
Herstory – Female Veterans of Denmark

BY SARA LA COUR, SEBASTIAN MOHR
AND MARIE HALD

“For me the military was a stepping stone to become a police officer. I remember when I was sent to the military base on Bornholm, before I joined the unit there, the man who gave me the spot, he actually laughed a bit, like: Good luck! And I didn’t understand why at the time. But then, when I arrived, I understood: I was the first woman in the unit.” (Anika, a police officer. She was a private in the army and left the military shortly after returning from deployment to Afghanistan.)

“When I became a sergeant, I remember my mom called me and told me that my grandfather had quietly passed away during the night. And I only replied: Okay, but I have an exercise tomorrow. I can’t deal with that now! I was so tough. I had developed this tough mentality and had such a hard time distinguishing between the vulnerable Maria and the military MK, my initials and military nickname. I mean, they tested me all the time. I like to think that they did that because they thought I was good and that I could become even better. But I have a feeling they al-

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so did it because I was a woman.” (Maria, a sergeant first class in the army, has served for 12 years. At the moment Maria is a university student.)

The Danish Armed Forces often pride themselves in being an inclusive and diverse workplace that offers the same possibilities for everyone. When looking at the armed forces’ official account of its progress regarding gender equality and diversity since 1962, the year in which women were first allowed to officially serve in selected military positions, this seems to be the case (Forsvarskommando 2015). This account paints the picture of an organization committed to do away with institutional barriers that might hinder women, lesbians and gay men, and ethnic minorities from serving in the military. This commitment earned the armed forces the so-called MIA-PRISEN in 2011, an award given by the Danish Institute for Human Rights to organizations that actively work towards more equal and diverse workplaces.

However, when looking at official numbers from the Danish Armed Forces on who actually serves, this apparent commitment to gender equality and diversity appears different. While there undoubtedly has been an increase in women serving as soldiers over the last ten years – in 2007, five percent of all military personnel were women, in 2018 this number rose to a little bit more than seven percent – this increase can hardly be called significant (Personalestyrelsen 2018). The story of gender equality and diversity in the Danish Armed Forces is thus more complicated than what official accounts can convey. Despite attempts at the opposite, female soldiers continue to be othered by a gendered ideal of the good soldier as Beate Sløk-Andersen remarks in her overview of women’s access to the Danish Armed Forces (2014, 23).

“Being a female soldier, you can make your womanhood invisible to some extent; wearing short hair, no make-up, and duct tape on your boobs, you know, blend in among your male colleagues. But a pregnancy is quite impossible to hide and makes your womanhood really visible. It was a challenge, not only for my colleagues but also for me, not being able to perform the same as before. In 2001, I gave birth to my second child, and when I got a letter to deploy in 2005, I felt torn: I am the mother of two small girls but I am also a professional soldier. Being a mom and a soldier. You are not a hero when you leave your children for serving abroad.” (Gitte is a social worker. She was a specialist in the army and served for 12 years.)

Working groups, policies, and initiatives aimed at targeting (gender) discrimination and sexual harassment have been numerous throughout the last 30 years of the Danish Armed Forces. Yet even in times of #MeToo, activist soldiers and veterans committed to raise consciousness about these issues are met with requests to not overdo the argument that gender discrimination, sexism, and sexual harassment are a defining part of women’s experiences in the Danish military. And even though high ranking military officials participate in annual pride parades in the capital Copenhagen and while collaborations between the armed forces and anti-xenophobic initiatives exist, homophobia and racism still constitute a definite part of the military’s organizational culture, its educational programs, and not least its shared social spaces as the experiences of LGBTQ individuals and ethnic minorities among Danish soldiers attest.

The various experiences of persisting discrimination, inequality, and harassment in the Danish Armed Forces led to the founding of the Danish association for female veterans, *Kvindelige Veteraner*, in 2017; the first of its kind in Scandinavia. The objective of *Kvindelige Veteraner* is to provide women, who have served in the Danish

military, a space where they can meet, exchange experiences, and work towards a better everyday life and well-being of female veterans.

“For me, the association meant that I was able to come home. Suddenly there was a place that anchored me. I felt safe, and I felt welcome with all that I am and that I was. It’s a place where I feel equal without reservation. The association is about finding peace, peace of mind, and a place to relax. Maybe because I was afraid of being rejected or that someone would take my truth away from me, I didn’t share my experiences with a lot of people. But now I want to share my experiences because no woman should have to look down on herself or devalue herself because she chose to become a soldier. That choice doesn’t reflect a woman’s poor judgement. On the contrary, joining the military shows her incredible strength and willpower” (Gitte).

