Vera Krylova fought a much publicised action against German troops at this time forcing a remnant company through Nazi lines into Moscow. (Jones, 1997: 137-138). Many Soviet women paid dearly for their military service on capture. Many were shot out of hand, often tortured and publicly humiliated. (Liza Ivanovna Chaikina, 1941, Krasnoye Pokatishtshe, Ibid.: 137).

Women were also heavily involved in resistance work throughout Europe. In France, Marie-Madeleine Fourcade directed a three thousand person network. (Zinsser, 1990: 315). Jewish women fought in the bitter hand to hand fighting of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. Examples abound of women who fought and died for their beliefs during this period. They were no less

brave, nor less effective than their male comrades. Nor were they less expendable or mortal. Hannah Senesh died at the age of twenty-three in Budapest in 1944 after being tortured by the Nazis. She was captured after the RAF parachuted her into Hungary. She did not reveal any information to her captors. (Zinsser, 1990: 315).

Under various auspices, clandestine combat training courses for women were operated by the British intelligence services. Hundreds of female agents were trained in sabotage and assassination techniques and parachuted into occupied Europe as members of the Resistance and Free French and Polish Armies, (Young, 1959). Examples include Rolande Colas de la Noye and Andrée Dédée de Jongh who controlled the “Comet Line” Resistance network in France. Another woman, Nancy Wade, trained by the British, commanded a 7,000 strong guerilla force in France in 1944. (Jones, 1997: 243).

Under the aegis of the intelligence services and Special Operations Executive, female personnel were trained for combat with the Palmach and Haganah organisations. These women fought in Palestine for the establishment of the State of Israel and were fully integrated into the Israeli defence forces. (Goldman, 1982), (Binkin, 1977: 131).

Women fought in the Balkans for the liberation of Yugoslavia. This partisan war was hard fought in difficult terrain in extremes of weather conditions. Hitler committed twelve divisions to the pacification, and 'sanitisation' of this theatre. The SS pursued a vigorous campaign of terrorism and genocide in the area. Under these conditions, women fought side by side with men against tremendous odds. This was not some 'feminist' social experiment carried out in sanitised conditions.

In the 1941 Yugoslav Liberation war... around 100,000 women carried arms as active fighters: 25,000 were killed in action, 40,000 were wounded and 3,000 became disabled pensionable veterans. (Oakley, 1981: 145).

Large numbers of women fought in the Italian partisan movement.

25,000 Italian women comprised part of that country's partisan movement; nearly 5,000 of these were captured, arrested, tortured and killed: 625 were killed in action or wounded, 2,750 were deported by the Nazis and 15 were awarded Italy's Gold Medal. (French, 1988: 230)

German women who opposed Nazi rule were executed along with their male counterparts.

"Their names have passed into oblivion although there is evidence of their actions", (French, 1988: 236).

Women's participation in the fighting in occupied Europe and in Russia was widespread and on a large scale. These female soldiers, partisans, saboteurs and assassins were commonplace. They were not unusual in some way, not aberrations, they were ordinary people who fought with extraordinary courage. Their participation refutes one of the basic myths of a male-female dichotomy, specifically as it applies to the use of force.

As argued in chapter three, it is part of the canon of patriarchal thought that women are inherently peace loving, and that this 'passive' nature is bound up in reproduction, and therefore genetically 'pre-programmed' and inevitable. The evidence of this chapter, however, suggests the opposite. Women can fight and kill with no less élan than the male of the species.

There is no inherent bond between "women" and "peace"; therefore issues about gender and the use of force are based on ideology, theory and political action, not on biologically determined or naturally immutable tendencies.  
(Howes, Stevenson, 1993: 12)

Hitler and his junta laboured under an Aryan mis-apprehension about women and certainly underestimated their potential. It was a costly mistake. When Hitler seized power in 1933, he announced his policy:

There is no place for the political woman in the ideological world of National Socialism ... the intellectual attitude ... is opposed to the political woman ... the German resurrection is a male event.  
(French, 1988: 234)

Unfortunately for the Nazis, the German crucifixion was to prove a unisex event. The saturation bombing of Dresden was to prove a gender 'neutral' event. The fall and rape of Berlin was to prove a 'gender integrated' exercise. The death camps were especially liberal in their special treatment of all age groups, religions, ethnic minorities, sexual persuasions, political beliefs and of course, gender groupings.

The German army were particularly ruthless in their treatment of female Soviet combatants. Wehrmacht reports at that time referred to women soldiers as 'Flintenweiber', a pejorative term translating roughly to 'musketwomen' in English. (Goldman, 1982: 55). The Nazis viewed Soviet and Slavic combatants as subhuman ('Untermensch') and prisoners of war

were thus treated in an inhumane fashion. In many cases local commanders simply executed prisoners out of hand, or handed them over to SS field units, or Einsatzgruppen for 'special treatment'.

Female prisoners were considered in many cases to be “irregular” elements. The “irregulars” or partisans did not enjoy the protection of the Geneva Convention and under the rules of engagement were to be executed on sight. Thus, women faced a double bind. On capture, not only did they face certain death, they were not even accorded the most basic status of ‘Prisoner of War’.

At the outset of Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht reflected the Nazi ideology which viewed women’s place as being strictly in the home, as ‘Hausfrauen’, or ‘brood mares’ for the ‘Fatherland’. Those women they encountered on the battlefield were considered to be less than human, examples of an inferior and barbaric culture and were treated as such.

Flintenweiber, or 'Gun Women' was the contemptuous German term for Soviet women who carried or fired weapons... The Germans looked upon armed Soviet women as "unnatural" and consequently had no compunction about shooting such "vermin" as soon as they were captured. The verbal degradation of enemy females made it easier for German soldiers to overcome inhibitions about harming women. (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 316-317)

As German fortunes began to fade, the Nazis, in the face of dramatic reversals at the hands of hitherto ‘inferior’ forces began to consider the mobilisation of women. These personnel, the 'Nachrichtenhelferinnen', Waffenhelferinnen', 'SS Helferinnen' and ‘Luftwaffen-Helferinnen' were initially denied any weapons training. They were tasked with the driving of light vehicles, clerical duties, signals and welfare/nursing assignments. The work assigned them was in tune with chauvinistic Aryan notions of propriety and femininity. Along with organisations such as the 'Bund Deutscher Mädchen', the roles given female military personnel were strictly those considered appropriate for women.

By 1944, with Von Paulus’s army annihilated in the East and allied inroads to the South and West, German territory was under direct threat. Discretion dictated that female personnel were to be mobilised, and drafted into the fighting arm of the Wehrmacht. Hitler was forced to reconsider his 1933 definition of the Nazi resurrection as a 'male' event. Under severe pressure from the war...

...in 1943 the Nazis forced women to register with the employment bureau,... as the country fell to pieces, Hitler informed women they were now equal: he pressed them into service in the military. (French, 1988: 236)

Female personnel manned anti-aircraft batteries, crewed armoured fighting vehicles and were drafted into the ranks of the 'Volksturm' (people's army) and 'Werewolf' (guerrilla army) establishments. (Rhodes, 1984, Read, 1989, Lewis and Whitehead 1990).

By 1944, after Goebbels' 'Second Order for the Implementation of Total War', 450,000 German women were serving in the military machine. At the end of the war, 65,000 of these women were serving in anti-aircraft units with the Luftwaffe and therefore involved in direct combat, (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 314, 315). No longer 'Bund Deutscher Mädchen', these German soldiers were now referred to unofficially as 'Blitzmädchen'.

The Blitzmädchen certainly proved themselves in battle. One such woman, "Erna", a twenty-two year old Pomeranian woman, destroyed three Soviet tanks with a 'Panzerfaust' or anti-tank weapon. She was awarded the Iron Cross (Second Class). Another woman knocked out a Soviet armoured scout car and retrieved from its commander military documents. "In all, thirty nine German women received the Iron Cross for their duty near the front". (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 317). Ironically, at the close of the war, many female German troops suffered the fate of their earlier Soviet adversaries. Denied full military status, many German women soldiers were declared to be "officers' whores" (Lucas, 1989: 75-9) and were systematically raped and abused by the advancing Soviet army. Many Soviet commanders considered these women to be outside the provisions of the Geneva Convention. (Ibid: 61-79). It is interesting to note how National Socialism and communism found common ground in the rape and murder of women.

#### 4.4 The British and American experience.

With the advent of war, the British and Americans saw the need to enlist women soldiers. The British formed female auxiliary corps for Army, Navy and Air Force, (WRAC, WREN, WAAF). The U.S. military followed suit. In the main, in both Britain and the U.S., these 'new' female soldiers were assigned strictly non combat tasks such as clerical, driving and nursing duties. In the case of the U.S. Army, females were also trained as pilots to ferry aircraft from the United States to bases in Europe. These female pilots or "WASPs" (Womens Air Force Service Pilots), flew planes into all theatres of war.

