

# Female Engagement Teams - FETs

**BLUF:** Female Engagement Teams (FETs) is a program that the United States Marines Corps initiated in Afghanistan in 2009. The teams were made up of female volunteer members of appropriate rank, experience, and maturity to establish trust-based and lasting relationships with the Afghan women they encountered on patrols. During the war, Marine FETs deployed in small groups with male infantry units. Their primary mission was to collect information from Afghan families and communicate with women without breaking cultural traditions. Having such a team at its disposal gave Marine forces an added tool in reaching out to the Afghan population ahead of scheduled troop reduction in 2014. The program was disbanded in 2012 but was revived in 2015 to be used both in Afghanistan and Iraq. The program has been highly successful in gathering intelligence and developing a better rapport with the local citizenry.

**LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED:** Justice, **Judgment**, **Dependability**, **Initiative**, **Decisiveness**, **Tact**, Integrity, Endurance, **Bearing**, Unselfishness, **Courage**, **Knowledge**, Loyalty, and **Enthusiasm**.

**SETTING THE STAGE:** Throughout its history, the Marine Corps has carried out humanitarian missions. In China in 1900, the Marines brought food to civilians as famine raged through the countryside. During the Banana Wars, Marines protected civilians caught in the middle of civil strife. This understanding of the needs of local populations carried into its mission in the Middle East and Near East.

Women have been serving with the Marine Corps in combat zones since 1967. When the War on Terror commenced in Afghanistan, the need for ground intelligence was apparent. The problem for ground forces was gaining the trust of local indigenous personnel, especially women in local villages. Because of the cultural taboos that restricted contact between men and women, the barriers seemed unbreakable. The women of the villages, however, were a wealth of information about the surrounding areas. The Marine Corps began to examine female Marines' role in working directly with Afghan women to solve this problem. As a part of the Marine Corps' development of their asymmetrical warfare planning, the concept of "Female Engagement Teams" began to take shape.

**THE STORY:** Beginning in 2009, the development of FETs became a prime directive from the Office of the Commandant. FETs trained in "Shoot, Move and Communicate" exercises, much like their male counterparts. The FETs learned to move and transition fire between their M4 Carbine and M9 Pistol. They are knowledgeable on assembly, disassembly, and shooting of Crew Serve Weapons. Each member is a certified "Combat Life Savors" licensed to use military vehicles before deployment. In addition to their traditional combat training, FET members go through a second phase of training. During this phase, they learn softer skills, such as communication capabilities that make them less intimidating to locals. Mainly they know how to gain the confidence of women and children. The FETs deploy in teams of two or three attached to a battalion, company, or platoon. Though the primary mission was to deploy as a security force, the FET provides the auxiliary function of direct interaction with the local villagers.

The challenges to the women Marines in the FET program have been many. The first obstacle was getting their male counterparts to accept their role as equals in the operations. In the villages, the team members needed to break the traditional roles of women in the eyes of the Afghan people. Developing a rapport with the people took time. The FETs worked diligently to show reliability and dependability to the Afghan people. One additional benefit was that the male members of the villages became more likely to speak to FET members over time than the male Marines. Females have a softer side that makes the males in the villages want to open up to them. The FETs carry their weapons differently, which makes them look less intimidating. Since its inception, FETs have been instrumental in the opening of schools and medical clinics.

In 2012, the Marine Corps FET program was disbanded in Afghanistan. With the increasing role of the Afghan Security Forces in the local villages, it was deemed that the FETs were no longer needed. The program was revived in 2015 as the need for FETs in other parts of the region became more apparent. The program is currently coordinated through the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit based at Camp Pendleton, California.

**AFTERMATH:** Because of the success of the Marine Corps FET program, the U.S. Army developed a FET platform known as the "Lioness" program. Members of Marine FETs have also been used in Iraq and Kuwait to train local police forces. Through their efforts, women have been incorporated into local police forces over the past years. As the humanitarian aspect of the Marine Corps increases, the needs of the FET program have increased at a rapid rate.

## QUESTIONS

1. How do the FETs demonstrate the elements of leadership?
2. In what ways do the FETs fit into the "Three Block Warfare" philosophy of the Marine Corps?
3. Why is the use of FETs necessary as a humanitarian element of the Marine Corps mission?

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