



By Captain Ashley Barber

Over the past decade, the U.S. Army has taken steps to fully integrate women into all positions in its formations. [Last month](#), the Army announced female infantry and armor Soldiers will integrate into the last nine brigade combat teams by the end of the year. In light of these initiatives and the open-mindedness of my leadership, I competed for and served as a light infantry brigade assistant S2 and, more importantly, an infantry battalion S2, a position open to women since 2014.

Gender integration has had its challenges but in my experience, leaders at all levels are trying to embrace this evolution. It is not unusual for a group of officers to experience awkward initial counseling sessions with their maneuver commander wherein the

commander overemphasizes their support of female integration directly to the one female officer in the room. Although it may seem uncomfortable for all parties involved, these maneuver officers are still learning and while it may not be perfect, at least they're trying..

However, even with the best of intentions, military leaders occasionally make decisions that inadvertently segregate women, leading to the unintended consequence of isolating them from their units.. This article addresses how a commander's simple decision on troop billeting can have an adverse impact, and how commanders and leaders can more successfully lead gender-integrated teams.

### **The female tent: A flawed good intention**

When a unit deploys to a Combat Training Center (CTC), Soldiers are housed in "tent city" while conducting Reception, Staging, Onward movement and Integration (RSOI), Leaders are responsible for allocating tents, ensuring they account for all personnel on the ground. Sometimes as an afterthought, someone asks the question "Where is the female tent?"

The idea that women require their own tent is an antiquated tradition that many senior leaders (and often junior leaders) have yet to break from and likely causes more harm than good . This issue may initially seem benign within the context of integrating women into combat arms units. After all, it's "just" a tent, it is only temporary, and you only go there to sleep and then show up to the next formation. This issue is about much more than a tent. The decisions leaders make can help or hinder their ability to build a cohesive team that sees beyond gender.

The female tent exists mainly as a safety precaution to protect the female Soldier population. Sexual assault and harassment continues to be a large issue in the military. However, as we look deeper into the effects of gender-segregated tents, we will start to identify how our separate treatment of genders only exacerbates the issue. Studies in the

past decade, including one conducted on the [Norwegian Army's Unisex living spaces](#) in 2014, concluded that integrating genders for training and in living quarters increased team cohesion between genders by breaking the “us versus them” mentality, decreased sexual harassment and assault claims, and made gender difference less significant. Instead of training separate teams of male and female Soldiers, the integrated training and living arrangements created teams of Soldiers comprised of men and women.

The segregation of women from their platoon, company, or battalion leads to them missing critical events, and team building and bonding built during times of uncertainty when leaders make decisions and plans change. The female tent creates an additional barrier to communication where a portion of the unit does not receive updates on the evolving operational conditions because men and women are hesitant to enter each other's tent to get information. Women show up to meetings being caught off guard by changes in the plan that were made among the male officers at 2300 but failed to make it back to the female battalion staff lead because they forgot, they figured it could wait, or it was too inconvenient to send a runner to inform them of the change. This communication barrier creates an overall disadvantage to the commander who now has a population in the formation that is unable to inform the decision-making process and in the end hinders the unit in achieving mission success.

More importantly, the female tent denies female Soldiers equal access to the esprit de corps and cohesiveness building reality of shared accommodation, and often imposes a gender divide on teams. In the end, this causes women to miss the stories told in their team, invitations to the gym, and group meals. They miss the inside jokes and become an outsider in their own unit. They struggle to get to know their unit and their unit struggles to bring them into the fold. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of damaging isolation that most women do not want, but are forced to endure.

### **How do we fight the female tent?**

**1. Prioritize mission success over comfort.** Key to mission success is enabling your commander's ability to exercise command and control over the formation. The female tent takes women of different ranks across the formation and puts them in one tent geographically separated from their organic teams. We, in turn, hindered multiple leaders' ability to lead effectively by complicating the flow of communication, reducing ability to receive feedback from a select population, and decreasing the flexibility of a unit to rapidly adapt and execute operations. The female tent becomes more unfeasible as we integrate more women into company commander, executive officer, and platoon leader positions in combat arms formations.

As leaders in charge of planning training events, we need to focus on how to enable mission success. In 2018, my light infantry brigade had one battalion commander, one command sergeant major, two brigade staff primaries, five brigade staff senior NCOs, at least one battalion staff primary officer or NCO per battalion, and five company commanders or first sergeants who were women. That equaled 20 leaders at the company level and above that were integral to the brigade's success at our CTC rotation. Since then, the number of female leaders in today's brigade combat team continues to increase.

