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## International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel)

## Pioneers across war zones: The lived acculturation experiences of US female military expatriates



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 27 June 2015

#### Keywords:

Female expatriate  
Extreme context  
Lived experience  
Military  
Phenomenology

### ABSTRACT

This exploratory study focuses on the lived acculturation experiences of United States (US) female career military expatriates who worked and lived in combat settings across five war zones. Based on an analysis of oral histories that spanned over 60 years, the research revealed that these pioneering women had a strong commitment to their profession, and that this, along with camaraderie, facilitated their adaptation to living conditions characterized by extreme danger, nominal domestic comforts, and unrelenting work requirements in culturally unfamiliar contexts. The research identified the multiple physical and psychological stressors of living and working as a female in a war zone and the variety of coping strategies employed for acculturation, particularly the prominent role of relational support from family and friends, and a combination of personal coping mechanisms (such as crying or compartmentalization) and religious faith. As extant expatriate research has overwhelmingly focused on male executives in multinational corporations, this research is significant in extending the literature to an analysis of the public sector, specifically women deployed overseas in highly dangerous settings and who were pioneering in both their roles in the military and as non-traditional expatriates at a time when few women worked internationally.

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## 1. Introduction

Extant research has largely examined expatriation from the perspective of employees (typically males) in multinational corporations undertaking traditional expatriate assignments (see [Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004](#)). In contrast, this research analyzes the oral histories of United States (US) female career military expatriates deployed across five war zones and a 60-year span and extends the general expatriation literature by examining female military expatriate acculturation and their coping strategies in an extreme context (i.e. a war zone), which is defined as a life-threatening environment characterized by physiological, cognitive, and emotional stressors ([Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009](#)). More particularly, it extends an erstwhile concentration on business expatriates ([Selmer & Fenner, 2009](#)) to public sector employees by focusing on career military professionals who were required to accept task and geographic relocation as dictated by operational needs.

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Doucerain, Dere, and Ryder (2013: p. 4) urge future research “to take into account the environment that acculturating individuals navigate and thus to focus on the concrete nature of their lived experience”. Doucerain et al. (2013: p. 3) further argue that there is a need for a deeper exploration of the ‘micro-context’ or the “immediate, concrete, local conditions of daily life”. Our study responds to the call to focus on the “lived acculturation experience” (Harvey & Moeller, 2013: p. 3) by fore fronting the hostile, dangerous setting in which military expatriates are embedded in order to account for the greater complexity of relationships and behavior occurring in an extreme context (Fisher & Hutchings, 2013). As noted in an exploratory study on the Irish Defence Forces during an overseas peacekeeping mission, the “sending organization and the receiving environment play a major role in the degree of challenge and stress an assignment entails” (Crowley-Henry & Heaslip, 2014: p. 4). Moreover, there has been limited consideration given to acculturation of public-sector organizations such as the military despite their frequent operation in multi-national alliances (Crowley-Henry & Heaslip, 2014; Selmer & Fenner, 2009).

Through an exploration of the experiences of female military expatriates across a range of wars over the past 60 years, our study informs present understanding of modern expatriate assignments in terms of impact of location and timing, in addition to providing insight into variations in the extent to which the women’s acculturation was shaped by changing societal norms and organizational policies. Our focus on career military also facilitated the exploration of individuals’ commitment to their organization and role in their acculturation. The women were pioneering in both their roles as military professionals in forward combat settings and as female non-traditional expatriates during times in which international career opportunities were scant for most women.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Military expatriates

Along with those involved in humanitarian efforts, peacekeeping missions, and civil political conflicts, military expatriates work in extreme contexts that are dangerous, highly dynamic, and that present multiple stressors (Hannah et al., 2009). Despite a long tradition of sending public sector personnel overseas for a variety of purposes, such as diplomatic and military service (Stening, 1994), research on public sector expatriates and their working conditions has been limited (Fenner & Selmer, 2008) despite the importance of understanding the contextual influences associated with an organization’s role in society (Nutt, 2006). As defined here, organizationally-assigned expatriates are individuals tasked to work and live for a fixed period in a country of the organization’s choice (Tharenou, 2009), thus military personnel share certain features with traditional expatriates. Nonetheless, they are also distinct from those in the private, for-profit, sector as detailed below.

One significant difference is that overseas postings are an integral part of a military career path, despite the ambiguity of future work locations (DoA, 2010). Moreover, limited research has acknowledged that there *are* differences in level of commitment (and, perhaps, motivation) between the public and private sector (see Fenner & Selmer, 2008; Selmer & Fenner, 2009). In this regard military career expatriates are similar to some other employees in the public (and not-for-profit) sector who accept that commitment to their chosen career implies the possibility of relocation to a dangerous area. For example, some humanitarian aid workers may choose their location, while others will be relocated according to organizational need. Moreover, while religious missionaries may have greater interaction with locals than other expatriates (see Navara & James, 2002), their faith commitment means sometimes accepting postings into areas of civil conflict. However, it is also recognized that not all corporate employees necessarily have a choice (or feel that they have a choice) in accepting or rejecting an assignment. Indeed, some research (see Bolino, 2007; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002) has suggested that if employees reject an offer of an international assignment that it can be perceived as lack of organizational commitment and affect their future promotion prospects or other opportunities. However, in direct contrast military *career* expatriates must willingly accept relocation as part of their commitment to active military service.

Depending on the nature of the military assignment (as driven by organizational needs) in conjunction with the individual’s own specific training and position (e.g. special forces, diplomatic corps, intelligence), the military expatriate may be required to undertake multiple short-term international assignments (STIAs) (Crowley-Henry & Heaslip, 2014) or they may occupy any one of the three categories of expatriate manager roles (propatriate, flexpatriate, and expatriate) characterized by a focused commitment on the organization (see McPhail, Fisher, Harvey, & Moeller, 2012). Successful career military personnel ‘sign on’ to a 20-year+ career, thus a commitment to the organization must be made early. Lastly, during a time of war, military personnel are generally unaccompanied by spouse/family when deployed and are rotated out of a combat setting every 12 to 18 months and returned stateside due to the psychological and physical demands of serving in an area under ‘hostile fire or imminent danger’ (National Research Council, 2012).

### 2.2. Female expatriation and female military expatriates

A 25-year meta-analysis of female expatriation conducted by Altman and Shortland (2008) reported that three key trends continue to be considered barriers to women’s expatriation, namely: perceived resistance from the host country to accepting women in managerial roles; organizational resistance to selecting women and limited support when working internationally; and women’s own disinterest in taking international assignments. Other studies (Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010; Mäkelä, Känslä, & Suutari, 2011) suggest that while on assignment women may experience different or additional

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