

IDEAS & ISSUES (COMMENTARY)

Women in Combat Arms Units

We're not culturally ready
by SgtMaj David K. Devaney

Afghanistan, 18 January 2017, 23 female Marines are killed in one improvised explosive device incident. This brings the total to 76 women Marines killed in action in the last 7 months. Was allowing females in the infantry a mistake?

During 1993 I was assigned as a Marine scout/sniper instructor and spent much time assisting a Federal Bureau of Investigation regional special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team with field skills. I was surprised to find they had a woman agent on their team, but pleasantly surprised to find that she was an outstanding operator. After a few months of training and getting to know the team, we were conducting a joint operation with the local police SWAT team. At one point I stepped into the tactical operations center, which was actually a large van, and found the woman agent inside and not with the assault element. I asked her why she was not with the shooters, and she stated (words to this effect): I can't do that to them. First of all, if one of them goes down, I can't possible carry him out. I'm not strong enough. Second, and more importantly, they can't handle seeing a woman injured. They all have mothers, sisters, aunts, etc. They can't handle seeing a woman injured, which will distract them from their job. Most men, American men anyway, are not adjusted to women being injured by an adversary. They are brought up learning that women need to be protected.

I found this statement to be very intriguing. She is right. For instance, if two guys were fighting in the street, many men would take bets on who would win the fight. But if it was a man beating a woman, most of us (men)

>SgtMaj Devaney is the Sergeant Major, Weapons Training Battalion, and is stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico. He has a bachelor's degree in social psychology from Park University and has been the keynote speaker at many venues around the world, speaking about the prevention of posttraumatic stress disorder through education. He has four tours to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and spent a majority of his career in combat arms units.



I have not found one (woman Marine) who desires to be an infantry Marine. (Photo by Cpl Meredith Brown.)

would run to her defense, even if we didn't know her. Keeping this in mind, until we change the mindset of American men and our society as a whole, women should not be allowed in the infantry.

Will women ever be in combat arms units? Yes. But as with women police officers, we will have to move slowly and allow society to adjust to the reality of losing women in direct offensive combat. When the American military decides it is time for women to serve, for instance, in the infantry, there are some serious issues that must be considered.

We would not be the first military to adopt women into the infantry. The Israeli military's Caracal Battalion is a light infantry unit that has about 90 percent females. They serve along the Jordanian and Egyptian borders. "While many troops see Caracal as a publicity stunt and a sop to the feminists, the unit has performed well, and has a reputation as a non-nonsense and reliable outfit."¹ During 2009, for the first time, Israeli women entered and completed a sniper course. These women are now operating with their male counterparts between Israel and

the Sinai Peninsula, where they have been conducting drug interdiction operations. According to David Isby, the Russians realized how valuable women snipers could be during World War II.² The Russians employed over 1,000 women snipers along the Eastern Front. One female sniper, named Rubakho, is credited with killing more than 300 Axis soldiers. She is memorialized with a statue located in the Russian Black Sea fleet museum. Two other notable women snipers for the Red Army were Lyundmila Pavlichenko, who was credited with 309 kills, and Nina Lobkovskaya, who commanded a company of female snipers that participated in the battle of Berlin.

During a personal interview with GySgt Jonathan Stormont,³ SNCO, Scout/Sniper Instructor School, I learned that the U.S. Marine Corps has approximately 500 active duty snipers, with only about 250 of them actually operating within a sniper billet. Many snipers, like me, are filling billets other than those of sniper. Some people, to include me, believe women are much more disciplined than men; therefore, it may make sense to explore women snipers in the U.S. military. But I must point out that 42 Marine snipers have been killed in action since 2003, which is a highly disproportionate number of deaths, even when compared to the regular infantry, let alone any other MOS.

