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Women in Combat: Five-Year Status Update

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It has been five years since the ban on women in combat was lifted in 2015 and women began integrating previously closed combat arms billets in January 2016. Five years is the length of a service academy contract and longer than the average enlistment contract. Two years ago, there was **mostly good news on integration efforts** and there have been coverage of female “firsts” since. Now, sufficient time has passed to note the status of integration across components and to see returns on recruitment and retention.

The military personnel model has traditionally been premised around a young male force supported by stay-at-home spouses. Such a model is built into how the military conceives of its personnel, from the language embedded in parental leave policies that assumes a woman is the primary caregiver to the names of base support and spouse groups. An industrial-age model leaves much to be desired for dual-professional couples as well as those service members who want to have families. Updating this model to become more agile is not just critical for supporting talent management across the force, but also is essential for creating inroads and support for women in combat arms billets, where women are still a significant minority.

Debate over women serving in combat roles has existed as long as there has been a military, with incremental progress throughout the history of the all-volunteer force. Despite institutional and cultural barriers, women are achieving **greater seniority** and leadership across the services. The 1994 rescinding of the 1988 “**Risk Rule**” allowed women to serve in all positions except those engaged in direct ground combat roles; subsequently, women have been able to serve in almost all Air Force and Navy positions since the mid-1990s, save for submarines and some small vessels. This has allowed more female sailors and airmen to achieve general officer rank than their soldier and Marine counterparts.

The practical meaninglessness of a formal ban on women in combat became increasingly evident in a post-9/11 world in which women were **dying** for their country. A number of programs (the **Lioness program**, **Female Engagement Teams**, and Cultural Support Teams) saw women supporting ground combat and special forces teams for years. In 2012, two **lawsuits** contesting limits on women serving in combat were filed in light of women’s service in the post-9/11 conflicts. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced in 2013 the plan to lift the ban on women in combat; Secretary of Defense Ash Carter formally announced the change in 2015. Today, **lawsuits** challenge the constitutionality of excluding women from the Selective Service System and the **National Commission** on Military, National, and Public Service recently announced its recommendation that women be included in the Selective Service System.

What is the state of female integration across the services?

The percentage of women in the services overall has been **rising slowly** in recent years, and female service members have slowly but steadily integrated combat arms jobs. Women have been serving as leaders of Marine Corps platoons, Air Force Air Wings, combat vessels, **howitzer** section chiefs, and numerous Army units. There are significant variations across the branches of service, explored in greater depth below.

Army

The percentage of women in the Army has **grown incrementally** in recent years to 19 percent of officers in 2018 from 17.7 percent in 2013; 9.6 percent warrant officers in 2018 from 9.5 percent in 2013; and 14.4 percent of enlisted ranks in 2018 from 13 percent in 2013. **Soldier 2020**, the Army’s gender integration plan, wraps up this year, and the DoD has said it will provide an update once the pilot phase is complete. Initially, the number of women expressing interest in combat fields **surprised leaders**, though they remain a significant minority of combat arms MOS.

The 19 Army jobs previously closed to women were opened in 2015, including infantry, armor, cavalry, fire support, and special forces. The first gender-integrated infantry basic training cycle occurred **in 2017**. The Army’s “**Leaders First**” approach has required female officers be assigned to units prior to assigning junior enlisted. The phased plan, therefore, built in an initial delay by focusing on integrating female officers. **Criticism** of the approach points out that it places the burden of integration on female leaders and assumes that women cannot succeed without female mentors.

As of **July 2019**, 46 women had graduated from Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course, 72 women from the Armor Basic Officer Leader Course, and 270 enlisted women from Infantry and Armor One Station Unit Training. **As of October 2019**, in the regular Army, 1,055 women had accessed into combat specialties while 653 women had completed training and were serving in combat roles. The **attrition rate** for women during their initial training in these previously closed schools ranges from 11 to 72 percent (infantry 49 percent, field artillery 11 percent, and armor 72 percent), while attrition rates for their male counterpart range from 0.46 to 18 percent (infantry 18 percent, field artillery 0.46 percent, and armor 17 percent). While the Army is succeeding at assessing women into the pipelines, completion rates for initial training remain troubling. All active-duty brigade combat teams for infantry, armor, and field artillery fields include female soldiers.

