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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# Women in the Infantry? No Thanks

As a former captain and airborne soldier in the U.S. Army, I say be careful what you wish for.



U.S. Army parachute infantry in the Zabul province of Afghanistan in 2014. PHOTO: THE WASHINGTON POST

By **JULIE PULLEY**

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With Capt. Kristen Griest and First Lt. Shaye Haver recently becoming the first female soldiers to complete Army Ranger School, demands for the complete integration of women in the U.S. military are growing. In 2013 then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta officially lifted the ban on women serving in ground-combat roles. On Jan. 1, 2016, all branches of the military must either open all positions to women or request exceptions.

As a former captain and airborne soldier in the Army's Second Infantry Division Support Command, I say be careful what you wish for. Overturning a long-standing tradition in a martial organization like the U.S. military will undoubtedly have unintended consequences. I am particularly concerned with demands that the Army permit women to join its Infantry Branch.

Don't misunderstand, I was thrilled when Capt. Griest and First Lt. Haver earned their Ranger tabs. I was especially pleased when Army cadre and peers assured me that the Ranger School's high standards were maintained. As a woman, I support equal rights to a sensible point. At the same time, women must acknowledge that equality does not mean selective equality. I wish it did. I want to see those hard-charging, superwomen sisters of mine pursue every career opportunity the military offers men. No doubt they can do it—and do it well. But Ranger School for these two exceptional individuals is not the same as allowing women to serve in the infantry.

First, opening the infantry to women necessitates revisiting *Rostker v. Goldberg*, the 1981 Supreme Court ruling that only men are required to register for the draft. If the infantry is compelled to include women, the argument against women registering for the draft will be invalidated. If women are to be treated “equally” and serve in the infantry, shouldn't they be drafted into the infantry at an equal rate?

The unlikely event of a draft aside, should women in an all-volunteer Army serve in infantry positions in equal numbers alongside men? If so, how would this affect American military families and morale? Would such changes dissuade women from voluntarily joining the Army? And most important, would significant numbers of women in the infantry serve to strengthen or weaken national defense?

From a practical standpoint, I believe the impact would be negative. Many civilians, veterans and active-duty service members will disagree. Many will view me as disloyal to women in arms. I respect and understand opposing perspectives. I also appreciate the sacrifices of women before me who suffered and overcame countless barriers so that I could live big dreams, choose to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point, and serve my country without feeling professionally inhibited, marginalized or disrespected.

But questions persist. Can the general population of fighting-age American women be expected to perform equally with their male counterparts? According to a U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center study released in 2004, the average fighting load carried by an infantry rifleman operating in Afghanistan was 63 pounds before adding a rucksack. The average approach-march load in combat, which includes a light rucksack, was 96 pounds. The average emergency-approach-march load, which includes a larger rucksack, was 127 pounds.

Would the infantry have performed as well in past wars had half the billets been filled by women instead of men?

Can fighting-age American women be counted upon to fulfill their duties without causing an increased administrative burden in time of national emergency? Around the time my company received orders to deploy to Afghanistan in 2002, a number of women in my unit became pregnant. My company, stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., attached soldiers from two other Army posts to fill the vacancies caused by the inability of these female service members to deploy.

Will women serving in the infantry be injured more frequently or more seriously? In a 2011 article, the Seattle Times estimated the Department of Veterans Affairs paid over \$500 million in benefits annually for degenerative arthritis, cervical strains and other musculoskeletal injuries. Will disability payouts increase with women serving in the infantry? I believe the defense leadership must conduct an objective study of basic training and military-school injury rates by gender to more accurately predict answers to such questions.

I don't raise these questions because I am a "hater" or a naysayer. I ask because I am a mother of both a son and a daughter. As a former service member, I wouldn't have wanted to be forced into a job in which I was severely disadvantaged. I do not want my daughter mandated to fill a position in which she will have to put forth significantly greater effort than her peers just to survive in a time of war. I do not want my son forced into a job where he is at greater risk because those serving alongside him are disproportionately taxed physically.

My hope is that the dialogue regarding the opening of all military branches will be thoughtful and realistic, unclouded by agenda and emotion.

*Ms. Pulley, a 2000 graduate of West Point, is a former captain in the U.S. Army.*