The Lioness and Other Engagement Programs

The Marine Corps has been using women directly attached to infantry units for years in Iraq. These women Marines and sailors are a part of the Lioness Program.⁴ Once major offensive operations ended and we transitioned into stability operations, infantry units began using women to assist them with the searching of civilian women. When insurgents realized that male Marines would not try to search or even engage with civilian women, which violates Muslim cultural norms, they started using women to assist them with the smuggling of contraband or even using them as suicide bombers. To counter this threat the Marine Corps devel-

oped the Lioness Program and other engagement programs. Along with their mission of searching civilian women, they also trained local women to search females and then supervised their search procedures. The women Marines with

whom I have spoken about the program were very positive, as were most comments from the infantryman with whom I spoke.

Some males stated that the unexpected effect of having women attached to their unit was that the men became better Marines because of a perceived bravado. In contrast, some males stated that the women could become a dangerous distraction. Additionally, some males stated that sometimes male Marines became preoccupied with the protection of the female Marines and/or sailors, which distracted them from their mission.

The Marine Corps has been using women directly attached to infantry units for years in Iraq.



Women Marines were attached to infantry units in Iraq as part of the Lioness Program. (Photo by Cpl Meredith Brown.)



Training standards would have to be the same for women if they are going to be assigned to combat arms units. (Photo by Cpl Katherine Keleher.)

Physical Differences

Most readers of *Men's Health* would not argue that there are many physical differences between genders.

Although some gender differences are proven and some still controversial, they should not be confused with sexist stereotypes. No one can really tell whether these gender differences are caused by nature or environmentally-learned, but the fact is that some amount of sex differentiation takes place immediately as the male or female begins to develop within the womb.⁵

In general, men are normally taller, heavier, and approximately 30 percent stronger than women, with some anomalies. "Although many feminists cannot face this fact, females simply do not have the strength or endurance necessary to be, for example, effective combat soldiers."⁶ Even oxygen intake favors men.

. . . women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression when involved in stressful life events. . . .

In comparison, with an average man running at 50 percent of his capacity, an average woman would be at 70 percent of her capacity. And finally, men have superior distance vision and depth

perception. When it comes to allowing women into the infantry, a first step is to change the Marine Corps physical fitness test (PFT) and start making the women conduct the PFT exactly as the men do (i.e., pullups and the same run time standards).

Psychological Differences

Of major concern is that Harkness, et al.,⁷ found that there is empirical data that found that women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression when involved in stressful life events, *such as war*. It is important to know that women are most influenced by adverse life experiences in young adulthood, which represents most of our women warriors.

The Desires of Women Marines

After dozens of personal interviews with female Marines, I have not found

even one who desires to be an infantryman (infantrywoman). I believe any future agenda to allow women in the infantry will be pushed by those outside the military, making statements

like women in the military should be allowed to enter any MOS they desire. Grunts (infantry) are many times sent to the world's most austere environments, with little ability or resources to attend to normal personal hygiene. I have gone as many as 6 weeks without bathing; I think this would be a serious problem for women.

Summary

So, when will we allow women in combat arms MOSs? Hopefully never! Since 2003 I have lost 55 of my friends, all men. Every one of their deaths hurt my soul, but I cannot imagine how I would feel if any of them had been women. The U.S. military must maintain its outstanding women warriors, but I think allowing them in the infantry would be a mistake for the infantry, for the women themselves, and for society as a whole.

Notes

1. Strategypage.com, *Israeli women volunteer for combat*, retrieved 13 January 2011 at <http://www.strategypage.com/html/htin/f/articles/20091028.aspx>.
2. Isby, David C., *Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army*, Jane's Information Group, London, 1981.
3. Personal interview with Cpl Sgt Jonathan Storment, 14 January 2010.
4. Dunn, LCpl Nicolas M., "Lioness Program 'Pride' of the Corps," Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Training Center, Twentynine Palms, 13 March 2009, accessed at military.com.
5. Steadyhealth.com, "Difference between male and female structures (mental and physical)," *Men's Health*, online by Heidi, 19 March 2007.
6. Harkness, K.L., N. Alavi, S.M. Monroe, G.M. Slavich, I.H. Gotlib, and M.R. Bagby, "Gender differences in life events prior to onset of major depressive disorder: The moderating effect of age," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Washington, DC, November 2010, pp. 791-803.
7. Ibid.

