

IDEAS & ISSUES (COMMENTARY)

Outside Our Lane

**Bold and daring women do belong in all combat arms.
A Rebuttal to “Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry”**

by LtCol Maria Pallotta

The *Marine Corps Gazette’s* editorial decision not only to publish Capt Lauren Serrano’s article, “Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry”¹ but additionally to award it first prize in the MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize essay contest is surprising and disappointing. Given their history of being thought leaders in a forum that challenges the status quo, this decision effectively moves the debate regarding women in the infantry backwards, harkening back to recent times with the same vernacular used to justify keeping homosexuals from serving openly, and even as far back as the 1940s, when many of these same points were used to justify continued racial segregation in the ranks. The article itself is based on outdated stereotypes, specious arguments, and poor logical reasoning, but what is more egregious is the *Gazette’s* all-male editorial advisory panel deciding to reward such a piece. In so doing, the *Gazette* has successfully undermined the purpose of the Chase Prize itself, which is to “challenge conventional wisdom,” “argue for a new and better way of doing business,” and to embody MajGen Chase’s belief that the Corps’ strength stems from “its ability to accept change.”² Rather than embracing this ethos, the article is full of tired arguments defending the status quo, and reinforcing outmoded conventional thinking while simultaneously ignoring the Commandant’s measured, standards-based approach to researching the assignment of women as explained in the Marine Corps Force Integration Campaign Plan.³

Capt Serrano chooses to argue points that are independent of and separate from the salient issue that undergirds this debate—validated

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physical standards of the infantry and whether or not some women can meet them. Instead of focusing on abilities, she dwells on male infantry’s biases on why women, regardless of skill, should not serve among them. Furthermore, the article is rife with inaccurate stereotypes regarding male sexual behavior, overgeneralizing all women as physically incapable of service in the infantry, and the ever-present paranoia surrounding the falsely feared

and exaggerated “women’s hygiene issues” in the field. The crux of Capt Serrano’s argument seems to be that young first-term infantry Marines possess a special, unique need to remain sequestered from women in order to fight well; furthermore, they apparently have more uncontrollable testosterone levels than other MOSs as well as their senior infantry counterparts serving in the special forces and/or working alongside counterintelligence Marines.



Women have been piloting Marine aircraft in combat. (Photo provided by Christine Westrich.)

Additionally, the captain maintains that these young infantry Marines have as their default setting sexual assault against women, enough even to make their wives worry about their husbands working alongside women in combat. This insults the capabilities, professionalism, intellect, and discipline of our Marines. We are better than that.

The article additionally asserts that an infantry rifle squad performs at its best in the absence of women, myopically ignoring the reality of conflict along the full range of military operations. Assuming the continuation of irregular warfare as the engagement of choice for the growing insurgent movements throughout the arc of instability, only a fraction of future possible operations will be devoid of women. Women exist throughout the battlespace in counter-insurgencies (with the population as the center of gravity), and women Marines serve in increasingly essential roles in many MOSs critical to success in this

more diplomatic, yet violent, conflict environment. Consider the mission critical necessity of Lioness teams in Iraq and female engagement teams in Afghanistan. Yet if Capt Serrano's arguments are held to be true, and women and their inevitable sexual assault "should be kept as far away from the infantry as possible,"²⁴ then how can a young infantryman possibly remain focused enough to achieve the mission in an irregular environment?

Since my days as a midshipman over 20 years ago, I have encountered this same attitude in various forms throughout my career. In the early 1990s, numerous articles and op-ed pieces guessed wrongly that the American public was not ready to see their daughters return home in body bags and that male leaders would pay too much attention to the women in their ranks to the tragic detriment of the mission. Some fellow midshipmen felt that women should not attend the Naval Academy or any

Service academy. As the combat exclusion law was significantly pared down in January 1994 right before our Service assignment, many critics additionally opined that women would experience inherent difficulties with, and bring unnecessary problems to, combatant ships and combat aviation.

These misguided assumptions proved untrue, and the Nation's sea change regarding women's military capabilities has been swift. Yet society regularly changes substantially within anyone's full career span, and even I have evolved significantly on the issue. The military rightly reflects the Nation it represents, and it is necessarily a perennially young Service; therefore, it is right that it evolves with the zeitgeist and values of the younger generation who make up its bulk and who define its future.²⁵ Yet, Capt Serrano—and those for whom she writes—place a higher premium on the older generation's views while at the same time discounting the reality

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Women Marines served in female engagement teams. (Photo by Cpl David Hernandez.)

that the military is accountable to its civilian leaders.

Throughout my career, I have persistently contemplated this issue. I have served in a variety of billets, locations, and operations, all of which have informed my thinking. They include an early MEU assignment as the second

I serve for the exact same reasons men do—to meet the challenge of becoming a Marine, to compete to be the best, and to test myself in the toughest conditions possible, where the action is—all due to a strong desire to serve my country in a meaningful way in jobs for which I am qualified, not because men may

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woman ever in the unit, Inspector-Instructor command of 4th LAAD (low-altitude air defense), SOTG (special operations training group), a Congressional fellowship, instructor duty, and two tours to Iraq conducting convoys under hostile conditions in Al Anbar Province. Unlike previous TBS companies, mine set a precedent by permanently integrating women into the male squads instead of assigning an all-female platoon. Back then, TBS staff platoon commanders were all combat-arms men. Of course, I experienced friction at times, particularly at TBS and in those early MEU days. But as all the women I have ever served with,

or may not have welcomed me. We too serve for our brothers and sisters next to us, and at no time have I served to make a political statement or advance some mythic personal feminist agenda. We are Marines who serve honorably, not a social experiment, and my peer group of women have excelled in some of the first combat and other leadership billets open to women. When the opportunities presented themselves, we simply took them like any qualified Marine would. Marines, regardless of gender, are more alike than different. I am a Marine first and a woman second. I accept that there is some aspect of the presence of women in traditionally

male jobs that existentially threatens many men's desire to be primal; the infantry is the last bastion of maleness that these men jealously guard from the presence of any woman. Yet, this sentiment has proven wrong in so many jobs and MOSs previously closed to women, in the civilian world as well as in the military.

It is an unrealistic desire for men to want to serve in modern combat among other men exclusively; the future battlespace dictates otherwise. As important, it is an inherently American can-do ideal that a person with the ability and the desire to serve in the military in a way that contributes to mission accomplishment should be afforded the opportunity—regardless of gender, race, creed, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. The younger generation of Marines appears to espouse these ideals in greater density than we older Marines do, and they represent our future. While a majority of women may not possess the ability or the desire to serve in the infantry, those who do should certainly be permitted to try right alongside the men. This does not make them selfish; this makes them American. This makes them Marines, full of the fire and élan that have always made Marines great, and I look forward to the inevitable day when these barriers no longer exist.

Notes

1. Capt Lauren F. Serrano, "Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry," *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 2014, pp. 36–40.
 2. MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest, accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette>.
 3. Gen James F. Amos, "Marine Corps Force Integration," *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2014, pp. 10–15.
 4. Serrano.
 5. For a more in-depth treatment of the Millennial generation, see Majs Chris and Jeannette Haynie, "Marines or Marines?," *Proceedings* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute), November 2012.
- >Editor's Note: LtCol Pallotta is now a member of the editorial advisory panel. 