

ACTIVITY 2: Women in the Infantry Four Corners Debate**Seven Myths About “Women in Combat”**

By G.S. Newbold, Lieutenant General, USMC (Ret.), March 14, 2013

<http://nation.time.com/2013/03/14/seven-myths-about-women-in-combat/>

Myth #1 – “It’s about women in combat.”

No, it’s not. Women are already in combat, and are serving well and professionally. The issue should be more clearly entitled, “Women in the infantry.” And this is a decidedly different proposition.

Myth #2 – “Combat has changed” (often accompanied by “There are no front lines anymore”).

This convenient misconception requires several counters. First, any serious study of military history will reveal numerous historical examples about how successive generations (over millennia) believed that warfare had changed forever, only to find that technology may change platforms, but not its harsh essence. To hope that conflicts over the last 20 years are models of a new, antiseptic form of warfare is delusional.

The second point is that the enemy gets a vote – time, place, and style. For example, war on the Korean Peninsula would be a brutal, costly, no-holds-barred nightmare of mayhem in close combat with casualties in a week that could surpass the annual total of recent conflict.

The final point on this myth reinforces the Korea example and it bears examination — Fallujah, Iraq in 2004, where warfare was reduced to a horrific, costly, and exhausting scrap in a destroyed city between two foes that fought to the death.

The standard for ground combat unit composition should be whether social experimentation would have amplified our opportunity for success in that crucible, or diminished it. We gamble with our future security when we set standards for warfare based on the best case, instead of the harshest one.

Myth #3 – “If they pass the physical standards, why not?”

Physical standards are important, but not nearly all of the story. Napoleon – “The moral (spirit) is to the physical as three is to one.”

Unit cohesion is the essence of combat power, and while it may be convenient to dismiss human nature for political expediency, the facts are that sexual dynamics will exist and can affect morale. That may be manageable in other environments, but not in close combat.

Any study of sexual harassment statistics in this age cohort – in the military, academia, or the civilian workplace — are evidence enough that despite best efforts to by sincere leaders to control the issue, human instincts remain strong. Perceptions of favoritism or harassment will be corrosive, and cohesion will be the victim.

Myth #4 – *“Standards won’t be lowered.”*

This is the cruelest myth of all. The statements of the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are telling.

They essentially declare “guilty until proven innocent” on anyone attempting to maintain the standards which produced the finest fighting force in the world. There are already accommodations (note that unit cohesion won’t be a metric), there will be many more, and we will pay a bloody price for it someday.

Pity the truthful leader who attempts to hold to standards based on realistic combat factors, and tells truth to power. Most won’t, and the others won’t survive.

Myth #5 – *“Opening the infantry will provide a better pathway to senior rank for the talented women.”*

Not so. What will happen is that we will take very talented females with unlimited potential and change their peer norm when we inject them into the infantry.

Those who might meet the infantry physical standard will find that their peers are expected, as leaders, to far exceed it (and most of their subordinates will, as well). So instead of advancing to a level appropriate to their potential, they may well be left out.

Myth #6 – *“It’s a civil rights issue, much like the integration of the armed forces and allowing gays to serve openly.”*

Those who parrot this either hope to scare honest and frank discussion, or confuse national security with utopian ideas.

In the process, they demean initiatives that were to provide equally skilled individuals the opportunity to contribute equally. In each of the other issues, lowered standards were not the consequence.

Myth #7 – *“It’s just fair.”*

Allow me two points. First, this is ground warfare we’re discussing, so realism is important. “Fair” is not part of the direct ground combat lexicon.

Direct ground combat, such as experienced in the frozen tundra of Korea, the rubble of Stalingrad, or the endless 30-day jungle patrols against a grim foe in Viet Nam, is the harshest meritocracy — with the greatest consequences — there is. And psychology in warfare is germane – the force that is respected (and, yes, feared) has a distinct advantage. Will women in our infantry enhance a psychological advantage, or hinder it?

Second, if it’s about fairness, why do women get a choice of whether to serve in the infantry (when men do not), and why aren’t they required to register for the draft (as men are)?

It may be that we live in a society in which honest discussion of this issue, relying on facts instead of volume, is not possible. If so, our national security will fall victim to hope instead of reality. And myths be damned.

Gregory S. Newbold served 32 years as a Marine infantryman, commanding units from platoon to the 1st Marine Division. His final assignment before retiring in 2002 was as director of operations for the Pentagon’s Joint Staff.