

IDEAS & ISSUES (MANPOWER)

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# Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry

Marine infantry isn't broken, it doesn't need to be "fixed"

by Capt Lauren F. Serrano

While reading the February issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, I skimmed past the "Be Bold" advertisement calling for readers to submit articles that challenge a Marine Corps policy or way of doing business. Immediately a current "hot topic" came to mind, but as usual I quickly discarded it because I have purposely avoided publicly disagreeing with the passionate opinions of many of my female peers and friends. After weeks of contemplation and debate, I am "being bold" and coming clean: I am a female Marine officer and I do not believe women should serve in the infantry. I recognize that this is a strong statement that will be vehemently challenged by many. I have not come to this opinion lightly and I do not take joy in taking a stance that does not support equal opportunity for all. I have spent countless hours discussing this topic with many civilians and Marines and have discovered that a large number of people agree with the arguments in this article but do not wish to get involved in the public discussion. Interestingly, most of the people who want to incorporate women into infantry are civilians or young, inexperienced Marines. Most of the more seasoned Marines with whom I have spoken tend to oppose the idea of women in infantry—perhaps this is failure to adapt or perhaps it is experienced-based reasoning. National

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Public Radio's recent segment, "Looking for a Few Good (Combat-Ready) Women," stated, "Col Weinberg admits there's anecdotal evidence that female Marines, who make up 7 percent of the

force, aren't rushing to serve in ground combat."<sup>1</sup> If the infantry had opened to women while I was still a midshipman or second lieutenant I probably would have jumped at the opportunity



**Women have served well in combat, but incorporating them into infantry units is not in the best interest of the Marine Corps or national security. (U.S. Marine Corps photo.)**

because of the novelty, excitement, and challenge; but, to my own disappointment, my views have drastically changed with experience and knowledge. Acknowledging that women are different (not just physically) than men is a hard truth that plays an enormous role in this discussion. This article addresses many issues regarding incorporating women into the infantry that have yet to be discussed in much of the current discourse that has focused primarily on the physical standards.

Before you disagree, remember that war is not a fair business. Adversaries attempt to gain an advantage over their enemies by any means possible. Enemies do not necessarily abide by their adversary's moral standards or rules of engagement. Although in today's world many gory, violent war tactics are considered immoral, archaic, and banned by international law or the Geneva Conventions, adversaries still must give themselves the greatest advantage possible in order to ensure success. For the Marine Corps, this means ensuring that the infantry grunt (03XX) units are the strongest, most powerful, best trained, and most prepared physically and mentally to fight and win. Although perhaps advantageous to individuals and the national movement for complete gender equality, incorporating women into infantry units is not in the best interest of the Marine Corps or U.S. national security.

### It's Not About Individuals

My argument has little to do with whether women can pass the Infantry Officer Course or Infantry Training Battalion, or endure the hardships of combat. Even those select women who can physically endure the infantry are still posing a threat to the infantry mission and readiness. Female Marines who want to stir the pot by joining the infantry ranks are more interested in their careers than the needs of the Corps—they are selfish. 2dLt Sage Santangelo's recent article in *The Washington Post* about why women are failing Infantry Officer Course argued that "the Marine Corps needs to set women up to succeed in combat roles."<sup>2</sup> Why? How will that contribute to a better fighting force,



**The task is to create an infantry community that can accomplish the mission.** (Photo by LCpl Austin A. Lewis.)

the needs of the Marine Corps, and the success of young enlisted Marines? The time, energy, and conflict associated with setting women up for success in infantry billets will not make the Marine Corps more combat effective.

I have no doubt that there are women who can pass initial infantry schools—and I applaud their strength. However, as Capt Katie Petronio argued in her 2013 *Gazette* article, "Get Over It! We are not all created equal," long infantry careers for female Marines will eventually lead to career-ending medical conditions as they get older and their bodies are unable to withstand the years of constant infantry training.<sup>3</sup> For the already fiscally strained military, this will lead to an increase in medically retired Marines who rate medical financial support for the rest of their lives.

Women who claim that they are not afforded traditional leadership opportunities by not being infantry officers are clearly not aware of the plethora of leadership opportunities in the Marine Corps. There are many other MOSs that provide great opportunities for leadership, some even more so than in the infantry. For example, communications or logistics lieutenants could have as many as 60 Marines in their charge. Great Marine officers embody leadership principals regardless of the MOS

or billet they are assigned. Marines are taught to "grow where planted," and

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a female Marine officer, regardless of MOS, can be just as successful as a male infantry officer if she is truly a leader and puts the needs of her Marines above her own. Success is about performance, not MOS. Women should seek opportunities to serve where they will be of most use to the Corps, not where the Corps can serve their personal career interests.

