

Women in Combat: Adaptation and Change in the US Military

By Ellen Haring

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Introduction

Throughout history women have been almost universally barred from formally serving in combat units of national militaries.¹ Since the late 1960s, women in liberal western countries have gained equal rights and opportunities in all other areas of public service except the military. Today, only a few countries allow women full access to military occupations and units. Those countries that have allowed women in on a completely equal basis, including Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and a few others, were pushed into it by women who challenged their exclusion through political and legal means.² In 1992, the last U.S. law limiting women's military service was eliminated. In 1993, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin directed the Services to open most combat ships and all combat aircraft to women. In 1994, in place of laws that limited women's service, the Department of Defense established an institution-wide *policy* that officially excluded women from over 300,000 "ground combat" positions and units and limited women's service in the ground forces to service and support units and specialties.³

On January 26, 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made the historic decision to eliminate the ground combat exclusion. He said that any future decision to exclude women will be made as an exception rather than the rule, flipping the paradigm from one of automatic exclusion to one of automatic inclusion. However, he gave the services and Special Operations Command three years to figure out how to successfully integrate women into previously closed positions. If, at the end of the three years, they found an occupation or unit that they could not successfully integrate they could request an exception to policy to keep that area closed to women. Any exceptions would have to be "narrowly tailored and based on a rigorous analysis of factual data regarding the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the position."⁴

The Department of Defense and its subordinate organizations are nearly at the end of that three year change period. Unfortunately, rather than taking the time to actually begin the

¹ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

² Paul Cawkill et al., "Women in Ground Close Combat Roles: The Experiences of Other Nations and a Review of the Academic Literature," *Literature Review* (Porton Down, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK: UK Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, September 29, 2009), accessed on October 31, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27406/women_combat_experiences_literature.pdf.

³ Lory Manning, "Women in the Military: Where They Stand, 8th Edition," *Annual Report, Women in the Military Project* (Washington, D.C: Women's Research and Education Institute, February 2013).

⁴ Martin Dempsey and Leon Panetta, "Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule" (Department of Defense, January 24, 2013), accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/news/WISRJointMemo.pdf>.

process of integrating women they have used the time to study whether integration is feasible or not.⁵ Their efforts to date reveal varying levels of commitment with subsequent missteps and corrections.

Managing Organizational Change

As the military forges ahead their efforts reveal an uneven application of recommended organizational change practices. The Army's professional military schools teach Dr. John P. Kotter's 8 Stage Change Process as an organizational change model. This model lays out a recommended step-by-step process for effecting large scale, systemic organizational change.⁶ Following is an analysis of DOD's change efforts using this model.



Establishing a Sense of Urgency

According to Kotter's model, in order to mobilize human capital and resources, leadership must overcome not just active resistance but a multitude of sources that contribute to complacency and impede change efforts. Creating urgency and momentum for change requires bold or even risky action. When the SECDEF and Chairman Dempsey announced the plan to allow women to serve in all previously closed specialties, they did so in such a way as to create a sense of urgency. More important, the change was directive in nature. They said that the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule "is rescinded effective immediately. Currently closed units and positions will be opened by each relevant Service, consistent with the guiding principles set forth in the attached memorandum".⁷ However, although the policy opened positions and units "immediately," they gave the military Services and SOCOM three years to fully implement the change. They established planning and implementation milestones to ensure the organizations met the targeted goal of full integration within the timeframe. Now, after more than two and a half years only 91,774 positions have been opened to women while 245,100 positions remain closed.⁸

⁵ As of the writing of this paper, 53 occupations remain closed to women and a total of 245,100 positions remain closed. United States Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: DOD Is Expanding Combat Service Opportunities for Women, but Should Monitor Long-Term Integration Process*, 2015, accessed on November 3, 2015, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/671507.pdf>.

⁶ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

⁷ Dempsey and Panetta, "Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule," 1.

⁸ Dec. of Juliatt Beyler, *Hegar vs. Carter* (Northern District of California, 3:12-cv-06005-EMC, Doc. No. 20).

