

Marines –

This story was forwarded to me by Headquarters Marine Corps and appeared in USA Today on Wednesday.

More information has been posted in the "news" section of our website –
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Please ensure that this message gets down to the Detachment level – it is a very important story for the Marine Corps and obviously very controversial.

Semper Fidelis –

Mike

Experimental force will test Marine women in combat roles

Jim Michaels, USA TODAY 4:01 p.m. EDT March 12, 2014

The military services have until 2016 to find the right way to integrate women into combat roles.
Marine women in training.

QUANTICO, Va. – The Marine Corps plans to establish an experimental force consisting of at least 25% women in the most far-reaching effort yet to determine how females will perform in ground combat jobs that remain closed to them.

It is the first effort to place women directly into such jobs, though the unit will not be deployed overseas and will be used exclusively to gather data. The unit will, however, undergo extensive training that mirrors what a typical Marine task force would undergo before being deployed overseas.

The Pentagon last year ordered the armed forces to open all combat

jobs to women by 2016. Since then, the services have focused most of their efforts on developing the exact physical standards required for combat arms jobs, partly to be used to screen applicants.

The Marine Corps, the most male-oriented of the services, has taken the research a step further in an effort to see how women will perform over sustained periods in jobs, such as the infantry, which require above average physical strength and stamina.

"We really want to get at answering that question and we need to do that by simulating an operational environment," said Marine Brig. Gen. George Smith, who is leading Marine Corps efforts to study the integration of women into ground combat specialties.

"I don't know of any other example of what we're talking about here," he said in an interview at the Marine Corps Base at Quantico. The Army, which is also studying the physical requirements of the infantry and other ground combat jobs, said it has no current plans to create a similar task force.

The women will be placed throughout the unit, including in infantry squads, artillery gun sections and tank crews, said Smith. "It will mirror what we have out in the operating forces today," he said.

The current plan is to have a male commander and a female as the task force sergeant major, the senior enlisted position.

The Marine Corps said the extensive research is needed to ensure that combat effectiveness is not compromised and women will not be at a disadvantage as specialties are opened up. "This is about ensuring that our female

Marines
are set up for success," Smith said.

The service will begin soliciting volunteers to create a task force of about 460 Marines, including about 120 women. Since it is an experiment involving people the plan has to meet stringent legal requirements that govern such work.

Assignment for men and women to the force will be voluntary. "We think we'll get the volunteers," Smith said.

In order to qualify for the unit volunteers will have to meet basic physical requirements, which have not yet been finalized, and will also be required to attend the relevant military schools.

The experimental task force will allow the service to compare the performance of an infantry squad of women to an all-male or a mixed gender unit.

Thousands of women have been exposed to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. "There's no doubt that our female Marines have done very well serving in combat over these last dozen-plus years in both Iraq and Afghanistan," Smith said. "This is not about women in combat."

Women already fly combat aircraft and serve aboard ships.

The services have been opening an increasing number of jobs and units to women. The Marine Corps, this month decided to open an additional 11 specialties to women, reducing the number of fields closed to women to 20 out of about 335 fields.

But jobs like the infantry and special forces have remained closed to women. The Marine Corps recently opened the Infantry Officer Course, a grueling

13-week class, to women on an experimental basis. So far 14 women have volunteered but none has completed the course.

About 40 women volunteers have successfully completed the Marines' enlisted infantry course, which is not as physically demanding.

Despite advances in technology in warfare, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq often came down to the most basic infantry fight.

"Infantry combat hasn't really changed much since time immemorial," said Gregory Newbold, a retired Marine lieutenant general. "At its most personal level it comes down to the skill of the individual, the cohesion of the unit and the training."

Infantrymen are required to carry all their equipment on their back, often over great distances, and be ready to fight once they arrive. The individual load has increased as improvements have been made in individual protective gear, weapons and radios.

The average weight a Marine carries has doubled in the past dozen years to about 85 to 90 pounds today.

"Amidst all the discussion of technological advancements and the push button nature of warfare in some people's minds, I would say the challenges for our infantry Marines have only gotten greater," Smith said.

Advocates of placing women into the infantry and other ground combat specialties say the military should verify the physical standards required for the occupations and open the field to females.

"Nobody wants to lower standards," said Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the National Women's Law Center. "We'll see who can meet the standards."

Some Marines and soldiers worry about the impact of integrating women into combat arms, such as the infantry. "The strength of feelings are very strong," Newbold said. "Male and female Marines have serious questions about the end result and what it will do for our combat effectiveness."