As the war intensified, allied female personnel found themselves increasingly in the theatre of war and were de facto combatants directly involved in ground operations.

They served with a mobile army in Italy... they moved with the troops... they island hopped in the Pacific dodging sniper fire. In addition to tackling their assigned jobs, they battled flies, dysentery, "jungle rot" and other tropical diseases. Before the women were sent overseas, there had been many questions as to how they would react under stress. The women were superb. (Halleran 1995: 47).

In Britain the Government had recognised from early on in the war the necessity for exploiting the female labour resource. All women between 18 and 50 were registered at the beginning of the war and in 1941, single women between the ages of 20 and 30 were drafted and given the choice of war work or military service. It was never the intention however on the part of the British or U.S. governments to assign women combat posts. The reasons were undoubtedly bound up in cultural taboos about appropriate gender roles for women, (particularly in America). (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 302). This cultural taboo was compounded by there being no direct threat to the American mainland. In Britain however, the threat of German invasion was imminent, and this forced the hand of the War office to experiment with gender integrated combat units.

The National Service Act of December 1941 drafted 125,000 women in to the British Military with a further 430,000 volunteering. Sir James Grigg, Under Secretary of State for War, on Churchill's instructions, directed General Sir F.A. Pile to experiment with female anti-aircraft batteries in order to release 40,000 men for the North African campaign. There was a lot of resistance in the form of public opinion and a general hostility towards women assuming these non-traditional roles. (Public opinion was obviously not a problem for Stalin or Hitler given the nature of their regimes). The first mixed A.A. (Anti Aircraft) Units went operational in 1941 and the first confirmed kills were reported by April 1942. (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 306). General Pile observed at the time; "The girls lived like men, fought their lights (searchlights) like men and alas, some of them died like men". (Ibid: 309).

During the war three hundred and eighty nine women were killed or wounded at their posts whilst manning Air Defence Batteries. Initially public opposition to female crews was based not on women being placed in danger of bombardment, for the Blitz placed everyone at risk, but rather on the notion of women pulling the trigger to kill.

The taboo on women firing weapons was and is still designed not to protect women but to protect the mythology, morale, motivation, prestige and privileges of the male soldier, to uphold the idea of the inevitable masculinity of combat... and to uphold the idea of the essential femininity of those who must 'be protected', those who give birth, those who cannot kill. (Segal, 1987: 174).

However pragmatism took over and the success of the mixed Anti Aircraft batteries proved "necessity, once it was dire enough, could overcome culture". (D'Ann Campbell, *ibid.*: 323).

Apart from the integration of the A.A. batteries the British and Americans did not fully integrate women into their armed forces but kept them separate in discrete women's service corps.

The Americans watched the British experiment with great interest and were very aware of the development in continental Europe involving the widespread use of female personnel. The Americans encountered female Japanese soldiers in the bitter hand to hand fighting in Okinawa. Like the Germans, the Japanese overcame the cultural bias that prevented women from being drafted into combat and despatched thousands of high school students, both male and female, into battle in Okinawa and on Kyushu to fight to the death. (*Ibid*: 322).

The Americans decided to explore the possibility of drafting women into combat.

The Pentagon was well aware of the performance of European women soldiers and the Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, conducted a full scale experiment to see how well American women could perform... The experiment stunned the General staff: mixed gender units performed better than all-male units. As the draft scraped further and further down the barrel, the availability of large numbers of potentially excellent unutilised soldiers became more and more an anomaly. The demands for military efficiency called for assigning women to combat. (*Ibid*: 302).

A conservative congress would not approve the radical notion of assigning women to combat units and the option was dropped in favour of a more 'palatable' series of Women's Service Corps, where female soldiers would do 'women's work', such as driving light vehicles, and clerking and administrative duties, for two-thirds of the wages of her male equivalent. The conditions in America differed from Germany and the Soviet Union in that public opinion was (and still is) a crucial factor for the successful pursuit of belligerent policies; and the territory of the United States was not directly under threat. For these reasons, the perceived threat was not sufficient to allow for the disinhibition of cultural taboos.

As the war came to its conclusion, women were again excluded from the ranks of the military and a mass exodus from industry was orchestrated. Both the British and Americans placed a 3% ceiling on the numbers of women allowed into their armed forces.

Two months after a U.S. victory had been declared abroad women were losing their economic beachhead as 800,000 were fired from the aircraft industry; by the end of the year, 2 million female workers had been purged from heavy industry.



Employers revived prohibitions on hiring married women or imposed limits on female workers' salaries... giving unemployment assistance only to men, shut down its day care service (Federal Government) and defended the 'right' of veterans to displace working women.  
(Faludi, 1992: 72).

Rosie the riveter found herself riveted firmly back to the kitchen sink. The latter day tribe of Amazons that fought on all sides were demobilised to disappear into the suburban wilderness from whence they came. They were no longer armed with Panzerfausts, machine pistols or grenades, now only with new improved pot scrubs and a plethora of new 'labour saving' devices. The eroticised housewife of the 50's was in sharp contrast to the overalled and oil-stained riveter of the 40's. The transition of women from the various theatres of war to the 'kitchenette' represented a post traumatic reaction of society and a clinging to the 'safe' and familiar traditional roles of the thirties.

Women, generally speaking, did not feature in the elaborate war memorials being erected all over Europe as victory was being celebrated. Nor did they feature in the history books, or the popular 'folklore' of the war. In the public psyche, women were removed from the landscape of war, and this excision permeated books, articles, magazines, journals, radio and all the history and discourses about war.

In contrast to the obliteration of women from the war record, other minority groups have had their military contribution highlighted. An interesting example is the role of all black African American formations during the U.S. Civil War, World War One and World War Two. Hollywood films such as "Glory", popular songs such as "Buffalo Soldiers" (Bob Marley), and many books and articles (Rainier, 1992: 3-9), extol their exploits. A similar vein of popular and academic culture cannot be tapped for women. The effect is simple:

Segregation and discrimination based on race are officially banned, while that which is based on sex remains institutionalised in laws and official policies. Officially, racism is no longer tolerated. Sexism remains alive and well.  
(Holm, 1993: 79).

They were removed even from the language of war. It was 'Johnny' who came marching home, not 'Jane', and it was 'our boys' overseas and not our men and women. This language persists today, and in this country, we hear constant references to the 'men of violence', even though our prisons, and those in England, hold plenty of females convicted of terrorist offences.

In the years immediately following the war, women were 'written out' of the historical script almost entirely. Their actions were more or less obliterated from the public record and from

the mind's eye of the public. This is a pattern that would appear to repeat itself across all societies and was repeated recently during the screening of the film, "Michael Collins". The surrender of the insurgents in the G.P.O. is depicted as being delivered by a man, when in fact it was given by a woman. This denial of the contribution of women to the survival or liberation of the state can often translate into a reversed of opportunities open to women and a lowering of status and roles assigned them post war; a return to oppression.

Why is the historical stage, for women, like Shakespeare's theatre - but empty of the actors?... They are dismissed afterward... they are absolved from their responsibility by political and trades union confessors, by long dead philosophers, by sociologists, economists, ... this is just another way of sending women into a vacuum... (Macciocchi, 1979: 67).

The phenomenon of the dismissal of women from the history book and from positions both industrial and military, is remarked on and has been observed by many commentators:

What is perhaps most extraordinary about women's history is our ignorance of it. Most people are hardly aware that women have had a history... Eminent women are treated as aberrations; they are prevented from transmitting their power and are obliterated from history. (French, 1988: 269-271)

Feminists would argue that a selective amnesia occurs post crisis when it comes to women, in order to avoid the painful accommodation of the fact that stereotyped expectations about characteristic differences between the sexes are without foundation.

Where the insurgents face a powerful, well armed military or policy apparatus, the discrepancy in force is such that women can be allowed to participate in the insurgency without threatening the significance of what the men are doing. Once victory causes the relationship... to become less lopsided however, the laws of ordinary life reassert themselves and women again - through no fault of their own - can expect to be cast out into the cold. (Von Creveld, 1991: 183)

Despite the many media images of Israeli female soldiers carrying weapons, the Israeli Defence Forces have barred women from combat units for the last fifty years. This is despite their contribution to the establishment of the state of Israel through the Haganah and Palmach organisations.

It is good for Jewish women to be strong and aggressive when Jews are in danger and she's acting in the people's interest... if we go through the Bible and the legends carefully, we will see that whenever Jewish survival is at stake, Jewish women are called upon to be strong and aggressive. When the crisis is over it is back to Patriarchy. (Goldman, 1982: 157)

Immediately following the war, women were to remain involved in the many regional conflicts that were to erupt worldwide. In Europe during the Greek civil war (1945-1948), female personnel comprised 15% of the opposing ELAS (Communist) and Hellenic army (right wing) forces. They fought throughout the civil war and were noted for their stamina, strength and ability to withstand the rigours of battle, and even physical torture at the hands of the enemy. They were prized members of combat units for their...

