**Let Women Be Warriors**

It’s time to stop questioning whether women should be in combat units.

**By Teresa Fazio**

Ms. Fazio is a former Marine.

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Eighteen women made history in May 2017 by graduating from Army infantry training.CreditMelissa Golden for The New York Times

Image

Eighteen women made history in May 2017 by graduating from Army infantry training.CreditCreditMelissa Golden for The New York Times

In the nearly three years since the Pentagon allowed women to join front-line combat units, questions about the policy have not gone away. Two former Marines — Owen West, now an assistant secretary of defense, and his father, the military writer Bing West — said women in the infantry would “[swiftly reduce combat effectiveness](https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/increase-dont-decrease-marine-lethality/).” In [The American Conservative](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-are-women-in-combat/), Scott Beauchamp could see no benefit in bringing women into combat roles and suggested that the Pentagon was cynically trying to bolster recruiting during ill-conceived wars.

And even the man who is overseeing gender integration, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, [recently expressed](https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1645598/mattis-more-data-needed-to-assess-womens-effectiveness-in-combat-arms/) a surprising level of ambivalence about the policy, saying that there are still too few women in the infantry to determine whether having them fight in close quarters is a “strength or a weakness.”

Yet women have [joined combat units](https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/10/11/has-combat-arms-gender-integration-been-successful-the-army-will-let-you-know-in-2020/) at Fort Campbell, Ky.; Fort Hood, Tex.; Fort Bragg, N.C.; and other bases. And several countries have allowed women into combat units for years, including Canada, Israel, Norway and Sweden. The evidence does exist, and is growing, that gender-integrated combat teams are effective.

Recently I visited Sweden to talk with conscripts in mechanized infantry, artillery and army ranger units. I learned that the performance of women in those units was not at issue. What was, at times, was the ability of their male peers to accept them.

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Sweden, which sent troops to support the American-led war in Afghanistan, first integrated women into combat jobs [in 1989](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1100/RR1103/RAND_RR1103.pdf) and began a gender-neutral draft last year. Swedish recruit training barracks look close to a “Starship Troopers” ideal of coed rooms and showers. One room housed 10 men and four women, all in bunk beds, and the recruits viewed this integration as crucial to unit strength. One night I accompanied a female corporal down a barracks hallway where a junior soldier stood without shirt or pants, one hand in his underwear, talking on a cellphone. We shrugged.

Two Norwegian researchers, [Nina Hellum](https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/17-01196.pdf) and [Ulla-Britt Lilleaas](http://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2015/09/unisex-rooms-made-gender-insignificant-army), have found that having male and female troops live together has a “degenderizing” effect that makes soldiers act more like siblings, reducing harassment.

Physical standards are gender-neutral. For example, all recruits must [run two kilometers (1.25 miles)](https://docplayer.se/5869373-Underbilaga-2-anvisningar-for-tester.html) while wearing combat gear — including body armor, helmet and rifle — in [under 10 minutes and 15 seconds](http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A235848/FULLTEXT01.pdf) if they want to join elite reconnaissance teams. Ranger conscripts in mountain warfare training must all carry the same weight, and ski and climb the same distances in the same amount of time. And they spend their off-time in similar ways, watching movies like “Full Metal Jacket” or playing “Call of Duty.”

Yet if women seemed to have assimilated into the military lifestyle in Sweden, their stories demonstrate that not all men had fully accepted them.

A noncommissioned officer I met was a sinewy CrossFit athlete who passed the grueling reconnaissance course. While she was deployed in Afghanistan in 2009, a male colleague bullied her in the months after they survived a roadside bomb, or I.E.D. In 12 years of service, it was the only time she was harassed. Their squad leaders surmised he suffered psychological effects from the incident, while she, who had been in combat before, remained unaffected.

Similarly, a Swedish Army captain told me that as a young soldier, she drove armored personnel carriers in Afghanistan. After dodging an I.E.D., she took charge when her new male lieutenant panicked and unwittingly disabled their radio network. At the time, her male colleagues praised her quick thinking, but they soon after closed ranks against her, excluding her from meetings and briefings.

In both cases, the harassment stemmed from male peers being uncomfortable with a woman who had handled a stressful situation better than a man. Like the United States military, Sweden has spent the past year reckoning with sexual harassment and assault in its ranks. Its military #MeToo movement, called [#givaktochbitihop](https://www.dn.se/debatt/1768-kvinnor-i-forsvaret-alla-anmalningar-maste-tas-pa-allvar/), loosely translates to “stand at attention and bite the bullet.”

