

Opening Statement
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Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, members of the Committee, the issues before us today are of vital importance to the future of the United States Marine Corps, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, and our nation as a whole.

The question at issue is very straightforward: How do we maintain and improve the combat effectiveness of our military as we execute the decision to open all previously closed positions to women.

Serving as Secretary of the Navy is the greatest honor of my life. Every single decision I make is in support of maximizing the combat effectiveness of the Marine Corps. For almost seven years as Secretary, I've been talking to Marines face to face about being Marines, making Marines, and the Marine warfighting ethos. I have seen them at Quantico, at Parris Island, at San Diego and at nearly every stop I've made along the 1,160,208 miles I've travelled during my time as Secretary, including every FOB in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. I've spent time with Marines where they are serving, and have seen first-hand that this decision to open all previously closed positions to women is putting policy in line with what is already reality, acknowledging the critical role women play, and have been playing, in mission success.

The Marine Corps is the most formidable expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known. That legacy is proven through the Corps' storied history, from the halls of Montezuma to the Valleys of Afghanistan, and that reputation is unquestioned in America and around the globe: No better friend, no worse enemy. The strong traditions of the Marines help make that reputation, and among those traditions is a commitment to evolve, to be flexible, – in one of the common instructions to young Marines – to improvise, adapt and overcome.

Throughout its history, the Corps has maintained its combat power and its lethality by adapting to changing conditions, evolving training and tactics to meet new challenges and new threats. Today's School of Infantry is not the same as it was just 25 years ago during Desert Storm, and the change is even more dramatic since Vietnam or World War II. In a world where the threats and the battle space are all increasingly complex, failing to re-evaluate everything from personnel policies to weapons programs can be dangerous if not fatal. A response of "that's the way we've always done it," is not, cannot be, and never has been, an acceptable rationale.

In the Department of the Navy, we are continually evaluating the way we operate. After Secretary Panetta and Chairman Dempsey set us in 2012 on the path toward opening all billets, including ground combat, to women by this year, the Navy and Marine Corps – along with our sister services – conducted extensive studies on that issue. These studies helped inform the Department's recommendation to Secretary of Defense Carter and his subsequent decision to open all previously closed positions in all services to women. But they were not the only source of information that was gathered in reaching that recommendation.

However, the Marine Corps study has drawn special attention, and at least some of what has made it into public discussion is – to put it generously – less than accurate. Among the misperceptions is that the Marines relied on just one study. In fact, their conclusions were, in part, based on a number of studies and reports. I have spent a considerable amount of time closely reviewing all of them, especially the Marines’ own study. In addition, I’ve had numerous discussions with senior Marine leadership, junior officers, and enlisted personnel.

First and very importantly, I commend the Marines who volunteered for the experiment for their work assisting the Corps with approaching the integration process. I also appreciate the thoughtfulness, diligence and sincerity of Marine leadership. Their time and effort helped to develop standards, reinforce the importance of leadership, and set specific metrics for these demanding ground combat jobs.

The most surprising finding of the Marine Corps study was that standards for many Marine Corps Military Occupations Specialties – or MOS’s – did not exist. An incredibly important thing that came out of this study was the establishment of operationally relevant, occupation specific, gender-neutral standards.

The Marines deconstructed each job in a ground combat unit to specifically detail its requirements so that individual members could function better as a team. So what we have now are a set of standards based on the actual requirements and demands for every Marine MOS, and the Corps is more effective and more ready because of this work.

As I thoroughly examined the Marine Corps study, it was clear that the conclusions focused on the average performance of female Marines rather than individual abilities. Averages don't tell the abilities and performance of an individual Marine. There were – and are – capable women who can meet the arduous standards the Marine Corps set for ground combat arms units. We all know the Marines have never been about average.

We also know, as Commandant Neller regularly and very correctly notes, that this is not about women in combat. Women have been serving in combat, serving with distinction, and they've been recognized for it; 422 female Marines have earned Combat Action Ribbons for their service in Iraq and Afghanistan for various roles they've played, to include the Lioness Program and Female Engagement Teams.

