

Female NCO makes history

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By **Marie Berberea**

FORT SILL, Okla. -- For Sgt. Pamela Stenman, becoming the first female noncommissioned officer for the 13M, Multiple Launch Rocket System Crewmember military occupational specialty, began with a pen and a T-shirt. As she was leaving her unit, her then-battalion commander gave her a simple goodbye.

"He said if you're ever at Fort Sill, look me up," said Stenman.

Stenman's original 13W MOS was being absorbed, and with the troop drawdown she was looking into reclassifying as a 13R or 13P. She came to Fort Sill for the Advanced Leaders Course, and so, she contacted her former commander for advice.

Col. Gene Meredith, 428th Field Artillery Brigade commander asked her what she thought about 13M, and everything fell into place.

"She was one of my NCOs when I was at Fort Bragg. She's an awesome NCO. I got to pin her for her combat actions in Iraq," said Meredith. "I know she's going to do an outstanding job."

Stenman is a part of history as the Army recently opened six combat MOSs to women, and now sergeants and staff sergeants are reclassifying into those positions to serve as role models to the younger female Soldiers.

"It's not going to be any more pressure than I've been putting up with all along. It's always been a little bit of a fight to just push forward," said Stenman.

The female Soldiers trained together, and most of the recent graduates are also going to the same duty station.

"The Army is a team sport. There's no 'I' in Army. We fight as a team, and so we always have a battle buddy. Sending them there as a group means they've built six weeks of a relationship here and they can continue that relationship when they get to Fort Bragg," said Meredith.

Stenman joined the Army in 2000, and originally planned on staying in for three years.

"The idea of women in the artillery, when I came in, was women are broken, they're more concerned about breaking their nails. I wanted to show other women that here's what you can do. If I'm 37 and I can run a 7-minute mile, and I came in as a couch potato those young girls of 18 should be able to do it."

Stenman is currently going through 13M Advanced Individual Training here. While she is training with Soldiers who don't know what the Army was like before women were integrated, there were field

artillery Soldiers of the past who saw 1st Battalion, 78th Field Artillery at a live fire exercise.

"If they can do the job, fine. In my command experience, I always maintained that the only difference between men and women, was which bathroom they used," said retired Col. Tom Davis, age 68, Georgetown, Texas, Field Artillery Officer Candidate School class graduate, June 1969.

"It's another opportunity to get rank and combat experience, but I'm wondering how they'll fare on the battlefield," said 13-year Army veteran 1st Lt. Joseph Gethers, 73, Miami, Fla., FA OCS graduate August 1968.

While the opinions and expectations for women serving in the military are changing, many contend it was the war in Iraq that led to action being taken.

"We drew a line in there and said women can be assigned to units that were here and not those that were forward of it. We got into Iraq in 2003, 10 years ago and realized that line didn't exist anymore. Units that we thought would operate further back from the line didn't they were out on the roads getting shot at every day same as everyone else," said Maj. Jason Yanda, 428th Fires Brigade.

Stenman is one of many women who may have helped in establishing the new Army policy as she served in the blurred combat zone during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She was in a meteorological section attached to a unit with 4th Infantry Division.

"When I was with the Copperheads I got to have the experiences that they say women didn't have. So every time I hear we're going to be in combat I want to say some of us have already been there."

She said it felt good to be a part of something that was important and to contribute to that effort. She also said the last thing she wanted from her peers was to be treated differently because she's a woman.

"I'd have more of an issue being separated out it's like well you have to go over there because you're a female. When I went with 1st Battalion, 321st Field Artillery, when we stayed in Kuwait, I was in a female tent with people I didn't work with and know. But when I came back at the end of eight months, I was in the bay with everybody all 80 people we were deployed with. Nobody said anything. There were no issues."

"For me the last thing I would say is 'I need to go stay somewhere special.' That's not the way I've been from my experience. To me it points to someone else having more of an issue if they feel you have to be separated."

Soldiers in 1-78th FA agreed, if the person is a good leader, then they are fit for the job, no matter the gender.

1st Sgt. David Caldwell, 1-78th FA, remembered a chemical officer from his previous duty station who won over her peers.

"It really just matters on the person. She had the tower of power, triple stacked, she was a monster so she earned respect and got it."

So far the few women who have gone through the 13M AIT have proven they're up for the task.

"Pvt. Alexandra Seccareccio, 1-78th FA, is just one example. In the first class of 13M females, she was

the honor graduate with a 100 percent average in the class," said Meredith.

Stenman said she is going to continue to work hard and hopes to be another example of a Soldier doing an excellent job.

"There's a position I have to fill and so I have to do it right for all those who follow and all the ones who went before me ... all the hard working women in the past, present and future. I know I'm not the only one who had experiences like that."