

Women in Combat:
Standardize the Physical Fitness Test

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Women in Combat Arms

Thesis statement

Allowing women who meet the mental and physical combat requirements of the Marine Corps to serve in any military occupational specialty will ensure the military of the future fulfills the expectations of our nation.

Policy

In 1994, after receiving a report from the *Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women to the Armed Forces*, Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Leslie Aspin redefined the Department of Defense (DOD) assignment policy for women in the military. In a memorandum, the SECDEF stated: "personnel can be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground." This memorandum also redefined direct combat on the ground as: "engaging the enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile forces personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect."¹ This definition is indicative of the type of action experienced by female members of the military on the battlefields of Iraq. The policy has not seen significant change since 1994. However, with the increased involvement

¹ U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Subject: Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule: Memorandum*, 1994.

of females in the Global War on Terror, this policy has come under scrutiny by groups such as the Center for Military Readiness (CMR). That organizations president, Elaine Donnelly, was a member of the *Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women to the Armed Forces* and has accused the military of being in violation of the DOD policy put in place in 1994. She alleges that the placement or "collocation" of female soldiers in units designated as "all male combat units" is a violation of the DOD policy that was overlooked by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and continues to be overlooked by the current Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.² The necessity of women in combat units is evidence that the DOD policy on the assignment of women needs to be modified. It is imperative that the Marine Corps initiate a program to physically prepare female Marines for this integration into all Military Occupational Specialties (MOS). The Corps must consider gender integration to be one of its key challenges in the near future.

History

On July 26, 1948 President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981 bringing an end to racial segregation within the ranks of the United States military. Since then many black Americans have proven their ability on the battlefield. A comparison can be made to the current exclusion of women with the previous segregationist policies concerning blacks in the military. The age old arguments of women not being physically capable to perform their duties in combat, destroying unit cohesion and being a distraction to their male counterparts are some of the same arguments used by those opposed to the integrations

²Elaine Donnelly, "Rumsfeld Dithers on Women in Combat," 16 June 2006, <<http://cmrlink.org/WomenInCombat.asp?docID=273>> (4 January 2009).

of blacks into the military. Given the opportunity, and the proper training, women can be successful in any role they are assigned.³

The Corps should use the model of racial integration as a starting point for the policy for gender integration; learning from the mistakes of that policy as well as its successes. It should establish one standard for all Marines regardless of gender. In her book, *Women in the Military: An unfinished Revolution*, Major General Jeanne Holms states, "the bottom line is that no individual, male or female, should be allowed or required to fill any job he or she cannot perform satisfactorily in war for whatever reason. Gender is rarely, if ever, the best criterion."⁴ Quite simply, if an individual meets the requirements, he or she should be given an opportunity to serve in any MOS.

Physical Ability

The starting point for true gender integration is the recognition of the disparity of physical ability and how to overcome this disparity. In studies conducted by The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, researches derived that:

"Compared to the average male Army recruit, the average female Army recruit is 4.8 inches shorter, weighs 31.7 pounds less, and has 37.4 pounds less muscle mass and 5.7 pounds more fat mass."

The Commission also found that, "Women are at a distinct disadvantage when performing military tasks requiring muscular

³ The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, 1 March 2009, <<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/9981.htm>> (1 March 2009).

⁴ Jeanne Holm, Major General, USAF (Ret), *Women in the Military: An unfinished Revolution*, 1982, 508.

strength because of their lower muscle mass." This lack of muscle mass could be beneficial in jobs such as light armor crews, tank crews or rocket launcher systems that are mostly automated and where crew space is limited.

In the areas of physical capabilities, the following findings were noted:

"Men exhibit higher strength scores than women, but there is a significant degree of overlap between the genders. Women have been reported to have 55 percent of the upper torso, 72 percent of the lower torso and 64 percent of the trunk isometric strength of men."⁵

This overlapping area is made up of female members that would possess the necessary strength to perform the duties currently performed by qualified male members of the military.

The Commission also stated that:

"Higher androgen levels in men account for the large strength differences between the genders. Androgens are potent muscle building hormones that are responsible for much of the muscle enlargement seen in men during the adolescent growth spurts and as a result of strength training. Because women have low levels of androgens, they experience little muscle enlargement from strength training. Women can greatly improve their strength, but they do not develop large muscles. They show an

⁵ The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, *Report to the President: Women in Combat*, (Washington, D.C.: 1992), C-3.

equivalent percentage increase in muscular strength as men who begin at a similar state of training."⁶

This point reinforces the thought that female members, given appropriate training, would be capable of performing the duties required of certain vehicle crew members in the combat arms MOS fields. They could have sufficient strength to perform the duties of the crew while their smaller stature would allow them greater freedom of movement in restrictive compartments.

The previously mentioned area of overlapping performance, sometimes called "gender overlap" is where the Corps needs to focus its attention. This overlap area represents women who perform equal to, or better than, some of their male counterparts. With the establishment of a unified combat standard and proper training, these women can perform the required combat duties. The Marine Corps needs to establish what this level of performance is and do away with separate physical standards for men and women. Brigadier General Margaret A. Brewer, USMC (Ret) stated that "If, at some future time, a decision is made to assign women to direct ground combat specialties then valid definitive performance standards should be established for men and women."⁷ Currently separate physical fitness test (PFT) standards exist for male and female members. The PFT is used to determine whether a Marine has the appropriate fitness level to perform his or her military duties. The fact that there are separate standards based on gender delegitimizes the PFT when it comes to it

⁶ The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, Report to the President: Women in Combat, (Washington, D.C.: 1992), C-5.

