



SMA Chandler says Opening Spots for Women Will Not Lower Standards

By David Vergun

Army News Service

There's been a lot of bad press" and "a lot of misinformation" about whether or not the Army is lowering its standards by the possibility of opening up military occupational specialties previously closed to women, said the Army's top enlisted leader.

"No, we're not" lowering the standards, said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III.

Chandler was the keynote speaker March 12 at the sixth annual Army Women's Foundation Hall of Fame

Reception and Summit at the Cannon House Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

This year's event theme was "Army Women — Resilient and Ready."

Chandler explained that since 2011, researchers and scientists from U.S. Training and Doctrine Command and other organizations have been validating baseline physical and mental requirements needed for traditionally male-only military occupational specialties, known as

MOSs: artillery, infantry, armor and combat engineers.

The MOSs were formally closed per the 1994 Defense Department's Combat Exclusion Policy, which prohibited women from engaging in direct combat on the ground. Those rules were lifted earlier this year, but validation testing is still in progress.

Since there were no traditional battle lines drawn during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, women in forward operating bases and along the main supply routes often suddenly found themselves on the forward edge of the battle area. And by many accounts, they acquitted themselves well.

The Army is establishing a measurable standard which all Soldiers — male as well as female — will be required to meet, Chandler said, adding that it's very possible that some male Soldiers who've been working in the closed MOSs might not make the cut, while some women will.

The operative word, he said, is "measurable standards." By meeting measurable standards, Soldiers of either gender will be provided a path forward "not only to achieve their personal and professional goals, but to fulfill the needs of the Army.

"It's about managing talent, not providing more opportunities for females," he continued. "It's about determining who's best qualified."

Later, he and wife Jeanne plan to travel to Fort Stewart to observe first-hand the physical demands study and validation process for infantry and armor. Chandler himself was a tanker, one of the closed MOSs, and he said he can attest to the repeated physical demands of loading heavy shells in awkward positions within the confined space inside the tank.

Once the physical assessment baseline is completed, he said he'll go back to the force and expect Soldiers, male or female, to measure up.

Chandler added that in addition to the "closed" MOSs, he expects the Army will be validating other MOSs as well.

It's one thing to open up MOSs to all qualified Soldiers and it's another thing to change the mindset or culture, he pointed out. Senior leaders will be part of that discussion and TRADOC is taking an active role in facilitating it.

"This is about finding the best talent, the best qualified. We should all be excited about that," he said.

Lasting Impressions

Chandler said he's been personally touched by stories of women he's met or served with over the last several years.

During a recent trip to Kuwait, he met 1st Lt. Christine Plackis, executive officer of the 74th Dive Detachment. To become an Army diver, there's "an extremely rigorous assessment program," he said.

She met the standards and "did extremely well." Chandler said he spoke to the unit's NCOs and they told him "she's the best diver in the detachment," and she'd been with them less than three months.

Another was Pfc. Monica Brown, a medic, who joined the Army in 2005. She completed high school early so when she came in she was only 17, he said.

Soon after boot camp, she deployed to a remote, mountainous region of Afghanistan. While on patrol with the infantry, their unit, which included Afghan soldiers, was ambushed. For the next three days there was "intense contact," he said.

Despite the obvious danger, she rendered aid to the U.S. and Afghan wounded for three days until the helicopters could safely medevac everyone out.

"She could have gotten on one of those birds," he said, but she chose to stay.

A third Soldier, 1st Lt. Ashley White Stumpf, paid the ultimate sacrifice. She was killed by an IED while in the performance of her duties, Chandler said.

These were only three examples of the many "Soldiers, who just happen to be women" doing their duty, he said.

"They chose to do something so few of the rest of the American people can do. That's what makes our Army — dedicated professionals, persons of character who are willing to do what's necessary; commitment to one another, their unit, the Army and the nation."

Chandler also thanked Army Maj. Gen. (Dr.) Nadja Y. West, chief medical advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for her positive impact on Army medicine and helping improve the health of the force. She spoke briefly prior to Chandler's keynote address.

West told of her role model, 1st Lt. Mildred Manning, an Army nurse. When World War II began, Manning and dozens of other Army and Navy nurses were captured in the jungles of the Philippines, West related.

They were taken to a Japanese prisoner of war camp where conditions deteriorated over time, she continued. Sickness and malnutrition were rampant and Manning lost all her teeth through illness.

Somehow she survived and after the war continued with her nursing practice into old age. During a later interview, she said the trauma experienced as a POW was still felt decades later, manifesting itself in unusual ways. For example, she was afraid of dark places and stored extra food in her house for fear she'd run out.

But the point is not to dwell on the morbid, but to recognize her resiliency, West said.

Manning said "I came out (of that experience) so much better than many of my friends. I have never had any harsh feelings. I've always known that if I could survive that, I could survive anything."

To survive all of that must have taken unimaginable resilience, West said.

Despite adversity, Manning “developed coping skills and went on to lead a productive life, making a meaningful contribution to society. This is what ready and resilience is about.”

Another female Soldier who is making a difference today, West said, is the Army’s surgeon general, Lt. Gen. Patricia Horoho. She is making a huge contribution through her efforts to highlight the importance of

sleep, activity and nutrition to making a more ready and resilient Soldier and family member.

Chandler said the Army and the nation should also not forget its veterans, men and women, many of whom are homeless and living in the street. He applauded individuals and organizations who are helping them get back to work, to school and to even start small businesses. ■



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