

A decade into war, body armor gets curves



Mark Humphrey/AP - Spec. Sarah Sutphin removes her new body armor after training in Fort Campbell, Ky. Female soldiers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division are field-testing the first Army body armor designed to fit women's physiques.

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To put it bluntly, the problem boiled down to hips and breasts. Over the past decade, as female U.S. troops were placed in de facto front-line roles in Iraq and Afghanistan, they were often encumbered by the weight and shape of body armor designed for men.

As the war in Afghanistan draws to a close, the military this fall is finally rolling out a new generation of body armor that includes his and hers models. Women who have patrolled, fought and taken cover wearing ill-fitting vests are ecstatic about the new gear, which is shorter and designed for narrower torsos. Some see it as welcome but inexcusably late.

Sgt. Bobbie Crawford, who is 5 feet 6 inches and weighs just over 100 pounds, said she struggled to maneuver wearing body armor when she served in Afghanistan in 2010 as part of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division. The vest made it hard to get in and out of vehicles, raise a weapon and crouch down, she said.

“It rubbed on my hips and limited my mobility,” said Crawford, 40, of Paris, Tex., who is among the soldiers who will be testing the new gear in Afghanistan in the coming months. “You definitely had to find a lot of workarounds, you had to learn to become creative.”

Though women are nominally barred from conventional combat jobs in the military, many have been in harm’s way in Iraq and Afghanistan, insurgency wars with no clear front lines. At least 81 female service members have died in hostile incidents in the two wars, according to the Pentagon.

“Female soldiers find themselves doing the same kinds of missions that male soldiers are doing,” said Col. Robert F. Mortlock, the Army’s program manager for soldier protection and individual equipment. “It is incredibly important to optimize their body armor.”

Female soldiers have been complaining for years about the bruising and discomfort caused by standard body armor. Giving women body armor designed for men also made them more vulnerable, military officials said, because it limited their mobility and the Kevlar plates did not always cover the chest snugly.

In 2010, when the generation of body armor currently in use was designed, military officials thought that offering a wider range of sizes would alleviate the problems women were having, Mortlock said. But the complaints kept coming.

Based on that feedback, experts at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center in Massachusetts started working last year on prototypes for vests designed to fit women.

The new female vests, which come in eight sizes, have been tested by roughly 120 soldiers this year.

“It’s a little late,” said Genevieve Chase, the founder and executive director of American Women Veterans, an advocacy group for veterans. “It would have been nice to have had this five, six years ago. But it’s never too late.”

When she posted news of the new vest on the group’s Facebook page, several female soldiers posted comments lamenting how long it took the military to address the problem. She said female service members saw the old vests as an inconvenience in a male-dominated force.

“You kind of get into this mind-set in the military not to ask for anything special,” said Chase, an Army sergeant in the reserves who expects to deploy to Afghanistan next year. “We sort of accept it as part of serving.”

Members of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division’s female engagement teams, which are tasked with assessing the needs of Afghan women, will be the first unit to test the vests in a war zone later this year. Their feedback will be taken into account as the Army contemplates outfitting the entire force with gender-specific protective vests.

Capt. Lindsey Pawlowski, 31, who will command female engagement teams in Afghanistan, said her troops are delighted, particularly because they will be spending long periods outside of bases in dangerous eastern provinces.

“We all like it because it fits,” she said. “Until I got this new set I had no idea how restrictive the old stuff was.”