documentary tracks efforts of female marines reaching across cultural boundaries in afghanistan

story by

photography by

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It’s the bun of long hair, wrapped and nestled between the military helmet and collar of the flak jacket, that gives the female Marines away.

Cloaked in desert-tan fatigues, boots, and sunglasses, a rifle laid across their chests, these women could be mistaken, at first glance, for their male colleagues. But these soldiers share a unique role in their battalion, as well as in the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan where they’ve been stationed.

Photojournalist Rebecca Sell heard them referred to as the third gender.

In an effort to stabilize communities in the country as part of the counterinsurgency war, the U.S. Marines created Female Engagement Teams (FET) to reach out to Afghan women. Local culture prohibits men outside of the family—in this case, the male Marines—from looking at or speaking to females. As Afghan women represent almost 50 percent of the population, the military realized that it was missing contact with a substantial part of the community.

In summer 2010, Beth Walls, Claire Ballante, and Rosemarie Epiti joined a battalion at Musa Qala, a former Taliban stronghold in the central region of the country. They were part of a larger contingent of about 40 female Marines spread across Afghanistan in the first full-time FET effort.

Sell, an assistant professor of visual communication at Ohio University, documented their experience for three weeks in August. On assignment for the *Free-Lance Star* in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where she previously worked as a journalist, she captured images and video of the FET’s nascent attempts to establish relationships with the Afghan women. Sell’s work has since been published on Time.com and in *The Marine Corps Times*. Related work has appeared in *The Washington Post* and on washingtonpost.com.

Inspired by a conversation with her brother-in-law, a war veteran, about the public’s lack of understanding about the role of women in the military, Sell read an article about the FETs and spent three months lobbying the military to document them. Once on the ground, the photojournalist worked quickly to build a relationship with her subjects and establish trust.

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“It’s about knowing when to pick up the camera and when to put it down,” she says of getting to know the Marines while still doing her job.

Sell’s experience was a microcosm of what the FET itself was up against. First on the agenda: Establishing rapport with a tight-knit unit of male Marines.

“We come into the battalion, we haven’t been with them that long, and they just see us as a liability,” Corporal Walls explains to Sell in her multimedia documentary. “They see us as a person other than a grunt. We don’t want to be a burden. We want to be one of the Marines, because we are.”

Making contact with Afghan women, who are rarely seen outside of the family compound, was a bigger logistical challenge, however. The FET couldn’t travel without a male escort, and there were certain security patrols they couldn’t join. Afghan community members could be skeptical of the FET’s motivations, Walls told Sell.

“The women didn’t want to talk to us because they were scared that they would get in trouble with their husbands or their brothers,” she says. “Some of them felt like they would be targeted by the Taliban. Some of them think that we were trying to westernize their women.”
For cultural and security reasons, the three members of the Female Engagement Team (FET), including Lance Corporal Rosemarie Epiti, center, could travel only in the company of male Marines, and embed only with certain patrols, during their efforts to make contact with Afghan women.

Corporal Beth Walls, team leader, and her female colleagues often worked out in their free time at the military base. “There was a lot of down time there,” Sell says.

FET and members of the 1st HNS Company Battalion patrol through Musa Qala and through the bazaar to attempt to gain the trust of locals.
Once inside the compounds, the FET, accompanied by a female hospital corpsman and a translator, evaluated the health and wellness of the women and their children. Malnutrition and dehydration were common concerns. The FET provided information and resources for cooking and hygiene, including toothbrushes and bars of soap.

The female Marines also gauged the women’s general sentiments about the state of their community. Military forces had largely stabilized the conflict in the Musa Qala District Center and were focused on public works projects, though some violence lingered on the outskirts. In addition, the FET tested the women’s receptiveness to starting a sewing school—a controversial concept in an area where young girls weren’t welcome in the classroom.

At the end of the mission, the FET members acknowledged that they couldn’t make enormous changes in the lives of the Afghan women and children in a few short months. But they were optimistic that they laid the groundwork for future relationships.

“I really appreciate the experience; it’s been amazing, it really has,” says Ballante, Corpsman 2nd class, in the documentary. “But you’re not going to see results right away. It kind of breaks your heart because all you want to see is progress and you just can’t see it. It might not be the next FET. It might be the fourth or fifth FET that will come in and make a difference.”
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When the U.S. Marines cleared Sell to join the FET, the photojournalist had no idea with which unit she would embed until she arrived in Afghanistan. She swiftly studied the history and culture of her assignment, Musa Qala.

Although Sell had photojournalism experience in Chile and Ghana, this was her first time embedding with a military unit. Pitching a specific story—a documentary on the relatively new teams—with the backing of an established media outlet is the key to gaining access, she explains. Journalists can't just show up in the Middle East, camera and laptop in hand, and expect credentials.

Sell drew on the expertise of a community of Ohio University photojournalists seasoned with covering military conflict. Graduate student Víctor Blue and alumnus Chris Hondros (who later died on assignment in Libya) gave useful advice on the embed process, as well as how to pack gear and body armor for the desert.

Once on site, Sell had to be persistent about ferreting out information from the military about daily activities, to determine her reporting strategy. In addition to the FET story, she discovered an opportunity to cover the activities in Musa Qala for The Washington Post.

It's not only important to have a thorough understanding of the issues and culture, but to watch for unique news angles and reporting techniques, says Sell, whose travel was funded by Ohio University. In addition to her still images, Sell shot video footage to create multimedia stories—a selling point to news outlets.

Though never in danger on assignment, Sell was mindful of any security instructions the Marines provided. Her biggest challenge, she notes, was to keep focused on the story in the face of daily uncertainty about access to sources and plans.

“You won't have enough room in your suitcase,” she was told by another photojournalist, “for the patience you need to bring.”

Walls and her female colleagues established a rapport with the male Marines, some of whom had trained together before the FET joined them.

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Corporal Beth Walls
Lance Corporal Rosemarie Epiti assists with a security checkpoint on the road between the Musa Qala District Center and Himal. The FET was used to search women as needed.

At the Musa Qala District Center bazaar, the main business area, reactions to the female Marines ranged from polite curiosity to animosity; some men were offended by the presence of the FET members, Sell says.