Female Marines have enhanced combat effectiveness by running convoys and security patrols, flying close air support missions, and leading engineering platoons. They have performed exceptionally on the front lines in places like Fallujah, Ramadi and Sangin – upholding the Marines' incredible combat proficiency and impeccable traditions. This is about opening up the last few MOS's in accordance with the direction by the Secretary of Defense and doing so in a way that maintains or increases combat effectiveness.

Last week, I was at Quantico to have a frank discussion with Marines and see them train. What the visit reinforced in me is just how exceptional these young men and women are. They are mission-focused and thoughtful, they are respectful and proud, and they are intent on doing what Marines do best: developing the world's finest warfighters, irrespective of gender, color, religion

or background because those things are irrelevant when it comes to meeting the standards required in combat.

Officers Candidate School and The Basic School at Quantico are already fully gender integrated. The questions I received there from the Corps' newest officers were far broader than the opening of the last few MOS's. There were questions about how to lead in new, ever-changing environments and about emerging threats like cybersecurity.

The Marines of history, those that fought at Belleau Wood, at Iwo Jima, at Hue City, at Fallujah and at Mousa Kala have always represented the best our country has to offer, have always adapted and overcome whatever threat has faced our country. My visit showed me that is absolutely still the case today.

Marine Corps leadership have developed thoughtful and deliberate plans to execute this transition effectively. The Corps has already notified the 231 women who have successfully completed ground combat arms MOS training at formal learning centers they can switch to these previously closed jobs immediately if they choose to do so.

Part of this transition is the evaluation of the training and education that we provide at every level, from recruits and officer candidates to the highest levels of leadership, and the Secretary of Defense highlighted education and training as focus areas as we begin implementation of this policy. A point of discussion has been that the Marines are the only Service which separates men and women at boot camp. I directed the Marines to brief me on a plan to integrate basic training and then to implement that plan by April 1.

The Marines prepared a very thoughtful briefing and way ahead, which provided timely and informative considerations as the Department of Defense-wide Implementation Group, headed by the Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, do their important work. I thank the Marine Corps for assembling this information.

With the benefit of their response, we can move forward in a measured and effective way using the lessons of OCS and TBS as well as the lessons learned as Marines have opened up many MOS's in the past 3 years.

With validated, operationally relevant, job specific standards – these are high standards – the only test that is important is whether a person can meet those standards. I know suggestions have been made that those standards might be lowered down the road to achieve some quota, some numerical goal. But that is unacceptable, unacceptable under the law, and unacceptable to me and every other senior leader in the Pentagon, because it would endanger not only the safety of Marines, but also the safety of our nation.

Lowering standards would also be unacceptable to every Marine, especially those women who choose to compete for these positions. One thing is inviolate: standards can never be lowered for any group or for any job. Standards will evolve as threats evolve, as circumstances change, but they will evolve for everyone equally. But just as there is no good argument to lower standards, there is also no good argument to bar anyone who has met those standards from serving.

The Secretary of Defense's decision to open all previously closed MOS's, including all Marine MOSs, to women is therefore an important step for our military and our country. This isn't about

quotas, and this doesn't mean every, or even most, Marines will make it, but it does mean every Marine who wants to will have the chance to compete.

And that is the American promise, which does not guarantee an outcome to anyone, but does guarantee opportunity for everyone.

Americans have always worked to fulfill that exceptional promise made at our founding. We have continually broken down artificial barriers to equal opportunity based on race, religion or gender. Our military forces have followed that same history and made themselves stronger and better and more effective because of it.

Implementing this policy breaks down a last barrier.

For those who want to serve in these trying MOS's, these high standards will not make it easy, nor should they, but each person will have the opportunity. And for those who succeed, they will operate side by side with everyone else who has met the standard to be a Marine. Those Marines and this nation will continue to uphold the motto Marines have fought and died under for almost two and a half centuries: *Semper Fidelis*.