The Army National Guard (ARNG) gender integration has also had a “**Leaders First**” approach, initially defined as two leaders (officer or NCO) in the same field and same company before assigning junior enlisted to a company. This led to placement constraints based off vacancies in any given unit. The ARNG **changed this requirement** in 2019 to one female leader in the same career field and one female leader in any career field at the company level prior to assignment of junior enlisted. In **July 2019** women were 17.5 percent of the ARNG and 368 women had been assigned to operational units.

Army special operations integration is discussed below.

Navy

Women comprised 19.3 percent of Navy officers in 2018 compared to 17 percent in 2013; 7.5 percent of warrant officers in 2018 compared to 5.8 percent in 2013; and 19.8 percent of enlisted ranks in 2018 compared to 17.7 percent in 2013. Women’s integration into submarines in 2010 preceded the women’s combat exclusion and may serve as a model for recruiting and retaining women into previously closed billets. As of **December 2019**, 19 submarine crews were integrated with female officers and 8 with female enlisted sailors.

Interest from female officers in submarine roles has exceeded the Navy’s expectations; the Navy subsequently **expanded** female officer **accessions** to accommodate interest. Female officer retention has also exceeded expectations. The Navy states a goal of 20 percent female representation in enlisted crews, backed by the Enlisted Women in Submarines (EWIS) program and a combination of rate conversions and enlistments. Enlisted female sailors have yet to go underway on submarines so complete crew data is not yet available. Women and men have nearly identical **attrition rates** for both nuclear and non-nuclear officer and enlisted submarine ratings. As of June 2018, four submarines crews were integrated with enlisted women.

Despite progress with submarine integration, the Navy has seen significant difficulty integrating Navy Special Warfare, discussed below.

Air Force

The Air Force has long had the best female representation of all the branches. Women made up 20 percent of Air Force enlisted ranks in 2018 compared to 18.8 percent in 2013; women were 21.2 percent of Air Force officers in 2018 compared to 19.6 percent in 2013. The Air Force has had female leadership in top civilian roles—including five female secretaries of the Air Force, while the other services have had no female senior leadership, civilian or military—and more female general officers than any other branch bar the Navy. The Air Force even recently updated its song to be gender neutral. However, the Air Force has struggled with integrating the last remaining community, Air Force Special Warfare, discussed below.

Marine Corps

The Marine Corps has had the most fraught experience with gender integration force wide. Not only was the Corps the only service to request an exception to the policy, which was denied, it issued a study in 2015 examining the impact of gender integration and has remained the only service to segregate basic training by gender. Former Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus criticized the study and the Marine Corps approach **saying**, “It started out with a fairly large component of the men thinking ‘this is not a good idea,’ and ‘women will never be able to do this,’... When you start out with that mindset, you’re almost presupposing the outcome.” Last year the Corps sought an academic study looking into co-ed recruit training, due to Congress’s ongoing push to have the Corps integrate fully, although there exist comparable studies completed by the Army.

The first wave of gender-integrated Marine Combat Training happened **in 2018** at Parris Island, three years after integration started. The Corps has been so slow in integrating boot camp that the **2020 National Defense Authorization Act** (NDAA) required training to be integrated at Parris Island and San Diego down to the platoon level within five years. Previously, only Parris Island had received gender-integrated units, and while three companies were integrated in 2019, integration was not at the platoon level.

The Marine Corps regularly has had the lowest percentage of women of any of the services: **women comprised** 8 percent of officers in 2018 versus 6.6 percent in 2013, 6 percent of warrant officers in 2018 versus 5.7 percent in 2013, and 8.7 percent of enlisted ranks in 2018 versus 7.3 percent in 2013. As of **December 2019**, a total of 613 female Marines and sailors were serving in combat arms units, though **not all of these** women serve in combat arms billets. There are 231 female Marines serving in combat arms billets: 52 officers and 179 enlisted women. Female officers are best represented in artillery and combat engineer fields, while enlisted women are serving in higher rates in infantry, assault amphibious vehicles, and artillery. A total of 9 women **have attempted Infantry Officer Course** and the first two women passed the course in 2018. The **attrition rate** for women officers at infantry school is 29.5 percent compared to 13.5 percent for men; attrition rate for women enlisted at infantry school is 23.9 percent and 11.2 percent for men. While there are lower numbers overall, female Marines have a significantly lower attrition rate than their Army counterparts. Some have noted the **arbitrary hurdles** required to pass the course that disproportionately affect women.

