

You've come a long way, baby, but it's not all good news

By Julie Kessler

On Nov. 27 of last year I wrote an article for this column titled "You've come a long way, baby" which discussed the news that three young women had become the first ever to successfully complete the punishing U.S. Marine Corps infantry course. No doubt these strong and courageous women's matriculation will likely advance considerably the issue of gender equality in the U.S. military, and that of complete integration of women into our combat units.

Since then I have received letters from several readers, all of which applauded these brave and able women. Two of the readers were retired male military officers — one a former marine, the other a retired naval officer — both of whom extolled the virtues of the women with whom they had proudly served.

Culture Commentary

There are, of course, other sides to the many strides women have made in the trades and professions once closed off to them. Women now suffer from heart attacks and

other illnesses in almost equal numbers to men; however, with regard to heart disease and heart attacks in women, there is often an enormous disparity in the treatment women receive over their male counterparts. This disparity is twofold: Women are often treated less aggressively for heart disease than men, and women are also underrepresented in the clinical studies that set protocols for detection and treatment.

Given some of the other areas in which women have made significant "progress," having heart attacks in almost equal numbers to their male counterparts may actually be the good news.

Colleen LaRose, the Pennsylvania woman who became a radical follower of Islam and who dubbed herself "Jihad Jane" was convicted and sentenced last week to 10 years for her part in a terrorist plot to kill Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist who insulted many Muslims by rendering a picture of the Prophet Mohammed's head on a dog's body. LaRose was facing a life sentence, but Judge Patrese Tucker granted the government's request for leniency as LaRose had cooperated with the government enabling law enforcement to better understand the genesis of homegrown terrorism. Also, both the prosecution and the defense agreed that the severe abuse that LaRose suffered during her early life, prior to her conversion to Islam — rapes by her father commencing in the second grade, subsequent prostitution, severe drug abuse and failed marriages — ultimately made her particularly vulnerable to becoming radicalized by al-Qaida operatives.

LaRose aligned herself with violent terrorists who valued her online predator skills. She then flew to Europe for her part in the plot to kill Vilks. After six weeks in Ireland and growing impatient with the slowness of the mission, she returned to the U.S. where she was arrested.

LaRose's alleged handler in Ireland, Ali Damache, remains in jail there, fighting extradition to the U.S. However, another troubled woman, Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, also

known as "Jihad Jamie," originally from Colorado, married Damache in 2009 after meeting him online. Paulin-Ramirez was sentenced to eight years in prison, though prosecutors sought a 10-year term because she took her 6-year-old son to Ireland where he was abused and

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being trained to kill non-Muslims.

Then, of course, there is Samantha Lewthwaite, who has become known in media circles as "The White Widow." This somewhat odd moniker was given to this British woman following her husband's participation in the July 7, 2005, suicide bombings in London, which killed 56 people and injured more than 700. A few days after the Westgate Mall siege ended in Nairobi, Kenya, in late September 2013, Interpol issued an "international wanted persons alert," also known as a "red

notice," for Lewthwaite, stemming from Kenyan charges in December 2011 for possession of explosives and conspiracy to commit a felony resulting from an alleged bomb plot in Mombasa that police ultimately foiled. Police also believe that Lewthwaite has links to al-Sha-haab, the Somali militant group that carried out the attack at Westgate Mall. Lewthwaite is also under investigation for alleged possession of a fraudulently obtained South African passport, and for a possible role in the Westgate Mall attack. Interpol's red notice will circulate to the organization's 190 member countries and will, in effect, act as a global trip wire for Lewthwaite, who is now deemed an international fugitive. (By way of background, when she was 17 Lewthwaite apparently became despondent over her parent's 1994 divorce and converted to Islam; she then married the man who became one of the four London suicide bombers. Thereafter, she moved to East Africa with her children, where authorities believe she commenced facilitating terrorist activities in operational roles.)

So what do these women represent and what do they have in common besides the horrid culmination of impulses of the disenfranchised, the disappointed, the disillusioned and the dispirited? While their backgrounds — at least for LaRose and Paulin-Ramirez — suggest that their early years saw suffering unimaginable for adults, much less children, they also suggest something far more. That women, the original keepers of hearth and home, of motherhood, nurturing, child-bearing and child-rearing, will, when given the same opportunities as men, not only engage in precisely the same conduct (with

equal numbers of attendant heart attacks apparently), but also do equally as good a job as men will. To include the good, the bad, and the ugly.

From a purely gender-biased standpoint, I would like to engage in a reverse separate but equal doctrine (even though I know intuitively this would never, ever work). I would like to think that we women can't possibly be as good at terrorism as our male counterparts, that we simply don't have it in our psychological and/or genetic make-up to be the next Jihad Janet or Jennifer (or Julie for that matter). But alas, I have never been very good at make-believe or magical thinking, especially when the hard facts of reality are right in front of my eyes.

Yes, we have come a long way, baby. A very, very long way.

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