

Women in Combat

The bogus old arguments rise again (a rebuttal)

by Maj Amy "Krusty" McGrath

Twenty years ago a major debate ensued on the national stage about the role of women in the Armed Forces. The Service Chiefs at the time mostly advocated for the continued ban on women serving in combat positions. When it came to the issue of women serving in combat aviation, the prevailing argument was that women did not have the physical strength required to fly certain airframes. They speculated that women could not pull the G-forces required and would be unable to make it through the rigorous training. Nevertheless, Congress rescinded the "combat exclusion law," and the Services opened some previously barred positions to women, including aviation and most naval ships. We have reached another time period of debate and change. Now is the time for the Marine Corps to embrace the opportunity to open more positions to women.

The basis for excluding women from ground combat positions lies in Department of Defense (DoD) policy, not in statute, thus the DoD holds the power to change the policy. From a legal perspective, DoD must simply inform Congress of any change to its existing policy. In the Marine Corps, application of the ground combat exclusion policy results in women being denied the opportunity to serve in the infantry, artillery, tanks, and assault amphibious vehicle (AAV) MOSs. Despite being only 8 percent of MOSs in the Corps, these four MOSs consist of almost 25 percent of the total positions Marines fill.¹

Clear "frontlines" on the battlefield in the past 10 years have not existed, and arguably all MOSs, including those with females, will continue to be in harm's way. In addition, new critical skills have placed many women front and center in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq causing the restrictions placed

>Maj McGrath is an F/A-18 pilot and weapons systems officer with three combat tours. She has flown over 85 combat missions in Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. She has qualified as an air combat tactics instructor and is a graduate of Marine Corps Division Tactics Course. She is currently assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps, Interagency Policy Coordinator, Department of Plans, Policies, and Operations.



DoD has the power to change the policy excluding women from ground combat positions.

(Photo by Evan Isentein-Brand.)

on women in traditional ground combat positions to be reassessed.

In response to the increasing suggestions to open up MOSs currently not available to women, numerous studies in the last few years have all come to the same conclusion: The DoD policy is not suited for operations in today's wars.² Keeping women out of direct-combat units and combat-related specialties hurts career opportunities for women, and the restrictions on women serving in combat roles should be eliminated.

The overall consensus is that women should be able to fill all roles in the military as long as they are capable and qualified for the job.³

Over the past few years the Marine Corps has tap danced around the ground combat exclusion policy by placing female Marines in assignments such as the Lioness Program and female engagement teams, effectively circumventing the outdated "collocation" policy. Most commanders in the field found the combat exclusion rule

restricted combat effectiveness because a commander is legally prohibited from attaching female Marines to units that might need their skills. Furthermore, to say that females *can* collocate in engineer, communications, logistics, and aviation detachments but not with members of an infantry company no longer matches the needs on the ground.

Instead of fighting policy change, the Marine Corps should *embrace the abolishment of the collocation policy*. This would eliminate an inconsistent policy that damages a commander's operational flexibility to assign the best Marine to any unit based on his/her skills. The Corps should *open the MOSs of artillery, tanks, and AAVs to women immediately*. Ironically, for the past 15 years in the Marine Corps, a female Marine can fly an F/A-18 in combat but cannot drive a tank. If collocation is no longer an issue, then there is no reason a woman could not do these jobs. Is driving a tank or an AAV more physically taxing than pulling seven Gs in a fighter jet? Twenty years ago then-Commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray, Jr., declared that removing the ban on women in the combat arms would "harm combat effectiveness and distract male Marines."⁴ We see these same old arguments in recent commentaries on this topic.⁵ Facts simply do not support this prejudice. For example, women are fully integrated into aviation squadrons and have flown combat missions in Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM over the past 10-plus years of war lockstep with their male counterparts. None of the fears presented by the likes of Gen Gray came to fruition. Similarly, opening artillery, tanks, and AAVs to women will not cause the feared-based disruptions that skeptics predict.

The Marine Corps should be the first Service to open the infantry to women. This is arguably the most concerning step to some Marines. By opening the other three combat arms MOSs first, the Corps could use many of the lessons learned as it develops a plan for opening the infantry. The infantry is no doubt a tough profession. It is physically demanding and not everyone has what it takes, neither does everyone (male or female) want to do these jobs. The key to successfully integrating women is

maintaining clear standards. However, determining those standards may take some study. Not all effective performance on the battlefield is accurately measured by being able to do 20 pullups. For example, there are stellar Marines who can score 300 on the physical fitness test (PFT), yet after 48 to 72 hours of little sleep and no food, they are rendered completely ineffective, while some women are able to endure much better in that sleep- and food-deprived environment. These types of tests in training (e.g., survival school), along with the performance of women who have fought in combat, reveal that effectiveness in harsh conditions and in ground combat is not necessarily dependent upon one's race, background, or even gender.