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Create a Guiding Coalition

Effective guiding coalitions must include people who have power, expertise, credibility and good leadership skills.⁹ When the SECDEF and the Chairmen announced their decision to rescind the policy, they placed responsibility for implementing this change on the military Service Chiefs and designated the Personnel and Readiness Office within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to oversee implementation.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this action arguably violated some of the key principles for creating a good guiding coalition. First, at the OSD level the overseeing organization is an administrative staff with no authority to direct the actions of the military departments. Second, the OSD staff office lacks credibility for understanding the operational requirements faced by the various Services. Finally, arguably, they have little expertise in overseeing an integration effort of this nature.¹¹

Despite the OSD personnel department likely not being appropriately situated to guide a coalition, each military Service department assumed responsibility for implementation within their own organizations. Each of the departments took differing approaches toward establishing their own guiding coalition. Some created robust guiding coalitions while others engaged in ad hoc efforts that were subsequently modified. For example, the Army designated a specific command, Training and Doctrine Command, to take the lead on integration while the Marine Corps doled out responsibility to numerous subordinate agencies and staffs. After a year, the Marine Corps found itself in the untenable position of having made little progress while one third of their timeline had elapsed. They were forced to regroup and develop a new plan that included a clearer guiding coalition. In March of 2014, the Commandant issued a White Letter refocusing the efforts and direction of the Marine Corps.¹²

3

Developing a Vision and a Strategy

Vision tells people where the organization needs to go and why it needs to go there, while strategy provides a way to get there. The best visions and strategies include some degree of member participation to garner buy in.¹³ In this case the military had a very mixed approach that failed to incorporate best practices. When the SECDEF made the announcement that he was rescinding the exclusionary policy, he clearly told the Services where they needed to go with full integration but he failed to fully explain why it was in the best interest of the military to go there. And he gave the Services a limited chance to affect the final outcome,

⁹ Kotter, *Leading Change*, 4.

¹⁰ Dempsey and Panetta, "Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule," 3.

¹¹ Women In International Security, "A Review of the Implementation Plans for the Elimination of the Direct Ground Combat Assignment Rule," October 2013, accessed on October 31, 2015, <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0BwvKWxwvvalaUm5wZHB1dzcwNGM/edit>.

¹² James Amos, "Integrating Female Marines within the Ground Combat Element," Department of the Navy, (March 12, 2014),

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B42YIHicFQWYZG45LWJ0NlpJTmc/edit>.

¹³ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chap. 5.

which they took as an opportunity to challenge the entire decision. He told the Services that if they found that areas of their organizations could not fully integrate then they could request an exception to policy, cautioning them that any exception would have to be “narrowly tailored” and based on a “rigorous analysis of the factual data regarding the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the position”.¹⁴ Therefore, while this change was directive in nature, it allowed for a degree of participatory decision making relative to the final outcome. As to strategy, the way to get to the end state, he largely left that up to the military Services. He provided some guiding principles as well as benchmarked dates but how they reached the end was completely up to the Services.



Communicating the Change Vision

A “shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations”.¹⁵ Under-communication and mixed messages lead to confusion about the desired future. When the SECDEF and the Chairmen announced this policy change they did so at a Pentagon news conference that lasted for 38 minutes and included a question and answer period. At that press conference the SECDEF said, “The time has come for our policies to recognize that reality, and the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I believe that we must open up service possibilities for women as fully as possible.”¹⁶ Throughout that briefing and in subsequent statements the military leadership used qualifying language like “as fully as possible” to create a less than clear vision. This kind of ambiguity about what the end state actually looks like violates good organizational change vision and communications principles.

The Services have variously interpreted this vision. The Marine Corps’ professional journal, *The Gazette*, subsequently engaged in a very public debate about the merits of opening up many units and specialties to women. They published numerous articles challenging the efficacy of the decision. Most of the challenges argued that, for a myriad of reasons, it is simply not possible to open the infantry to women.¹⁷ Although the SECDEF and the Chairmen had issued a directive the Marines thought it was acceptable to debate the merits of the directive itself rather than get to the task of figuring out *how* to implement it. At the same time that the Marine Corps

¹⁴ Dempsey and Panetta, “Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule,” 2.

¹⁵ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chap. 5.

¹⁶ *Full Press Briefing - Panetta, Dempsey on the Women in Service Implementation Plan*, 2013, accessed on October 31, 2015, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Acq7GfiEUSY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

¹⁷ John Keenan, “An Open Letter to the Secretary of Defense,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2014, accessed on October 31, 2015, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2014/07-0>; Katie Petronio, “Get Over It! We Are Not All Created Equal,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, March 2013, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2013/03/get-over-it-we-are-not-all-created-equal>; Lauren Serrano, “Why Women Do Not Belong in the U.S. Infantry,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 2014, accessed on October 31, 2015, <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2014/09/why-women-do-not-belong-us-infantry>.

was debating *if* women should be allowed into combat specialties the Army developed a deliberate effort to figure *how* women would be integrated.¹⁸ The different approaches reveal widely differing interpretations of what should have been a clearly communicated vision and strategy for accomplishing this organizational change.

