

## Operation Overwatch

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*Megan Gemar*

*Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this article, U.S. Army CPT Megan Gemar suggests a comprehensive program to address the concerning female retention rates in the Army and build inter-service connections amongst women.*

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In the wake of the [Independent Review](#) of recent incidents at Fort Hood, the U.S. Army has realized the lack of trust in senior leaders and the organization that occurs under suboptimal command climates. In the Army today, average female soldier retention across all ranks is [five percent](#) lower than their male colleagues. Systemic organizational diversity gaps like this threaten our national security by widening the civil-military divide and limiting contributions to national defense. A US Army-created and -fostered program of supplemental training and mentorship for female soldiers would be an internal investment to reap leadership rewards and increase retention at a low cost.

The Army is not the only large organization to experience gender-specific talent leakage. The Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) sector suffers from a similar gap. Deficiencies include women in leadership positions, women-to-women mentorship, widespread societal support for women entering the career field, early educational development in the field of interest, and instructional materials created from a female perspective. Fortune 500 companies have realized the need to address these concerns and are repositioning to support independent organizations that increase female involvement in STEM, such as [Girls Who Code](#), [WiSE](#), and [Women Who Code](#). These three nonprofits effectively support women in STEM from childhood through their professional lives. The Army is in a position to apply lessons from these programs to support women retention in its ranks from their first day to their last. This article proposes a program designed from these best practices.

The program, herein referred to as *Operation Overwatch*, includes supplemental online training tailored for female soldiers and a mentorship program. It begins with a survey to establish a new baseline of the initial-entry soldier's understanding and familiarity with "ten level tasks" (the infantry basics all Privates must know) prior to the instructional portion of Army basic training. Today's recruits, and particularly women recruits, are less likely than previous generations to have experience in sports and hobbies that might give them a cognitive and performance advantage in Army basic training, e.g. recreational [hunting](#), the [Boy Scouts](#), and [backpacking](#). Expertise in the basics is critical to foster female soldier confidence, ensure competence, and combat gender bias perceptions. Male performance advantages due to childhood background results in inaccurate performance assumptions and negative gender perceptions of female trainees, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy for instructors and leaders. *Operation Overwatch* will include a website with links to a series of online classes, videos, and other training material designed to fill the gap, allowing female recruits to gain a more equal footing when first entering the Army. *Operation Overwatch* will also provide mentorship programs, both in person and remote, to support female soldiers.

Like [Girls Who Code](#), a nonprofit organization supporting women in computer science, the *Overwatch* online portal will be accessible to any female soldier anytime they choose to begin lesson content. Female soldiers will not have to wait for Senior Noncommissioned Officers to train them but can act proactively to get the individual training they feel they need. This provides additional training opportunities for motivated soldiers and eliminates [potential biases](#) in the quantity and quality of their training.

*Operation Overwatch* will also encourage connection with in-person mentors, a successful aspect of the [WiSE](#) collegiate program that encourages women in STEM degree fields. It will foster in-person mentorship communities specific to each Army post, in which members can use the online platform to plan and schedule on-post and off-post meetings, panels, and mentorship sessions. In-person mentorship will aid DoD efforts to increase retention and support women, especially those in combat arms branches. These branches have been slow to cross the [30 percent changeover point](#), a term coined by a comprehensive RAND study which indicated a 30 percent women population would be necessary at the lowest unit level to ensure a safe and mission-effective working environment for women soldiers. While the Army endeavors to increase women's recruiting, *Operation Overwatch* will bridge the gap; creating a network of mentorship and comradery for women soldier support when lacking in certain specialties and locations.

In adopting structures from [Women Who Code](#), a nonprofit supporting woman in technology careers, *Operation Overwatch* will create a platform for online mentorship. *Overwatch* will act as matchmaker, matching volunteer mentors with mentees. This curated volunteer system will increase trust between women soldiers and higher command echelons and fill the gap when person to person mentorship opportunities is limited. Unfortunately for organizations as large as the Army, one bad interaction with a senior leader can cause lack of retention and early career exit. By establishing a virtual mentorship platform targeting women soldiers, the Army could increase the number and quality of touchpoints the average soldier has to "higher command."

The Army has failed to capitalize on the potential benefits of leveraging technology to expanding the very definition of command climate. Soldiers, Noncommissioned Officers, and Junior Officers need more support from the Army. The Army cannot afford to offer a sink or swim approach to personnel management. It threatens our ability to maintain civilian-military relations and poses a national security danger as well. We need innovative new programs, like *Operation Overwatch*, to increase and expand access to tailored training opportunities and high-quality mentorship.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author. They do not represent people, institutions, or organizations with which the author is associated and are not intended to malign any person or group.*

## Author

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