

The Definition of Direct Ground Combat

Before and during recent wars, women have served with unquestioned courage "in harm's way," subject to incident-related or contingent combat. [More than 143 women in uniform](#) have given their lives in **Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait** since September 11, 2001. Their experiences deserve respect and recognition, but they do not fit the definition of **direct ground combat (DGC)**.

Official definitions of combat for all the services have made it clear that direct combat is more than the experience of being shot at or being in danger. All of the definitions stress physical proximity to and violent conflict with the enemy in contested territory, waters, or airspace.

1. From the **Report of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces**, November 15, 1992, pp. C-33, C-34:

- The **Department of Defense** currently defines "*combat mission*" as "*A task, together with the purpose, which clearly requires an individual unit, naval vessel or aircraft to individually or collectively seek out, reconnoiter and engage the enemy with the intent to suppress, neutralize, destroy or repeal that enemy.*" (CF 1.5)
- The **Army** definition adds: "*Direct combat takes place while closing with enemy by fire, maneuver, or shock effect in order to destroy or capture, or while repelling assault by fire, close combat, or counterattack.*" (CF 1.6)
- The definition of combat by the **Marine Corps** (in MCO 1300.8P) is: "*For assignment purposes, direct combat action is defined as seeking out, reconnoitering, or engaging in offensive action.*" (CF 1.9)
- **Air Force** and **Navy** combat definitions were similar, with the Navy adding that "*The normal defensive posture of all operating units is not included in this definition.*" (CF 1.7, 1.8)

2. In military history, personal accounts, and testimony before the Commission, repeated emphasis was on the extreme physical demands and violent nature of combat.

- "Closing" with the enemy often means traveling over difficult ground, under debilitating loads, while exposed to the harshest climatic and environmental conditions, with little or no personal privacy, under the duress of mortal danger. (CF 1.11)
- Physical contact with the enemy is a probable condition of combat and risk of capture is inherent at all times when in proximity to the enemy or conducting air or sea operations in contested airspace or waters. (CF 1.11)

- Modern weapons technology has made combat more lethal, not less so. War continues day and night, environmental hardships remain unchanged, and close coordination between cohesive units is essential for victory. (*CF 1.12, 1.14*)

Note: The DoD "**Risk Rule**," which exempted women from units exposing them to a "substantial risk of capture," was eliminated by then-Secretary of Defense **Les Aspin** in 1994.

The Aspin rules set forth this definition: "*Direct ground combat is engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile forces' personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.*"

The Aspin Rules also set forth four conditions under which women would be exempt from assignment to direct ground combat and support units that were constantly collocated with units such as the infantry. For more details, see the April 2003 edition of [CMR Report](#).

On February 9, 2012, then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta called for a review of policies regarding the assignment of women in the various services, and authorized exceptions to policy in order to assess the suitability and relevance of future assignment policies affecting women in the military. The February 2012 statement dropped the DoD collocation rule, which the Army had been disregarding since 2005, and called for the development of "gender-neutral physical standards" for occupational specialties closed to women due to physical requirements.

On January 24, 2013, Secretary Panetta dropped the 1994 Aspin regulations. Joint Chiefs Chairman **Gen. Martin Dempsey** announced that the services would eliminate all of women's exemptions from direct ground combat units by January 2016, unless the service chiefs requested exemptions.

At the same news conference, General Dempsey admitted that high standards beyond the abilities of women would be questioned. Any training program deemed "invalid" under Pentagon-endorsed "gender diversity" goals eventually will be eliminated, modified, or scored differently to achieve what Gen. Dempsey called a "*critical mass*" of women in the combat arms.

The nation needs and respects our women in our armed forces, but for many reasons, ordering them into direct ground combat units, which attack the enemy with deliberate offensive action, would be unfair as well as unwise. In the direct ground combat environment, female personnel do not have an equal opportunity to survive, or to help their colleagues survive.

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*Prepared by the **Center for Military Readiness**, an independent, non-partisan public policy organization that specializes in military/social issues. More information is available on the **CMR** website, www.cmrlink.org.*