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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# A Victory for Women at War

By **MARIETTE KALINOWSKI** DEC. 4, 2015

THE announcement this week by Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter that all combat roles in the United States military would officially be open to women is, without question, a victory. News of the decision was a thrill for me and thousands of other women who have served and continue to serve over the past 14 years in “support” roles in Iraq and Afghanistan, many of whom enthusiastically volunteered, as I did, for positions that put us in the middle of conflict.

In Iraq, I was attached as a turret gunner to a military police unit that specialized in convoy security, during a period of high risk for I.E.D. attacks. I operated all of the weapons systems used by that unit, and was expected to perform at the same level as a man. I did. There are thousands of others like me. Now that I’m home in the States, I know that nearly every day I encounter a woman who served, even just in passing, even without knowing it. You have encountered them, too.

To be perfectly honest, the Pentagon’s decision was not much of a surprise to me. The repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell paved the way for fresh reconsideration of this clearly discriminatory policy. And the past three years have seen a good number of positive showings in field tests of women in grueling training scenarios. The lifting of these restrictions on women in the military represents a long overdue crack in the “brass ceiling,” a point where only combat training and experience merit promotions to the highest ranks.

But along with this victory comes a burden, because it's up to us women to prove the secretary right, to show that we can handle any combat role, "no exceptions." To do that, we have to rise above the outdated notions and prejudices that some military leaders still have about us.

The ability of women to perform in combat will be a direct result of how they are trained. If you consistently train women to march and fight under 85-pound loads, they will match or exceed these demands. But we have to move beyond simply demanding equal performance, and look to the potential to transform gender relations in military culture. In the best-case scenario, full integration may reduce the risk of sexual harassment and assault. Discrimination and rape are used as tools of dominance and control, but if the last point of control is removed, perhaps the motivation to enforce the status quo will disappear. Change could extend to life outside the military as well. Narrow and distorted messages about young women and their bodies could be challenged. Women could be raised to know that weight training and functional applications of strength are a form of empowerment consistent with feminism.

The military is certainly taking a positive step in this direction, but there are times when this still seems to me like wishful thinking.

I recently attended a black tie celebration of the Marine Corps' 240th birthday celebration. I was introduced to a retired general who told me that women consistently failed to lift the same weight and perform in the same roles as men, and that he believed that women were physically incapable of fulfilling the rigorous demands of combat. This gentleman was commissioned as a Marine Corps infantry officer in the mid-1970s, and only recently retired. He is what I and a lot of younger Marines refer to as a "salty dog" — a Marine who has "been there and done that." Salty dogs belong to an older generation that proved itself in iconic conflicts and events. They are deserving of our respect and deference, and we rightly give it. We look to them for guidance, and we listen. But they also come from a period of American history that perpetuated overt discrimination against nonwhites and homosexuals, and have very specific views on gender roles.

Despite my confidence that we women can fully and faithfully answer the call to combat, I still have some anxiety. I'm concerned that the ingrained ideas of gender roles and abilities, and the older generation of leaders who fully believe in these traditional ideas, will reject women's place in combat no matter how good we are. The system is stacked against women — we will have to be twice as good as the men, simply to remain in combat.

Men (and some women) feel that the system works as it exists now, and shouldn't be touched, no matter what evidence is presented to them. To some leaders in the military, a woman who volunteers for a combat unit and makes it through the training is a nice perk of the system, but shouldn't be relied upon. We're up against a quiet, strong prejudice that has everything to do with our biological ability to create life, and nothing to do with our willingness and abilities as soldiers.

As this older generation ages out of the military and younger men and women move up in the ranks, ability and leadership will change, and individual merit and performance, rather than gender, will determine role and rank. I, for one, look forward to witnessing that new military, will applaud the women who step up to the call, and hope we prove all the naysayers wrong.

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