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Haley Shotwell

hshotwell@radford.edu

Women have long been an integral part of the United States Military. But when Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced on January 24 that the ban on women fighting on the front lines had been lifted, chaos erupted. This new policy overturns the 1994 Pentagon rule that restricted women from artillery, armor, infantry and other combat roles.

This change is long overdue considering women have been serving in those roles, without recognition, for as long as America has been fighting. For example, as of last year more than 800 women soldiers had been wounded in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and 130 have died.

The Marine Corps also has an all-female search team called the Lioness Program.

As of 2011, there were 214,098 women serving on active duty and even though that sounds like a large number, that only makes up 14.6 percent of all active duty military personnel.

The new policy has the potential to open up 237,000 positions for women to fill. Virginia alone currently has 93,637 female veterans.

While some people may be upset over the fact that daughters, mothers and wives have the same risk of coming home in a body bag as men do, many feel that the new policy is a good thing. Dale Fair is a Colonel in the Army and has been involved with the Army/ Army Reserve for more than 37 years now. Col. Fair served in Iraq in 2008 and feels that the new policy change is a good idea.

"Women have always been in combat. There is no such thing as the front lines because we are involved in asymmetrical warfare, meaning our enemies are all around us," Fair said.

Cadet Jaritzelis Roberts, an ROTC member at Radford, is also in favor of the new policy.

"I think this is a good decision because women should be treated the same as men. Some women are capable of doing things the men in this world cannot. If you sign up to serve our country that should be enough to prove that we are just as equal as men are," Roberts said.

Roberts believes that women are underestimated a lot of times with what they are capable of and while that can be frustrating, she feels that men think they are protecting the women.

K.W. King, also a ROTC cadet at RU, thinks that because men are so protective, women would be a distraction in battle. "Men have that protective instinct for women and if one were hurt, we would do reckless things to save her. I personally do not think women are made for combat, they are a distraction," King said. Fair feels differently on women being a

distraction in combat.

"I've been there, done that. I have a Combat Action Badge and a Purple Heart. The only distraction in battle are those who are trying to kill you," Fair said. However, as Fair shared some statistics on women casualties: in World War I at least 359 service women died mostly from influenza and vehicle/ aircraft accidents, World War II left 543 dead including 16 Army nurses that were killed by enemy fire, in the Korean War only 17 died mostly from vehicle accidents, the Vietnam War only had eight female casualties and the Gulf War where 16 died from enemy fire.

Pam Berry, an Information Technician Senior Chief (SW/AW) in the Navy served for 21 and a half years, serving overseas in more than 15 locations. Berry believes that the policy change is good but it is also being done in an effort to cover the past mistakes made by politicians in Washington, D.C.

"The only drawback I see is within the White House and the civilian attitudes toward women in combat. We are living in the 21st century and we as a society need to stop stereotyping based on gender abilities. Yes, it is a proven fact that men are physically stronger than women. However, it isn't a proven fact that men are emotionally or mentally stronger than women and in combat that is very important when you are in a highly stressful situation," Berry said.

Fair feels that there are no pros or cons when it comes to this policy change, there are only soldiers.

"We all carry weapons and we all protect our battle buddies," Fair said.

As for the impact of the policy, there are mixed views. King feels that the policy is just a pleaser and he does not believe that there will be an increase of women on the front line. Berry and Fair both believe that the only impact the policy will have is on the people who make an issue out of it.

"This will not have a large impact on the military service members. We are already trained to work together as a unit," Berry said.

The question still remains about women holding positions on these special operations forces including the Navy SEALs and Army's Delta Force. While those positions are still being debated for now as to whether they should be open to women, Fair thinks women will eventually be able to hold those positions.

"They have to meet the standards and I can tell you that very few men can reach the standards but I am confident that over time some women, not all, will achieve this high standard," said Fair.

Roberts feels that women can do anything men can do regardless of how the world portrays women.

"We may not have the big muscles that the men have but we can get the job done," Roberts said.

Berry feels the main reason people do not want women fighting is because of the possibility of a woman being captured and then used as a way to “weaken our male counter parts into obeying what the captor says”. Berry dealt with that in her time overseas.

“While I was in the Middle East the Taliban had put out a message: A bounty of \$250,000 American dollars will be paid to anyone who captures, rapes and beheads a Female American Service Member on video. The day we were pinned in an abandoned building, this thought did run through my mind and also my male counterparts mind. As a leader it was my job to somehow clear their minds of that thought and focus on what we had to do to get back home. I made it clear, under NO circumstances would I be taken alive by anyone other than American Forces. I had prepared myself to die that day,” Berry said.

Berry said that not for one second did she believe that as a female she should not be fighting and says that she did the same thing her male counterparts did in order to survive, take human life in order to save her own. She also said that no one was ever left behind and they did what was necessary to survive, bringing them all closer together.

As for women serving for countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, they do so in a much different, deadly way.

“For the most part our enemy was invisible, but yes they did use women. They are called suicide bombers,” Fair said.

So as the debate continues to flourish, women will continue to fight just as they have for many years now alongside men and war will continue to be war with blood, violence and death. As for the people who have such strong opinions on the matter just keep in mind, we are all in this together.