Focusing on mission success means all leaders are able to be with their Soldiers through all aspects of a training environment. Integrated tents allow leaders to better take care of their Soldiers because they are together in one place where they can monitor the well-being of each Soldier as the unit goes through stressful training exercises. It allows leaders to identify and address sexism issues in their ranks because they can monitor the interactions among all of their Soldiers. In a segregated environment, leaders may not be present when their female Soldiers are harassed while they are isolated in separate areas. Integrated tents build better teams that communicate more effectively, provide feedback to their commanders, and react quicker to rapid changes because they are a cohesive unit that treats everyone as a valued member of the team.

**2. Use informal leadership.** As described in [ADP 6-22 Army Leadership](#), part of informal leadership is taking the initiative to advise formal leaders on decisions based on previous experience or expertise. Informal leadership takes initiative and some courage, because it usually involves an individual speaking up to leaders who outrank them. In one experience at a CTC exercise, my company leadership was trying to remove the female Soldiers from our unit's tent because the brigade's designated female tent did not have enough females in it. A female lieutenant I supervised looked at me with disappointment and asked me if there was anything I could do to stop it. I decided to work with another female captain located in our company to make it clear to our leadership that we did not want to leave our sections to live in a separate tent. The company leadership relented but not without some offhand remarks about how we were an inconvenience.

After that experience, the female officers made it a point to teach our staff sections how the separation of women into female tents affects women because our male peers honestly did not understand. How could they? In their military career, they never had to be separated from their team because of their gender. The effort we made to stay in the tent was worth it because our section became a more cohesive team and it was a leadership opportunity that enabled us to discuss a gender issue with our male counterparts that they will never experience firsthand. Informal leadership is a powerful tool that leaders can use to prevent segregation in their units, regardless of gender.

**3. Be comfortable asking "What's best for the team?"** You may not know all the right answers when it comes to how best to integrate women and that's okay. It is a learning process for everyone. What Soldiers do not want to hear is what one of my peers told me as he shrugged his shoulders, "We forgot to account for you guys (for bed space). Sorry, I'm infantry." Instead, leaders should exercise humility and ask their female peers or subordinates for input. More often than not, they have been through these situations multiple times and they will appreciate your willingness to learn about how best you can assist your formation. It is as simple as something an infantry major once said to me, "I'm

new to this. Do I need to make special accommodations for you or do you feel comfortable staying with the unit?" Yes, it can feel awkward to ask, but there is a certain amount of respect you gain when you open yourself up to learning how best to ensure everyone feels like a valued member of the team.

If a living situation is poorly planned or seems like it may be an issue, present the options. "We can let you stay in the open bay with the males and everyone will just use their sleeping bags or the latrines to change, or we can cordon off an area in the bay for privacy so that we can keep you with the team."

**4. Keep everyone in the loop.** Sometimes it is inevitable to be forced to split your unit into gender-specific tents, especially while traveling through different locations with transient barracks or if the final decision is made above your level. When this happens, it is important to take steps prior to the unit splitting apart to make sure that the isolated personnel stay in the loop. Leaders should develop a clear communication plan and battle rhythm to distribute information. It is imperative to ensure inclusiveness of the isolated population for both work- and social-related events. If a squad goes to eat together, it is the responsibility of that squad and team leader to include the female squad members. If a platoon is tasked for a working party, the platoon sergeant needs to get everyone involved in helping. If the battalion staff needs to talk through some minor decisions, make the effort to get those female staff officers involved. It can be demoralizing to hear the stories of what someone missed because no one bothered to let her know what the unit was doing.

### **It's a learning process**

Gender integration will continue to be a learning process for the military. To build better integrated teams, units need to train, eat, and sleep in harsh environments together. As leaders, we are responsible for making decisions that enable mission success, providing feedback on gender integration, and remaining open to new ways to improve integration. No part of *ADP 6-0 Mission Command* and *ADP 6-22 Army Leadership* suggests that any

type of segregation is good for the Army. Segregation of any type creates resentment, isolation, and ultimately an unsafe environment for everyone. Instead, leaders need to focus on building cohesive teams based on mutual trust, and unit integrity through shared hardship is essential to that cohesion. We should be able to reach solutions that allow all Soldiers, regardless of gender, to feel like an equal member of the team and trust that they can depend on each other for anything.

*Captain Ashley Barber is a military intelligence officer currently serving in the 10th Mountain Division G2. She has previously served in MI brigades and IBCTs (LI). She completed her KD time in 2/10 IBCT (LI) as the brigade AS2 and the 2-87 Infantry Battalion S2 through iterations of LTP, JRTC, and a deployment to Afghanistan.*

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