In Denmark, the term *veteran* is an officially defined policy term that was coined in 2010 when the country’s first so-called veteran policy was made public (Forsvarsministeriet). As a policy term, the status of a veteran regulates access to welfare benefits. A veteran is defined as a person who has been sent on at least one international deployment for more than 28 consecutive days, regardless of whether that person is still employed by the military or not after deployment (Veteranceret 2018). The Danish Veteran Center puts the current number of all veterans in Denmark at around 60.000, and while there are no official numbers of how many of these are women, *Kvindelige Veteraner* estimates this number to be about 2.500.

What unites the members of *Kvindelige Veteraner* is the experience of being othered due to their gender, of not fitting into the traditional image of a male soldier. Sexual harassment and, in some cases, also sexual violence are aspects of military life,

which the members of *Kvindelige Veteraner* are familiar with as well. *Kvindelige Veteraner* is an initiative by women for women, for some the association can also be an eye-opener.

“For me it has been a real eye opener: I am not alone! I can learn from other women’s experiences. It has also given me the opportunity to participate in and be part of a community of people that understand me and the circumstances I’ve been in better than any other person. Even though I’m still skeptical at times and sometimes struggle a bit to trust people, I know that in the long run my life will benefit a lot from this” (Maria).

As such a space, *Kvindelige Veteraner* might be read as part of a feminist tradition of consciousness raising and biographical introspection that leads back to at least the 1960s (Sarachild 1970). At that time, women across different countries and institutional arenas realized that they shared the experience of living in a patriarchal and at times violent society. Yet rather than accepting the position of the helpless victim, these women decided to transform their experiences into a collective feminist consciousness that could assert social and political efficacy. This approach to building fertile grounds for feminist critique and activism is still well and alive today (Davies et al. 2006; Firth and Robinson 2016). Even if *Kvindelige Veteraner* has not directly been inspired by such feminist consciousness raising as a particular method, the association nonetheless joins the fight for social transformation that willful feminist *killjoys* (Ahmed 2010a; 2010b; 2014) have been committed to for so many years.

“To me, *Kvindelige Veteraner* is so important. We are not against men and that’s important to emphasize, but war affects us all differently, and *Kvindelige Veteraner* is a place where I can mirror some of the things I have struggled with. I think it is important for our

well-being that we have a place where we can recognize ourselves in others and where we can support each other and lift each other up when it is needed” (Anika).

Kvindelige Veteraner addresses the issue of an institutional military culture defined by what has been termed *military masculinity* (Belkin 2012). In such a context, female soldiers often have to erase their womanhood in order to be able to embody the masculinized ideal of the good soldier. In many cases, female soldiers even develop an ambivalence to their gender self-image due to this dynamic, which then may lead to an internal feeling of disunity that has negative effects on their well-being. In 2006, Anika was deployed to Afghanistan as part of the first squad in the Helmand province. Anika was the only woman in the unit.

“My experience in the army was that of being very lonely. Even though I was surrounded by men all the time, I felt very alone. I felt like I had to watch my back at all times, who I talked to and for how long, to prevent misunderstandings and rumours. That, unfortunately, resulted in very superficial relations to my colleagues. Being the only woman in my unit on Bornholm and in Afghanistan, I didn’t have anyone to share my experiences of being a woman with. When I look back on that time, I felt like I needed to do everything with a 300 percent effort, not 100 percent, but 300. I did that, I think, because I was competing with my male colleagues in everything; exercise, marches, just everything. I mirrored myself in men. I felt that I needed to over-perform in everything that I did in order to show that I was worth my space. When I look back, maybe it was only in my head, but I would never give up, never! And even though I haven’t been as pressured as I was when I was in Afghanistan and probably never will be again, I wouldn’t change it. It is part of who I am today” (Anika).

Being asked during the interview what she

would say to her younger self when joining the military, Maria said:

“I feel that I get really emotional thinking about that because I have been very hard on myself. While there is nothing I regret, I am still sad that I didn’t trust myself and the abilities that I have more than I did. I focussed too much on the critique I got, probably also because I tried to improve myself, and therefore I was less supportive of myself. So, if I had to say something to my younger self today, it would probably be: ‘Trust yourself, trust yourself, trust yourself!’ so many times so that I wouldn’t have to convince myself anymore. And I would say: ‘You are good enough, you are giving your best, every time!’” (Maria).