... endurance in long and arduous mountain marches and under very harsh living conditions; their ability to carry heavy loads of arms and ammunition, their bravery and risk taking as well as their persistence in fighting, even after they were wounded, and their ability to withstand pain and torture without breaking down, or disclosing information even though this resulted in hideous death.  
(Goldman, 1982: 166).

Prior to the civil war, Greek women fought in the resistance movement during the German occupation. Two hundred and fifty Greek women were awarded the title "National Heroines" of the Second World War. Despite this, and their acknowledged prowess in battle during the civil war, they form only a tiny minority of today's male dominated Greek army. They cannot undergo officer training and can only reach the rank of Corporal, (Goldman, 1982). As has been the case in so many other conflicts their contribution in time of war has gone unrecognised and unrewarded in the institutions of their armed forces.

#### 4.5 Modern conventional warfare from World War Two to operation Desert Storm.

The trend for women's participation in regional conflicts post world war has continued apace. This is true across all cultural boundaries including the most patriarchal and fundamentalist of societies. From Asia to Latin America and in Africa and the Middle East, women are becoming involved in combat in ever increasing numbers.

Emerging from strict Islamic seclusion, Algerian women were very active in the war of independence from France... the men began to include women because they needed them enough to overcome the weight of tradition for both sexes...  
... captured, imprisoned and raped repeatedly by the "civilised" French, they were also hideously tortured. Two women, Djamila Boubired and Djamila Boupacha became heroines because they held firm under torture.  
(French, 1988: 231)

The participation of women outside of a strictly prescribed way of life has been noted in other fundamentalist societies in times of upheaval and conflict. As a consequence of the revolution in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen:

... there has been a major effort to erode purdah restrictions and to encourage women to enter all areas of public life, including the militia, politics, the legal profession, and other areas of activity formerly closed to women.  
(Molyneaux, 1979:8)

In the Iran/Iraq conflict, Iranian fundamentalists trained female combatants for war. (Hiro, 1989: 150).

Elsewhere, women's involvement in conflict and warfare has continued. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army used female troops in all support and combat formations. In the heavily infiltrated south of the country, thousands of women were members of the Viet Cong. Many of these women died in action against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, (ARVN) and in continuous clashes with U.S. troops. In this conflict, over 40% of North Vietnamese Army commanders were female. (Jones, 1997: 34-35). The Vietnamese had many female role models in battle. Among them were Nguyen Thi Ba who poisoned 400 French troops in 1931, and the Commander Madam Dinh, who at Ben Tre in 1937 repelled a force of 13,000 French troops. Notions of girlishness or feminine passivity quickly evaporate when confronted with Din Le Tunn's sniper school for girls which operated out of Min Top during the U.S. occupation. These women in the interests of concealment and economy specialised in a technique of killing U.S. troops with one shot, often beating survivors to death with their own weapons. (Jones, 1997: 35). Initial surprise and a 'culture shock' for U.S. troops in encountering a female adversary was quickly tempered by the knowledge that man, woman or child, the enemy of either sex was equally deadly.

At present, women total roughly 11% of British and U.S. army strengths. Fifteen per cent of all NATO active military forces are women. Nine per cent of Canadian forces are female. (Stanley and Segal, 1988). The dramatic increase in the numbers of women enlisted to the armies of the West in the eighties and nineties can be attributed to two main factors. Political pressure from an equality of opportunity agenda allied with equality legislation in the seventies led to the initial increase in numbers. As time wore on, and women began to occupy most appointments both combat and line, the military authorities began to realise that these highly educated, highly motivated troops were indispensable to the military machine. At a time of falling numbers wishing to enlist, women proved of benefit to military planners. Still, emotive arguments based on patriarchal assumptions about the role of women were used

in opposition to this trend. At a congressional debate about the enlistment of women into the U.S. military, Senator Ervin made his famous statement of opposition:

To prevent sending the daughters of America into combat to be slaughtered or maimed by the bayonets, the bombs, the bullets, the grenades, the mines, the napalm, the poison gas and the shells of the enemy.  
(Senator Ervine, Congressional Record, Vol. 118, point 7, 1972), (Binkin, 1977: 42)

Despite this and similar protestations, the integration of female personnel into the U.S. military has continued apace. Over 100 women served in Korea as nurses, clerks, aides and interpreters. Seven thousand five hundred women served in Vietnam, mostly as nurses. Eight of these women were killed in the course of their duties and their names are engraved on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington. One woman, Dr. Doris Allen, (Intelligence Officer, 519th Military Intelligence Battalion, 1967-1970) remarked on her Vietnam experience: "Vietnam was a war with no battle lines; everybody was subject to be blown up no matter where you were, so that kept the adrenaline pumping". (Haynes, 1994: 2). In 1983, about 200 army women participated in the invasion of Grenada. (Maginnis, 1992: 26). During the Libyan air strikes in 1987, women performed essential operational tasks servicing and re-fuelling the strike aircraft. The in-flight refuelling was managed by a female airborne refuelling pilot. The deployment of these female personnel was vital to the viability of this operation. Eight hundred female troops were involved in the invasion of Panama in 1980. Some were involved in ground combat with the infantry and notably as helicopter pilots ferrying troops into and out of the combat zone. (Schneider, 1992; Moskos, 1990).

During this operation (Just Cause) a female military police captain became involved in a firefight with hostile armed elements. The involvement of Captain Linda Bray in this action drew the attention of the media who proclaimed the event as the first time a female officer had led U.S. troops in combat. This media-hyped incident sparked a further debate in Congress as to the appropriateness of having female personnel in combat situations. Consequently, Congress formulated a policy on 'Combat exclusion' based on the vague 'function, co-location and level of danger' rules. (Goldman, 1982: 238). Based on this definition, combat was defined as follows:

To close with the enemy by manoeuvre, or shock effect, to destroy or capture, or whilst repelling assault by fire, close combat or counterattack. (U.S. National Defence Authorisation Act).  
(Maginnis, 1992: 27).

The legal definition was found to be irrelevant on the modern battlefield which being highly mobile and fluid, does not lend itself to tidy definition. Rear echelon elements may at any

time be subject to attack, counterattack, bombardment or nuclear, biological or chemical (NBC) contamination. As such, the battlefield in a modern 'total war' is said to comprise the entire 'Theatre of Operations'. In short: "Now all residents of a state at war are potential targets". (Goldman, 1982: 238).

U.S. Congress Statutes (Title 10, USC 6015, and 8549) - the Navy and Air Force Statutes, along with the Department of Defence 'Risk Rule', (Function, Co-location and level of danger), combined to form the Direct Combat Probability Coding (DCPC) in 1983.

Under the DCPC, every position in the Army is evaluated based upon the duties of each MOS (Military Occupation Specialities)... the Unit's mission, tactical doctrine and the battlefield location. Positions are then coded based on the probability of engaging in direct combat. The DCPC closes many positions to female soldiers. (Maginnis; 1992: 27).

As was evidenced by Captain Bray's encounter with armed elements, the DCPC would appear to be an inadequate barometer for predicting likely contact with the enemy. The DCPC does not 'protect' women from contact with the enemy, rather it 'protects' jobs for the boys.

It reinforces a gender division of labour within the forces and restricts women from entering the higher paid MOS. The DCPC has nothing to do with the realities of war, and everything to do with patriarchal notions of the 'appropriate' place for women. The DCPC has led to many anomalous and even bizarre outcomes on the battlefield.

With the huge increases in the numbers of female military personnel, many occupying key combat appointments, it was inevitable that their involvement in direct combat would occur. Forty one thousand female troops were involved in operations 'Desert Shield' and 'Desert Storm'. Eleven women were killed in combat in the Gulf War. (Schneider 1992).

The thorny question of whether women would be in theory engaged in direct contact with the enemy was answered on the battleground, "It's not going to be a controversy, it's going to be a necessity". (Schneider, 1992: 160).

The diktat of the Gulf War battlefield certainly did not answer the combat question. To begin with, Logistics Units, which would have had a traditionally low DCPC, did not operate from the rear. Logistics Units manoeuvred hundreds of miles ahead of the armoured assault and deep into hostile Iraq. There they covertly assembled petrol oil and lubricant, (POL) dump sites in order to permit a rapid advance. This rapid advance prevented the Iraqi Republican Guard from mounting a re-organisation and counterattack. Many of these Logistics personnel were female, operating deep within hostile enemy territory. "The men and women of the 2nd

Forward Marine Support Group dug into the desert close to Iraqi Occupied Kuwait ... were as prepared (for combat) as any professional marines could be". (Holm, 1993: 493).

The DCPC was further undermined by the deaths of twenty eight personnel (including three women) in the "rear". The twenty eight, all members of a combat support unit, the 14th QM Detachment, were based in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia. Their post was hit by an Iraqi scud missile. In modern conventional operations there would appear therefore to be no "rear", or safe haven from long range dedicated armaments.

