

More Women Than Expected Take on Combat Arms Roles

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Full gender integration in the Army is exceeding expectations, with more than 300 women successfully recruited or transferred into the service's most physically demanding career fields in 2016, according to senior leaders.

Earlier this year, the Army opened about 138,000 positions once closed to women in the infantry, armor, field artillery and Special Forces.

"This is about identifying a Soldier or applicant who is capable of doing a job to standard regardless of gender," said Maj. Gen. Hugh Van Roosen II, the Army's deputy chief of staff for G-1, or personnel. "For us, this means opening up some of the hardest jobs in the Army to all the talent pool that's out there and not cutting ourselves off from 50 percent of the population."

The influx of women interested in combat arms has surprised Van Roosen and others who expected to see half that number of women by this time after the defense secretary approved the Army's implementation plan in March.

"This is a real success story," he told representatives of military and veteran service

organizations who visited the Pentagon recently. “This has gone far better than we anticipated.”



Pvt. Lashonda Ivy, a combat engineer with 43rd Combat Engineer Company, Regimental Engineer Squadron “Pioneer,” 3rd Cavalry Regiment, dons her helmet during training earlier this year at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by Spc. Josephine Carlson, 982 Combat Camera Company, Airborne)

Now in its third phase, the integration plan, also known as [Soldier 2020](https://www.army.mil/article/114753/5_things_to_know_about_Soldier_2020) (https://www.army.mil/article/114753/5_things_to_know_about_Soldier_2020), is placing female infantry and armor officers in operational units at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Hood, Texas. The fourth and final phase will sustain and optimize integration efforts once the Army reaches full operational capability and re-validates screening requirements for jobs in combat arms.

Small cohorts of female and male officers are currently being trained together and assigned to the same company as a way of gradually adjusting the culture in male-dominated units before female enlisted Soldiers begin to graduate this summer.

“We’re going to break stereotypes,” Van Roosen said. “We keep that up ... until we determine the climate and culture have sufficiently changed to normalize processes and get back to business as usual.”

A majority of the women within the program — more than 260 — are part of the infantry and armor fields. Of them, fewer than 30 are serving in the reserve component.

Unlike the regular Army, which can place active-duty troops in positions at any base, the Army National Guard must figure out how to place its members in positions based on vacancies. One way the Guard hopes to offer guidance to women enlisted in combat arms is by having female officers who are serving nearby in other career fields act as leaders for them, Van Roosen said.

Initial data of fully integrated training at Fort Benning, Georgia

(<http://www.benning.army.mil/>) — where infantry and armor courses are held — have shown no significant difference between male and female student performance.

“The female attrition rate is lower or the same as men,” Van Roosen said. “These are women who are physically fit and absolutely prepared for this.”



First Sgt. Raquel Steckman, with the 374th Engineer Company (Sapper), headquartered in Concord, California, jokes with her Soldiers before the start of formation. Steckman is the first woman in the Army appointed to a combat engineer company as a first sergeant. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michel Sauret / U.S. Army)

The Army has also conducted several studies to decrease injury and attrition rates among all trainees. The Occupational Physical Assessment Test (<http://tradocnews.org/tradoc-now-opat-matching-soldiers-to-the-right-job/>), which rolls out to the entire service Jan. 3, was developed as a result of the findings.

The new test features gender-neutral tasks, including a standing long jump, a dead lift, an interval run and a seated power throw to measure strength needed for tasks such as

loading ammunition. Those who score in the highest physical category, among other qualifications, will be allowed to work any job in combat arms, Van Roosen said.

As of now, no cap has been placed on the number of women who can serve in combat arms, and Van Roosen doesn't believe there should be one. "This isn't about gender, this is about capability," he said. "We don't really care what the gender is."

The general does believe the U.S. Army could have a larger percentage of women in combat arms compared to the Canadian army, which served as a model for the gender integration plan. Canadian women have served in combat arms for 30 years, but commissioned and enlisted females make up only about 2 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively, of that army's infantry, Van Roosen said.

"We will probably do better than the Canadian model," he said. "Time will tell what the long-term propensities will look like."

Having women in the Army's toughest jobs will greatly benefit readiness, the general believes.

"We're getting after the best Soldiers we can," he said. "This will give our Army capability that we've not had before on several levels, and it will make us a better Army."