In late February 2020, the current Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Berger, **announced critical areas** for improvement. This may be in response to the 2020 NDAA, which pushed the Marine Corps to improve on gender integration. These included seeking active-duty company-grade female officers to attend the Infantry Officer Course as well as enabling lateral moves into previously restricted jobs for female Marines.

Coast Guard

Although the Coast Guard sits under Department of Homeland Security, it can operate under the Department of the Navy in times of war. The Coast Guard **removed** all gender based assignment restrictions in 1978. In 2017, the Coast Guard surpassed DoD with female representation, at **26.4 percent**. **Recent work** completed by Rand indicates the Coast Guard can do more to close gaps in female retention.

Special Operations

Special operations forces (SOF) remains a community where integrating women has largely not been successful. None of the traditional SOF components (Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Raiders, or Air Force Special Tactics) have been integrated, though multiple women have entered the selection pipelines. Functional barriers to entry are the high failure and attrition rates of assessment and selection combined with injury-related eliminations. However, there exist additional cultural and mental barriers. Women who are first to integrate these previously closed communities carry additional sentiment as trailblazers for those who follow, not just numerically but psychologically; “firsts” carry huge psychological impact for others attempting the courses.

It is equally important to recognize women **have been serving** in modern special operations units for some time despite the failure to date of formal recognition as special operators and the perception of SOF as a bastion of male-dominated hyper-masculinity. Women have also supported SOF, including deploying with them, in various capacities **for years**.

Army Special Operations

In addition to combat jobs, Army Ranger and Green Beret positions were previously closed to women. In 2015, the **first two** female officers graduated Ranger School, in 2017 the **first woman** passed the 75th Ranger Regiment assessment and selection, and in 2019 the first enlisted female soldier **graduated**. A number of other female soldiers, as well as one **airman**, have continued to graduate from Ranger School, for a total of 44 women to date with 11 currently in the course.

In January 2020, the Army **announced** a National Guard woman was set to pass Special Forces training and join the Green Berets. Although Captain Kathleen **Wilder** passed the Officers Special Forces Course **in 1981**, she first was told she did not pass, only to have the qualification backdated when she successfully contested the ruling. While Wilder could have served as a Special Forces officer, she never returned to a Special Forces unit, and the Army subsequently changed regulations to bar women from taking the course. While women have supported the Green Berets for years, a new era is ushered in with a woman formally assigned to the units.

Naval Special Warfare

All Naval Special Warfare career fields were previously closed to women, including SEALs and Special Warfare Combatant Craft (SWCC). A handful of women have **qualified and/or entered** Navy SEAL assessment. In **July 2019**, NSW had 568 female sailors serving on NSW staff. As of **November 2019**, a total of five women had been invited to attend Seal Officer Assessment and Selection (SOAS); one completed SOAS in **August 2019** but was ultimately not selected. Seven enlisted women have received SWCC contracts since 2016, though no woman has completed training to date. **Reporting indicated** there were three female sailors in the SWCC pipeline as of December 2019.

Air Force Special Warfare (AFSPECWAR)

Previously closed career fields for women included two officer jobs: special tactics officer and combat rescue officer, as well as four enlisted jobs: combat controller, pararescuemen, special operations weather, and tactical air control. A small number of women are in the pipeline for Air Force Special Warfare career fields, including pararescuemen and combat controller. The Air liaison officer position has always been open to women, though it sits under AFSPECWAR. To recruit capable male and female candidates to attend Special Warfare training, the Air Force **established** the 330th Special Warfare Recruiting Squadron.

In November 2019 the **Air Force reported** two women were selected for the other closed fields and are awaiting training start dates. A total of 12 enlisted women have entered the AFSPECWAR pipeline, with two in training as of November 2019, one for combat controller and one for pararescue. Four women have attempted the special tactics officer or combat controller officer pipelines and in **March**, the Air Force announced one special tactics officer candidate started the next phase of training, the first woman to progress to that stage.

Recently **announced changes** to enlisted special warfare recruiting and training pipeline will also affect potential female candidates. The changes, which create a single-entry pathway for enlisted airmen, will allow candidates to make informed decisions about which career field is the best fit.