Iraqi long range artillery and... surface to air missiles were unisex weapons that did not distinguish between combat and support troops.  
(Holm, 1993: 446)

In the Air war, arguably the most technologically advanced area of operations, and traditionally a last bastion of male dominance women more than held their own.

Airman First Class, Kimberley Childress, a 27 year old... assigned to an Air Force A-10 "Warthog" tank killer squadron said she wanted to come, "It's my job".  
(Holm, 1993: 443).

Female pilots participated fully in the action and some such as Major Marie T. Rossi, Commander of 'B' Company, 18th Army Aviation Brigade, lost their lives. It is ironic that the DCPC designed to 'protect' women from a perceived threat, actually increased their risk of becoming casualties.

Female pilots of the 101st Airborne Division 'Screaming Eagles' flew BlackHawk and Chinook helicopters loaded with supplies and troops 50 miles into Iraq as part of the largest helicopter assault in military history. To the Iraqis, the 'non-combat' helicopters flying over the battlefield were as much targets as any Apache and probably a lot easier to hit.  
(Holm, 1993: 447).

Many women became involved in direct combat in the Gulf. Examples abound of female personnel who executed their duties to lethal effect. Captain Sheila Chewing, Weapons Controller, participated in the destruction of two MiG 29 Interceptor fighter jets. Lieutenant Phoebe Jeter, Commander of an otherwise all male Patriot Missile Unit (Delta Battery), successfully engaged and destroyed Iraqi scud missiles. Many women were decorated for their service.

Captain Cynthia Mosley (30), commanded Alpha Coy of 24th Battalion, Forward, 24th Infantry Division (Mechanised)... awarded the Bronze Star medal for meritorious combat service.  
(Holm, 1993: 452).

Women were also taken prisoner. This fact drew considerable media interest. Specialist Melissa Rathbun-Nealy and Major Rhonda Cornum (Army Flight Surgeon, 2nd Battalion, 229th Aviation Regiment), were both captured in action. Major Cornum was on board a helicopter shot down by Iraqi fire. She survived this ordeal with a broken arm and leg to assume the dubious honour of becoming a feted "female" POW.

The performance of women in the British Army mirrored that of their American counterparts.

The 1,000 female officers and other ranks serving with the 1 (UK) Armoured Division in the Gulf powerfully changed the image of servicewomen.  
(Mack, 1993: 33)

The Gulf War was, amongst other things, a media event. The CNN Report described the opening shots of the war from Baghdad as being like "July the fourth". One interesting outcome of the coverage of the war, and the presence in theatre of 41,000 women was the use of language. For the first time since World War Two, women were included in and associated with a national struggle or crisis. Women were "re-discovered" by the media. Saddam Hussein's "Mother of Battles" was to quote Kate Muir, a "Battle of Mothers". (There were also grandmothers involved in the operation.) (Mack, 1993: 34). Many newspapers headlined with "Mom goes to war", etc.

The language of state also changed to include women. Announcing the commencement of the ground offensive on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> January 1991,

President Bush declared, "No president can easily commit our sons and daughters to war". In June 1991, Peter Williams, U.S. Chief Defence Spokesman declared:

One of the lessons we've learned from Operation Desert Storm is the extent to which the nation accepted the significant role of women... until then there had always been a concern that having women involved in combat would be traumatic for the country.  
(Mack, 1993: 34).

The overall Commander of Forces in the Gulf was asked about the performance of women in the conflict by a Congressional Delegation led by Congressman Ford. "How did they do? The CINC (Schwarzkopf) said. "Great!" (Schwarzkopf, 1993: 569).

The overall British Commander had this to say about his female troops.



I think this will make a number of people sharpen themselves up because they are going to find they are nothing like as good as the girls who are competing with them.  
(Mack, 1993: 37).

The bottom line would appear to be that with 195,000 women serving in U.S. Armed Forces Line Appointments (including ten Army Generals, five Naval Admirals, six Air Force Generals and a female secretary of the Air Force), women have become crucial to the success of any military operation. (Defence Issues, Volume II, No. 31, March 1996). Indeed, the Gulf War could not have been fought without women. The Defence Secretary for the Bush Administration at the time of the Gulf War acknowledged this fact. "Women have made a major contribution to this (war) effort. We could not have won without them". (Holm, 1998: 67-68).

The experience of the Gulf War led to Secretary for Defence, Les Aspin, rescinding the DCPC and the so-called Risk Rule from October 1st 1993. (Los Angeles Times, Jan 14, 1993: 18). It has been argued that the Risk Rule analysis and DCPC merely reflected the puerile fears on the part of a male dominated military that the admission of women into certain MOS would in some way dilute their perceived masculinity. (D'Ann Campbell, 1993: 321).

Our society has clearly defined "acceptable" and "unacceptable" behaviour for both males and females, but these definitions are not even handed... especially..(in).. the Army... undoubtedly one of the strongest bastions of male dominated attitudes beliefs and practices.  
(Weatherill, 1996: 43).

This preoccupation with gender roles is a luxury that a military force can ill afford. Its roots are in patriarchy's dependence on sex difference theories and notions of absolute determinism. This flawed thinking is reproduced repeatedly in opposition to women's participation in the military. A chaplain to a U.S. Army Reserve Unit, (29 Infantry Division, Virginia National Guard) reveals his own biases in an article expressing opposition to women in the military.

The traditional paradigm of the regular soldier is exclusively masculine... this invocation of monastic fraternity also calls to mind the traditional *male* (sic) character of Christian clergy.  
(Webster, 1991: 27)

It is a classic patriarchal posture that posits women a fundamentally weaker sex, by reason of sex alone. From pre-history through to the Gulf War, women's *de facto* performance in combat flies in the face of tired, theoretical and patronising notions of womanhood.

When we talk about woman and the use of force, then we are digging at the roots of what simultaneously makes women feminine and men masculine. Not a biological determinism that make males aggressive and females passive, but how we as human beings have constructed and continue to interpret the world. (Howes, Stevenson, 1993: 20).

Several recurring arguments are used to prop up this patriarchal construction of womanhood and the question of combat. They constitute myths surrounding a hypothesised conflict involving women. Reality and the *de facto* experiences of women would appear to render them irrelevant and untrue. Holm, 1993, identifies these myths as follows:

1. "Military women are protected from exposure to combat".

The DCPC and Risk Rule analysis have been proven to be irrelevant. The modern fluid battlefield and long range technologies expose all personnel to enemy fire and combat.

2. "During mobilisation for war, women could not be counted on to deploy for war".

Forty one thousand women deployed to the Gulf. Countless thousands have overcome religious and cultural taboos, prejudice and fear of torture and death to fight for their beliefs.

3. "Women would not be able to perform in the pressure of the combat environment".

Women have performed as well as their male counterparts on the battlefield. Actual tests show gender integrated units out-perform single sex units. Lily Litvak, (the "White Rose of Stalingrad"), shot down twelve male German pilots in the pressure of the combat environment.

4. "Women are too accustomed to their 'creature comforts'; they would not be prepared to cope with the tough primitive living conditions and the physical demands of the combat zone".

Women's performances in the Gulf showed no degradation in efficiency due to menstruation, personal hygiene or personal administration in the field. A brief look at the history of partisan warfare in Greece and Yugoslavia amongst others, show women to have been prized for their stamina and ability to survive in extremes of conditions. (Studies have shown women lose about half as much service time as men due to the latter's absenteeism, desertion, alcohol and drug abuse). (Nabors, 1988).

5. "The presence of women in the Combat Area would destroy male bonding".

As was proved in the Gulf and as was the case during World War Two, the presence of women did not affect "male" bonding and in fact helped achieve a more efficient unit cohesion.

6. "Men and women could not work together in a Combat theatre without sex getting in the way".

Sex was not an issue for women in the Soviet Army fighting the Germans, nor for partisans engaging an occupying force. It did not pose a problem in the Gulf. On the contrary, when troops are segregated by sex and trained separately for different jobs, the incidence of sexual harassment, assault, and rape increases.

- 7 "Enemy soldiers, Arabs in particular, would rather die than surrender to a woman".

According to Sergeant April Hanley, 503rd Military Police Battalion, U.S. Army: "They (Iraqis) couldn't surrender fast enough". (Holm, 1993: 463)

8. "The public would never tolerate women being taken prisoner or coming home in body bags".

This emotive argument was shown to be incorrect during the Gulf war. It becomes irrelevant when one considers the vast numbers of women killed in action over the last number of wars, or killed during saturation bombing raids, or systematically tortured, raped and murdered in ethnic cleansing.

Field Commanders continue to find that the performance of female personnel far outstrips jaded stereotyped predictions based on bias.

