

DRAFTING FEMALE SOLDIERS?

Court ruling spurs discussion about role of women

BY MARTIN C. EVANS
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A federal court ruling that an all-male draft is unconstitutional has veterans on Long Island reassessing the role of women in the military.

In his decision last month, U.S. District Court Judge Gray H. Miller cited the Pentagon's current policy of allowing women to serve in combat. If women can stand on the front lines, he wrote, they also can be drafted.

The draft is formally called the Selective Service System.

"I'm an equal opportunist," said Kareem Buckley, of Hempstead, an Army veteran who has two school-age daughters. "At the same time, I don't want my daughters in harm's way. You don't put women in front of you."

Catina Johnson, of East Mea-

dow, the wife of a Marine and the mother of three daughters, agreed with the judge.

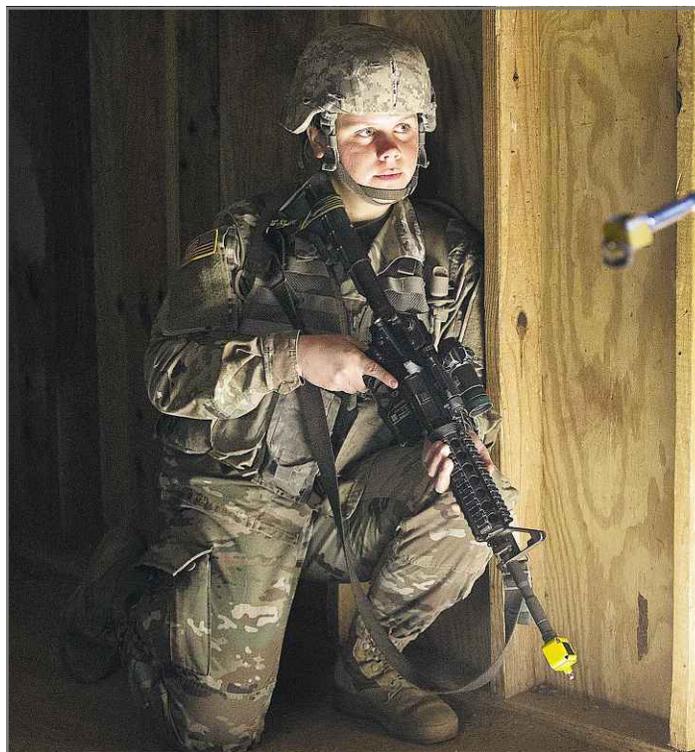
"We're U.S. citizens, too," she said. "I think it would stop a lot of the debate over whether women are equal."

Huntington native Alison Bardeguez has served 13 years in the Marines, first on active-duty and now as a reservist.

Women in uniform, she said, already are at as much risk as their male counterparts. She knows of several women who have been injured in combat.

"So to me, it's a misconception many people have that women don't already serve just like men," said Bardeguez, who belongs to a women veterans group based in Long Beach. "And equality is equality."

The draft, first instituted during the Civil War, ended in 1973 as the Vietnam War wound down. In 1980, Congress passed a law still in place that requires all men ages 18 to 26 to register with the Selective Service System. Those who don't comply risk 5 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. The lawsuit that re-



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sulted in Miller's ruling came in 2013 from the National Coalition of Men, which argued that the draft's men-only requirement violates the Fifth Amendment's due process clause.

The government countered that Congress should have the last word in establishing the military and that the draft was already under review by a congressional commission.

Miller wrote that Congress relied on "assumptions and overly broad stereotypes" about women in combat when it imposed the men-only requirement.

"Combat roles no longer uniformly require sheer size or muscle," Miller wrote in a footnote.

In August 2015, two women made history by graduating from the U.S. Army Ranger School, a

two-month course that is mentally and physically grueling. That December, the Obama administration opened up combat roles to women. The military's evolution has made the male-only draft requirement obsolete, said Annette Tucker-Osborne, a retired Army colonel who served nearly 30 years.

When Tucker-Osborne joined the service in 1984, she trained for battle. There was never the expectation, though, that women would be placed in combat roles.

"Now, they can be on the front line, firing a rifle right on next to a man," said Tucker-Osborne, who once oversaw a nurses corps during a Middle East deployment.

"And there have been plenty of female soldiers who have died in the line of duty," she said. "So

there is nothing I can see that would preclude women from being in the draft."

Cynthia Ventura, of Selden, is a past president of Blue Star Mothers of America, a national organization for parents of military personnel. She had two sons serve. One died of a drug reaction eight years ago at a Marine air station in San Diego, where he was being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ventura wonders why women should be exempt from having to serve, especially during war, when they already play all kinds of combat roles — from infantry soldier to fighter pilot.

"It seems very sexist to me that they would just do a draft for men," Ventura said. "We already have women serving, so it doesn't seem fair."

Bellone seeks to hire outside lawyers for probe

BY RICK BRAND
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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, who called last month for a probe of former civil service head Alan Schneider, will seek a waiver Wednesday to hire outside attorneys to conduct an inquiry, even though Schneider has since retired.

Without mentioning Schneider by name, county attorney Dennis Brown asked the three-member waiver committee to authorize the hiring of the Manhat-

tan-based law firm of Littler Mendelson for an "employment-related investigation into discrimination." Jason Elan, Bellone's spokesman, would say only that the probe involves "a personnel issue in civil service." Schneider declined to comment.

In his request, Brown said his staff had no one "with the requisite expertise" to adequately represent the county. Due to the "highly sensitive nature of such an investigation it would be in the county's best interest

to retain an outside law firm," he said.

When the issue first arose, Bellone said in comments released by aides that "allegations have come forward that have prompted serious concern." Bellone said he would order the hiring of an outside counsel to conduct an independent investigation of Schneider.

Schneider, a 36-year county veteran whose most recent six-year term ran out Feb. 12, had maintained he legally remained a holdover in the civil service

job until Bellone nominated, and the county legislature confirmed, a successor.

Bellone named Jo-Anne Taormina as the county's new personnel officer Feb. 15, and Schneider was ordered out.

State Supreme Court Justice Joseph Santorelli issued a temporary court order Feb. 25, reinstating Schneider in a lawsuit brought by Brookhaven and Babylon towns. Hours later, Schneider announced his resignation. That was not long after Bellone referred to the unspeci-

fied allegation.

Brown, in his waiver request, said five firms specializing in employment investigations and disputes were solicited in a request for qualifications, and the county got four responses and interviewed two firms. The committee gives county agencies waivers from state requirements for competitive bidding.

Brown said Littler Mendelson had the "most impressive record" and said its rates, from \$370 to \$621 per hour, are "fair and competitive."