Let's get to the sticking point of the gender integration issue — physical capability. There are countless discussions and online comment threads that are part of the general consternation over whether women are physically capable of succeeding in combat arms. Many critics argue that women will not succeed in combat arms
because none of the 26 lieutenants who have volunteered for the Marine Corps’ Infantry Officer Course (IOC) have passed — yet. Stating a feat is impossible because it has yet to be accomplished is the dying rallying cry of opponents clutching to the status quo. Opponents to integration would accept as obvious that women are physically capable of flying combat aircraft. They would accept as equally obvious that despite the fact that black Americans make up less than 2% of the Navy SEAL community, this lack of “critical mass” should be no obstacle to these brave young men being afforded the opportunity to try out at BUD/S. The critics simultaneously fail to acknowledge that what they now consider to be totally apparent was formerly considered highly controversial and unsupported by science. In other words, their arguments are ahistorical, unscientific, and reactionary.

**Can They Hack It?**

In the early 1990s, the subject of whether or not women had the physical ability to pilot high performance combat aircraft was hotly debated. It was widely accepted at the time that the pure physical demands of this occupational specialty were beyond the ability of women; furthermore, even if women could handle the physical demands, it did not mean that they could simultaneously apply highly complex piloting skills under those same physical conditions in combat. Consider the following:

> I just really object to the news or whatever coming out and saying, ‘Oh, they’re already doing that job.’ That’s not true. Yes, they are flying F-18s. They’re not flying combat mission F-18s, you know, and to put them in the same role is just ludicrous.

That’s from a Navy Top Gun instructor to the 1992 *Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces*. Today we, including female integration opponents, would dismiss this sort of commentary out of hand. We
would tell ourselves, “Of course this is nonsense.” Ironically, female integration opponents do not hear the echo of the Top Gun instructor’s testimony in their own arguments today.

In 2011, 19.4% of enlisted sailors were black; 8.1% of naval officers were black. However, less than 2% of the SEAL community is black. Senior Chief Joseph Jones commented on NPR’s Tell Me More: “Out of approximately 2500 SEALs, there’s only like 50 of us; it’s rare to see a black face.” Whatever hypothesis one subscribes to, the fact remains that black men are vastly underrepresented in the Navy SEAL community. Opponents to female integration in combat arms point to the few instances where, given the rare opportunity to attempt combat arms entry-level schools, women have succeeded as being so few as to be insignificant. However, no one is seriously attempting to close the SEAL community to black volunteers because so few have passed BUD/S.

**Just the facts Ma’am...**

There are many factors required to pass any specialty school (e.g., the Q-course for Army Special Forces or BUD/S for Navy SEALs) or introductory school (e.g., IOC for Marine infantry officers). The men who compete to be in these units must be smart, mentally tough, and of course, physically strong. There is a minimum physical expectation that is defined by what that specific occupation requires. As long as the minimum physical expectation is justified and articulated for a particular job, then any woman who passes the physical requirements should be given the opportunity to compete for the job.

The first argument against female integration is based on physical capability and usually begins with, “the average man is stronger than the average woman....” It is true that as a group, men are physically stronger and faster than women; while women, as a group, are more flexible and coordinated than men. However, this is
missing the point. There are many highly capable men and women within the performance overlap of both sexes. Our military is an All Volunteer Force. The services target individuals, not groups as a whole, for recruitment. If the gender-based barrier to entering the combat arms is erased, recruiting becomes about bringing onboard the most mentally and physically capable individuals, regardless of sex. Some operators already recognize that there are women out there who are capable of passing and maintaining the standards; some women already have. From honor graduates at select courses to combat arms entry-level schools to the Army Ranger screener, some women have already met this elite standard.

Given time and training, women will pass combat arms screeners. Consider the below:
In 1996, when the Marine Corps made men perform “dead-hang” instead of “kipping” pull-ups on their annual physical fitness tests, the average score dropped dramatically. Nearly an entire generation of Marines passed through the Corps before, in 2010, the scores returned to their 1996 averages. Old Marines had to train to a new standard; new Marines knew no difference. Given a standard to train to (those required to pass elite and difficult schools), women will meet the standards. However, as illustrated by the Marine Corps pull-up example, we cannot expect this to happen overnight:

All women possess the ability to excel physically; elite female athletes are elite because they train. Significantly, the difference in athletic potential between ordinary women and elite female athletes is greater than it is between ordinary men and elite male athletes. As an example, the average eighteen-year-old female needs 10 minutes and 51 seconds to run a mile, whereas the average eighteen-year-old male needs 7 minutes and 35 seconds. The untrained woman is 3 minutes and 16 seconds slower than the untrained man. By contrast, the women’s world record holder is only 29.43 seconds slower than her male counterpart; the elite female runner completes the mile in 4:12.56, whereas the men’s world record holder completes the mile in 3:43.13.

Accompanied by a policy that allows all candidates to compete for entry and presents validated, identified physical standards for accession to the combat arms, this new generation of young women will train to the necessary standards.

**Physical Injury**

The second argument against female integration is based on supposed increased incidence of physical injury. A Marine captain publicly argued against integration based on what she claimed were gender-specific injuries. She particularly gained
sympathy when she asserted that her deployment as a combat engineer rendered her infertile. Thankfully, this was a temporary condition, like that experienced by many high-performance female athletes, and she has been blessed with two beautiful children since her article was written. The greater injuries women experience have more to do with their lower fitness levels than it does their gender. According to a report that studied injury rates among female Army trainees, “Gender per se is not the major risk factor that a crude analysis of military training injury data might imply…. Low physical fitness may be the underlying predisposing factor.” Injuries can be mitigated with better fitness for both genders.

A related concern that has been raised is the cost of caring for combat arms injuries in women. First, re-read the previous sentence and take out the last two words. Ridiculous, right? If the cost of veteran care ever reaches such importance that it debilitates our tactics on the ground or selection of the most capable warriors, we will lose the fight before we begin. A life in combat or in a combat arms occupational specialty is a hard life. The services can always do a better job at educating all recruits to the potential health risks of certain occupational specialties. What is the rate of injury amongst explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) soldiers and Marines? How many helicopter pilots survive a crash and what are the most common injuries of those who do? What is the average hearing loss of an artilleryman? We do not keep young men from volunteering for the difficult jobs because we as a nation might have to care for them after they have spent five or 20 good years protecting us. To make a decision for a young woman choosing her career path due to the potential long-term health risk of that job is both patronizing and discriminatory. If citizens volunteer to serve their country, the country will care for these citizens if injuries are incurred during their service.

Conclusion

Elliot Ackerman, whose credentials are pretty hard to top in this world (Marine infantry officer, MARSOC team leader, CIA paramilitary officer, awarded both a Silver Star and Bronze Star with “V”), concludes his case for female SEALs with...
Silver Star and Bronze Star with V, concludes his case for female SEALs with, “My daughter is three and, when she’s eighteen, I expect to have the same conversations with her about combat service as I’ll have with her little brother. I anticipate she’ll have those choices, if she wants them.” We should be striving to put the strongest and most capable on the battlefield by setting a singular standard and holding our troops to this standard, regardless of whether they are a man or a woman. Is integration worth the investment during the approaching interwar years? Ask a black SEAL.

Katey “Talent” van Dam is an attack helicopter pilot by trade and combat veteran. The opinions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Marine Corps or the Department of Defense.