

Why Women DO Belong in the U.S. Infantry

What the U.S. wants is what the USMC needs

by Capt Eric Hovey

Reading the 2013 MajGen Harold W. Chase essay in the September edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, entitled “Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry” was a surreal and sobering experience.¹ It was sad to see that the best effort to “challenge conventional wisdom” was a call for maintaining the status quo of keeping females out of the infantry, a policy recommendation that is neither bold nor daring.

I respect Capt Lauren F. Serrano’s decision to sound off on a controversial subject and to write what she thinks is the best direction for the Corps of the future, but I categorically disagree with many of her arguments as they rely on a flawed logic and are not in keeping with the best interests of the future of the Marine Corps. After the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and with the imminent drawdown of forces in Operation Enduring Freedom, the issue of women in combat arms is one of the most pressing concerns that we will face in the coming years, and all Marines will have to live with the ramifications, good or bad, for years to come. In writing this response, I want to stress that—while not diminishing the high standards for serving in the infantry—accepting and integrating women into the infantry MOS is the best for the Marine Corps and the Nation.

Capt Serrano opens the discussion on women in the infantry by stating that female Marines who want to join the ranks of the infantry are selfish, simply want to “stir the pot,” or otherwise

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Provisional Rifle Platoon, Company A, Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force, is made up of male and female Marines—all volunteers—from various MOSs. (Photo by Cpl Paul S. Martinez)

advance their careers at the expense of mission readiness. That is a sweeping generalization and certainly cannot speak to the myriad reasons for why any individual might want to join the ranks of the infantry. At the turn of the century, many individuals (male and female) looked at the suffragettes and asked why they needed to stir the pot by asking for the right to vote: after all, we already had a functioning U.S. democracy and

why bother, since their husbands could already vote for them? Those women who were brazen enough to ask for the right to vote were vilified in media of the time, sometimes as angry spinsters who were best kept muzzled or as selfish for wanting to go out and protest for votes while their husbands stayed home and did (womanly) housework.² Nearly a century after women earned the right to vote, it is unfortunate to

see the aspirations of women who want to join the infantry shamed with these same, tired arguments. The fact that women in the Marines have stepped up to take Infantry Officer Course or School of Infantry might not sit well with those who approve the status quo, but these women do not deserve to be disparaged. It might not have been apparent to many voters in 1920 that the 19th Amendment was a just and critical change of policy for the United States of America, but you would be hard pressed to find someone who could argue that it has been for the worse in the years since then. What side of history will the Marines want to be on a century from now?

The retort comes quickly: giving women the right to vote is one thing, but voting rights and serving in the infantry are an apples-to-oranges comparison. Moreover, Capt Serrano aptly points out that there are many other leadership roles that women can, and do, play in the Marine Corps, so why all the fuss about wanting to be in the infantry? After all, women are a minority in the Marine Corps, and it will be too expensive and too difficult to bend over backwards to accommodate them. Really, they should just accept that the “needs of the Marine Corps are more important to society” than any feminist propaganda about women’s rights, and let the boys do the heavy lifting. There are many issues with this line of reasoning.

While it is true enough that the right to vote and being in the infantry are dissimilar actions, the decision to bar women from either event amounts to a common application of sexism (“prejudice or discrimination based on sex; especially: discrimination against women³”). We do not like to use this word because, like racism or homophobia, it carries with it heavily charged connotations of bigotry and intolerance, so we use euphemisms instead. In 1942, it was OK to let African-Americans become Marines at Montford Point, but it was a necessary evil that they train separately from whites.⁴ In 2013 *Gazette* prize-winning article logic, it is OK to let women in the Marines, but precluding them from the infantry is “a necessary accepted evil because the needs of the



Standards can't be changed for infantry training because of political pressure. (Photo by Sgt Paul Peterson.)

Marine Corps are more important to society.” Thus the argument goes—just be happy with the gains you have now because it is too hard to change the larger Marine Corps for the sake of a minority of Marines.

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My thoughts, reading this portion of the article, wandered back to TBS, when we were told as new second lieutenants to read *First to Fight*. LtGen Victor H. Krulak opens the book with a lengthy response he wrote to the then-Commandant, Gen Randolph McCall Pate in answer to a simple question: “Why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps?”⁵ He flips the question around and, after expounding on how capable our existing Army and Air Force are, makes the case that it would be very difficult to prove we do *need* a Marine Corps. He goes further: “the United States does not *need* a Marine Corps. However for good reasons which completely transcend cold logic, the United States *wants* a Marine Corps.” We exist, LtGen Krulak believed, because of

three things: that when trouble arises we would be ready to act immediately; that when we do fight, we win, always; and “that the Marines are masters of a form of unfailing alchemy which converts unoriented youths into proud, self-reliant stable citizens.”