To begin and as a general comment, female soldiers occupying "traditional" roles, (i.e. typist and medic) were outstanding. Those female soldiers who were in "non-traditional" jobs such as military police, heavy equipment operators... proved to be equally outstanding... these comments apply not only to the narrow concept of "duty performance" but also to the more important "total soldier" concept... my overall conclusion is that female soldiers are as dedicated, motivated, and professional as their male counterparts.  
(McKnight, 1982: 20-1).

The reality of war requires military planners to lay aside any stereotyped views of women and to realise their full potential. As for the Soviets, Yugoslavs, and albeit too late for the Germans, necessity overcomes culture and social constructs of reality.

The reality of conflict bears no relation to peacetime conditions, values, laws, standards of living and conditions of work".  
(Searle, 1997: 39)

In conclusion, I have shown quite clearly the precedent of women engaging in combat throughout history. With the advent of total war, their participation in this century has increased exponentially. However, as stated at the beginning of this thesis, through some process of cognitive dissonance this contribution is not acknowledged. A cultural *parti pris* has evolved which views women and this expression of citizenship antithetically. This may be in response to a perceived threat to culturally ascribed notions of masculinity. The idea of female warriors as protectors...

... threatens to destroy to some extent the single gender uniqueness from which men derive their self identity and feelings of masculinity.  
(Wilcox, 1992: 310)

Despite society's taboos around women and the use of force, despite inhibitions and reservations that polite and 'civilised' patriarchal society has about women being armed and dangerous, the reality is that women are crucial for the waging of modern warfare.

This sentiment is echoed by Goldman in "Israeli Women in Combat", (1982),

We have already, through the semantics of combat definitions begun to count women as *de facto* combatants. It matters not at all whether this has been done for reasons of well intentioned desire for social equity, or for pure political expediency. The result is the same.  
(Goldman, 1982: 260).

#### 4.6 Non conventional warfare. Low intensity conflict.

As well as participating in conventional warfare as armed and uniformed members of standing armies, women have also come to the fore in terrorist organisations. Women across Europe have become involved in armed struggle against the state. In Spain, ETA has many female members, in Germany and Italy women were heavily involved with the Red Brigades, some of them, (Ulrike Meinhof) achieving international notoriety.

Women appear very frequently in leftist groups on a basis of apparent equality, even to the point of carrying weapons, planting bombs and killing... the implication here is that the leftist revolutionary terrorist is breaking with a prevailing cultural pattern through political principle.  
(Segaller, 1986: 81)

Further afield, women have overcome cultural and religious barriers to actively participate in armed struggle. In the autonomous territories in Israel, young Arab girls and women took an active role in the intifada. "They were experts in the tactics of street warfare and were treated as equals by the boys". (MacDonald, 1992: 72).

In September 1970, another Arab woman, Leila Khaled, hijacked an El Al flight from Tel Aviv to London.

She became a sex symbol for her violence; she shattered a million and one taboos overnight, and she revolutionised the thinking of hundreds of other angry young women around the world.  
(Ibid: 97)

If there was hostility to women who assumed non-traditional roles during World War Two, their latter day activities as terrorists have provoked outrage. This outrage seems directed not only at the act of violence itself, but the 'unnaturalness' of encountering women behaving counter to their gender role. After a female member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) assassinated a part-time member of the UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) in 1990, the condemnation contained a double message: condemnation of the act, and revulsion that a woman would act outside her 'gender norm'.

It is hard to believe that a woman who, under God, can give birth to a new life, can be so twisted and warped by hate that she can bring forth death to an innocent victim.  
(MacDonald, 1992: 133-4)

Despite the expression of revulsion that a woman would behave in a manner considered inappropriate to her sex, the British authorities have never been shy of using lethal force to counter a 'feminine' threat. Mairead Farrell was shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar in 1988. The authorities have, on one hand, always taken very seriously the threat of violence from women while on the other denying their lethal potential and blocking positions to them in the military. When women do operate outside the rigid confines of the 'natural' role prescribed for them by patriarchal thinking, (Delphy, 1984: 23), it poses a threat.

This threat is a perceived threat to the established power relation between the sexes. Patriarchal society's angry reaction to female killers is not an expression of dismay at a loss of

innocence, a violation of biologically pre-determined behaviour; but a knee jerk reaction to behaviour which challenges deeply held beliefs about the role of women. Female killers are held up as aberrations of their sex. They must be demonised in order to maintain the status quo. They offend:

...the presumption that 'men' and 'women' exist as biologically based categories prior to and independently to the power relationship which currently exists between them. (Delphy, 1984: 8).

Society found it very difficult to accept the idea that women would go on active service with the PIRA. They were held up to be less than human, and demonised in the press.

When the Price Sisters were arrested for their part in the 1973 bombing campaign in London in which 180 people were injured, they were called "the sisters of death". (MacDonald, 1992: 135).

Roisin McAlliskey is a similar and more recent example of the demonisation process. Though convicted of no crime, whilst awaiting extradition on remand, this young woman was held in maximum security solitary confinement and faced the prospect of giving birth while manacled. Elaine Moore (charged with Semtex possession in London) had a much publicised and similar experience in July 1998. Though convicted of no crime, this woman was held in solitary confinement in a male high security prison whilst on remand. It is interesting to note the cultural schizophrenia that on the one hand defines women as helpless and passive and then on the other hand demonises them as soon as they deviate from the culturally assigned roles. Not only did McAlliskey and the Price sisters challenge authority but they challenged it as women - double jeopardy it would seem. They are reviled for their sex as they threaten the patriarchal order.

Despite the harsh treatment meted out to female republican prisoners, despite society's demand that girls remain somehow innately peace loving, earth-mothers who are 'reluctant to fight for the group', (Tiger, 1969), there would appear to be no shortage of women capable of carrying out acts of violence 'inappropriate' to their sex.

Dr. Rose Dugdale was charged with hijacking a helicopter with the intention of dropping milk churns full of explosives on to RUC posts. Marion Coyle was imprisoned for her part in the kidnapping of Tiede Herrema in 1975. (The Dutch industrialist later remarked he was unable to establish a rapport with his female captor, a chilling departure from classic counter-insurgency doctrine and the 'Stockholm Syndrome'). Anna Moore received life imprisonment for the infamous Ballykelly 'Droppin Well' bombing which claimed the lives of

seventeen people. In 1986 Ella O'Dwyer and Martina Anderson were given life sentences for their part in a plot to bomb London and a number of seaside resorts. (MacDonald, 1992, :. 136-166).

The list goes on and on. Evelyn Glenholmes was the subject of an extradition attempt on foot of charges relating to the Chelsea Barracks nail bomb, and the murder of a British Army Bomb Disposal Officer in London. Rita O'Hare, charged with the attempted murder of two British soldiers, was shot in the head during her arrest.

It is interesting to note the 'progressive' use of female volunteers within the PIRA and the Irish National Liberation Army, (INLA). These organisations operate a policy of complete gender integration and all appointments and positions within these organisations are open to women. The intelligence gathering network of An Garda Síochána and the PDF (Permanent defence forces) acknowledge this and I have been present at briefings which outlined the threat assessment posed by both male and female members of PIRA/INLA.

Soldiers on the ground certainly have no illusions as to the potential of female terrorists:

The Brits treat women volunteers just the same as they do men. There was a woman who appeared in court with bruises and a black eye. I saw her being dragged up the steps and battered. When I was in Castlereagh on the evidence of a supergrass, I was deprived of sleep, kicked off a chair and beaten up. The Brits know that the women are just as dangerous as the men.  
(MacDonald, 1992: 144-5).

The SAS on covert surveillance operations tracked and ambushed both male and female targets. "Suspected male provisionals were reported as 'cocks' and female suspects as 'turkeys'. (Murray, 1991: 73).

It is common policy for most Special Forces and antiterrorist units to regard women terrorists as a priority target. It is argued that having to overcome one's passive sex-role stereotype, and then to take up arms, requires leadership and a force of personality and conviction. Many books contain accounts and typologies of terrorist organisations which prove women's 'hyperactive' role in terrorism and violence. (White, 1991: 10-13). (Cutterbuck, 1990). For this reason, it is considered an imperative to neutralise female antagonists as quickly as possible. They will tend to have a command function. This is probably the *raison d'être* behind GS, G9, (the German Anti-Terrorist Unit), S.O.P. (Standard Operating Procedure) to "shoot the women first". (MacDonald, 1992: 111). (Dobson, 1986: 134)

The German authorities found women to be persistent and recidivist in their violent tendencies.

Of the male German terrorists who had been sentenced to long prison terms, not a few disassociated themselves from terrorism... There are few known cases of women terrorists willing to admit that their acts of violence were wrong. (Laqueur, 1987: 80)

Many of these women committed suicide in prison rather than be 'rehabilitated' (Baader/Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, Stammheim Prison 1977). (Irish Times, 22 April 1998: 11).

