

THE TROOPS

Lt. Col. Shawna Kimbrell is the Air Force's first African-American female fighter pilot.



COMBAT FOR ALL

Expanded roles promise equal opportunities, obligations for women

AIRMAN 1ST CLASS ASHLEY WOOD/U.S. AIR FORCE

By Matt Alderton

KA^{TEY VAN DAM} WAS a freshman at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., when she made up her mind to serve in combat. The Sept. 11 attacks happened during her freshman year. "Of course, I wanted to get in the fight, but the only way for me to do that offensively was in the air," recalled van Dam, who wanted to become an infantry officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. Unfortunately, direct ground combat roles in infantry, armor, reconnaissance and special operations had been closed to women since they were first admitted to join the services in 1948. Because the

Marine Corps has allowed women to serve in combat aviation roles since 1994, van Dam applied instead for flight school and became one of the first 10 women to ever pilot an AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter.

Then, in January 2013, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced his intention to end the Pentagon's direct ground combat exclusion rule for female service members following a three-year period during which the services could study the issue and request an exception.

"At that point, I was an instructor at the Quantico Marine Corps Base, which is where we train all our (junior officers). I looked around and saw this amazing talent pool of young Americans who'd volun-

teered to serve their country in a time of war, and I realized what a shame it was that we weren't taking advantage of that full talent pool by allowing women to serve in combat arms positions," said van Dam, who co-founded No Exceptions, a coalition of post-9/11 military veterans advocating combat inclusion as a means to military readiness. "Although I'm a huge believer in equal opportunities for women, our goal wasn't women's rights, per se; it was the belief that our country is best served when we have the strongest talent in the most challenging jobs."

Now a graduate student at Johns

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WOMEN WELCOME

Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that the Department of Defense would open all military occupations and positions to women "without exception" as long as they qualify and meet specific standards effective Jan. 3, 2016.

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Hopkins University, van Dam is among those who celebrated last year when Defense Secretary Ash Carter made good on Panetta's promise: The Department of Defense, he announced, would open all military occupations and positions to women "without exception" as long as they qualify and meet specific standards effective Jan. 3, 2016.

"The secretary has made it clear that he wants to be able to draw from ... 100 percent of American society to get the best we can possibly get into our military," said Peter Levine, the acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. "In his view, if we're excluding women from the universe we're drawing from, we're limiting ourselves."

Indeed, the number of applicants for all enlisted positions across the services has been falling since 2009, according to a 2016 report prepared for Levine's office by CNA, a non-profit research and analysis organization.

"The environment for recruiters is likely to become significantly less fertile in the near future," CNA concluded in its report, noting a 42 percent decline in military applicants — from 374,368 in 2009 to 216,182 in 2014, the most recent year for which there are data.

Recruitment was one impetus for the policy change. Another was the decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, during which women demonstrated their competence in combat despite their formal exclusion from it.

"Women had been allowed to serve in support roles ... in rear echelons that were supposedly more protected. But for periods in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the most dangerous place to be was in the rear because you were transiting roads that were studded with IEDs," explained defense analyst Nora Bensahel, a distinguished scholar in residence at American University's School of International Service. "Women were already being wounded and killed; it became harder and harder to justify excluding them from combat because combat was everywhere."

In fact, one of the first U.S. casualties of the Iraq War was Spc. Lori Piestewa, whose official job was to keep track of her unit's supplies. She died when her convoy was attacked in the first days of the war in 2003.

The Air Force has allowed women to serve in most combat aviation roles since 1993. The Navy, meanwhile, has allowed women to serve on combat ships since 1994, and on submarines since 2011. When Panetta and Carter made their announcements, therefore, all eyes were on the Army and Marines, the latter of which requested — and was denied — a partial exception to combat integration based on a controversial study suggesting males physically outperformed females in marine



U.S. Marine Corps Cpl. Amanda Sallee executes pullups during physical training. Women are eligible for any combat position in the military as long as they meet specific standards.

CPL. AARON S. PATTERSON/U.S. MARINE CORPS



Staff Sgt. Jennifer Garza disciplines her Marine recruits during boot camp at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C.

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES



Then-Pfc. Lori Piestewa checks equipment before deploying for Iraq in 2003. She was one of the first to die in that war.

RUDY GUTIERREZ/EL PASO (TEXAS) TIMES

combat training.

Nearly a year into combat integration, the Marines continue to drag their heels relative to the Army, observers report.

"As the service that is most steeped in its own traditions, the Marine Corps has always been resistant to change from the outside," explained Bensahel, who said the Army has been more proactive about promoting opportunities for women, and faster to execute on them.

Still, both services say they're fully committed to the Pentagon policy.

"The Marine Corps is currently executing the new force integration policy with no foreseeable obstacles," said Marine Corps spokesman Maj. Garron Garn, who added that there are currently more than 550 female Marines, 180 of who have been as-

Levine said: "First, they're laterally moving women into leadership positions ... so new recruits have role models to look up to ... who are the same gender they are. Once we have people in leadership positions we'll be more prepared to move (women) into the enlisted ranks."

Although women's introduction to combat roles has been swift, their integration will be slow, van Dam predicted.

"Integration is going to be a long process," she said, adding that most young women will take a wait-and-see approach to ground combat roles, pursuing them only after pioneers have made the seat warm for them. "There's always someone who has to break the headwinds. For the person who comes behind them, the headwinds will be a little weaker, and for the person behind them a little weaker still. And so on and so forth until finally you get to a point where it's really not a big deal."

The headwinds aren't just social. "The physical requirements for these positions are considerable," Bensahel said. "You need women who are not only interested in these positions, but who have done the physical training that's required to serve in them."

How to provide women with the motivation to seek combat roles and the muscle to fill them is a complicated question that could take years to answer. Opening all jobs to anyone who can do them, however, is a strategic first step on which the Pentagon believes future military victories rest, officials said.

"Not only is it the right thing to do, but it's in the best interest of our military and our readiness to be accepting of those who are qualified to serve," explained Levine, who said the Pentagon is working hard to establish objective standards for combat service that can be applied universally to men and women across all military branches. "We want to have the best force possible, and we think we can achieve that by being open to all types of people as long as they meet our standards."

As for the next frontier: Now that they have equal opportunities, many military women also want equal obligations — including mandatory selective service registration for women when they turn 18. In late November, Congress dropped the requirement from the National Defense Authorization Act, but President Obama still supports it.

Unresolved issues like sexual assault and access to reproductive health care mean women will continue to face challenges in the armed forces. Their newfound opportunities in combat, however, mean they'll be more prepared than ever to confront the challenges they face at war.

"There will always be ways to make things better (for women)," van Dam concluded. "But as a country, we're going to be stronger for this." ●

signed — in both combat and non-combat roles to previously all-male units.

In the Army, two active component captains have already been trained and transferred into the infantry, according to Army spokeswoman Lt. Col. Jennifer Johnson, who said 10 non-commissioned Army National Guard officers have likewise been trained and transferred into infantry and armory occupations, with another five currently completing training.

Other milestones include the 24 women who have completed infantry and armor commissioned-officer training and the more than 160 enlisted female recruits who will begin training for infantry and armory occupations in February.

Both the Army and Marines are taking a "leader-follower" approach to integration,