

ACTIVITY 2: Women in the Infantry Four Corners Debate**Five myths about women in combat**

By Jane Blair, May 27, 2011

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During my service in Iraq as a Marine officer, I, like many other military women, found myself fighting on the front lines of America's wars — yet was unacknowledged for doing so. Women are dying in combat, but Congress still officially bans us from serving in combat units that engage the enemy with deliberate, offensive action.

This antiquated policy may be seeing its final days. Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.) has prepared an amendment to the defense budget bill that would end the ban. On Memorial Day weekend, let's also end some revered stereotypes purporting to explain why women couldn't possibly succeed in combat.

1. Women are too emotionally fragile for combat.

This myth is based on cultural stereotypes and Hollywood hype. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that women are any more susceptible to combat stress than their male counterparts.

Women in the Marine Corps, for example, go through training identical to what men get. While boot camp is segregated by gender, subsequent training is integrated, and women train for combat the same way as men. Gender-integrated units don't exclude women from any activity. Women shoot, exercise, plan battles and conduct military maneuvers the same way as the men do. They become mentally conditioned the same way as their male counterparts and develop the same combat mindset. Several studies, including one in 2009 by the Defense Department's Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, have found that gender integration in noncombat units has no effect on overall unit cohesion.

[Post-traumatic stress disorder](#) is an unfortunate consequence of war, especially for those who have served multiple deployments — and sadly, no gender is immune to it.

2. Women are too physically weak for the battlefield.

While it is indisputable that the average man has more upper-body strength than the average woman, women have different physical abilities that enable them to offer unique capabilities in combat.

Distance running is one such arena, and it's relevant because combat can be as much about physical endurance (sustaining activity over time) as physical strength. According to a study analyzing track-and-field records and published in the journal *Nature* in 1992, the gaps between male and female performance narrow as the distance is extended, and some studies show that at ultramarathon distances (100 miles or more), women with equal training as their male counterparts outperform men. Researchers theorize that women's ability to metabolize fat more efficiently contributes to their endurance and success in longer runs. Women also tolerate hot and humid racing conditions better than men because of their smaller body size, according to a 1999 article in the *European Journal of Applied Physiology and Occupational Physiology*.

Foot patrols involve carrying 50 to 100 pounds of equipment for miles at a time, and I've seen male Marines who can bench-press 300 pounds but struggle to walk two miles with 50 pounds of gear. And you don't have to bench-press 300 pounds to pull a trigger. If a woman passes the physical requirements, why shouldn't she get the chance to fight?

3. The presence of women causes sexual tension in training and battle.

This notion insults men as much as women. For nearly 10 years, the U.S. military has been fighting two wars with a majority of units that include both men and women. Why hasn't supposed "sexual tension" undermined the stellar performance of gender-integrated units?

Women work in close proximity to men in all sorts of occupations — whether dancers or astronauts or war correspondents — without cause for alarm. Personally, I have found more sexual harassment and gender bias in the corporate world than in the military. In the military, I was treated as a Marine first and a woman second.

If anything, the presence of women might improve rather than detract from the service of men. My unit sergeant major, an infantryman, told me once that the presence of women made the men complain less — they didn't want to appear weaker in front of female counterparts who weren't complaining.

4. Male troops will become distracted from their missions in order to protect female comrades.

This myth conjures an image of a heroic soldier, attacking the enemy and about to win, until catastrophe strikes: He spots a wounded woman on the battlefield and abandons his assault to save her life, costing his side the battle. It's the "women and children first" argument translated to the battlefield.

This reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be a warrior. In battle, saving a comrade is one of the highest and noblest things one can do. Since Vietnam, 10 Americans have won the Medal of Honor, our highest decoration for valor. Nine of them received it for saving the lives of comrades on the battlefield.

If men — or women — have the gallantry to save a fellow soldier's life in battle, it's because that is what we are trained to do. It's no drawback; it is part of our greatest strength as a fighting force. And if a woman, or a man for that matter, can't carry the wounded, the corpsman or another soldier will be close behind to help.

5. Women can't lead men in combat effectively.

Why not? Across the planet, women have proven their worth as leaders as diplomats, heads of state and corporate titans. This is no less true in the military and in combat. In history as well as ancient mythology, women have often emerged as heroic leaders of men and women in battle, with Joan of Arc and the Assyrian queen Semiramis just two of the most notable examples. In the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been countless women who, often unrecognized, have served as leaders of military men and women.

Army Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody proved a few years ago, when she received her fourth star, that women can achieve high leadership roles in the military — yet she is not the norm. Leaders such as Dunwoody prove that women have what it takes. They just need the opportunity.

"If women are expected to do the same work as men," Plato wrote, "we must teach them the same things." If we trained women to be leaders in combat as we train men to be leaders in combat, why wouldn't they perform just as well? But women do not receive intensive infantry training because they

are excluded not just from combat roles, but from serving in combat units at all. This is the same discrimination that kept women from voting — the idea that they were not qualified to do so.

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