

Transcript: CNN Presidential Town Hall: America's Military and The Commander and Chief -- September 28, 2016

TAPPER: Our next question comes from Captain Lauren Serrano, who's an active duty Marine. She earned a Bronze star for her service in Iraq and has a question on that subject.

CAPTAIN LAUREN SERRANO: Good afternoon, Mr. President. A study by the Marine Corps revealed that mixed gender combat units performed notably worse and that women suffered staggeringly higher rates of injury. Just one of those statistics showed that mixed gender units took up to 159 percent longer to evacuate a casualty than all-male units.

As the wife of a Marine who deploys to combat often, that added time can mean the difference between my husband living or dying.

Why were these tangible negative consequences disregarded and how does the integration of women positively enhance the infantry mission and make me and my husband safer?

OBAMA: I don't think any of - any studies are going to be disregarded. I think that what we have to do is to take a look at the particular deployments, the particular situations. There are going to be situations in which women are on the front lines. And they're doing a bunch of stuff now. We - sometimes we can call them combat or not, but the truth of the matter is they're in war theater and they are at great risk.

There are going to be other situations in which the commanders in the field have to make decisions about what's going to be best in order for us to accomplish the mission. But the one thing that I do know is that as a consequence of women serving in our military and opening up what used to be closed situations to them, we've gained a lot of talent. We've gained a lot of incredible soldiers, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen. And it is - I want to make sure that our starting assumption is if you can do the job, you should be able to get the job.

Now, if you can't do the job, if there is a problem with performance, then that has to be taken into account. But keep in mind that there are a lot of jobs that are considered combat that don't necessarily involve you being on the front lines going door-to-door in Fallujah. And part of the - the task of the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of Defense and others is making those determinations and not just simply painting a broad brush and saying, you know what, women can't be in combat, because there may be situations in which they could do the best job. It may not involve physical strength or how many pull-ups you can do, it may involve the precision with which you can operate and you being able to keep your cool you being able to carry out a task with a low error rate. And it may be that in those situations, a woman can perform better than a man.

So what I would - my instructions to the secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs is not to engage in political correctness. This isn't some symbolic issue. This is let's make sure that we're not fielding half a team if we've got a whole team. Let's figure out who can do what and who can do it best. And if they can do it best, I want to make sure they've got opportunities. I don't want the presumption to be that a woman can't do the job, because I'm looking at you right now and I'm pretty sure that you're in better shape than I am and you can do a lot of stuff I couldn't do. And I don't want you not to have that opportunity.

I agree with you that we can't just out of some ideological notion make it more dangerous for your husband. But I don't want to - I don't want a military, an institution that starts with the premise that women can't do something. If it turns out they can't do something, then we'll deal with that specific situation. But I don't want to start off with that assumption.

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