

AN OFFICER AND A FEMINIST

James M. Dubik

I'm a member of a last bastion of male chauvinism. I'm an infantry officer, and there are no women in the infantry. I'm a Ranger and no women go to Ranger School. I'm a member of America's special operation forces—and there, although women are involved in intelligence, planning and clerical work, only men can be operators, or "shooters." Women can become paratroopers and jump out of airplanes alongside me yet not many do. All this is as it should be, according to what I learned while growing up. Not many women I knew in high school and college in the 60s and early 70s pushed themselves to their physical or mental limits or had serious career dreams of their own. If they did, few talked about them. So I concluded they were exceptions to the rule. Then two things happened. First, I was assigned to West Point, where I became a philosophy instructor. Second, my two daughters grew up. I arrived at the Academy with a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and a graduation certificate from the U S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. I was ready to teach, but instead, I was the one who got an education. The women cadets, in the classroom and out, did not fit my stereotype of female behavior. They took themselves and their futures seriously. They persevered in a very competitive environment. Often they took charge and seized control of a situation. They gave orders; they were punctual and organized. They played sports hard. They survived, even thrived, under real pressure. During field exercises, women cadets were calm and unemotional even when they were dirty, cold, wet, tired and hungry. They didn't fold or give up. Most important, such

conduct

seemed natural to them. From my perspective all this was extraordinary; to them

it was ordinary. While I had read a good bit of "feminist literature" and, intellectually, accepted many of the arguments against stereotyping, this was the

first time my real-life experience supported such ideas. And seeing is believing.

Enter two daughters: Kerith, 12; Katie, 10. Kerith and Katie read a lot, and they

write, too—poems, stories, paragraphs and answers to "thought questions" in

school. In what they read and in what they write, I can see their adventurousness, their inquisitiveness and their ambition. They discover clues

and solve mysteries. They take risks, brave dangers, fight villains—and prevail.

Their schoolwork reveals their pride in themselves. Their taste for reading is

boundless; they're interested in everything. "Why?" is forever on their lips. Their

eyes are set on personal goals that they, as individuals, aspire to achieve:

Olympic gold, owning their own business, public office.

2

Both play sports. I've witnessed a wholesome, aggressive, competitive spirit born

in Kerith. She played her first basketball season last year, and when she started,

she was too polite to bump anyone, too nice to steal anything, especially if some

other girl already had the ball. By the end of the season, however, Kerith was

taking bumps and dishing them out. She plays softball with the intensity of a

Baltimore Oriole. She rides and jumps her horse in competitive shows. Now she

"can't imagine" not playing a sport, especially one that didn't have a little

rough play and risk.

In Katie's face, I've seen Olympic intensity as she passed a runner in the last 50

yards of a mile relay. Gasping for air, knees shaking, lungs bursting, she dipped

into her well of courage and "gutted out" a final kick. Her comment after the race:

"I kept thinking I was Mary Decker beating the Russians." For the first time she experienced the thrill of pushing herself to the limit. She rides and jumps, too. And her basketball team was a tournament champion. The joy and excitement and pride that shone in the eyes of each member of the team was equal to that in any NCAA winner's locker room. To each sport Katie brings her dedication to doing her best, her drive to excel and her desire to win. Both girls are learning lessons that, when my wife and I were their age, were encouraged only in boys. Fame, aggressiveness, achievement, self-confidence—these were territories into which very few women (the exception, not the rule) dared enter. Kerith and Katie, most of their friends, many of their generation and the generations to come are redefining the social game. Their lives contradict the stereotypes with which I grew up. Many of the characteristics I thought were "male" are, in fact, "human." Given a chance, anyone can, and will, acquire them. My daughters and the girls of their generation are lucky. They receive a lot of institutional support not available to women of past generations: from women executives, women athletes, women authors, women politicians, women adventurers, women Olympians. Old categories, old stereotypes and old territories don't fit the current generation of young women; and they won't fit the next generation, either. As Kerith said, "I can't even imagine not being allowed to do something or be something just because I am a girl." All this does not negate what I knew to be true during my own high school and college years. But what I've learned from both the women cadets at West Point and from my daughters supports a different conclusion about today's women and the women of tomorrow from the beliefs I