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Battling Gender Misconceptions

Women's roles and abilities in the United States military are subjects on which people have varying opinions. One of the most common of these opinions is that women are unable to perform their jobs in the military as well as their male counterparts. My experience as a female service member has caused me to believe that women are quite capable of performing their jobs in the military, in many cases exceeding the performance of their male counterparts.

One of the generally held beliefs I encountered prior to my time in the service was that women were incapable of enduring the same physical stresses as men. When I entered basic training, I was placed in the primary running group. My physical fitness test scores were in the top ten-percent for our unit. I was appointed as the squad leader for our final fifteen-kilometer road march. This road march took place in the Ozark Mountains of Ft. Leonardwood, Missouri. Being squad leader during this march meant ensuring that everyone kept an equal distance and pace for its duration. Carrying a thirty-five pound rucksack and a fifteen pound M-16 rifle, I travelled the columns' lines from the inside position, travelling back and forth through the files the entire march telling my team members to catch up or slow down in order to keep a six foot

distance from the person in front of them. It may seem like a simple task; however, my squad led the march, setting the pace for the entire company (four platoons of four squads). Our squad lines were approximately one hundred feet in length, the majority of the distance we travelled was ascending the Ozark Mountains, and we beat the time requirement for the march. As I later discovered, I had fractured my kneecap and torn the ligaments in my knee somewhere along the way. Further along in my military journey, at my unit assignment, I received the Adjutant General's Gold Award for achieving the highest physical fitness score in our Battalion (State of Florida).

Another generic misconception I encountered regarding women's ability to perform in the military was the idea that they are unable to be effective when placed in a leadership position. The co-ed basic training and Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) schools that I attended encouraged and developed female leadership. Most of the females in my advanced training company were placed in leadership roles based on their charisma and attention to detail. I won the Battalion Soldier of the Month Board for outstanding achievement based on critical leadership factors such as military bearing, self-confidence, and drive for success.

Females I observed during my time in the service were more effective than many of the males when it came to assigning tasks and following through on their execution. Our female superiors demanded more of us than male superiors. My female leaders expected more precise task fulfillment, a neater appearance, and more commitment to quality in comparison with orders given by male leaders. Most of the soldiers did not look forward to receiving orders from the female leaders; it meant one would actually have to complete the mission.

One of the ways in which the topic of women in the military has expanded recently is the role of women in combat. Many people believe that women are not directly involved in combat

missions. That could not be farther from the truth. Women are involved in almost every supporting mission in the current war. Women are deployed as armed security with Special Operations Groups in the Air Force, we are involved in supply convoy operations, we are fighter pilots and NFO's (flight gunners) in the Navy, and we are military police in all of the branches. All of those military specialties are being fired upon, and the enemy has no regard for gender. One of the most basic tenets communicated to me during my Signal Corps training was to be prepared for anything. Individual units do not commonly travel with a separate fighting force to protect them. Each unit will have designated people that assume a defensive role. In my unit, each communications shelter had two designated Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW, M-249, light machine gun) gunners assigned to it in the event of an attack. I was one of those designated SAW gunners. The basis, I believe, for the belief that women are not directly involved in combat is that they are not allowed to be in the Army Special Forces, the Navy Seals or the Infantry. Those groups within the armed forces are unique. They are highly trained and specialized sub-groups for which most men do not even meet the requirements. The reason, as I understand it, that females are not allowed in those groups is due to the perception that women would be a distraction to the men within the groups. That appears to be a restriction based more heavily on problems with the group members themselves than on the ability of a woman to perform effectively in that role.

The military is a highly competitive environment. Most women enter assuming they will be at a disadvantage that they will fight their entire career to overcome. There have been many changes over the years in the military relating to the training and development of female service members. We are now trained in the same combat skills, our occupational specialty education is

the same, and we are given the same orders. Why would the product of that education and training be different because of gender?

The military is a focused organization that allows any person that whole-heartedly applies him or her self to succeed to the utmost of his or her ability. An Army recruiter once told me that an individual defines his/her own career in the military, and I have found that to be true. The promotion scale is based on merit, achievement, and education, not gender. Having participated in both the civilian workforce and military service, I can say without a doubt, there is no comparison. I have never felt more confident of success than when I was in the military. I was a soldier; I was no longer a female, a white girl, a blonde, or a single mom. I was the same as everyone else and I was expected to lead, follow, or get out.

The subject of women in the military is a very personal one for me. My father was a Chief Warrant Officer in the Marine Corps, and he raised me believing that women did not belong in the military. As an adult, I set out to prove that belief wrong, and I did. The other women I knew that joined the service also did so to prove something to their self. They had a personal commitment to success and set very high standards for themselves and their performance. That drove them to success in any mission. In general, this effort to achieve quality was not reciprocated by the males; therefore, most of the male superiors with whom I had contact actually preferred working with female soldiers. I learned a lot of new concepts during my time in the service, one of those being that women are highly dedicated, motivated, honorable, and courageous members of the military. Being in the armed forces was strenuous, difficult, and uncomfortable, but I belonged there, as does any other person that has the desire for a challenge that few others will ever attempt.