To sum up:

Society seems more afraid of violent women than men, as if they were more threatening than men. Indeed they are, for if women usurp the traditionally male role of aggressor, and if they do it successfully, men fear that their ultimate weapon - their physical superiority over women - is gone. The whole basis of society might crumble as a result of these dangerously unleashed women running amok. Men would be emasculated. (MacDonald, 1992: 239).

The patriarchal thought process is disturbed by the fact that women can fight and kill. Sex difference theories and naturalism which ascribe passive and peace loving characteristics to women are collaborative patriarchal discourses. Reality is less co-operative. Hence the need to bury women's history, to make them invisible.

#### 4.7 Irish Women, the war of independence and the civil war.

This section will deal with the record of Irish women in combat during the war of independence and civil war. This section is not intended as an exhaustive or comprehensive historical account of women's activities during this period. I have concentrated on the activities of Cumann na mBan due to access to Cumann na mBan files made available through military archives. The purpose of the section is to draw attention to the precedent of women's experience of combat, their *de facto* roles determined by reality as opposed to roles awarded according to the patriarchal 'ideology' discussed in earlier chapters.

In order to assess critically the status and roles assigned female personnel in the Permanent Defence Forces, it is necessary, I believe, to examine their contribution during the emergence



of the State. I intend to examine whether or not their ascribed status is consistent with their de facto role in the liberation of the State.

Women became involved in the 1916 Rising and War of Independence through the auspices of the Irish Citizen's Army, and Cumann na mBan. Like their predecessors, Cumann na mBan was initially an organisation dedicated to mass agitation for change. Cumann na mBan, however, had its own specific agenda for equality and in its constitution makes explicit its ideal of a new society wherein men and women enjoy equal rights and suffrage. Its founding members Maud Gonne, Countess de Markiewicz, Mrs. Pádraig Collum, Louise Gavan Duffy, Miss Cosgrave and Una O Farrelly held their first meeting at number 6, Harcourt Street in Dublin in 1913. (Fitzgerald W.G., 1930), (Lee, J.J., 1989).

More commonly known as W.B. Yeats's muse for a body of infatuated poetry, Maud Gonne was a particularly interesting member of this group. Sadly, because of her association with Yeats, her background in politics and political intrigue is generally not acknowledged.

(We need) to recover the figure of Maud Gonne from historical accounts which have seen her merely as a lover, wife or mother to the Irish historical figures of W.B. Yeats, John MacBride and Sean MacBride.  
(Hayes, 1992: 55).

Like many of the women of this period, her contribution to liberation and affairs of state has been suppressed in a patriarchal, 'male-stream' account of history.

Her first political action was to deliver from Paris to Russia the draft of a Treaty proposed by General Boulanger and the Ligue des Patriotes. She smuggled the papers into Russia without a passport and delivered them to Pobedonostev... These papers became the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1891, a treaty which changed the whole of European diplomacy and alliances in an opposite direction from that desired by England.  
(Hayes, 1992: 57).

With this background and commitment to the spirit of rebellion, Maud Gonne certainly helped inspire Cumann na mBan.

Forty members marched to the G.P.O. and took up positions there. Others were stationed at the College of Surgeons and the Four Courts. Elizabeth O'Farrell was chosen by Pádraig Pearse to carry a message to General Lowe for the surrender.  
(Fitzgerald, W.G., 1930: 162)

Cumann na mBan continued their fullest participation during the War of Independence and Civil War. Throughout these bitter years, these women shared with the men the constant risk of arrest, imprisonment and death. Their contribution however has perhaps been forgotten or

overlooked in an historical and popular account of this period which speaks of “The Men of 1916”.

Cumann na mBan was set up with the expressed aim of entering its members into combat. Its aims included:

1. To advance the cause of Irish liberty...  
Misc: To teach its members First Aid, Drill, Signalling and Rifle Practice in order to aid the men of Ireland.  
(Cumann na mBan Constitution, 1914).  
(Kilmainham Jail Documents).

The appeal of this call to arms was widespread. By 1914 there were 68 branches nationwide, and by 1921 almost 800. (Military Archives). A branch was even set up in New York by the McDermott sisters. (O’Farrell, 1980: 95). Members of Cumann na mBan marched in uniform along with members of the IRA, IRB and Volunteers at the funeral of O’Donovan Rossa in August 1915.

Members of Cumann na mBan participated in all phases of resistance against the occupying power and members fought and died during the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Approximately ninety women took part in the 1916 Rising. Sixty were members of Cumann na mBan. The remainder were members of the Irish Citizen’s Army, and a collection of 'strays' and 'last minute volunteers'. One such 'straggler' was Margaret Skinnider, a Glasgow school teacher and suffragist. Skinnider took a keen interest in the concept of an organisation for women that was going to participate in a rebellion. On hearing of the imminent 1916 Rising, she took her Easter holidays and travelled to Dublin to take part.

She arrived at the Royal College of Surgeons on a bicycle. She received bullet wounds at the Harcourt Street Burning Incident. She survived, was imprisoned and wrote "Doing my bit for Ireland", in 1917.  
(O Farrell, 1980: 145)

By the end of the first day of the Rising, women were established in all of the major outposts bar one. "There remained one commandant who steadfastly refused to have any women under his command - DeValera in Bolands Mill". (Ward, 1995: 110). This was in direct defiance of the orders of Pearse and Connolly. It annoyed many of the women, and one Sighle Bean Uí Dhonnchadha remarked afterward:

DeValera... refused absolutely to have Cumann na mBan girls in the posts... the result, I believe, was that the garrison there did not stand up to the siege as well as in other posts.  
(MacEoin, 1980: 338)

The women in these posts faced an angry and numerically superior foe. The British regarded the Rising as a 'stab in the back', particularly given the battles they were fighting in France at that time. The insurrection was to be put down mercilessly and stamped out as quickly as possible. It was during this bitter street fighting that these Irish women engaged the might of the British empire in open defiance and actual combat.

According to Ward (1995: 111), nine women took part in an assault on Dublin Castle, the seat of British power in Ireland. "The Castle" was the symbol of an oppressive occupying force.

A small contingent of ten men and nine women under the command of Sean Connolly had left to launch an attack on Dublin Castle, symbol of British Rule in Ireland... The women were all given revolvers... and both women and men took part in the charge upon the gates of the Castle. Failing in that, they eventually occupied City Hall.

Michael Mallon was another commander whose female personnel took the initiative in pressing home the attack on the British. Constance Markiewicz demanded that she and Skinnider after a day of sniping be allowed attempt to bomb the Shelbourne Hotel. Mallon disagreed, as he felt the risks were too great. "Markiewicz's indignant reply was that as the Republican Proclamation stated, women were now equal... women have the same right to risk their lives as the men". (Ibid: 113). It was en route to the Shelbourne that Skinnider was shot and Cumann na mBan member Margaretta Keogh, was shot dead outside the South Dublin Union.

On Friday the 28th April at 0200 hours, Major General Sir John Maxwell with plenary powers from the British Parliament to quell the Rising, arrived on the North Wall. By eight o'clock the following evening he had secured a surrender from the rebels. British Army protocol however did not cover the contingency of taking a surrender from women. The presence of women amongst the insurgents shocked the British.

Winifred Carney armed with a typewriter and a Webley revolver along with Julia Grennan and Elizabeth Farrell had taken part in the seizure of the GPO. It was Elizabeth Farrell who presented Pearse's surrender to the British, (not a man as depicted in the film 'Michael Collins').

The garrison at City Hall was surrendered by Dr. Kathleen Lynne, the only officer present. (Ward, 1995: 112). She was immediately arrested and imprisoned. (McCurtain, 1991: 63). Dr. Lynne was the first female medical doctor to be elected a resident doctor at the Adelaide

Hospital in Dublin. Objections from other doctors to the presence of a female colleague meant however she could not take up her post. Despite the prejudice she daily encountered, Kathleen Lynne overcame all barriers to the fullest participation in public life. She fought in 1916, was elected to the Sinn Féin executive in 1917 and founded her own hospital, St. Ultan's, in 1919, and initiated Ireland's first immunisation programme for children and Ireland's first Montessori ward to help educate children hospitalised for long periods.

The officer in command of the female detachment at the Marrowbone Lane Distillery, Rose McNamara, presented the surrender of herself and twenty one other women. They were taken to Richmond Barracks and then to Kilmainham jail.

The women of the garrison could have evaded arrest but they marched down four deep in uniform along with the men... an attempt was made to get them to sign a statement recanting their stand but this failed... Miss McNamara who led the contingent went to the (British) O/C and explained they were part of the rebel garrison and were surrendering with the rest.  
(Dublin's Fighting Story, The Kerryman: 1929, Military Archives)).

There were no reports of women deserting their posts. Some of the men did.