5

Empowering Employees for Broad Based Action

Removing barriers gives employees both the power and resources to effect change. Structural barriers, recalcitrant leaders, and lack of training are all potential barriers to change.¹⁹ In the military, many barriers have hindered the change process. One of the structural barriers lies in the joint nature of the military services. Today, all of the Services cross-support each other to varying degrees, and all provide personnel to Special Operations Command. As some Services have moved forward, they have found themselves blocked by slower moving Services. For example, the Army trains Armor officers for both the Army and the Marine Corps. The Marines have said that because the Army hasn't opened up armor school they can't conduct any research on women in armor specialties. Similarly, all of the Services say that until Special Operations Command begins accepting women they can't open their elite specialties to women because women's assignment and promotion opportunities would be limited if they aren't ultimately allowed to be assigned to SOCOM.²⁰ In particular, the Air Force, whose only remaining closed specialties require cross assignment to SOCOM, has been waiting for SOCOM to accept women as combat airmen before they put women through their training pipeline.²¹

Another barrier has been senior military leaders who have made public statements that erect barriers to full integration. Shortly after the policy was lifted the Marine Corps Commandant said that if there aren't enough women officers who are interested or who qualify for the Marine Corps infantry then it isn't worth the effort to allow any of them to serve in the infantry.²² The Commandant's remarks clearly indicate a lack of senior leader support for this change. However, over time the Commandant changed his tone and his level of support. His March 2014 White Letter was a marked change to earlier comments made to the press.²³

Later in 2014 the Marine Corps made a more concerted effort to overcome organizational resistance and barriers by holding a series of "town hall" style meetings at units and installations

¹⁸ TRADOC, "TRADOC Leads Review of MOS Standards, Gender Integration | Article | The United States Army," July 2, 2013, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.army.mil/article/106746/>.

¹⁹ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chap. 7.

²⁰ Women In International Security, "Implementation Plan Analysis."

²¹ Michael Donley, "Air Force: Implementation Plan," Women in the Services Review (Washington, D.C., April 24, 2013), accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://battlerattle.marinecorpstimes.com/2013/11/19/the-first-four-women-in-marine-corps-history-have-completed-infantry-training/>.

²² Julie Watson, "James Amos, Marine Corps Commandant, Voices Skepticism About Women In Combat," *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2013, para. 2, accessed on October 31, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/01/james-amos-women-in-combat_n_2597568.html.

²³ Amos, "Commandant's White Letter."

throughout the world to address concerns held by Marines. They made these events open to all Marines and to the public. They emphasized that existing standards will be held firm and that only woman who can meet existing standards will be allowed to join combat units. These town hall meetings were designed to reassure Marines that not only will standards remain unchanged, but units will not be negatively impacted by the introduction of women. The meetings were conducted by senior male Marines who are themselves infantry officers.²⁴ These examples illustrate recent efforts to manage recalcitrant leaders and the rank and file by addressing their concerns.

6

Generating Short Term Wins

As an organization begins to change, it is important that members see and understand how the change benefits the organization. If short term successes aren't highlighted, skeptics will begin to challenge the efficacy of the change.²⁵ As the military has moved forward with this organizational change, it has highlighted and celebrated some early successes. Both the Army and the Marine Corps have allowed women from historically open specialties like communications, logistics, and intelligence to serve in previously closed combat units. Both Services have noted that the women have been well received in the newly opened units and women continue to volunteer for every new opportunity that opens.²⁶ Also, when late in 2013 the first enlisted women were allowed to attend Marine Corps infantry training, their success was celebrated with what has come to be called an "iconic photo" of the young women.²⁷

However, others have noted that some of the early statements designed to celebrate this change within the military have been less successful. One observer points out that the military has made a number of statements to sell this change as one that will not "harm" the identity of the combat arms community or the military. But this focus on the negative sends a less than positive image of the benefits of this change. Dr. Robert Egnell notes, "The issue of women in combat should not be approached through the lens of damage control, but rather with an emphasis on maximizing the effectiveness of military organizations in the contemporary strategic

²⁴ Ellen Haring, "Opinion: Deck Stacked against Women in Experimental Task Force," *Marine Corps Times*, July 6, 2014, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/article/20140706/NEWS01/307060015/Opinion-Deck-stacked-against-women-experimental-task-force>.

²⁵ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chap. 8.

²⁶ Lindsey Whitehurst, "Utah Guard Soldier among First Women Headed to Elite Ranger School," *Military Times*, December 24, 2014, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2014/12/24/utah-guard-soldier-among-first-women-headed-to-elite-ranger-school/20883211/>.

