8

Women in the IDF

From the start, the IDF were unique among all armed forces worldwide because the compulsory military service inaugurated with their establishment on May 26, 1948, applied to women as well as men.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the perilous early months of the War of Independence, when many Jewish villages came under attack from their Arab neighbors as well as from roaming bands, both men and women fought in local defense groups, doing their best with their few rifles, pistols, and revolvers. That was hardly unprecedented in human history; women have always fought alongside men in defending towns and cities under siege, with pouring boiling oil (or water more likely) over attackers something of a literary cliché, while others are depicted sword in hand.[[2]](#endnote-2) In the years just prior to Israeli independence, moreover, Soviet wartime propaganda had made much of the Red Army’s fighting females—pilots, snipers, machine gunners, tank crew and partisans (89 received the Hero of the Soviet Union award) who were a small minority of the hundreds of thousands of women in the army, a twentieth or so of its total strength, who were mostly nurses.

The IDF’s novelty was that women were not exceptions to be lionized as heroes or relegated to safely female roles (as with WWII British home-service army drivers, for example) but simply conscripts along with the men, who therefore served in a great variety of roles, including combat in the *Haganah* units that transitioned into the IDF ground forces, and in the elite *Palmach* striking forces. As more organized IDF forces emerged, however, women soldiers and officers, while still trained to use rifles and pistols, were assigned to noncombat roles as radio operators, headquarters staff, office secretaries, storekeepers, bookkeepers, and military nurses.

Conscription was also different because women served shorter terms. Initially service was 24 months for both genders, but gradually men’s service was lengthened to 30 then 36 months and then shortened again to 32 months. Another difference is that a significant proportion of women were legally exempted, including females married by age 18, not uncommon among some socioethnic groups, and those who applied for exemption on ideological grounds and could meet set conditions: a convincing declaration that the applicant cannot serve because of reasons of conscience or because of a “religious way of life,” which is accepted if the applicant “keeps the laws of Kashrut at home and outside and does not travel on the Shabbat,” these being observable practices. Yet another difference that lasted until 2001 was that female soldiers and officers remained under the managerial and disciplinary authority of the Women’s Corps (no matter in what unit they served). The Corps was in charge of induction, recruit training, and transfers among different IDF units; it also operated soldier-teacher units, which augmented local teachers in new immigrant townships and remote communities.

The post-1949 regime changed radically with the expansion of the field forces after the 1973 war, in which IDF frontal forces were badly outnumbered by expanded Arab field armies. Personnel therefore had to be found for many more frontline combat units by slimming down everything else—service and logistic units, supporting commands, headquarters, and, most damagingly, the instructor cadre of the training schools large and small. Even before then, Colonel Avishai Katz, Commander of the Military Engineering School (acronym *Bahalatz*) Ba’had 14, had started a new program in 1972 that enrolled women as combat instructors. Its evident success spread the practice to the infantry and armor training bases, and then throughout the IDF.[[3]](#endnote-3) A new policy emerged to employ selected women as trained instructors in all areas, notably including weapon and armored-vehicle training.[[4]](#endnote-4) IDF male recruits learn from young women aged 18-20 specialist and technical skills from sniping to the emplacement of demolition charges, operation of all field radios and assorted sensors, artillery gunnery, the skills needed by armored fighting vehicle crews, and more. Started because of harsh necessity in the 1970s, when Israel did not have enough male conscripts to man both its field units and to serve as instructors in all its training courses (any intensively trained military force needs many instructors), the practice was institutionalized when the IDF discovered that women often made better instructors than men, not least because they could more easily strike the right balance between discipline and sensitivity in dealing with young conscripts.

Because their own training is very thorough and employs highly effective pedagogic techniques, women instructors earn the respect of their male colleagues in the IDF, and the close attention of their male pupils.[[5]](#endnote-5) Young recruits in their first encounter with dangerous weapons, such as hand grenades, are reassured by the familiar ease of the women instructors who do it first. Aspiring gunners of the huge, high-velocity 120mm of the standard *Merkava* tank may see their instructor next to them inside the tight tank turret nonchalantly flicking away a strand of stray hair as the gun’s three tons of steel recoil back explosively two inches from their right ear.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The IDF’s training needs are certainly unique: among all the armed forces in the world it alone must rely on teenaged conscripts to operate even the most complex weapons and support systems, instead of the professional, technically trained or long-service noncommissioned officers of every other armed force.[[7]](#endnote-7) Therefore, even before the arrival of the women individually tested and selected for instructor training, IDF pedagogic methods were very carefully considered, in order to capture and retain the attention of young soldiers and teach them what they have to know. The advent of female trainers added an element of gender tension to the motivating force of the established pedagogy as young male recruits would strive to the maximum to avoid failing in front of their women instructors.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The Women’s Corps, which had affirmed the separate and different role of women, became increasingly obsolete as women served as trainers in all parts of the IDF, with some going beyond in combat support and then combat roles. Roni Zuckerman, the first female jet-fighter pilot, received her wings in 2001. That same year, after years of declining importance, the Women’s Corps was finally abolished and replaced with the radically different office of the Women’s Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, charged with enhancing the role of women in all capacities by ensuring more opportunities, promoting suitable unit environments for women soldiers, and assimilating women into military leadership positions at all ranks. Soon individual women volunteered for all manner of roles in the ground, air, and naval forces, if not in direct combat except for dedicated units, near enough to combat in “combat support” roles from artillery to airborne search and rescue. Some women instructors exploited opportunities to go into combat – thus, a driving instructor for a heavy APC joined an operation in Gaza when the APCs in her training unit were allocated to equip an infantry unit with none of its own.

