

The Army's drive to address equality in uniforms and personal equipment

By Donna Edwards, TACOM Public Affairs June 1, 2022



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We live in a time of diversity and, like all of society, the Army is changing to accommodate the needs of the individual Soldier. While the Army has provided uniforms for the female Soldier since the World War I, the pace of change is accelerating. Females now compose over 15% of today's active-duty force. Army Chief of Staff, General James McConville, has put the motto behind the mission quite clearly, "Our people are the centerpiece of the Army."

To properly provide for this 'centerpiece,' each Soldier needs to be outfitted as an individual from the first day of basic training to the end of their military career. An Army uniform is more than a simple necessity, it gives every Soldier the opportunity to present a professional appearance while out of the

battle space, and provide safety, protection, and the ability to perform their duties in a combat environment. Matching the uniform to the warfighter, is a crucial element in the command structure because the Army understands that fairness is a critical component and an effective part of leadership.

A major part of this push for re-design of both uniforms and equipment is going beyond treating each Soldier in a gender-neutral fashion to gathering the information and creating new designs to address the issues raised by gender-specific requirements.

Providing uniforms to Soldiers is the job of the U.S. Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command (TACOM) and one of its key providers is the Peckham Vocational Industries facility in Lansing, Michigan. At this facility, listed by Fortune magazine as one of the best medium-sized companies to work for, workers ship Army uniforms to units around the world.

According to Tom Minich, vice president of logistics for Peckham, “We’ve been honored to serve as a 3rd party logistics provider for the U.S Army for almost a decade and ship over 20 million items annually to service members around the globe. We hire people with disabilities and other barriers to employment who may not otherwise have access to meaningful, stable jobs. Approximately 60% of our workforce has a psychiatric or emotional impairment disorder and we pride ourselves in being very intentional about hiring veterans – 42% of our staff, including myself, are veterans.”

A Brief Look at the Long History of Army Uniforms

For almost 250 years, what an American Soldier wore has been a matter of importance to the nation and the military command. The Continental Army was created on June 14, 1775, and in the beginning, uniforms were modeled on those of our allies and enemies, the French and British. In 1779, Army uniforms were standardized, and that regulation lasted until the Civil War when the enlisted Soldier’s uniform was redesigned. At the beginning of World War I, the Army created new M1910 service uniforms, which were the first divided between winter uniforms of olive drab green wool and a summer version made of khaki cotton.

In 1778, Molly Pitcher took over her husband’s cannon when he fell at the Battle of Monmouth and, indeed, women have fought for America since its earliest days. It was not until World War I that women serving in the Army (or in auxiliary units like the WACs and WAVES) wore uniforms, according to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History exhibit, “Dames Collection of World War I Women’s Uniforms.” Generally, these were “feminized” versions of men’s uniforms.

The first Army uniform designed for a female body was created in 1950, when the Army asked Hattie Carnegie, a fashion designer, to restyle the Women's Army Corps service uniform. The uniform became the standard for WACs in 1951. It was followed in March 1956 by the very first female green service uniform.

In past decades, as women have moved into every military specialty-including combat arms-the US Army, along with the other military services, has undertaken radical changes in the way their uniforms and equipment should be designed and fitted. In the beginning, some of these changes were haphazard and too often based on a gender-neutral standard but in 2009, the Army undertook the task of designing an Army Combat Uniform specifically for women.

Welcome Changes for Female Soldier

Although there have been many changes in fit and fabric over the past years, several major redesigns stand out.

In 2013, the service developed and made available an alternate Army combat uniform that was intended to provide a more functional, and comfortable, fit for female Soldiers who were not well served by a unisex uniform which is issued in NATO standard sizes. In 2020, the Army made uniforms in an alternate size format a standard issue for female Soldiers, instead of providing it only for optional purchase.

Today, as the number of women in the Army continues to increase, with the active-duty force over 15% female, the Army has responded in a way that shows that it values the women in its ranks. The Improved Hot Weather Combat Uniform is a state-of-the art, fast-drying jungle and hot climate uniform that the Army issued for all Soldiers in 2020. In 2021, just a few months after the unisex version was tested and introduced, a version to fit females, based on the test data used for the unisex fit, was designed and issued.

Women were integrated into the US military in 1948 but until 1970, if a Soldier became pregnant, she was automatically discharged. With the creation of an all-volunteer military force, this practice was discontinued, and for decades, the Army has offered maternity uniforms in both formal and combat versions. However, it was not always a standard uniform requirement and female Soldiers had to purchase it as an option. Now each pregnant Soldier is given three sets of maternity uniforms at no charge when she requests them. In 2022, a special undershirt for nursing and a maternity physical fitness uniform will be available.

Perhaps nowhere does the female body differ more from a “standard” male body than in the shape of the torso. Before women Soldiers deploying to Afghanistan in 2012 were issued the Female Improved Outer Tactical Vest (FIOTV), 85% of female soldiers were issued a small size of the standard unisex IOTV. Studies found that the vest, designed for the average male, restricted women’s movement, and even hampered shouldering a rifle. The FIOTV was designed to be more comfortable, more likely to be worn, and thus more protective for female Soldiers.

In 2018, the Army approved the Modular Scalable Vest (MSV), an entirely new body armor system that weighs less, allows freer movement, and is adjustable to any body type or size. Because of this flexibility, the MSV is now available to both female and male Soldiers.

The Female Urinary Directional Device does not have an inspiring name, but it does allow increased flexibility for female Soldiers living in combat environments or operating in armored vehicles for extended periods. This device, introduced in 2014, reduces inconvenience and the risk of urinary tract infections for female Soldiers.

Leaning Forward

When Soldiers are issued uniforms at the beginning of their careers, they are given an “Army standard issue” item for most things they will need. For non-issued items like sports bras and running shoes, the Army now provides each female Soldier a \$199 debit card, which allows them to select and purchase the items that meet their personal preferences.

The Army is aware of the significant improvements in active wear technology and its increasing cost on the open market. An all-female panel is currently meeting to decide if female Soldiers should be given additional money for underwear during basic training.

Looking ahead, in 2021 the Army implemented data analytics into its uniform modernization plan. At the same time, the Anthropometric Survey of U.S. Army Personnel database (ANSUR II) was updated. The ANSUR II uses 93 measurements and 3D scans of the human body, both male and female, to achieve the ultimate fit for tomorrow’s Soldiers in body armor, uniforms, backpacks, and even vehicle seats.

Maj. Gen. Darren Werner, commanding general of the U.S. Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command, stated, “By providing proper-fitting uniforms for female Soldiers, we are able to save them money while reinforcing our commitment to them as part of the Army family.”

He went on to say, "All Soldiers are important to the Army, and the efforts that we are making to be inclusive and to design uniforms for every body shape and size is an important part of putting people first. This is no longer the Army of the 1970s, '80s or '90s. This is an Army that embraces diversity, respects differences and appreciates the uniqueness of every Soldier regardless of gender."

As the Army continues to lean forward in creating uniforms and equipment designed to meet the needs of the Soldiers of today and tomorrow, TACOM will do its part by ensuring that every uniform processed through the Peckham Vocational Industries facility is properly designed and fitted for the individual Soldier and sent to wherever Soldiers stand guard over our nation's freedom.