²⁷ James Sanborn, "– HISTORIC PHOTO: The First Female Marines Ever to Complete Infantry Training," *Battle Rattle*, November 19, 2013, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://battlerattle.marinecorpstimes.com/2013/11/19/the-first-four-women-in-marine-corps-history-have-completed-infantry-training/>.

context”.²⁸ His observation also highlights a failure in vision and communication. Namely, vision should clearly communicate why this change is good for the organizations.

7 *Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change*

Resistance to change is “always waiting to reassert itself.”²⁹ Hardcore resisters continue to look for opportunities to undermine the change process, and short-term gains are not enough to transform the entire system. The interdependent nature of complex social systems means that change must be widespread across all systems before long-term change and true transformation is realized. While the military is in the early stages of this change process, they have already identified mid- and long-term challenges to fully realizing this change. For example, in order to accommodate women in the Navy, many ships are being modified to provide separate berthing for men and women. Although the Navy has redesigned future ships, some of their older ships were deemed prohibitively expensive to modify. The Navy decided that they will let some of the older ships be decommissioned over time rather than modified to accommodate women.³⁰ While this seems logical, it will potentially provide pockets of resistance to the overall transformation effort. Additionally, if any of the Services is granted an exception to policy that keeps any units or specialties closed, it will undermine the entire transformation effort.

8 *Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture*

According to organizational psychologists Sarris and Kirby, culture is arguably “the most difficult element to change in an organization.”³¹ Kotter agrees, noting that not only is culture hard to change but that it should be the last area of focus of any organizational change effort. He asserts that “culture changes only after you have successfully altered people’s actions, after the new behavior produces some group benefit for a period of time.”³² Kotter’s rule of thumb is that any organizational change plan that sets out to change culture as a first step is doomed to failure from the start. Regardless of how hard or when culture is tackled, it is clear that culture develops slowly, over time, and is hard to see and understand, even—perhaps most particularly—for those who are imbedded within the culture. Some aspects of culture are visible while others are hidden deeply within the subconscious of the organization. Most definitions of organizational culture refer to an organization’s shared values, norms, rituals, stories, and

²⁸ Robert Egnell, “Gender Perspectives and Fighting,” *US Army War College Quarterly Parameters*, Women in Battle, 43, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 41.

²⁹ Kotter, *Leading Change*, chap. 9.

³⁰ Jacqueline Klimas, “Navy Opening More Jobs to Women, but Some Might Stay Closed,” *Navy Times*, June 26, 2013, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.navytimes.com/article/20130626/NEWS/306260005/Navy-opening-more-jobs-women-some-might-stay-closed>.

³¹ Aspa Sarris and Neil Kirby, eds., *Organisational Psychology: Research and Professional Practice* (Prahran, Vic: Tilde Publishing and Distribution, 2013), 335.

³² Kotter, *Leading Change*, 156.

expectations. Culture is sometimes referred to as the software that invisibly guides all aspects of an organization's functioning.

Certainly the military stands as an example of an institution comprised of organizations steeped in tradition and an enduring culture that rests on centuries of "the universal gendering of war"³³ where women have rarely served, officially, as combatants. For this change to take root in the military, it will require a sustained effort on the part of leaders and change activists to highlight improved capabilities and cement new beliefs and new normative behaviors in the organizations. It will likely take decades to realize full integration.

Conclusion

Ultimately, a range of conditions and people drive change, and in the change process normative internal behaviors are disrupted and adaptation occurs. As adaptation occurs, organizational cultures evolve and reconstructed identities emerge. How long that takes is dependent upon the change methods that the military employs. Women's acceptance into the service- and support-based occupations has been slow but steady. If the military ultimately opens all ground combat positions to women, the path to changing the culture and adapting individual, group, and organizational identities within the combat sub-community is likely to be even slower but not impossible. A hundred years ago it would have been unthinkable to envision a woman Sailor on any Navy ship, but today female Naval officers command Navy combat ships.

The military's record to date reveals a series of mixed approaches to this organizational change process. Mixed messages, provided by military senior leaders, and outright challenges to a modified identity, evident in professional journals, do not bode well for a smooth transformation. However, changes outlined in the Army's 2014 Capstone Concept identify a need for new approaches to "unified land operations" in a "complex world" that highlight the needs for soldiers with a much broader range of skills than those typically associated with the combat arms of past years.³⁴ It may be that this final integration effort is about to coincide with a reconstructed, post-modern soldier identity that embraces the contributions and inclusion of women.

³³ Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 10.

³⁴ Michelle Tan, "Army Unveils New Plan to 'Win in a Complex World,'" *Army Times*, October 13, 2014, accessed on October 31, 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20141013/NEWS/310130024/Army-unveils-new-plan-win-complex-world->.