Instead of sending women soldiers en masse into existing combat units in pursuit of formal equality regardless of the practicalities—the IDF lives rough, in tents or huts, with outdoor showers—specially structured combat units of female and male soldiers were established to provide needed facilities, and also to accommodate upper-body strength differentials (attempts to deny physiology have caused high injury rates among women soldiers in other armies).

In 1995 the Border Guard, administratively under the police, but operationally often under IDF command, opened combat roles for women conscripts, both as riot police and as counterterrorist light infantry. Following the Border Guard’s successful integration of women combatants, a mixed combat unit was formed in 2000: the *Caracal* 33rd border security battalion, more than 50% female in 2021. Its soldiers were trained to patrol the borders for armed infiltrators and smugglers of drugs and humans. By taking on the border security role, the *Caracal* and other mixed-gender infantry battalions allow the first-line infantry units (*Givati*, *Golani*) more training time.

The IDF leadership, including the Women’s Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff, had resolved that if the IDF were to have female combat soldiers, they would have to be really good soldiers, and *Caracal* as the first mixed combat unit therefore had to be tested not in the safest possible sector but the very opposite. Indeed *Caracal*’s women and men soon had to fight off well-armed ISIS infiltrators from the Sinai. In one incident Captain Or Ben Yehoda led her company against some well-armed infiltrators; she was injured but her force was able to kill six of them. A female officer and a female sniper were awarded citations for their bravery and performance during similar fights.

Soon recognized as a success, *Caracal* became the model for two additional mixed light-infantry battalions: *Lions of Jordan* in 2014 and *Cheetah Battalion* in 2015.[[9]](#endnote-9) Many other women served in individual combat roles in artillery units, antiaircraft units, transport, and as combat pilots, navigators, and officers in every branch. Orna Barbivai, the first female major-general (*Aluf)* in the IDF—one of very few at that level—was promoted to that rank in June 2011 when she was appointed head of the General Staff personnel department.

The compulsory service of women in the IDF was a unique innovation at the start in 1948 precisely because it was neither a short-term remedy for the manpower shortage nor a propaganda stunt, but rather a case of making the absolute best use of scarce human resources. In a country where almost all eligible men but for the most religious serve in uniform—as near a “universal military service” as one can find anywhere in the world—many women did not serve because they were the daughters of traditionalist families, in which military service was seen as subversive of the modesty expected of all young women. One unintended consequence was that the IDF became the emancipator of a great many women who rebelled against noxious old-country customs by running away from home to recruitment bases to join the secular women of their age cohort. For the same reason, some Arab women, mostly Christian, also volunteer for service in the IDF, some serving in combat roles.[[10]](#endnote-10)

1. Norway followed in 2015, but only one-sixth of the age cohort actually enlist. See Colonel Ode Inge Botillen, “Universal Conscription in Norway,”Norwegian Armed Forces, Defense Staff Norway, at <https://www.defmin.fi/files/3825/BOTILLE_2017-06-12_Universal_Conscription_in_Norway.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. One among many is the centerpiece of Béla Vizkelety’s “Siege of Eger Castle.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The first armor instructor was Racheli Bar-Ziv, Shaul Nagr, “The First Female Armor Instructors' Course,” *Shiryon* 37, March 2011, 62-64. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Avishai Katz, *Chocolate Soldiers* (Tel Aviv: Carmel Press 2011). (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A volunteer trained to serve as a tank-gunnery instructor after graduating from a well-reputed US high school and a highly rated US university declared that IDF training techniques were “altogether more effective, to a different dimension.” [source?] [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview, Yael Luttwak, former tank gunnery instructor, IDF Armor Corps. Tel Aviv, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. There are some career NCOs in the IDF with maintenance and administrative responsibilities, but the IDF mostly has to rely on its young conscripts. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Aryeh Hashavya, *The IDF at Arms: Armor* (Tel-Aviv: Revivim Press, 1981), 196. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Or Heler, “Lions of Jordan: The IDF will establish a new battalion in the Jordan Valley,” *Nana 10*, 14 November 2014. (H) At: <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1092487> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Chen Kutz Bar: “Introducing Elinor Joseph, Arab Woman Combat Soldier in the IDF,” *NRG Online*, February 06, 2010. (H) At <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/1/ART2/050/556.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)