One man had deserted during the night, the barricade across North Earl Street had been completed... succeeded in tunnelling through to the Imperial Hotel. In addition, four Cumann na mBan girls had come across from the GPO.  
(Caulfield, 1963: 175).

Markiewicz refused offers of leniency and misplaced courtesy on the part of British soldiers shocked at encountering a middle aged woman armed with a revolver and complete with her best plumed hat. (Ward, 1995: 112).

She refused a British offer of transport but marched her detachment away. She was tried and sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to life imprisonment.  
(O Farrell, 1930: 107).

(On learning her sentence was to be commuted, Markiewicz remarked, "Imagine it... I was sentenced to be shot, and I'm a lifer now - imagine, a lifer". Dublin's Fighting Story, 1913-1921, The Kerryman: 211 – 1929, Military Archives).

These women would have been expected under normal circumstances to have led quiet lives preparing themselves for marriage, and familiarising themselves with the contents of Mrs. Beeton's cook book. They would have been expected to have subordinated their interests in political matters for the modest station of the home, that place, 'she was best gifted to occupy'.

These women however came out into the streets, and into the rebel garrisons and into the gaols; they carried out all the arduous and dangerous work of the National Struggle.  
(Ibid: 212).

Women had come, guns blazing, into the public sphere. They had answered the call to arms, and had demanded an equal say in the new Republic. They demanded full suffrage and representation. "A Free Ireland with no sex disabilities in her constitution should be the motto of all Nationalist women", (Countess Markiewicz, *ibid*: 207).

Cumann na mBan members continued to be very active in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. With most of the male leaders either imprisoned or shot, Kathleen Clarke, Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Lynne and others took over the Sinn Féin executive. They asserted the right of women to equality in any new state and re-asserted their militant stance against the British. At the Sinn Féin convention in 1917 they passed a motion that all Sinn Féin bulletins, press releases and propaganda would emphasise the equality of men and women in the Organisation. This went on to become the final clause in the Sinn Féin Constitution. Cumann na mBan members throughout the country enlisted and trained to assist in the fight for Irish freedom.

Cumann na mBan was organised in companies and districts corresponding to IRA units. Its help was invaluable.  
(Duggan, 1991: 58)

In the first Dáil of May 1921, there were six female deputies; Markiewicz, Margaret Pearse, Kathleen Clarke, Ada English, Mary MacSwiney and Kate O'Callaghan. Forty three women were returned to borough and district councils. Kathleen Clarke, the first female Lord Mayor of Dublin, was elected in this period. Women also served as judges in the Sinn Féin courts which maintained law and order in the country between 1919 and 1921. (McCurtain, 1991: 10).

Cumann na mBan were determined as the War of Independence was being waged, that their new found status would persist after the crisis had passed. At its convention in 1921, Cumann na mBan had as its first aim:

1. To follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the nation.  
(Military Archives).

The Catholic Hierarchy felt obliged once more to address the issue of the 'unseemly' activities of these women. In a pastoral letter issued in October 1922, the Hierarchy urged all women to desist from their Revolutionary activities. The British Government had already recognised the special threat Irish women posed and on 3rd July 1918, had proscribed Cumann na mBan

under the 1887 Crimes Act. They declared Cumann na mBan to be a "dangerous organisation". (Townshend, 1975: 10).

In response to the hierarchy, Cumann na mBan issued a reply which appeared in the "Republic of Ireland" on 30 December 1922 which stated:

If the Provisional government has not received authority from the Irish people, they have no moral right to rule Ireland... and the question of their moral right is subjudice and all the Bishops back to St. Patrick and all the Popes from Peter to Pius cannot settle the question. They were sent to preach the Gospel and to teach Faith and Morals, but they received no authority to settle political disputes.  
(Military Archives).

In response to the British, Cumann na mBan redoubled its efforts, often taking the lead and initiative in the guerrilla war. Women from all walks of life and from all parts of the country became heavily involved in the struggle. The British acknowledged the threat and the use of lethal force against women was used. Women became combatants in every sense of the word.

Ellen Quinn was shot in the stomach by Black and Tans whilst nursing her baby on the day Tom Barry was hanged, 1st November 1920. She was attended to by the Rev. John Considine while bleeding to death for seven hours. Sir Hamar Greenwood was notified of the occurrence but ignored it.  
(O Farrell, 1980: 137).

Despite the threat of imprisonment or worse, the women of Cumann na mBan continued to defy the British.

None were more irreconcilable Republicans than the party's women... in Cork the brilliant and dominating young Mrs. Mac Swiney until her arrest in October, ran what was virtually Republican Headquarters in Dalton's Territory.  
(Younger, 1968: 441-2).

Even when imprisoned, the women constantly sought means of escape. Eithne Coyle was arrested on the 1st January 1921 by the Black and Tans and was sent to Mountjoy prison. She managed to persuade a wardress to smuggle a map of the prison out to her accomplices. On Hallowe'en night at 9.00 p.m., she and three others, Mary Burke, Linda Kearns, and May Keogh escaped. Some of the women imprisoned were as young as 15. (MacEoin, 1980: 153).

The women often used pathetic and hapless notions about their sex to their advantage. By playing the role of "innocent and naive young girl", or "harmless old woman" they could inflict terrible damage on the enemy.

In this connection Mrs. Wilmot deserves special mention. She was employed at the RIC Barrack in Listowel and hardly a day passed that she did not smuggle out ammunition for distribution to the volunteers - about ninety rounds of revolver or rifle ammunition at a time. She also succeeded in getting out a number of Mills bombs... On one occasion she smuggled out two revolvers belonging to two RIC men who were later fined £7 10s 0d each... she was escorted out of the Barracks by one of these two whose revolvers she had on her.  
(Kerry's Fighting Story, 1919-1921, The Kerryman, 1929, Military Archives).

The continuing activities of Cumann na mBan offended the deep rooted conservatism of society at the time. Women found themselves battling not only the British forces, but also the Catholic church and a growing uneasiness amongst the Nationalist movement about these 'militant' women. These women had daily to challenge a plethora of cultural norms in order to maintain any degree of autonomy. Their efforts did not go unnoticed and as has been noted earlier, they were singled out by the press, then as now:

"A London newspaper, 'The Sunday Graphic' ran... an article entitled 'Irish Gunwoman Menace'... (describing Irish women) as 'trigger happy harpies'.  
(Ward, 1995: 218).

As the War of Independence drew to a close, Cumann na mBan rejected the Treaty terms delivered by Collins and entered the Civil War on the more militant side of the IRA irregulars. The Government of the Free State banned Cumann na mBan in January 1923 declaring it an illegal organisation. In addition, the Government opened up Kilmainham "as a detention prison for 'suspect' women... All women found actively helping the irregulars should be arrested and imprisoned". (Minutes of Executive Council of the Senate, 23 January 1923, Military Archives)

The tide was rapidly turning. The brief honeymoon period that women revolutionaries had enjoyed within the republican movement was coming to a close. By the end of the twenties, attitudes towards women had hardened yet again and many of the gains made in the war were lost. The Free State Army, under the command of General Richard Mulcahy, fully recognised the importance of Cumann na mBan as a battlefield asset. The following Army Intelligence Report, dated 16 October 1922, illustrates the point;

(The I.R.A.)... still in large numbers... keep all roads broken... No railways running. Very hard to keep Tralee-Fenit road open. Labourers terrorised and won't do any repair work... 1200 irregulars have looted Kenmare and robbed all shops. Father O'Sullivan kidnapped. Cumann na mBan the problem in Kerry.  
(Valiulis, 1992: 186)

Despite the hardening of attitudes against them, the women fought on, against their own countrymen. Máire Comerford found herself in the Four Courts which was being shelled by the Irish Army.

The building was shelled through and enveloped in flames. It was time for all of us to leave or surrender... I rode off through the smoke and the ruined buildings on my bicycle. I had stayed almost to the end and had cheated the enemy.  
(MacEoin, 1980: 47)

Slowly but surely however, the women were arrested or simply interned. They remained defiant. Comerford herself was involved in a plot to kidnap the Taoiseach, W.T. Cosgrave. She was arrested and shot whilst trying to escape. Despite her injuries she went on hunger strike and was eventually released. "I got carried out after 27 days". (Ibid: 49)

Eithne Coyle continued the struggle single handedly. Armed with a revolver she held up the evening train at Creeslough setting fire to all the newspapers on board. For a month she continued hijacking and burning trains. (Ward, 1995: 186)

The patience of the Free State government began to run out. In November of 1923 Free State troops opened fire without warning on Maud Gonne and Charlotte Despard on O'Connell Street. They escaped with their lives. The then Minister for Home Affairs in the new Irish Government angrily announced that these women ought to hang up their weapons and retire to the kitchen, "hysterical young women who ought to be playing five fingered exercises or helping their mothers with the brasses". (Ibid: 192)

During the North Dublin Union riots the Free State Army delivered the last straw. The women of Cumann na mBan received such vicious beatings at the hands of Free State soldiers and guards, "it seemed as if the Government was hell-bent on providing the women with their first martyrs". (Ibid:: 194). To add insult to injury, some like Rose Killeen, had their clothes removed, "and... (they) were subjected to great indignities". (Ibid: 194). In seven short years, from rebellion to Civil War, the women had gone from marching as comrades in arms to being literally and metaphorically stripped of their citizenship. It was a poignant end to the years of solidarity and liberation.