So what does a note between two USMC generals in the 1950s have to do with the 21st century debate over women in the infantry? Most immediately, it should crush any notions that the needs of the Marine Corps are somehow more important to society than the need to comply with the will of the American people, as manifested in the actions of our publicly elected officials. In 1994, enough of the American people felt uneasy about women in combat that the “Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule” was put in place to keep women out of direct combat roles (i.e., the infantry); but on 24 January 2013, a Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense memorandum eliminated this rule.⁶ Put another way, arguing against women being in the infantry amounts to explaining to Congress, and the American people, the reasons why the Marine Corps cannot comply with a Secretary of Defense order. Sorry America, it is just too hard; boys will be boys. If the American people trust in our unfailing alchemy to make their sons and daughters into better citizens, what does it say if we give up on letting

women into the infantry, not even because of their perceived shortcomings, but because young infantrymen “are raging with hormones and are easily distracted by women and sex.”

We are better than that.

When the day comes that we are unwilling or unable to adapt, organizationally, because a necessary change is too hard, then we are no longer needed—and the Army and the Air Force will be more than happy to pick up the slack. Thankfully, every indication from USMC leadership is that the foundations are being laid to ensure that women will be able to integrate into all combat arms MOSs or, at the very least, we will have given our best effort and can explain why we came up short. What is disheartening, however, is to see how much entrenched resistance there is to repealing a sexist policy that prohibits some Marines from serving in the infantry simply because they were born female. Make no mistake: this is a Herculean task and a battle that will not be won overnight or even in our lifetimes, and there will be many challenges associated with it.

Capt Serrano makes the point that “incorporating women into infantry ranks will increase the number of cases [of sexual assault/harassment] in infantry units,” and that is a serious concern that we will need to address. However, this is a narrow view of looking at a larger problem of sexual assault and harassment that is prevalent throughout *all* sectors of U.S. society, and we should not punish women (the vast majority of victims) by keeping them out of the infantry because they could become victims. By that logic, since one in five women who attend college will be a victim of sexual assault, we should not send our daughters to college, so they do not become victims either.⁷ Moreover, if a (male infantry) Marine is willing to assault another (female infantry) Marine, what is to say that he will not assault a civilian woman back in garrison or a foreign national while deployed? Simply put, removing women from the infantry is not a guarantor of removing the problem of sexual assault from the infantry.

Moreover, removing women from the infantry flies in the face of the suc-

cesses of the Lioness Program and Female Engagement Teams (FETs), both of which demonstrated the critical role that women can play in a counterinsurgency scenario, in being able to interact with women and children as part of a larger strategy of protecting the populace and winning “hearts and minds.” Since the Marine Corps ended its use of FETs in Afghanistan as of 2012, we currently do not have an organic, institutionalized means by which to employ these teams if and when the need should arise.⁸ Allowing women into the infantry would give the Marine Corps GCE an immediate means to interact with the female populace in any combat environment, and a capability that has been a demonstrated force multiplier in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, it would help address some areas of concerns noted with the larger FET program (to include the Army), and the need to “institutionalize [FET] training for future contingency missions and better alignment of tactical and operational objectives for FET missions.”⁹

Ultimately then, not only is it a bad policy to bar women from serving in the infantry, but counterproductive, especially in an asymmetric fight. I would not advocate for a lowering of standards, and that is one area where our leadership is adamant that we not compromise, but already women are breaking barriers and proving that they can keep up with the guys. While some pundits are content with the blanket generalization that men, on average, tend to have greater strength and size than women and use this as a means to justify the latter’s exclusion from the infantry, they use too broad a brush and fail to take into consideration women as individuals. There are women who are strong enough, mentally and physically, who can make the standard: it has already happened with the School of Infantry, and it will happen with the Infantry Officer Course. If any woman can meet these qualifications and wants to join the infantry, how can we justify saying “no”? After all, demonstrating that women *can* meet the male standard is really the easy part. The bigger challenge ahead is how will we come to grips, culturally, with allowing

women to serve in the infantry? Will we embrace the difficult road ahead and align our organization toward the larger DOD standard of allowing women in the infantry, or will we dig in our heels and wager that the status quo is good enough?

The choice is ours.

Notes

1. Lauren F. Serrano, “Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 2014, accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette>.
2. Therese O'Neill, “12 Cruel Anti-Suffragette Cartoons,” *The Week*, August 2005, accessed at <http://theweek.com>.
3. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, online ed., s.v. “Sexism,” accessed at <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.
4. Gerry Butler, “Montford Point Marines (1942–1949),” *The Black Past*, accessed at <http://www.blackpast.org>.
5. Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1984).
6. Ray Mabus, Secretary of the Navy, *Department of the Navy Women in the Service Review Implementation Plan*, (Washington, DC: 2013), accessed at <http://www.defense.gov>.
7. Dean G. Kilpatrick, et al, *Drug Facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study*, (Charleston, SC: Medical University of South Carolina, 2007), accessed at <http://rwu.edu>.
8. Dan Lamothe, “The End of Female Engagement Teams,” *The Marine Corps Times*, (Springfield, VA: 29 December 2012), accessed at <http://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.
9. Janet Holliday, “Female Engagement Teams: The Need to Standardize Training and Employment” *Military Review* 92, no. 2 (2012): 90–94.