Many (mostly civilians) have argued that it is sexist and against the Nation's attempt to promote gender equality to refuse infantry to women. Personnel in

locate, close with close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver and/or repel the enemy assault by fire and close combat." The implied task is to create an infantry community of warriors that can best accomplish the mission. As all Marines are taught from day one of training, the mission always comes first. Marines attempt to accomplish the mission at all cost, and it is the duty of the higher headquarters of the Marine Corps to provide Marines with the best training and circumstances possible to accomplish the mission. Incorporating

women can serve in ours, is flawed. The Palestinians have vowed to "wipe Israel off the face of the planet" and are constantly causing riots or staging violent attacks in Israel. Israel's mere existence is always in jeopardy, and in order to ensure its survival, they rely on conscription. Saddam Hussein conducted mass genocide of the Kurds in a campaign known as Al-Anfal. Kurdish women bore arms during Al-Anfal and have remained a Kurdish Peshmerga infantry unit ever since. In order to preserve their existence, Israelis and Kurds understand that they need manpower, professional training, and constant readiness within their infantry. They train women in their infantry to ensure they do not lose in a war of attrition or face another genocide. Israeli and Kurdish infantry women provide necessary manpower to their mission of survival. Its not about equal opportunity for the Israelis and Kurds, it's about cultural survival—which is why it works. The all-volunteer U.S. military is not at war to defend the Nation's existence; on the contrary, it has a surplus of manpower, is downsizing its number of servicemembers, and can afford to be exclusive. Again, there is no *need* to incorporate women into the infantry.

### The Infantry Brotherhood

In addition to theoretical opposition to having women in the infantry, there are also very practical reasons why women do not belong amongst infantrymen. Having women in an infantry unit will disrupt the infantry's identity, motivational tactics, and camaraderie. The average infantryman is in his late teens or early twenties. At that age, men are raging with hormones and are easily distracted by women and sex. Infantry leaders feed on the testosterone and masculinity of young men to increase morale and motivation and encourage the warrior ethos. Few jobs are as physically and emotionally demanding as the infantry, so to keep Marines focused, the infantry operates in a cult-like brotherhood. The infantry is the one place where young men are able to focus solely on being a warrior without the distraction of women or political correctness. They can fart, burp, tell

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## No matter how masculine a woman is, she is still female and simply does not mesh with the infantry brotherhood.

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leadership positions have kept quiet or agreed to open the infantry to women for fear of being called sexist or of not promoting equal opportunities, or not wanting to be attacked by feminists. I am forever indebted to the many women who courageously advocated for the women's rights that I enjoy today. Perhaps it is slightly unfair to the few women who desire to join the infantry, but that should be a necessary accepted evil because the needs of the Marine Corps are more important to society. Keeping women out of the infantry is not about oppressing women's rights or blocking gender equality, it's about maintaining the most combat effective military. In an age where U.S. hegemony is slowly decreasing and nations like China, Iran, and North Korea are building their conventional forces, citizens should be more interested in creating the strongest, best-trained, most ready infantry force to defend our national interests.

### The Mission

Incorporating women into the infantry does not add to the infantry mission to "locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver and/or repel the enemy assault by fire and close combat." Period. The mission does not say, "*with ranks of equal men and women,*

women into the infantry will actually make the mission more difficult to accomplish and take away from the training, readiness, and morale of the infantry units.

Several years ago the Marine Corps began allowing women into certain sections of special operations forces (SOF) and into the counterintelligence/human intelligence (CI/HumInt) MOS. The purpose behind this was to fill a gap and tap resources that men in those MOSs were unable to access. By nature of their gender, women were able to gain placement and access to information and locations that were previously untapped by men. As a result, the SOF and CI/HumInt communities grew stronger and more effective, and better accomplished their missions. The need for females to accomplish certain mission sets drove these communities to accept women. This same need does not exist in a basic rifle squad. Furthermore, the average age, experience, and maturity level of Marines in the SOF and CI/HumInt communities is much higher and more tolerant, which mitigates much of the testosterone-driven behavior that is a common characteristic of young infantrymen.

The argument that Israeli, Kurdish, and various other nations' women serve in their infantries, therefore American





**Ensure that our infantry units are as strong as possible. (Photo by LCpl Diamond N. Peden.)**

raunchy jokes, walk around naked, swap sex stories, wrestle, and simply be young men together. Although perhaps not the most polite environment, this is the exact kind of atmosphere that promotes unit cohesion and the brotherly bond that is invaluable. This bond is an essential element in both garrison and combat environments. Ask any 0311 what encourages him to keep training or fighting in combat when he thinks he can go no further, and he will respond, “My brothers to my right and left.” No matter how masculine a woman is, she is still female and simply does not mesh with the infantry brotherhood.