(Women) felt for the first time the cold winds of disapproval that began to accompany any disagreement... (with Government, Church or former Comrades)... that Commandant Markiewicz's credentials were matched only by those of Commandant De Valera were never stated, but from then on the mantle of 1916 rested exclusively on his shoulders... cabinet posts thereafter became a male prerogative and remained so for many many years.  
(McCurtain, 1991: 36-7)



A cursory glance at any of the history books on school or college curricula will show only fleeting references to these women. The efforts of our grandmothers and grandaunts go unrecognised and forgotten. Where for example are there statues in Dublin erected to the memory of these women? The silence is deafening.

It is important then to retrieve women, to reset them back into our history... and to celebrate their presence at every period of our national commemorations... The restoration of what was lost or made invisible is the first step in engaging a society to think with esteem of its past... to focus on female subjects helps to retrieve the fuller context of what happened at a particular period. It is the threshold of constructing women as historical subjects, not just footnotes, or wives of famous men.  
(McCurtain, 1991: 6-7).

The Military Archives in Cathal Brugha Barracks, in Rathmines, the State Papers Office, and Kilmainham Jail all contain documents attesting to the military and paramilitary roles of women.

The "Captured Documents" collection in Rathmines contain the papers and articles confiscated from these women by the Free State Army during the twenties. These documents and letters speak eloquently of the ingenuity and determination of these activists. The following examples give insights about them:

**(a) Lot No. 31 A/1022;**

contains Cumann na mBan papers captured on 7th February 1923 in what the Free State Officer describes as a "baby club" on 21 Werburgh Street in Dublin. (Obviously the women organised crèche facilities in order to release the women for work or other activities.)

**(b) Lot No 63:**

This lot contained papers and letters captured on Miss Mary Comerford at 9 Merrion Row. The following letter appeared in same:

*Bridge Ho.  
Uppr Baggot St  
Dublin April 14 1922*

*Chicago  
Dear Sir,*

*Seeing your advertisement in Science + Invention for April about a pocket penknife and pistol I would be obliged very much if you would send one by return of post.*

*I encl postal order for the sum of one pound eight shillings for one of no. 467 pattern. Kindly send by return of post to the above address and send ammunition instead of change if any.*

*Yours truly  
B. Parsons*

**(c) Lot No. 62:**

This lot contained amongst other things a handwritten map of Mountjoy Prison adjacent Glengariff Parade.

The following letter authorising the bearer to collect funds for the IRA was also enclosed.

*HQ 2nd Battn  
Dublin 1 Bde IRA  
16 11 22*

*Tá cead ag an ta seo airgead a bhailiú ar son arm poblachta na h'Eireann.*

*Bearer is authorised to collect funds for the Irish Republican Army.*

*Signed O/C Batt II*

A list of residents and contributions on Clonliffe Road is also included.

**(d) Lot No. 34:**

This lot contained a letter from General Headquarters of the IRA dated 15, Dec 1922, to the Hon Secretary of Cumann na mBan about the death of a female informer.

Para 2b

*It is not our policy to expose women and children to danger. The McGarry case was most unfortunate and regrettable.*

3.

*The enemy has outraged all Rules of Warfare in murdering our prisoners. Those who stand for this policy must be prepared to meet the fate of traitors.*

The letter is signed by the Assistant Adjutant General of the IRA.

**(e) Lot 34, No. 21:**

This lot contains documents which show a Miss Lily O'Connor to be proficient in the use of

- (1) Webley Revolver
- (2) Colt Revolver
- (3) Smith and Wesson Revolver

**(f) Lot No. 79, A/1068:**

Miss Coyle Papers  
Captured on Miss Coyle when arrested July 1922

Letter from Intelligence Dept.  
(Comms Branch)  
1st Northern Division  
IRA 25 July 1922

From Div Intelligence Officer

To Miss Coyle "No 23" from Intelligence Officer. Urging caution in intelligence gathering.

*"Don't talk about what you have done or are going to do like ourselves - the Enemy has ears everywhere".*

Para C

(2)

*"Girls can get any amount of information from most men. Get them going. Don't think there is anything ignoble about Army Intelligence work. There is not - decidedly not. No army can move an inch or win the slightest victory without it. Help us move miles. Help us win victories. The work is as necessary - and as noble - as the regular scrapping. But - be careful! MOUTHS SHUT - EARS OPEN*

*- Realise your own importance - we realise it and rely on you*

**(g) Lot No. 227**

This lot contained papers captured on Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington in her residence at 9 Belgrave Place on 30th December 1922.

The papers included condemned men's last letters smuggled out of prison to be used for propaganda purposes, and also poignantly, undertakers' receipts for pitch pine coffins for these men.

The lots listed show a number of things. The women networked sufficiently to operate crèches in the straitened Civil War Years and obviously operated in a mutually supportive fashion. The women were active in planning escapes from prison and in procuring weapons and ammunition by whatever means available. The women were evidently fully trained in the use of weapons and therefore prepared to use maximum force if required. The sample shows women were subject to the same use of force and were liable to "meet the fate of traitors" if necessary. The papers suggest women were active in fund-raising for the IRA, and in the dissemination of propaganda. Their importance as intelligence operatives is very clearly stated in the letter from the IRA's (Northern Division) Intelligence Officer. (This importance was obviously realised by both sides as the women were all arrested and documents confiscated).

All members of Cumann na mBan were liable to arrest and imprisonment without charge throughout the 1920's. The State obviously took these "hysterical young women" very seriously.

In De Valera's Constitution of the 1930's, (the Commander who refused to have women in his garrison) he appended to Article 45 the following:

4-2: The State shall endeavour to ensure that the inadequate strength of women, and the tender age of children shall not be abused and that women and children shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength.  
(Ward, 1995. p. 238).

The once "hysterical young women" who were now mostly middle-aged, mounted a campaign of protest against De Valera's misogyny. (The clause denied women access to many areas of paid labour). The veterans of 1916 and the War of Independence registered their disappointment with "the way that the State cherished its women citizens". (McCurtain, 1991: 81).

With the advent of World War Two, the "Emergency", De Valera interned many middle aged women, all former members of Cumann na mBan, without charge.

Mrs. Patsy O Hagan recalls:

I was never arrested myself even in the period that I am speaking of. It was left to Frank Aiken and Gerald Boland to intern me one evening in 1941. It was they way they did it that made me despise them. I was in the house with the two children when they arrived.

“We want you for a few moments at the barracks”, they said,... I left the children and stepped into the car. It never stopped until we passed through the double gateway of Mountjoy... finally in 1943 I was released.  
(MacEoin, 1980: 171).

This is a classic example of the patriarchal double standard. De Valera attempted to codify into the constitution the myth of female frailty or "the weaker sex". On the other hand, the fact that he saw fit to intern these middle aged women betrayed the knowledge he had of their real strength, their potential and power. They were a threat to the state and yet had to be labelled 'weak' and 'vulnerable'. It is a thought process that implies women are some way inferior or less deserving of full citizenship. They can contribute to society, even die for it, suffer its sanctions and imprisonment - but may not share all of the rewards and status of their male counterparts.

The apparent negation of these women's contribution in most historical accounts is consistent with the pattern outlined in Chapter Four. During periods of conflict, women are enlisted into the fight against the enemy. However, once the crisis has passed, society reverts to its traditional role definition and women are re-assigned the kitchen sink.

This in effect has denied Irish women these dynamic role models.

It is not only the achievements and struggles themselves which are omitted, but the presence of women in history, and as a result of such omissions there is nothing by which she (women) can orient herself to bring her personal experience into continuity with the past.  
(Tanton, M., 1994: 12-3).

The systematic exclusion of women from history and discourses around conflict and affairs of State may have had an influence on the roles and status assigned women in today's army. I took the army as the focus of my study, but I believe parallels can be drawn and applied to politics, the legal profession - in fact all walks of life and society as a whole. It reveals an interesting pathology which involves sex, gender and power, perceptions of sex and gender roles, the gender division of labour, sex difference theories and sex role stereotyping, and the fragile male ego.

It is a mechanism which functions to restrict women's fullest participation in many walks of life. Even in the most liberal and learned of institutions such as universities restrictive and prohibitive policies apply to the advancement of female professionals. (“Academic Women are Angry at Being Kept Out”, U.C.D. – The Irish Times, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1998: 8).

I would contend this mechanism is very much at work in one of our most conservative of institutions, the Permanent Defence Forces.

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