⁷ Rosemarie Skaine, *Women at War: Gender Issues of Americans in Combat*, (North Carolina: McFarland, 1999), 174.

being the standard of physical fitness. It is either a legitimate standard or it is not. The Corps should establish one standard that does not grade based on gender. Any individual who meets the standard should be given the opportunity to serve in all MOS fields.

Cohesion and Distraction

Some individuals opposed to the service of women in combat have used the excuse that women would be a distraction to their male counterparts and those coed combat organizations would suffer from the lack of unit cohesion.

The Presidential Commission reports that it considered the effects that women could have on the cohesion of ground combat units. The Commission defined cohesion as "the relationship that develops in a unit or group where members share common values and experiences; individuals in the group conform to group norms and behavior in order to ensure group survival and goals; members lose their personal identity in favor of a group identity; members focus on group activities and goals; members become totally dependent on each other for the completion of their mission or survival; and members must meet all standards of performance and behavior in order not to threaten group survival."⁸ This statement clearly supports the belief that unit cohesion can be negatively affected by the introduction of any element that detracts from the need for key ingredients such as mutual confidence, commonality of experience and equitable treatment. There are no authoritative military studies of mixed-gender ground combat

⁸The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, Report to the President: Women in Combat, (Washington, D.C.: 1992), 25.

cohesion, since available cohesion research has been conducted among male-only ground combat units.

The Commission noted five issues that may affect unit cohesion:

1. Ability of women to carry the physical burdens required of each combat unit member.
2. Forced intimacy and lack of privacy on the battlefield (e.g. washing, bathing, using latrine facilities, ect.).
3. Traditional Western values where men feel a responsibility to protect women.
4. Dysfunctional relationships (e.g. sexual misconduct).
5. Pregnancy.

The Commission also states that the introduction of women into all male combat units would add additional strain on the officers and noncommissioned officers in those units.⁹ With the exception of the first point, all of these examples are nothing more than leadership challenges. The Corps trains these same young leaders to be multifaceted, modern warriors capable of employing high-tech military hardware while dealing with diverse foreign cultures under the ever present eye of the media, yet the Corps consider them incapable of supervising a two-gender unit. According to Multi-National Force Iraq official website, Marines assigned to the Lionesses program: "work alongside of infantry units throughout al-Anbar province, posting at entry points to prevent

⁹ The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, Report to the President: Women in Combat, (Washington, D.C.: 1992), 25.

any suspicious individuals from causing violence in the area."¹⁰ This Program is one of the many examples of the successful integration of women into combat units. Having personally experienced situations of "forced intimacy" and "lack of privacy" in an integrated combat service support unit as a noncommissioned officer, few issues arose in dealing with this problem. The Marines, both male and female, respected each other's privacy. When hygiene was conducted by the members of our section; one Marine would act as a watch while the other member conducted their hygiene behind a poncho.¹¹

During World War II, Women Army Corps (WAC) troops "needed no extra guards, the lack of privacy did not send them into a decline, and they remained phenomenally cheerful."¹² Like most other issues in the Corps, leadership was the answer. The same "traditional western values" of men protecting women goes hand-in-hand with how Marines treat their male counterparts; they are going to do it-because that's what Marines do.¹³

The reports final two issues of sexual misconduct and pregnancy are again, leadership issues. The latter, pregnancy, is a preventable one. The sexual misconduct is one that must be addressed with sound leadership and firm application of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Keep in mind that it is no more preventable than any

¹⁰ Cpl. Jessica Aranda, "Lioness Program Trains, Maintains Female Search Team." 13 June 2008,

< http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20372&Itemid=128>

¹¹ Writers personal experience

¹² Helen Rogan, *Mixed Company: Women in the Modern Army*, (Toronto: Colony, 1981), 135.

¹³ The Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, Report to the President: Women in Combat, (Washington, D.C.: 1992), 25.

other violation of the UCMJ. Again; sound, mature leadership is the answer.

The final misnomer is the statement often made that women in a combat unit would distract the male members and prevents them from doing their job. It is conceivable that there are homosexuals in the military, to include the Marine Corps. If one believes this to be a true statement, then it is also possible that one or more homosexuals have made their way into any one of the combat arms. There are no recorded cases of male members being so distracted by their fellow male members that they failed to do their duty in combat. So the question is, are women the issue or is it a selected few undisciplined heterosexual males that are the issue?

Conclusion

The Corps needs to establish a single standard for physical fitness regardless of gender. Once it determines the requirements then the Corps must train all Marines to meet that standard. Some will meet the standard, others will not. Once it draws the proverbial "line in the sand" the Corps will truly be one team, ready for any fight.

Integrated combat units are conceivable in the near future: the Corps must be ready to deal with the associated issue involved in this historic integration. Marines never fail; the Corps must never fail its Marines, women Marines included. The Corps must establish one combat fitness standard, and train to that standard, in order to ensure all Marines are fully prepared for this integration.

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