While standing in line at the shopette in civilian attire a few weeks ago, two young grunts stood behind me intimately describing the toned, fit body of a female on the front of a women’s athletic magazine. Subsequently, the Marines discussed how attracted they are to women who are in shape and how they can’t wait for the weekend when their squad was planning to go to the club to pick up ladies. Women in the Marine Corps are already in better shape than the average civilian and it can be assumed that any infantry woman will be a physical specimen. In the young, testosterone-filled infantry ranks, this is asking for love triangles, unit drama, and the potential for intraunit relationships. Platoon commanders in co-ed

units already deal with a tremendous amount of drama, pregnancies, and sex in the co-ed unit barracks. Each time an issue arises, the platoon leadership spends a lot of time switching Marines’ barracks rooms, billets, etc. Oftentimes the unit equal opportunity (EO) representative must get involved to ensure gender bias does not occur. Infantry units bring significantly less drama to

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### ***Sexual harassment and assault is a huge issue in the military today. . . .***

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work because they don’t have women in their barracks or workspaces. This allows them to better focus on their mission, training, and readiness.

Logistics will also need to change if women are added to infantry units. Women require separate billeting, bathrooms, and other various “womanly” needs—things that could be difficult to provide in a combat environment and costly to build in the existing garrison infrastructure. Yes, in some situations (such as at The Basic School) women and men share fighting holes;

however, doing so for extended periods of time in isolated combat environments with a population of stressed out 18- to 22-year-olds poses the potential for sexual relations, unwanted incidents, and drama (again, disrupting the brotherhood and taking the focus off the mission), not to mention the spouses of those who are married who now have the added burden of worrying about their husband sleeping next to another woman throughout his deployment. Yes, good leadership, added training, and logistical planning can mitigate these concerns, but that effort is not worth the benefit.

#### **Sexual Assault/Harassment**

Sexual harassment and assault is a huge issue in the military today, and few things are more disruptive. Although already not immune to sexual assaults/harassment, without women amongst their ranks, there are simply fewer opportunities for infantry Marines to be involved in sexual assault/harassment cases. Incorporating women into infantry ranks will increase the number of cases in infantry units, subsequently taking time away from training, readiness, and unit morale.

As a victim of sexual assault, jury member on a special courts-martial, and investigating officer in several preliminary inquiries, I can personally attest to the harm sexual assault/harassment has on any unit. Every time there is a report of sexual assault/harassment, several Marines have to dedicate important man-hours to resolving the issue. The special courts-martial I sat on required approximately 15 Marine officers to dedicate an entire week to the court-martial, putting a hold to all matters pertaining to their primary job. In addition, many other Marines were required to sit in the witness room for days waiting to testify in court. The judge advocates obviously spent months preparing for the trial, and many high-ranking unit commanders sat in court at various times throughout the week to keep tabs on their Marines. Several Marines had to change their permanent change of station orders due to the trial. Overall, one sexual assault case ended up costing the Marine Corps an absurd

amount of time and money. The opportunity cost for the Marines involved in the case was costly to the Marine Corps and hurt unit readiness. As the pinnacle fighting elements of the Marine Corps, it is in the best interest of the infantry units to mitigate the opportunities for sexual assault/harassment. If women are part of infantry units, it will be a matter of when, not if, more sexual assault cases will happen.

Some counterargue that good training and leadership will prevent sexual assault/harassment. The Corps already invests significant time and money on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) annual training and hires full-time SAPR specialists. The issue persists. Incorporating women into the infantry would require more SAPR briefs to junior Marines, time that could have been spent at the range, doing land navigation, movement-to-contact training, etc. Furthermore, good leadership and discipline do not necessarily prevent

sexual assault/harassment cases, and senior leaders are not immune. As the executive assistant to the Chief of Staff, I witnessed several EO and sexual assault/harassment cases against senior military officers—many of them substantiated. Neither any amount of SAPR training nor the best leaders can completely prevent sexual assault/harassment and EO cases. It is an issue that should be kept as far away from the infantry as possible.

**Conclusion**

Marine Corps infantry is not broken, so let's not "fix" it. Women should be incorporated into the infantry if they can provide additional support to the infantry mission, thus filling a gap in the needs of the Marine Corps. Until that gap is identified, I do not believe it is in the Nation's interest to allow women in the infantry. Most importantly, the incorporation of women takes time away from training, jeopardizes readiness,

and puts undue strains and requirements on the unit. National leadership should be more concerned with ensuring the Marine Corps infantry units are as strong as possible to fight our Nation's battles, not with avoiding a difficult EO debate, promoting a particular political agenda, or maintaining a certain public image. Above all, preserving national security should be the driving factor of infantry policy change.

**Notes**

1. Bowman, Tom, "Looking for a few good (combat ready) women," National Public Radio, 7 July 2014.
2. Santangelo, 2dLt Sage, "Fourteen women have tried, and failed, the Marine's Infantry Officer Course. Here's why," *The Washington Post*, Washington, DC, 28 March 2014.
3. Petronio, Capt Katie, "Get Over It! We are not all created equal," *Marine Corps Gazette*, March 2013.



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