

Tested and Proven

By Tammy Duckworth, an Iraq war veteran and assistant secretary of public and intergovernmental affairs for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

In the military, rank has a wonderful way of leveling the playing field. A sergeant recognizes the gold oak leaf on my uniform, signifying my rank as a major in the Army National Guard. By virtue of that rank, I'm on par with every other major in the U.S. Army, female or male. Rank also commands respect in the military, no matter the gender.

I want to believe the recognition of my rank precedes the awareness of my gender—evident, of course, by the length of my hair and the sound of my voice. But recognizing rank over gender is not always the case today, and certainly not historically. Women like me who have served in the military for a few years can speak of the hardships and obstacles we've had to overcome to prove we were "just as good as the men." Many of us overcame them by trying to out-macho the men or join their "good ol' boys club."

In aviation, I made my way being as tough and gender-neutral as possible. But earlier in my career, I played tough and failed to realize (and failed to capitalize on) my strengths as a woman. In some cases, our strength is in our ability to encourage and engage others. For others, strength comes from the confidence gained through personal and career achievements. In the military, strength comes from the knowledge that women get equal pay for equal work; I earned exactly the same pay that my male counterparts did.

When my helicopter was shot down in Iraq in 2004, I didn't distinguish among the genders of my comrades who stayed by my side, determined not to leave me there, dying. And they didn't care

about my gender. They cared about their fellow American, their fellow soldier, their buddy. Me.

In today's military, we have leveled the playing field in so many ways. Yet, sadly, much of American society lags behind. Each of us, men and women, has a wonderful opportunity to participate in this monumental shift in American society where women now equal the number of men in the workplace. We have a wonderful opportunity to transform our country so that each of us is an equal stakeholder in the American Dream.

Much remains to be done. There are glass ceilings that need to be shattered, sexual harassment that is still too common, and negative stereotypes that remain pervasive—that women are weaker, more emotional.

But it's a new day and age. We've just confirmed our third woman Supreme Court justice. We've doubled the number of women in the military in the last 30 years—350,000 are serving now. It's time to stop being surprised that America's daughters are fully capable of doing their jobs and fighting for freedom. It's time to stop thinking we can be "just as good as the men."

We've already proven it. More important, it's time to celebrate women taking part in the common goal of serving the greatest democracy the world has ever known.

It's time to stop thinking we can be "just as good as the men." We've already proven it.