

Opening Statement on the Integration of Women into Ground Combat Units
Chairman John McCain
February 2, 2015

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to hear testimony about how the Army and Marine Corps are planning to implement the Secretary of Defense's decision to open all ground combat units to women. We welcome our witnesses this morning: Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus; Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Robert Neller; Acting Secretary of the Army Patrick Murphy; and Army Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley. We thank you for being here this morning and for your many years of distinguished service.

This hearing is not about whether women can serve in combat. The fact is that women have served honorably in our military for years. They've filled critical roles in every branch of our military. Some have served as pilots, like Martha McSally who flew combat missions in Afghanistan. Some served as logisticians, like Joni Ernst who ran convoys into Iraq. Others have served as medics, intelligence officers, nuclear engineers, boot camp instructors, and more.

Many of these women have served in harms' way. Women like Army Specialist Monica Lin Brown, who ran through insurgent gunfire and saved the lives of her wounded comrades by using her body to shield them from incoming mortar fire. Women like Army Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, who led a counterattack that defeated an ambush by 50 insurgents and saved the lives of her fellow soldiers.

Many women have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our nation, including 160 killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We honor their service and sacrifice. And we honor them.

That is why, when then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifted the ban on women serving in combat three years ago, I supported that decision. But as I said then, as this decision is implemented, "it is critical that we maintain the same high standards that have made the American military the most feared and admired fighting force in the world." We have a responsibility to do the right thing, but we also have an equal responsibility to do the right thing in the right way. That is what this hearing is about – ensuring that, as women move into more positions across our military, the readiness, combat effectiveness, and the safety and well-being of all service-members, both men and women, remain our paramount priority.

On December 3, 2015, Secretary Carter announced that the Department of Defense would lift the ban on women in ground combat units. In advance of this decision, both the Army and the Marine Corps sought to assess the physical and readiness impacts of integrating women into their ground elements, including through special field studies. The Army study simulated tasks to determine what the gender neutral standards should be for each occupational specialty based on physical tasks. The Marine Corps simulated the combat environment with men and women Marines living and working together under combat-like conditions.

These studies, while different in their approach, are complimentary in their results. For the first time, they helped establish objective, scientifically based standards for the tasks required for ground combat. They found that certain women could meet these standards. But both studies also found that, when performing brute physical tasks, on average these higher performing women were generally comparable to lower performing men—and that, in the process, women sustained higher rates of injury than men. Indeed, only two women Marines were able to complete the combat activities simulated in the Marine Corps study due to extremely high rates of injury to lower extremities.

In short, the Army and Marine Corps studies demonstrated that biological differences between men and women can have implications when it comes to the sustained physical activities involved in combat.

Rather than honestly confront these realities, some have sought to minimize them. Indeed, we have even heard attempts to disparage the women Marines who participated in the study at Twentynine Palms as somehow less than our best. In fact, these women were top caliber Marines, self-selected and chosen to participate based on their aptitude and physical strength. I hope that Secretary Mabus and others who have spoken ill of these women will repudiate their comments.

Put simply, I am concerned that the Department has gone about things backwards: This consequential decision was made and mandated before the military services could study its implications, and before any implementation plans were devised to address the serious challenges raised in the studies. Indeed, the services now have the authority to begin contracting women for ground combat positions, but the Congress has yet to receive any implementation plans. Our witnesses are here today to address these concerns and the many questions that still remain.

For the members of this Committee to perform our oversight responsibilities, we need to know what the gender neutral military occupational specialty tests will

look like, when they will be administered, how often they will be administered, and how they will interact with the current physical fitness standards, which are currently gender normed. We need to know how women service-members will be set up for success to serve long and healthy military careers while maintaining high standards. And while the services are committed to maintaining standards that are tied to specific military occupational specialties, we know that, over time, political pressure will come to bear to increase the number of women in combat arms specialties. We expect to hear the witnesses address these important concerns.

Most importantly, we need to hear, from a professional military perspective, how integrating women into scout sections, infantry squads, tank crews, artillery batteries and combat engineers will improve the readiness and combat power of our ground units. After all, that is the overriding mission of our nation's military.

Recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq serve as a stark reminder that close combat remains brutal and uncompromising. Warfare has changed over the years, but the duty of our fighting men and women, from the Second World War to Vietnam to today, remains the same – to close with and destroy the enemy. It is conducted in dangerous and austere environments. No other human activity is more psychologically straining, morally demanding, and more physically stressful. High physical standards alone do not assure success in ground combat. Ultimately, those standards must be devised and implemented in a manner that ensures that we treat our soldiers and marines fairly, but that we never offer the enemy a fair fight.

That is why we must be uncompromising in our insistence on training to high standards. It is why we must preserve the small unit cohesion and discipline that ensure small combat units can win and survive on the forward edge of the battlefield. Troops in close combat bear the heaviest burden across the entire Department of Defense. And going forward, it is the wellbeing of those service-members, whether they be men or women, that must override every other concern.

Senator Reed.