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Michael O'Hanlon: A Challenge for Female Marines

The grueling Infantry Officer Course was too much for the women who volunteered.

By MICHAEL O'HANLON

In recent years they have flown military transport planes from continent to continent, launched and landed combat jets on aircraft carriers, steered helicopters through the mountain passes of the Hindu Kush, shepherded supply trucks up and down the highways of Iraq and Afghanistan, and connected with Afghans and Iraqis in ways that male GIs never could. America's women warriors are an extraordinary lot.

Women make up about 15% of the U.S. military and have suffered more than 100 combat fatalities over the past decade. Yet many military positions are still not open to them—from special-forces commandos to front-line Army and Marine Corps infantry, to Navy billets on certain ships where berthing members of both sexes is logistically challenging. While 99% of active-duty Air Force positions and 88% of Navy billets aren't restricted according to gender, the share is closer to 67% in the Army and Marine Corps.

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A U.S. Marine and members of the U.S. Navy Hospital Corps in Helmand province, Afghanistan, June 7.

Do the remaining restrictions result from sound judgment, an anachronistic form of chivalry, or closed-minded machismo? Top military officers are right now trying to answer that question—and perhaps no one has a greater challenge than Gen. James Amos, commandant of the Marine Corps.

Because of the Marines' infantry focus ("every Marine a rifleman," the adage goes), and perhaps their culture also, women make up less than 7% of the Corps. They aren't allowed into most military occupational specialties that could bring them into close contact with the enemy.

To inform his judgment, Gen. Amos this year initiated a trial, inviting women to participate in the Marines' fabled Infantry Officer Course—the intense crucible in which, for 35 years, the Marine Corps has prepared its future infantry platoon leaders for the most personal and old-fashioned kind of combat still conducted by the American armed forces.

At Gen. Amos's invitation, I have observed a number of Infantry Officer Course training activities at the Marine Corps base in Quantico, Va., over the past six months—first when men alone were in the course, and then when two women joined 107 men in the latest class, starting in September. (They were the only two who volunteered.)

The course is physically and mentally intense. This isn't the place where future Marine leaders learn of the accomplishments of past military greats or the ins and outs of Afghan culture. It is where, at 2 a.m., after marching all evening through a drenching downpour with 100 pounds of gear on their backs and no foreknowledge of when the exercise will end, Marines might stage a mock ambush of an enemy, or figure out how to evacuate a wounded comrade, or navigate through deep woods after their GPS devices are switched off by instructors.

The goal, says Maj. Scott Cuomo, the course director: "Figure out how to win," whatever the mission. Future platoon leaders might not need to be the strongest or fastest among all their fellow Marines. But they arguably do need to be the toughest, and they need to be able to earn the utmost respect of those who will soon serve under them in times of extreme duress.

Gen. Amos's goal is to have several dozen women sign up for the course, which is offered four times a year, so that the trial results will be statistically reliable. But by last report no women were yet enrolled for the next course, which begins in January. Part of the challenge is that, since this is a test program, a woman who passes still wouldn't be able to become an infantry officer, at least not anytime soon. The low enrollment means that the Marine Corps may have to evaluate its trial program based on a smaller-than-preferable sample size.

As for the two women who started in September, one passed the initial "combat endurance test" and the other failed (as did 26 of the 107 male recruits). The test is akin to an Ironman competition combined with examinations of core infantry fighting skills.

The woman who failed was (and remains) a remarkable Marine officer. She was extremely fit and had no trouble with the endurance aspects of the test. Her poise under stress and uncertainty was also impressive. But her upper-body strength wasn't adequate for the several parts of the test requiring intensive use of the arms, back and shoulders.

The other woman in the course failed out two weeks later, in her case due to injury. She did a great deal to show that, in principle at least, some women can handle this challenge. But in the end her body couldn't withstand the strains, at least this time.

Some might challenge the irreducible strength standards demanded of Marine Corps infantry officers. But being able to lift oneself—while wearing body armor and carrying a pack—up and over walls is essential in modern combat. So is being able to move a wounded fellow Marine across a field to safety, or to haul part of a dismantled mortar to an ambush site.

We would put Marines in danger and risk mission failure by lowering such requirements. Moreover, no female Marine officer would be able to command the respect of the enlisted Marines in her platoon without holding her own physically. She wouldn't have to be the strongest among them, but a certain minimum level of strength is an essential prerequisite.

Where does this leave us? If only a few women want to serve as Marine infantry officers or prove that they can, it may not make sense to restructure core elements of the combat force to place women in positions of infantry command. The stakes are too high to take this matter lightly or to pretend it is a simple matter of civil rights akin to earlier debates over integrating blacks and gays into the nation's armed forces.

I am inclined to think that women with the skills and desire for intense ground combat should, at least initially, be steered toward other parts of the military (certain responsibilities within the special forces, for example) where they can contribute in important ways even in small numbers. But this judgment is provisional. We need to see if other women volunteer for training and see how they do. There is no need to rush, or to let politics drive the decision-making. The stakes are too high for that.

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