Forcing the same PFT standards for all Marines regardless of gender is often an argument given in the context of the women in combat debate. The PFT is an administrative test given to Marines to measure general health and fitness. The PFT is not a unique test taken to become an infantry Marine. We don't make a 6-foot 5-inch male Marine fit into the same height/weight standards as a 5-foot 5-inch male Marine because we recognize that there are differences in weight that will be based upon one's height (and gender for that matter). We don't determine that all infantry Marines have to be 6-feet tall because height doesn't determine performance as an infantry Marine. We don't have standards for our pilots to have to do 15 or 20 pullups because pullups don't determine one's ability to fly a combat aircraft. Much like the Corps' height/weight standards, administrative measurements (like the PFT and height/weight) do not necessarily test one's ability to perform in any given MOS.

SgtMaj David K. Devaney, the author of "Women in Combat Arms Units: We're not culturally ready," cites a study that has no research applicability to combat stresses and mental health for either gender. Furthermore, he attempts to extrapolate from scientific data obtained using an instrument that is more than 20 years old. What we have learned about the prevalence of depression in both men and women, as well as the impact of combat stress on both

genders, has clearly changed in the last 20 years. The understanding of mental health before and after combat is evolving. There are no controlled studies that look at mental health in men or women as a precursor to combat tolerance. Recent news and medical literature is full of references that speak to the need for more mental health research with regard to combat stress. No one is arguing that women have the same physical strength as men, not even the "feminists," but there is no evidence whatsoever at this time to connect the issue of women doing certain MOSs with mental health.

Even if one acknowledges the random stories of failed integration from 20 years ago, such as those cited by SgtMaj Devaney, the facts are that we have already successfully opened a large-scale combat arms MOS to women. We did it in Marine aviation. Clearly in the 15 years since women began flying combat aircraft, we have learned that the testimony in 1991 claiming women couldn't fly fighter jets was inaccurate. We've found that it does take a great deal of strength and endurance to fly certain airframes and that, in fact, there are some women who can't sustain the G-forces, just as there are some men who can't. Some men get airsick while some do not. The same holds true for women. Because the standards are solidly set (such as swim qualifications in early aviation training all the way to night carrier landings at the end of a jet pilot's training), some people will meet those standards and some will not. Success is not gender dependent. Most importantly, because the standards have been clearly articulated, the product of that training is known by all to be ready for the position and worthy of the job. If clear qualifying standards to become an infantry Marine can be determined, then even the infantry can be opened to women who qualify. *Having the same training standards for everyone to make the cut in that MOS is a must.*

The issue of women in combat is not going away. The current new policy opening up more assignments for women Marines is a step. However, the practice of placing a female with a combat service support MOS in combat arms battalion staffs is not full integration and should not be treated as such.

Doing so is akin to claiming one has opened fighter squadrons to women by allowing them to be intelligence and maintenance officers but not pilots. In addition, the current attempt by the Marine Corps to “study” how women perform in infantry school is also flawed. The Marine Corps is allowing women to volunteer to attend infantry school, yet these volunteers will not be awarded the MOS upon successful completion of the school. The Marine Corps must, at a minimum, award the infantry MOS to these women.

We have female Marines who can do these ground combat arms MOSs. We can recruit more. The same arguments that women don’t “desire” to go into ground combat MOSs were heard 20 years ago, particularly when it came to fighter aviation.⁶ The most difficult thing for a young female entering the military to do is to become a U.S. Marine, and yes, (like 15 or 20 years ago) there will be some women who will be

attracted by these challenges. Of all of the Services, we are fortunate enough to have the reputation to attract the brightest and the toughest-minded women into our ranks. We should be the Service that leans forward and propels these elite women into these positions first.

Let’s not dwell on the same old prejudices from 20 years ago, but let’s look at what our female Marines have done since. The Marine Corps should open the combat arms of artillery, tanks, and AAVs immediately. With a proactive opening of these three combat arms MOSs, the leadership of the Corps could ensure that solid standards are in place so the lethality of the Marine infantry is neither diminished nor compromised.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *U.S. Marine Corps Concepts and Programs 2011*, Programs and Resources Department, Washington, DC, 2011, pp. 316 and 321.

2. RAND Corporation, *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women*, Arlington, VA, 2007.

3. Defense Department Advisory Committee on Women in the Service 2009 and 2010 Reports, available at <http://dacowits.defense.gov/Reports>.

4. Senate Armed Services Committee on Manpower and Personnel Hearing, “Restrictions on Women in Combat,” 18 June 1991, available at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/18459-1>.

5. Devaney, SgtMaj David K., “Women in Combat Arms Units: We’re not culturally ready,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, Quantico, June 2012, pp. 62–64.

6. Ibid.



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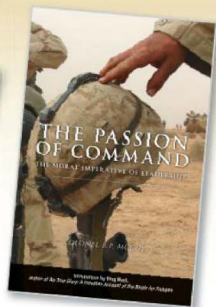
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