



Capt. Beverly Nordin, a jumpmaster from the 54th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, performs jumpmaster preinspections on a fellow Soldier (U.S. Army photo)

Gender integration into combat arms

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"The integration of our services ... is important ... We are a country that believes ... that every individual deserves the same opportunities if you're capable ... if you can do the job."¹

—former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, calling for the integration of the military and mandating equality of treatment and opportunity. Sixty-two years later, under orders to integrate

women into new positions and units no later than January 1, 2016, the Department of Defense conducts assessments to develop, review, and validate gender-neutral individual occupational specialty standards.

Historical Perspective

During the Revolutionary War, women served the Continental Army in traditional roles as nurses, seamstresses, and cooks.² However, some courageous women, such as Margaret Corbin, served in combat alongside their husbands or disguised as men, while others operated as spies.³ During the Civil War, more than 400 women, such as Cathay Williams and Frances Clayton, concealed their true identities and fought in the Union and Confederate armies.

Ultimately, unit standards and unit cohesion survived the 1948 desegregation of the armed forces and repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which allowed lesbian, gay, and bisexual military members to serve openly.⁴ One year after the DADT repeal, a study published by a University of California research institute found gay and lesbian service members did not cause a negative impact on the U.S. military.⁵

There is no reason to believe gender integration into combat arms would produce any different results.

There is no broader-minded system than the Department of Defense and specifically the U.S. Army, which led the charge on every one of the previously mentioned challenges.

Leadership is Key

What produced the best results when facing these issues? Unflinching equality backed by a sincere, mature team of leaders. Expectations and the commander’s intent are the same, regardless of gender. From the moment a service member arrives at a new assignment, the unit’s standards and expectations of them as a member of the unit are clear. The unit’s hardships and burdens are shouldered by both genders equally, not unlike its victories and failures. No matter if it is living conditions, accommodations, or access to facilities, if it is available to one Soldier then it is accessible to all. Warfare will not be taking a break any time soon, and neither should the standards by which we measure our service men or women’s performance.

One would be hard-pressed to find a more aggressive “testing platform” for these types of changes than the Army’s only “always” forward deployed airborne field artillery battalion, the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment. Having been assigned three of the field artillery branch’s first female field artillery officers in the summer of 2015, the 4-319th AFAR has an advantage in gender integration.

Immediately assigned to separate firing batteries as fire direction officers, they found themselves out in front of their sections and platoons. Within 12 months of arrival, these three FDOs participated in 18 airborne operations, led their Soldiers through two section certifications, attended the U.S. Army’s Jump Master School, participated in numerous named operations and multinational live fire exercises, and oversaw the safe, accurate, and timely firing of over 4,800 artillery rounds. Like their male counterparts, the battalion’s newest FDOs proved to be combat multipliers.



Capt. Nargis Kabiri, commander of Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 9th Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division Artillery, helps her team prepare an M119 Howitzer on Fort Stewart, Ga. This was the first time Kabiri participated in a live fire as Alpha Battery’s commander. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Zoe Garbarino)

When dealing with living arrangements, undoubtedly one of the loudest arguments against gender integration, we found it was disruptive to the planning and execution of operations when we polarized genders by assigning separate living quarters. On numerous occasions, and as a direct result of the living arrangements, they were not present for those epiphanies that occur without warning in team quarters. The situation is further exasperated when the missing individual is a leader.

Social breakthroughs are occurring daily in the Army. Gone are the days when the U.S. segregated its female populace to “protect them.” From what or whom are we protecting them? Who are we then labeling the possible offender from whom our female or male Soldiers need protecting? Who are we villainizing or victimizing? To the contrary, we, as a battalion leadership team, feel our Soldiers, regardless of gender, are more vulnerable when we isolate them away from those who care about them the most: their teammates.

Challenge Old Thinking

Gender integration is not going to be an easy process, and it will not come naturally to many of us. In 2016, during a battalion after action review after exercise Summer Tempest in Sardinia, Italy, three female combat medical specialists and a radar operator asked me why I had separated the female Soldiers from their male teammates. My response? It was the most straightforward solution while dividing the battalion into our four-man tents.

In hindsight, I did it because that is how I have seen it done throughout my 17-year career. I did it without thinking twice because it was what felt right to me at the time. Inadvertently, I reverted to the “old way of doing business.”

For months leading up to this incident, I felt I had done everything to promote a healthy and positive gender integration. However, I should have considered the second and third order effects that my decision to separate the female troopers would cause to them, their teams, and the battalion. As a result, I unintentionally

cheated my subordinate leaders of the opportunity to develop, thus hindering our progress toward gender integration.

Our FDOs have since become platoon leaders and fire support officers in our sister infantry battalions and cavalry squadrons. It is only a matter of time before we see our first female section chiefs graduate to platoon sergeants. Thus, it is imperative that the Army develops and maintains systems to facilitate familiarity and trust for all Soldiers regardless of gender.

Conclusion

As with every challenge the armed forces have overcome in the past, phasing gender integration into the Army will take time. As past leadership can attest, change does not happen overnight and setbacks can occur. However, a sincere, professional, and conscious effort must be made to change the culture, and it begins with us, the leadership. As a result, we will be a stronger and more adaptive fighting force. ■

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