Certain aspects of military culture can do harm to female soldiers, and *Kvindelige Veteraner* wishes to give voice to and raise awareness about women’s experiences in the military. At the same time, *Kvindelige Veteraner* insists upon that being a victim in this sense does not mean that women in the military are without the ability to act on their own behalf. Rather, female soldiers develop different ways of protecting themselves from experiences of discrimination. While some women try to blend in as one of the boys by playing along with military masculinity, others report instances of harassment and discrimination, while still others might seek protection from harassment and/or sexual violence by engaging in intimate relationships with high-ranking male officers or the stereotypical ‘alpha-male’ in a unit. Here gender as a relation of power simultaneously binds women to particular modes of oppression on the one side while also enabling them to make authoritative decisions to care for themselves and others on the other. In spite of the Danish military’s official mantra that ‘a soldier is a soldier’ and that gender does not make a difference, *Kvindelige Veteraner* insists that gender does matter.

“Back in 1993 when I started, there were not a lot of women in combat units. Therefore I and the other women started in a so-called ‘test unit’, which also meant that we were quite a lot of girls. But many of them didn’t continue on like I did. I ended up in a tank unit, which deployed to Bosnia in 1995. Because we were a fixed unit and were working on a tank, we really depended on each person to make it work. We treated everyone equally and knew each other like family. As I remember it, it was the best time. I really had found what I was looking for in that unit. Unfortunately in 1998, I lost all that when I got pregnant with my first child and had to leave that unit” (Gitte).

Yet while a shared consciousness of what it means to be a woman in the military unites the association’s members in their movement, it is also important for them that the diversity of their experiences is reflected in the association’s discussions, initiatives, and activities. The association’s main political objective of bettering the well-being of female veterans can only ever be achieved when differences among women (and men) in the Danish Armed Forces are acknowledged. In this sense, *Kvindelige Veteraner* faces the same challenges as feminist activism has for some time, namely to unite women (and men) for social action against gender discrimination while also confronting the differences among women (and men) due to each person’s intersectional positioning in social space.

Having existed for roughly a year, *Kvindelige Veteraner* is still finding its form driven by the dedication and energy of women like Anika, Gitte, and Maria, who constitute the association through their membership. This essay is meant to honor that commitment and dedication. The accompanying photographs by Marie Hald provide a visual reflection of a feminist inspired photographer’s meeting with members of *Kvindelige Veteraner*. Anika, Gitte, and Maria were asked to pick items and a

place that they connect to their time in the military and/or deployments. The portraits thus consist of a photograph and each woman’s own reflection on what we can see in the specific picture. Taken together, this essay, the photographs, and Anika’s, Gitte’s, and Maria’s reflections make for portraits of what it means to be a soldier, a veteran, and a woman in Denmark today, a piece of herstory that we hope will move other women to share their stories as well.

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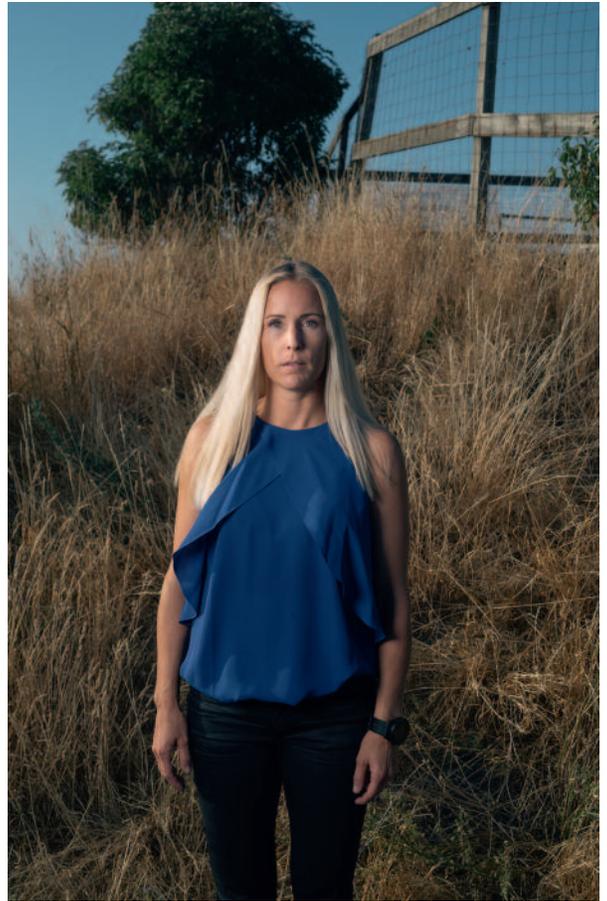
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Anika