The question, then, is not whether women can be effective combat troops but whether a hypermasculine military culture can adjust. The potential benefits of having women in combat units argue for making that happen.

Women, for instance, led teams that interviewedand searched civilian women in Afghanistan, providing crucial information to infantry units while also engaging in combat alongside them. A 2015 Marine Corps study found that coed groups were better at problem-solving. And while I was a platoon commander in Iraq and California, Marines came to my office to discuss their breakups and divorces. Perhaps these guarded young men seemed comfortable revealing their heartbreak because I’m an older sister of three brothers.

Women volunteer for the infantry for the same reason men do: to protect their country and their comrades. When a revered leader like Mr. Mattis hedges on whether women should be in the combat arms, he does all of the troops a disservice.

Teresa Fazio, a former Marine, is a freelance writer. This essay was written with the support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

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# Maintain the Combat Exclusion for Women in the Military



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As a female Marine combat veteran of the Iraq war, or just as someone with common sense, I urge Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to maintain the combat exclusion. We need our combat units to be the most lethal fighting force our tax dollars can buy. Adding women creates more danger for everyone and risks compromising missions.

Men make the infantry standards all the time. Women fail to make them [a lot of the time](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/04/08/women-now-0-for-29-in-attempting-marine-infantry-officer-course/).

Even on lower fitness standards, women have [far higher rates](https://www.nationalreview.com/article/420826/women-in-combat-military-effectiveness-deadly-pentagon) of injury, illness, non-availability, non-deployability and attrition than men. Commanders of coed units know too well the added burdens of trying to juggle sexual dynamics, accommodations, relationships, fraternization, rape, pregnancy, hygiene and much more while maintaining troop welfare and good order and discipline, let alone mission accomplishment. These are liabilities that can result in mission failure and high casualties in the combat units, all to satisfy a tiny group of women selfishly petitioning for their own career advancement.

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ISIS doesn’t care that our military has met its diversity quota and broken the so-called brass ceiling. They will see our self-imposed weaknesses and exploit them to cause as much damage as possible. That’s precisely [what happened](https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/20/world/middleeast/a-mission-that-ended-ininferno-for-3-women.html?_r=0) to the group of female Marines who served on entry checkpoint duty two months before I did in Fallujah in June, 2005. Insurgents targeted their convoy almost certainly because they were transporting females. They laid an ambush that began with a bomb and ended in a firefight. Three American servicewomen died (one was a single mother) and several others suffered horrendous injuries. They hadn’t made and maintained the infantry standards to be there — they were just attached to the infantry by day. Women are targeted as easy marks because their capture and torture devastate American morale, further hindering our ability to fight our enemies.

Women can serve their country in all sorts of noble capacities and enjoy long and lofty military careers. Maintaining the combat exclusion doesn’t take anything away from them. It elevates and protects women and empowers the combat units to succeed in fighting America’s vicious enemies.

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# Now, Open the Ranger Regiment to Women



*John Rodriguez, a Herbert Scoville Jr. peace fellow at the Truman Center for National Policy, graduated from Ranger School in 2007 and served six years as an Army infantry officer including a deployment to Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley from 2008 to 2009.*

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Two Army officers, Kristen Griest and Shaye Haver, have just proved to the world that women have what it takes to pass one of the toughest courses in the U.S. military. Through physically and mentally grueling patrols, they earned the trust and respect of their peers, who evaluated them along with the instructors. I know because I graduated from Ranger School in 2007 as a young infantry lieutenant. Earning my tab paved the way for me to lead an infantry platoon in combat — a path currently denied to women.

*Secretary Ashton Carter should open up all positions to every qualified individual, but also continue evaluating standards for each job and make infantry standards tougher for everyone.*

When I served in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley, having the most qualified soldiers around me was a matter of life and death. Griest and Haver clearly have the physical, mental and tactical skills to perform in the infantry; they could not have earned their tabs otherwise. (As [other Ranger School graduates have argued](https://rhinoden.rangerup.com/time-to-welcome-a-new-era-of-rangers-army/), alleging special treatment, contrary to evidence, is an insult to the instructors and the Ranger Standard.)

Ranger School is more than just a finishing school for infantry leaders; it is a leadership school. I graduated alongside medics, parachute riggers, intelligence analysts and truck drivers. The course made all of them better leaders. Opening it permanently to the best soldiers, regardless of gender, will be a net positive for the Army.

Elite units like the 75th Ranger Regiment should also be opened up to women who meet the standards. The performance of female cultural support teams fighting alongside Ranger Regiment and other special operations forces in Afghanistan have proved not only the capabilities of many female soldiers, but also the tactical advantages of a gender-integrated force. All of the services’ elite special operations units should follow the lead of the Navy SEALs and open their doors to physically and mentally qualified women, for the sake of national security and common sense.

