

Women in Combat: A View From The Top

by MajGen Gene A. Deegan

The following is extracted from Gen Deegan's statement to the President's Commission on Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces on 25 June 1992 and from remarks made to his staff and subordinate commanders at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island.

The increasing number of women in our Corps during my 34 years of commissioned service has been a major plus. We have a better Corps because we have finally begun to fully utilize their capabilities.

I fully support the deployment of female Marines to a combat theater. There are plenty of opportunities for them to contribute to combat operations without being assigned to combat arms occupational specialties.

Specifically, with regard to proposed changes to the legislated combat restrictions, here are my recommendations:

- First, the combat restrictions should not be repealed.
- Second, it is pure lunacy to consider *involuntary* assignment of women as infantrymen. The vast majority are physically incapable of such an assignment. An individual that advocates such a policy simply does not understand the rigors of close combat, the unique spirit required for success on the battlefield, and the physical limits of even the exceptional women that serve in our Corps today.
- Third, I am also opposed to the *voluntary* assignment of women as infantrymen. However, the rationale is much more difficult to articulate or quantitatively prove. I will admit up front that my position is based both on facts and gut feelings.

Let me try to explain why I am opposed to the voluntary assignment of women to infantry units. As mentioned earlier, only an exceptionally small number of our females have the physical abilities to be an infantryman. Even my most physically fit and assertive female officers and staff noncommissioned officers are not advocating voluntary assignment as infantrymen.

They are not seeking such assignments, yet sense being pushed in that direction and are asking "why?" This change in policy would introduce unhealthy pressure among our top quality female officers, especially among the junior officers, to seek an assignment in the infantry.

Our most physically fit male officers are not necessarily our best officers. Frequently, they have a warped sense of the importance of fitness and can be intolerant of subordinates with less abilities. These zealots spend too much time on fitness and insufficient time on other aspects of their professional development or primary duties. Balance is the key. For a female to devote the inordinate time required for her to compete physically in the infantry arena, I fear that there is a high probability of distorted values.

The problem in infantry units is not simply one of showers and slit trenches. I will note that as a company commander in Vietnam, my company went 3½ months without ever seeing a rear area—no tents, no messhalls, bathed in a very small stream that trickled down the side of a mountain;



the bathroom facilities within the patrol base were urinals made of 4-inch plastic pipes inserted into a bed of gravel in the ground and open-air toilets fabricated from plywood and cut-off 55-gallon drums. That's the life of an infantryman in combat. That is the infantryman's rear area.

Infantry units would behave differently with women in the ranks. I may be old-fashioned, but I don't think that traditional manners and special consideration of women are necessarily in conflict with equal opportunity. I will never be comfortable with a female opening the door for me, even if it is a junior officer or enlisted Marine. If a male is physically abusing a person, my instinct is much stronger to interfere if the victim is a female. I continue to find it much more repugnant for an enemy to abuse a female prisoner than a male prisoner. Males are instinctively more protective of their female associates. Is this wrong? I don't think so. Equal opportunity is absolutely essential. However, it is possible that distorted concepts of equal opportunity are undermining our traditional respect of women and contributing to the increase in abuse of women in society.

Last, the development of a successful warrior is hard to describe. It is much more a state of mind than it is physical abilities or knowledge. We do this very well at Parris Island. Come see the process if you have any doubts.



A View From the Bottom

□ I am writing to express my opinion concerning placing women in the combat arms. I realize this is not the "politically correct" view; however, I feel we are wasting time and money on this issue for strictly political reasons. Women do not belong in combat arms, period. It is time for rational-thinking people to speak up and put an end to the initiatives of groups like DACOWITS, and the liberal womens' rights activists that would have women in combat today. I don't believe they speak for the bulk of women, and I know they don't speak for the bulk of men who have been in combat.

Having recently given up command of an artillery battery, and prior to that having served in the 1st Marine Divi-

sion forward command post in DESERT STORM, I consider myself qualified to speak for the combat arms. I have also had the privilege of doing a tour at Headquarters where there were several woman Marines in my office. I worked closely with women Marines for 3 years, and I have never met one who was even remotely interested in becoming a combat Marine. My experience has been that they performed their duties in as competent a manner as their male counterparts; however, they had neither the desire nor the capability to perform in the combat arms. None of the women had the physical capacity or the warrior attitude/spirit required in a combat unit. I'm sure some of them could outrun me in 3 miles, but then when has

anyone run 3 miles in athletic gear during a war? Never, I would venture to guess.

My point is that the people at the top doing all the talking on this issue are not talking to those of us at the bottom who know what we're talking about and have practical experience in this matter. Don't be deceived; these activists do not have combat effectiveness foremost on their minds. Their concern is strictly political/social and their solution is designed primarily to make the numbers look right. The idea that combat units can withstand the integration of women, as many propose, is whistling in the dark. The units won't be able to fight effectively, and this experiment won't be worth the lives it costs. Finally, to take it to the extreme,

do you want your daughters and sisters and perhaps your wives subject to the draft . . . with the possibility of assignment to a rifle company or battery of artillery? What kind of nation are we becoming when we send our young women off to fight our wars?

All of the men I know are against integrating women into combat units. The common response upon hearing such proposals is a laugh and a shake of the head in disbelief. We can't afford to do that anymore. We need to start speaking out against this foolishness. Those of us at the bottom who have the clearest picture must speak the loudest. It's time to fight back and put these misguided ideas to rest!

