



by Hannah Wentland

For a long time I have struggled to write or even share my thoughts. The first notion inhibiting me is always, “Who am I to write something worth knowing?” I fear I lack the credibility to sit at the table and champion my voice: I lack the rank, title, experience, badges, and a myriad of other spoken or silent markers of merit. Still, even more pervasive, is my fear that anything I say will be construed and generalized as blanket truth for other women in similar positions. Indeed, this is one of my greatest career hurdles and daily struggles.

My perspective and experience cannot speak for an entire gender. Furthermore, my niche of being a female combat arms officer still does not mean I can speak for all women in these roles. I want you to hear my voice and know there is truth in my experience□ that many probably share it, as well as my opinions, but it is only one part of the whole. The very thing that polarizes me from people is what makes me diverse, allows me to bring something to the table, and fosters a dialogue to ensure we, as leaders and stewards of the profession, create the best environment we can.

So I write this article for two reasons. Foremost to combat my fear that I have nothing worth sharing. I can seem to find grace, compassion, and even empathy for everyone around

me, so in writing this I finally offer some to myself. Second, and more importantly, I share my voice with the hope of reaching others who might benefit from reading it. Recognizing that learning is a lifelong process and I do not have all the answers, I write this piece armed with my experience, earned perspective, and sincere intent to effect positive change.

### **“Are you pregnant?”**

That was, if not the very first question, the question I was asked within a minute of arriving to my first unit. I think about that question often. I also think about my meek but adamant “No” in response to it.

If I could do it over, I hope I would respond with more charisma. Even more, I hope the question would simply not be asked. Although that question, in many ways, encompasses a formative piece of my military experience and broader life perspective. To me, that question and my response to it spoke volumes.

I feel compelled to clarify, I do not want this article to be interpreted as an indictment of an institution undergoing earnest changes. The purpose of this article is not to bring shame or reproach to my organization, leaders, or the systems, many of which are still in their infancy, designed to advance the well-being of all Soldiers. I write this story because I want you to understand the first thing people see when they look at me, and I mean really look at me, is that I am a woman.

Yet, it is not my gender or sex that makes me an effective or ineffective leader.

Nor is it the number of pushups I can do. No, my worth comes innate in my person. My greatest contributions are immeasurable. No badge, award, or title captures the effort, work, and outcomes I have birthed. We can attain positions of great power, wear badges of unparalleled merit, and inherit or protect preeminent legacies, but that is not our identity.

Personally, I find there to be a fixation surrounding women’s worthiness to serve in combat arms roles. Moreover, this fixation is normally geared towards physical excellence, quantitative measurements, or other arbitrary means of prescribing merit. Some examples of arbitrary merit include where you received your degree from, if you are married with a family, and the number of awards you have received. These can all be indicators of your potential and abilities, but they are not holistic. Likewise, I am not relegating the importance of fitness by any means; commitment to fitness demonstrates a level of discipline and values that every soldier deserves from their leaders. However, it should not be the reason we turn away capable, competent Soldiers and future leaders from serving in

these roles.

One of the most important ingredients to success is enabling and promoting people who want to be in these roles. And if they really want to be here, their leaders, their soldiers, and their institution will or should make a way for them. Still, I must articulate it is hard to buy into and serve an institution that prescribes merit largely or exclusively from physical assessments or the badges adorning an individual's chest.

**“If you are working on something exciting that you really care about, you don't have to be pushed. The vision pulls you.” □ Steve Jobs**

When we look at history, who do we define as our military experts? Mostly men and a select few women lionized for their character, conviction of spirit, and commitment to a vision. Analysts, pundits, professionals, and professors rank, rate, and assess the relative contributions of these titans to the course of human history. Yet, despite the algorithms and analysis they utilize to determine results, one element is consistently missing: an individual's raw fitness test score. Whether it be because few records exist of these accomplishments or because the designers of these formulas found it unnecessary, both are telling.

These leaders tend to be less remembered for their physical feats and more for the composition of their character. General John Sedgwick's Aid-de-Campe, Edmund Beaufort, [wrote about his leader's unwillingness](#) to share his shoe size because he did not want new shoes while many of his soldiers had none. Meanwhile, Beaufort's personal diaries and records have little to no mention of General Sedgwick's physical prowess when it comes to athletics. But physical fitness is merely one piece of the flawed paradigm through which we evaluate merit and worthiness.

Jeremy Graves [advocates effective leadership](#) these days is largely in knowing your audience, and how we need to work to reach different generations of the work force. Some of the most timeless leadership, self-help, and historical texts also revolve around more immeasurable attributes; rather than the metrics we often use to comparatively assign value. More than a few of these works appear on senior leaders' reading lists. They include but are not limited to [David Grossman's On Killing](#), [Elbert Hubbard's "A Message to Garcia"](#), [Simon Sinek's Start With Why](#) and [Leaders Eat Last](#), [James McDonough's memoir Platoon Leader](#), [Sun Tzu's The Art of War](#), [Edgar Puryear's 19 Stars](#), and a plethora of biographies that stretch from Marshall to MacArthur and beyond.

LT Gen (Ret.) Robert Caslen and Dr. Michael Matthews write about the hyphen on

tombstones, articulating this mere punctuation mark serves to encompass an individual's "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues." They go on to write about how most people care more about being remembered for their eulogy virtues over their resume virtues. I believe we should care more about who our leaders are as people than their physical appearance or what is captured on a resume.

**"It's the little things that are vital. Little things make the big things happen." □  
John Wooden**

Assessments hold us accountable and demand that we remain consistent and disciplined. They help us establish criteria and standards. We need them; they are vital. However, strict adherence and myopic emphasis on an individual's test scores divert meaningful attention from what we can never physically see and never truly quantify. Moreover, prescribing merit or worthiness solely on what we can materially see causes the organization to lose talent both in initially acquiring it and retaining it. Unsurprisingly, to suppress this negative outcome, Secretary Mark Esper headed the effort to eliminate the Department of the Army photo from officer promotion boards.

My worth comes from the fact that I show up every day. That I work tirelessly for my soldiers. And it is my genuine care and concern for them that motivates them to work for me. Any and all shortcomings I have □ the people around me, especially my soldiers □ rise up and fill. My hope is not that I prove to people why I have the job I do, but rather to earn the role and title every day.

My other hope is that women will continue to step up and fill these roles in combat arms and other career fields where they are underrepresented. Your unit, our Army, and our society will be better for it. Do not fear failing to make the standard. Do not fear what people will think when they look at you. From experience I can tell you that if you want to hold the title, you will make a way for yourself. Even more, if you truly give the best of yourself, you will find advocates and confidants who will help find a way for you.

**"Argue for your limitations, and sure enough they're yours." - Richard Bach**

Often the most formidable obstacles in our lives are the limitations we set for ourselves. By the same token, it is possible - albeit difficult - to unfetter ourselves from these limitations entirely. We can convince ourselves that some patterns are immutable, and perceptions fixed, especially when we detect judgment related to fundamental characteristics of our identity. So while the judgment may be real at times, recognize that it cannot permeate your character, your worth, your merit. So even if the first thing you see when you look at me is

that I am a woman, it will never impede me.

*Hannah Wentland is an active duty Armor officer stationed at Fort Stewart. She graduated from the United States Military Academy in 2019. She currently serves as the Headquarters and Headquarters Company Executive Officer in 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment 69<sup>th</sup> Armor Battalion. Prior to that she served as the Executive Officer for Alpha Company, 3-69AR, where she also served as a tank platoon leader. She is a recipient of the Order of Saint George and the Order of the Spur.*

### Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)