As part of the "Force of the Future," Secretary Ashton Carter should open up all positions to every qualified individual, but also continue evaluating standards for each job. The current standard to join the infantry, besides being male, is meeting bare minimum physical standards like 42 push-ups — that bare minimum would get you dropped from Ranger School on Day 1. For the infantry, standards should get tougher, but some cybersecurity jobs might relax certain physical requirements in order to recruit skilled professionals. Our military and country need to maximize talent by utilizing our full bench while simultaneously ensuring our standards make sense.

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# Make the Standards for Male and Female Marines Equal



[*Kate Germano*](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/us/marine-commanders-firing-stirs-debate-on-integration-of-women-in-corps.html?_r=0) *is a lieutenant colonel in the United States Marine Corps. She has served in a variety of challenging billets, including deployment to Iraq with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and two tours on recruiting duty.*

**Updated** August 20, 2015, 1:59 PM

The elephant in the room in this debate is not whether women should be allowed into direct combat roles, it is the acknowledgment that for years and years, we have demanded less of women in the military. We owe them — and the American public — better.

*The Marine Corps mission is to make Marines, win battles and develop quality citizens. There is nothing in this mission statement about making female Marines and male Marines.*

The Marine Corps mission is to make Marines, win battles and develop quality citizens. There is nothing in this mission statement about making female Marines and male Marines, who have separate tasks, responsibilities and are up to different standards. Yet we clearly do have different expectations for the performance and conduct of men and women, starting from the day they are screened to enlist. Right from the start, women are held to a lower standard for achievement, which [explains](https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/lt-col-kate-germano-on-the-marines-and-women/) why their failure rate on the initial physical fitness test at boot camp is nine times greater and their discharge rate is double that of men. It also explains why we have such a problem with [sexual assault in the Marine Corps](https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2014/12/04/marine-corps-highest-sex-assault/19910575/). There is no level playing field established for men and women in terms of respect, conduct, performance and expectations.

The majority of data being collected to support opening combat roles to women is based on physiology, physical endurance and strength. However, over the the past five years or so, the women being tested were recruited under different sets of expectations and performance standards from the men. For instance, men perform pull-ups and women do the flexed arm hang. Those standards are simply too different to measure strength and they set women up to fail in the combat integration tests, which then allows the Marine Corps to say that women aren't up to the challenges of combat.

Until we acknowledge the elephant in the room and stop lowering expectations for female performance and conduct, the data will continue to demonstrate why women should not be allowed in these new combat roles. We simply can’t allow such an easy out for the military.

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# The Military Shouldn’t Have to Reflect Society



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**Updated** November 16, 2015, 9:24 PM

The issue of whether women should be permitted assignment in combat units is the kind of issue on which almost every American has a view, but by which almost no Americans are affected. Women comprise 15 percent of our military forces, which in turn comprise one half of 1 percent of the American public. That creates a tendency to believe the military ought to fully reflect the individual opportunities and practices of our broader society, rather than society appreciating that the “sharp end of the stick” that fights to protect us is organized along different lines. It also creates a tendency to believe the military is socially regressive rather than try and understand the more complicated truth that there are justifiable reasons for the combat exclusion dictated by the demands of battlefield success.

*The defense secretary shouldn't value the achievement of female Ranger graduates over the male Ranger graduates. And he should advise Obama not to attend the graduation.*

It is unquestionably true that combat exclusions disadvantage those few women who would succeed. But from my experience, it is also true that the men who fight against our enemies — especially in the close-in fight of the infantry — largely oppose it, and they know things about the profession that those of us they protect do not. To many in the military, it seems our society is unconcerned about the demands on them from 14 years at war, and more concerned that they conform to the practices of broader society.

I would advise Defense Secretary Ashton Carter not to value the achievement of female Ranger graduates more than he does the male Ranger graduates. And if President Obama is planning to attend the graduation, I would advise Carter to discourage him. The president attending this graduation will signal to our fighting forces that the president is more impressed with the achievement of the two women who made it through than he is with the 95 men who also made it, or the thousands of men who achieved it in previous Ranger courses. It will give the sense that the commander in chief is less interested in the vast majority of Americans fighting our wars than he is in the rights of the few women who will have the ability and interest in combat or in clocking “firsts” for a progressive agenda. Those impressions will make more difficult the integration of women into combat units, which is going to be hard enough without further politicizing the issue.

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