Capt Rick J. Messer

A former Marine Commandant frequently commented, "When it comes time for war, its not how many show up, but who shows up." He was exactly right. Success on the battlefield is not so much superior weaponry, superior numbers, or superior tactics. These all help. However, the most important ingredient is the heart and gut of those soldiers or Marines who must attack and kill the enemy.

What infantrymen do in battle defies common sense. No amount of education or logic will cause a young Marine to attack an enemy position. The willingness to close with and destroy the enemy evolves from a sense of duty and loyalty to country, Corps, and fellow Marines that transcends self-interests. Personal safety is secondary to the good of the unit. They don't deliberately think about it—it just happens. In many ways the warrior spirit is like a cult.

An essential ingredient in the warrior spirit is a feeling of physical strength and superiority over the enemy. We teach combat hitting skills (a form of boxing), bayonet fighting, and hand-to-hand combat at Parris Island. Do we really think that we will employ these techniques on the battlefield? Not really. Are the physical demands that we place on our recruits representative of combat conditions? Not really. These events are merely vehi-

cles for accomplishing the mission—instilling the warrior spirit—the confidence that they can carry on in the face of impossible odds.

When I add all of these thoughts together, there is no doubt in my mind that we are planting the seeds of failure on the battlefield when we integrate females into the ranks of combat units. Some may advocate a test. You can't come close to replicating the brutality, terror, fatigue, filth, and spartan conditions of infantrymen in war. You would never convince me short of an extended wartime employment that a mixed-gender rifle company would have the cohesiveness and capability of an all-male rifle company. Male bonding is real, and male bonding is good in this environment.

In closing, you cannot legislate away stupidity or discrimination. We seem to be mired in a nonproductive debate over the definition of combat. How far to the rear is the rear? The communicator defending a command post during an attack by bypassed or infiltrating enemy forces is engaged in combat. The avionics technician under fire from enemy aircraft, missiles, or artillery is in combat. This threat of hostile action throughout a theater should not preclude the deployment of women. At the same time, you should not attempt to legislate a clear line of demarcation. Each situation is

different. In fact, a clear line could force the deployment of women when it was imprudent or deny the opportunity when deployment was appropriate.

If we need a policy, keep it simple. Here is my suggestion for a policy:

Women are authorized to deploy to a combat theater and should be deployed unless overriding considerations dictate otherwise. It is the policy of the U.S. Government that females not be assigned to infantry and other combat units that have a high probability of becoming involved in direct fire engagements with the enemy. It is recognized that females may become prisoners of war in any unit on the modern battlefield. However, they should not be deliberately assigned to units when the potential of becoming POWs is a reasonable expectation.

The American people trust us to make decisions in combat operations involving the very life and death of their sons and daughters. Is it unreasonable to expect that we can be trusted to carry out wisely the will of the people on the assignment of women?

There are some clear training implications that flow from the ideas expressed above:

- Female Marines must be prepared to participate in combat actions involving defense against indirect fire, infiltrators, or enemy units that breach forward positions. They must also be

prepared for surprise engagements while conducting normal combat support and combat service support operations to the rear of forward maneuver units.

- In order to perform these functions, the training of female Marines must not be rigidly limited to defensive actions. Any good defense involves offensive actions. At the lower level, security patrols and immediate actions are good examples. The threat environment for a security patrol around an airfield, logistics installation, or command post is quite different than for an infantry unit. However, if we expect our female Marines to participate in these operations, they must be properly trained.

- Despite our assertion that the training of female Marines is limited to defensive actions, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island already trains female recruits in selected offensive techniques required for their role in a combat theater. It is time to change the policy to match what we already are doing. If there are other tactical skills required to be a full contributor in the rear, we should add them.

- On the other hand, I do not believe that our female Marines must be pre-

pared to participate in every offensive action in the defense. For example, a rear area commander may be tasked to form an ad hoc reaction force to prepare to counterattack enemy forces threatening other units in the rear. Most likely, this is an infantry-type function that would be inappropriate for female Marines. At the same time, a centralized reaction force within a perimeter with the mission of reinforcing threatened positions on the perimeter could be appropriate for female Marines. *Common sense should prevail.* We are not trying to make infantrymen out of female Marines. They do not need the physical attributes of infantrymen, nor the warrior spirit required to attack defended positions and kill the enemy.

- Female Marines at the senior levels must be prepared to participate in the planning and conduct of security and defensive operations in the rear. An understanding of offensive operations is essential for a well-planned defense. Thus, our senior female leaders must understand both the offense and the defense, and they must be educated in these matters at all appropriate schools.

There is one other training issue

that deserves a few words. Many ask, "Why does a male 0151 (administrative clerk) or 0411 (maintenance management specialist) need to be trained differently from his female counterpart?" The answer is easy. There are billets for 0151s, 0411s, 2531s (field radio operators), etc., in infantry battalions and other combat arms units. Males must be prepared to serve in, or be attached to, infantry units. Females do not. Second, and of more importance, every male Marine must be prepared to be assigned as a casualty replacement in an infantry unit. This is not an ideal situation. However, extraordinary conditions require extraordinary actions. In every war, *noninfantry Marines* have been used as emergency casualty replacements. In DESERT STORM, replacement units that included a wide array of occupational specialties were formed in anticipation of heavy infantry casualties. Every male Marine must have the warrior spirit, confidence, and skill required to attack and kill the enemy. This ethic, and the associated training, provides a combat resiliency unique to our Corps and is a quality we must retain.

USMC

>Gen Deegan is the commanding general of MCRD Parris Island/Eastern Recruiting Region.



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