

Out-numbered but not out-gunned

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Close your eyes and picture a soldier? What does the person look like? Let me guess what you may be imagining: someone wearing a green camouflage uniform, has a fierce face painted a shade of green and brown, carrying a rifle, wearing a helmet and some very heavy duty boots. You pictured the soldier... and you pictured a man!

Well that soldier is actually a woman. She knows how to shoot various types of weapons and hits the target too, she can scale a six-foot wall, walk long distances and carry a heavy rucksack on her back, she can give you a fireman's lift. You might see her abseil down Mosta bridge or you may come across her at the airport.

Although a soldier, she is no less a woman! She could be the girl next door, who possibly displays a bit more courage and guts to choose to work and compete for promotion in what is considered by many as being a male-orientated environment.

Throughout history it has been men who have always fought in battle, but times are changing. Today men and women fight alongside each other. Women

have been given the opportunity to join armed forces in various parts of the world. The AFM is no different.

The first group of women joined the AFM in 1989. There are now 37 women in the Force spread throughout headquarters and the three regiments. They perform different roles and occupy various ranks and positions. Statistically speaking, women in the army have been promoted at a faster rate than their male counterparts, thus rewarded for their competence and dedication!

So how do women soldiers feel about being in the AFM?

L/Bdr. Sharon Cushieri says that it took a while for women to establish themselves as equals in capability to their male counterparts. Like anything new, there was an initial sense of apprehension, but that is now gone, and more doors of opportunity are opening.

In fact, she was the first Maltese soldier to successfully complete a Combat Medic Course in the USA. The course was three months long and her fantastic result put her up on the Commandant's top five list.

Since women are quite new to the AFM, many of them have become the pioneers in certain trade qualifications and ranks. There are still a few areas as yet not breached by females and which still pose a possible challenge to any woman in the Force. But we now have women in the infantry, the medical field, training, clerical, catering and security posts. A few years back there was also a female fixed wing aircraft pilot who has since retired.

2/Lt. Audrey Aquilina recently became the first Maltese officer to attend Naval School in the United Kingdom. She has just returned to Malta and is now qualified to take a crew and patrol boat out to sea. And that is another frontier reached.

Not every girl can be a soldier but couldn't you say the same for men? It's just that we still wear lipstick and mascara, but when it is time to get our hands dirty and nails broken for the job, there are no second thoughts. Not all girls want to go running through an obstacle course, marching around a parade square so fast their shins hurt, or staying awake and alert during the early hours of the morning on guard duty when the rest of the world is asleep! The public may peer at us females in the army and expect a bunch of GI Janes, which we aren't. On the other hand, there's definitely some courage and a sense of duty towards the service, which we have bound ourselves to serve as Maltese citizens. In this day and age, this is no mean feat.

Maybe next time you picture a soldier, it won't necessarily be a man. Women may be outnumbered, but not outgunned in the Force. Challenges and adventure aren't just for men. And you never know, your daughter, sister, or wife could be a helicopter pilot, explosive ordnance disposal officer, diver, combat engineer or even Brigadier one day. Who knows! ●



Photograph by Darrin Zammit Lupi