

Women in combat: Good to go if they meet standards

LOLITA C. BALDOR, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Women in the military must have the same opportunities as men to take on grueling and dangerous combat jobs, whether loading 50-pound artillery shells or joining commando raids to take out terrorists, defense leaders declared Thursday as they ordered a quarter-million positions open to service members regardless of gender.

As Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, signed an order wiping away generations of limits on women fighting for their country, the military services said they would begin a sweeping review of the physical requirements. At the same time they acknowledged that women have been fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan for more than a decade.

Women make up about 14 percent of the 1.4 million active U.S. military personnel. More than 280,000 women have been sent to Iraq, Afghanistan or neighboring nations in support of the wars. Of the more than 6,600 U.S. service members who have been killed, 152 have been women.

The leaders said no physical standards will be lowered just to send more women closer to the battlefield.

"I fundamentally believe that our military is more effective when success is based solely on ability and qualifications and on performance," Panetta said at a Pentagon news conference.

"Not everyone is going to be able to be a combat soldier. But everyone is entitled to a chance."

It won't happen quickly or easily. But in the end, he said, the U.S. military and America will be stronger for it.

Dempsey did not rule out women serving even as members of elite special operations forces, including the Army's Delta Force and the Navy's SEALs, whose members killed 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden.

Dempsey said that because of the particularly punishing physical standards and training required for those teams, it might be years before they include women.

But he added: "I think we all believe that there will be women who can meet those standards."

Recent surveys and experiences suggest the transition may not always be easy. When the Marine Corps sought women to go through its tough infantry course last year, two volunteered, and both failed to complete the course. And there may not be a wide clamoring from women for the more intense, dangerous and difficult jobs, including some infantry and commando positions.

Representatives of the military services said they will look at each job and military specialty that is currently closed to women and examine the requirements that troops must meet. In some cases — because of equipment upgrades, new technology and automation — the requirements may change, but in no case will they lower the standards in order



AP PHOTO

to allow women to qualify.

As an example, a loader on a tank crew must be able to lift a 50-pound, two-foot-long artillery shell, spin 180 degrees and load it into a tank's cannon. Because of space constraints in the tank, it requires a great deal of upper body strength to hoist the shell.

Troops asked about the change said they just want comrades who can do the job.

"This gives us more people to work with," said Sgt. Jeremy Grayson, assigned to field infantry at Fort Bliss, Texas. "But they would have to be able to do the

physical stuff that men do. Like in some jobs in infantry you're out there for a long time, or in artillery there is heavy work. And they have to be able to pull their own weight."

As a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point two years before women were admitted, Dempsey said he has seen the changes over time.

In 2003, when he went to Baghdad as commander of the 1st Armored Division, Dempsey recalled that he jumped into a Humvee on his first foray out of the forward operating base.

"I slapped the turret gunner

on the leg and I said, 'Who are you?' And she leaned down and said, 'I'm Amanda.'"

"And it's from that point on that I realized something had changed, and it was time to do something about it."

But Dempsey cautioned that no one knows where future conflicts will take place. That's why the military needs time, he said, to review and possibly revise standards for combat jobs. The historic change overturns a 1994 rule prohibiting women from being assigned to thousands of front-line artillery, infantry, armor, special operations and pararescue jobs.

The Navy also announced that it is opening jobs for female sailors on smaller attack submarines — ships that had traditionally been closed to women largely due to privacy concerns in extremely close quarters.

There long has been opposition to putting women in combat, based on questions of whether they have the necessary strength and stamina for certain jobs, or whether their presence might hurt unit cohesion. But the Pentagon's announcement was largely hailed by lawmakers and military groups. There were only a few offering dissenting views.

Spc. Jean Sardonas, who works as a lab technician at a hospital at Fort Bliss in Texas, said she considered joining an Army team that faces combat situations. But since she's had children, she said her perspective had changed.

"If you see the enemy, well, that's the enemy, but now if you see a kid with a gun you're going to think twice" about shooting him, she said.

Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, who will be the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he is concerned about the possible impact of completely ending the ban, adding that he suspects legislation may be needed to stop changes that would be detrimental.

Under the new memo, military service chiefs will have until May 15 to develop plans for allowing women to seek the combat positions. Some jobs may open as soon as this year, while assessments for others, such as special operations forces, may take longer.

The services will have until January 2016 to argue that some positions should remain closed to women.

Thursday's move fits into the broad agenda President Barack Obama previewed for his second term during Monday's inaugural address, which focused in particular on issues of equality. It also comes on the heels of a presidential election in which Obama won the majority of female voters following a campaign that focused heavily on women's issues, though not women in combat specifically.

The change also comes as Panetta wraps up his tenure as defense secretary. The order expands the department's action of nearly a year ago to open

about 14,500 combat positions to women, nearly all of them in the Army.

Under the 1994 Pentagon policy, women were prohibited from being assigned to ground combat units below the brigade level. A brigade is roughly 3,500 troops split into several battalions of about 800 soldiers each. Historically, brigades were based farther from the front lines, and they often included top command and support staff.

The necessities of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, propelled women into jobs as medics, military police and intelligence officers that were sometimes attached — but not formally assigned — to battalions. So while a woman couldn't be assigned as an infantryman in a battalion going out on patrol, she could fly a helicopter supporting the unit, or move in to provide medical aid if troops were injured.

Dempsey suggested that eliminating the ban on women in some combat roles could help with the ongoing sexual assault and harassment problems in the military.

"When you have one part of the population that is designated as warriors and another part that's designated as something else, I think that disparity begins to establish a psychology that in some cases led to that environment," said Dempsey. "I have to believe, the more we can treat people equally, the more likely they are to treat each other equally."

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