Marine Corps Special Operations Command

In addition to combat arms jobs, Marine Raider jobs were also closed to women. Women have to pass assessment and selection to attend the Marine Corps Special Operations Command Individual Training Course (ITC), and then pass the course, in order to be part of MARSOC. A **number** of women have attempted MARSOC assessment and selection, with one making it through to date, although she was ultimately **not selected**.

What can the military do better?

What explains the continued lag in even-greater female participation in military service and combat arms?

Leadership

Despite five years of integration efforts, structural barriers remain. To dispel any cultural opposition, it is essential that civilian and military leadership stand by ongoing integration efforts. Leadership wavering on integration may stall progress. Former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis's comment that "**the jury's still out**" on women in combat was a signal to detractors in the ranks that their opposition was valid. It also showed a lack of commitment by senior leadership to stand by the decision and facilitate greater female representation. Part of encouraging female representation is leadership at the top. A combination of institutional preference for combat specialties and **lower rates** of promotion and retention for women have led to few female general officers. However, the number of female leaders has **climbed** since 2000. Importantly, the percentage of women in senior enlisted ranks **has risen** as well. As greater numbers of women hold leadership positions, it will signal opportunities to junior enlisted and junior officers, not to mention young women considering joining the military.

Recruitment

That being said, each of the services can and should do more to recruit women into the force.

Concerns of young women considering military service differ from those of young men, and are **well documented**, yet the services have done little to directly influence or address these concerns, either through targeted recruitment outreach or structural policy change. Overall, female propensity to serve **is decreasing**. National **surveys** from the Joint Advertising, Market Research & Studies show women are discouraged by parents' perception that the military treats women poorly. Women also reported concern of failure and physical fitness requirements. Some efforts to attract women have included a diverse range of women on marketing materials and some ads focused on these influencers. The services have added gender inclusive language and worked to advertise expanded career opportunities. However, because polling shows women do not want to be pandered to, marketing tends not to be gender specific.

Recruitment into the service academies is also critical. Recent research has shown members of Congress overwhelmingly nominate young men. Even while members advocate for gender diversity, they neglected to nominate an equitable number of female candidates for admission. Female nominations have hovered around 20 percent, only recently rising to a high of 27 percent. The gender breakdown for the military academy classes of 2023 include: the U.S. Naval Academy at **26.2 percent** female; West Point is **24.1 percent** female; the U.S. Air Force Academy is **28.2 percent** female; and the Merchant Marine Academy is **26.4 percent** female. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy has the best female representation overall, boasting **34 percent** women academy-wide. In particular, the Air Force has seen a boost in interest from young women, in part attributable to **Captain Marvel**.

Discrimination and Sexual Assault/Harassment

Implicit and explicit bias continues to exist in the military, starting even before women have joined. **Focus groups** have shown women feel discouraged by society, family, and recruiters to join the military or enter certain job categories. Recurring sexual assault and harassment scandals—from **Marines United** to rising numbers of assault at the **military academies**—further undermine the military as an institution that supports women to the public. In response to Marines United, the Marine Corps issued and published a **culture review** that examined social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership. The report found that centrifugal social forces can lead to poor cohesion and isolate certain groups within the Marine Corps. The realities are stark: sexual assault **rose across the services** between 2016 and **2018**, with the highest rates in the Marine Corps, where 10.7 percent of women reporting having experienced sexual assault in the past year. The population at highest risk is female service members aged 17 to 24.

The excuse that “women vote with their feet” has been used to explain low numbers of women entering combat arms positions. Such a perspective places the burden on the female service member rather than recognizing the numerous structural and cultural barriers and detractors to choosing combat jobs. Stressors that disproportionately affect women are society- and military-wide issues. **Top lifestyle stressors** include financial, relocation, and isolation from friends and family, as surveyed by **Blue Star Families**. Relocation stress, due to **unsafe base housing**, translating their **children’s education** across states, or the likelihood of a spouse’s **unemployment**, weigh on a service member. Military women are more likely to be in a **dual-military relationship**, further compounding relocation and isolation stress, as well as forcing couples to prioritize one partner’s career over the other. Female **DACOWITS survey** participants were more likely to report difficulty having a family than male participants and thought pregnancy was discriminated against.

Should these issues not be comprehensively addressed, the military undermines its ability to recruit and retain talent, especially female talent. While women have been slowly but surely integrating previously closed communities, each of the services could do more to attract and retain these women.

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