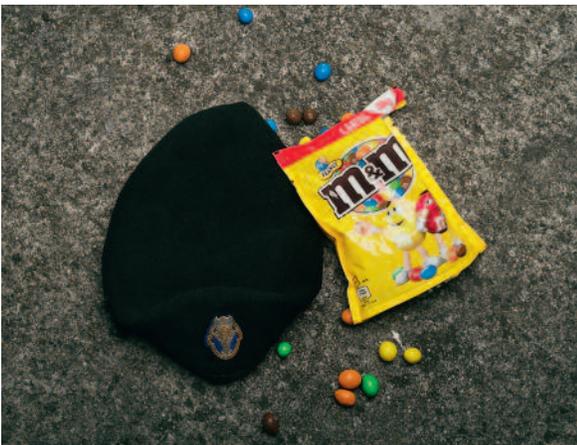
PLACE

We are at Dragør-fort, but any place with a view of the sea would work actually. The sea very much represents my journey. While it now is a place where I can dream and a place of joy, it used to represent a deeply felt sadness. But today I can sit here and be happy instead of lonely. Being part of a minority in the army, I sought acknowledgement to feel I was okay. But trying to blend in with my male colleagues, trying to hide my womanhood, I became this grey thing. I had to reflect on my time in the army and in Afghanistan, really look back on it and take responsibility for what happened. It was a journey characterized by a lot of self-criticism and unrealistic expectations towards what I was able to perform. I will never become a man, and today I'm happy about that. Today, I'm proud of having served and I'm proud of being a strong woman.



ITEMS

I didn't know what to bring along that would be big enough to accommodate the entire palette of different experiences that I connect with the military. But I brought the beret, which is a hat every soldier has. Its colour and badge tell you which part of the military you belong to. To me, it also illustrates a dilemma; on the one hand it is connected to feeling proud to be part of this specific scout unit on Bornholm, but, on the other hand, it also reminds me of never really feeling accepted as the woman and soldier I was and therefore also not really



being part of my unit. The bag of M&M's is just a funny thing, or maybe it's not funny at all actually. Somehow it represents a serious side of war. I had a bag of M&M's with me to Afghanistan, to comfort me in difficult situations. Every time I looked at it, I thought: 'Okay, now it's really bad. I need some!' But then I thought: 'No. It will be even tougher later! You will need them even more then!', which led to that the bag of M&M's returned home with me unopened even though we all came home 10 kilos lighter than when we left.



Gitte

PLACE

I left the army three years after Iraq. I needed an intellectual addition to it all. I was looking for something that could provide me with insights beyond my own personal experiences and subjective feelings, something like: ‘Okay, this is science. This is actually not up for discussion. And then it doesn’t matter whether you’re man or a woman. This is science, period.’ I delved into psychological books. The library, therefore, symbolizes my process of returning home to myself after many years of having to hide my womanhood in order to be part of the military community. It relieved me and made me understand. Why do we do what we do, act the way we act psychologically? Through the books, I experienced a lot of healing.

ITEMS

The backpack has been with me to Bosnia and Iraq, but it also symbolizes all the things that I had to carry about with me since then. Luckily it gets easier every day. To be honest, the medals don’t mean that much to me. But for my daughters, the medals are proof: ‘Once our mother was a soldier. Our hero!’ To me the picture of my daughters, the correspondence with my family, and the articles from my time abroad in Iraq, are the concrete proof of my military service. In Iraq, I carried a small bag with my military ID and the pictures of my daughters close to my chest. That bag symbolizes my double role and division between being a soldier and being a mother. So much from that time in my life has vanished, but the pictures, the correspondence, these things help me to put together a picture of that time in my life. I have forgotten what people said, I have forgotten what happened, but I have never forgotten, how it all made me feel.



Maria

PLACE

The recreation area in Slagelse, called Lystskoven, is very important to me, both in a good and in a bad way. I fought my battles here, but here I also healed. There are always two sides of the coin. Having a hard time coming home from war with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression as is happening to me now, that can hit everyone.



ITEMS

My dad sent me an iron box while I was in Afghanistan. I have kept it because it bears a message that actually represents my mixed feelings about all of this. It reads 'MK Andersen', which represents my military identity, but it also reads 'I love you skattepige [darling girl]', which kind of represents my vulnerable side as Maria. I collect items like others write a diary. The box contains stuff from my mission that bear a special meaning for me; my dog tag, pictures of my family, bracelets we made in the camp. Making the bracelets felt like being away from the dangerous world we were in. And now they remind me of the strong companionship we shared. The bottle contains a piece of Afghanistan. I filled it with the smooth sand, which played such a big role. It was everywhere just like war was everywhere.

