

## [Roth on Rivers, 'Beyond the Call: Three Women on the Front Lines in Afghanistan'](#)

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The following book review from H-War may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Eileen Rivers

Reviewer:

Tanya L. Roth

**Eileen Rivers.** *Beyond the Call: Three Women on the Front Lines in Afghanistan*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-90307-6.

**Reviewed by** Tanya L. Roth (Independent Scholar) **Published on** H-War (January, 2019) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

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In March 2018, a new Rand Research report noted that about 2.77 million Americans have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11.[1] Women account for 10 percent of that number, and their work has led to several significant policy changes that have expanded women's service opportunities. In her new book *Beyond the Call: Three Women on the Front Lines in Afghanistan*, journalist and army veteran Eileen Rivers tells the story of women participating in three separate Female Engagement Teams (FETs), one of the new roles developed as a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While Rivers's focus is the women themselves, *Beyond the Call* contextualizes their service within the conflict in Afghanistan and the longer story of women's military participation. As Rivers explains it, FETs first emerged in the war in Iraq, then began being utilized in Afghanistan not long after. The first FET served in Iraq beginning in 2003, as field commanders began to recognize that they needed women to help them interact with Iraqi women in the areas where American troops were. Without providing the twenty-five women with much, if any, training, the FET began going on all missions with male infantry members. While the men engaged with male Iraqis, servicewomen focused on interactions with women and children in a variety of ways.

The practice quickly grew as many commanders saw the utility of using women to help them interact in places where it was not culturally acceptable for strange men to speak with or address women, much less frisk them at safety checkpoints. Even as women were technically barred from combat roles, the creation of FETs put women into combat roles, embedding them with infantry units tasked with missions on the front lines.

These accounts are the heart of the book and represent Rivers's work at its best. Getting to that point

takes a bit, as Rivers begins unexpectedly by focusing on Jamila Abbas, an Afghani woman affected by the war. She recounts how Abbas, her husband, and their four children fled their home in 1996 to avoid the Taliban, only to end up in mujahedeen territory. Abbas watched as the mujahedeen murdered her husband, throwing her life into turmoil once again. On the one hand, Abbas's story is a powerful indicator of why having women on the front lines matters: women, arguably more than anyone else, bear the brunt of the war. While Abbas is an important figure, her story early on is not well situated. The book presents itself as an account of three servicewomen, and Abbas is clearly not one of these individuals. It is not until much later that Abbas's role becomes clear, but situated as it is at the front of the book, her story seems out of place in a book that appears so focused on American servicewomen.

Ultimately, Abbas seems to appear at the beginning for chronological reasons more than anything else. After her story, Rivers recounts Sheena Adams's, Maria Rodriguez's, and Johanna Smoke's experiences in a way that allows the reader to track the advancements—and backpedaling—of how the US military used FETs over a four-year period. This is a helpful approach for those who want to understand the history of FETs, even on this small scale.

Between Adams, Rodriguez, and Smoke, Rivers shows the range of women's engagement in Afghanistan. For Adams (2010-11), this included supporting census-type work to identify and learn more about inhabitants in an area. This work might seem innocuous and "safe," with Adams mostly knocking on doors, but Rivers never lets readers forget that Adams served with an infantry unit. Where they went, she went, and at times, that meant being in the midst of engagements with the Taliban or traveling in a convoy that hit an IED. If Adams's experience highlights the dangers of being on an FET, Rodriguez's story (2011-12) shows how the US military made itself ineffective by deprioritizing or not understanding the significance of using FETs. Rodriguez spent weeks trying to get access to a unit of Afghani female police officers to see how the FET might offer support, only to be frequently stuck on base or working through other red tape. As Rodriguez's story shows, sometimes FETs could not fulfill their missions because they could not get to local women in the first place. And, when they did get those connections with local women, the challenge of gaining local women's trust remained, a vital piece for ongoing mission success.

It is not until the final section, Johanna Smoke's (2012-14), that Jamila Abbas appears again. If Rodriguez helped create programs to support local women, Smoke provided that support in a different way, by being the right-hand woman for Jamila Abbas, by then an activist in her own right fighting to get Afghan women out of abusive homes. Here, it becomes clear that while FETs can and should play an important role in American military engagement, it is ultimately local women like Abbas who can effect the most change for their own people.

Despite the title, then, this is not a story just of three American women, but also of Jamila, and how the FETs and women locally have the capacity to change things, and do. *Beyond the Call* is simultaneously biography and a (limited) history of the ways in which conflict and religious fundamentalists have reshaped women's rights, experiences, and opportunities. The experiences of Adams, Rodriguez, and Smoke are all fundamentally tied up with the lives of women who live through the war even when the troops do not.

Rivers deftly weaves in the broader context of US military actions and policies in each woman's

section, culminating in a final section of the book that explores the challenges Adams, Rodriguez, and Smoke have faced since returning home. In particular, since none of these women were ever recognized as being in combat, it has been challenging for them to get the recognition they need to access support services, such as medical and mental health care.

Rivers's primary goal is to bring these women's experiences into the light, offering readers a way to better understand women's service today. Readers looking for such accounts, particularly ones that are shorter than a full-length biography or autobiography, will find useful information here. Because Rivers is primarily a journalist, the book does not offer deep analysis on the history of women's service, nor an extensive bibliography to aid readers who want to learn more. While there is a bibliography of citations mentioned throughout the book, those seeking academic sources will largely need to look elsewhere. Rivers also notes that the United States is not the only military using FETs; while this is a matter for another book, it is a topic that is worth a bit more mention in this work.

These critiques should not detract from the book's success in demonstrating how important FETs have been and should be to ongoing engagement in Afghanistan and other places. In particular, *Beyond the Call* offers a striking argument for the ways in which women's gender can and ought to be an asset in combat. For decades, American military leaders asserted that it was important to keep women "safe" behind the front lines, maintaining the fiction that they could keep servicewomen out of harm's way. These leaders also know that women and children are often the first victims of conflict, stuck in war zones without the safety of policy to keep them free from harm.

Military and government leaders have long assumed that combat—confronting the enemy and taking them out with force—is the most crucial part of war. But experience also shows that force has its limits: to reshape a nation and to create the long-term change that will stabilize a country and free its people from forces like the Taliban, combat may be the least effective tool. FETs have demonstrated time and again that there are other, better ways to make inroads: relationship-building, listening, and supporting those who are already trying to make change. It is a new way of managing conflict altogether.

Note

[1]. Jennie W. Wenger, Caolionn O'Connell, and Linda Cottrell, *Examination of Recent Deployment Experience across the Services and Components* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1928.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1928.html).

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