

Grunt school test: Women accept one of the Corps' most grueling challenges

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A lieutenant in the Infantry Officer Course handles a weapon July 2 during the initial Combat Endurance Test at Marine Corps Base, Quantico, Va. (Thomas Brown / Staff)

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A female lieutenant in the Infantry Officer Course hikes July 2 during the initial Combat Endurance Test at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. (Thomas Brown / Staff)



A male and female lieutenant climb over a wall July 2 during the initial Combat Endurance Test at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. (Thomas Brown / Staff)



A lieutenant in the Infantry Officer Course is shown July 2 during the land navigation portion of the initial Combat Endurance Test at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. (Thomas Brown / Staff)

MARINE CORPS BASE QUANTICO, VA. — The female lieutenant pushed her way to an obstacle course through the wilderness, her copper-colored hair matted to her head with a mixture of rain and sweat. She was hours into the Marine Corps' grueling Infantry Officer Course, but her toughest challenges were yet to come.

Perhaps 5 feet 4 inches tall and 125 pounds, she determinedly worked her way through a series of bars, walls and beams, her rifle, body armor and day pack with her. The rules said each student and all of his or her gear had to make it over each obstacle. The Marine, maybe 22 or 23 years old, failed to make it over a 6-foot wall several times, but then scaled it with little problem after taking off her armor. She put her vest back on and moved to a 20-foot rope, climbing it relatively easily — something a handful of the male lieutenants failed to do. But she failed to make it up the rope again in several attempts, despite substantial rest between tries, which caused her to fall behind most of her male counterparts.

The woman was one of two female Marines who attempted the latest iteration of the Infantry Officer Course, which began July 2, as part of a Defense Department examination of which jobs women should fill in combat. The women joined 77 male lieutenants for IOC's grueling Combat Endurance Test, a broad initial exam that assesses military skills and individuals' ability to make tough decisions while physically and mentally exhausted.

The copper-haired lieutenant reached the end of the course — something not all of the men accomplished. However, she failed to meet the course's standards, said Maj. Scott Cuomo, director of IOC. The other female volunteer, a short-haired brunette who also appeared to be in her early 20s, struggled even more with the course's upper-body strength demands. She joined five men who were pulled from the course by instructors for falling so far behind that they could not pass.

In total, 61 lieutenants passed the CET this month, and 18 failed. Five of the failures came from students who asked for a "drop on request," or DOR. The move allows them to bow out of IOC and seek another military occupational specialty.

There is no quick end to the research in sight. Commandant Gen. Jim Amos wants data from IOC to make an informed recommendation by 2016 on whether the infantry and reconnaissance communities can be opened to women, but it is unclear how long that means women will attend the course.

Over the past year, the Corps has given more than 160 female students attending the Basic Officer Course at The Basic School the opportunity to attempt IOC afterward. Ten initially signed up, and six reported for duty. Five failed the initial test, including the two female Marines on July 2. The sixth woman passed the initial endurance test last fall but was dropped a little more than a week into training due to stress fractures in her foot, Marine officials said.

The volunteers will likely keep reporting. Four women with TBS's Bravo Company have expressed interest in attending the IOC class this fall, but they can change their mind at any time, said Leon Pappa, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel and infantry officer who oversees aspects of the research. That IOC course also could include women from TBS's Charlie Company, which is even earlier in the training pipeline.

It is not clear how a pending decision to open some assignments in the ground intelligence officer community will affect female recruitment to IOC, said Pappa, who works for Quantico's Training and Education Command. Women who volunteer to attend IOC now do so with the understanding that it will not advance their careers; all specialties that require it are closed to female Marines. However, the Corps is preparing to open 56 ground intel officer jobs — in logistics units and division intelligence battalions — to women beginning later this year. That would potentially create more incentive for women to attend IOC because it is a part of the career path to become an 0203 officer.

"Most times, if they volunteer now, it's the personal challenge," Pappa said. "I tell them in the brief, 'There are no incentives we can offer you, lieutenants.' It's sort of a 'God, Country, Corps' speech. It's, 'If you think you're up to it, to completing one of the toughest schools in the Marine Corps, here's your chance.' They know full well that there's nothing waiting for them at the end."

The women are not identified in this story because the Corps granted them anonymity as part of the experiment.

Facing uncertainty

Marine Corps Times agreed to observe the latest Combat Endurance Test, sending a writer and photographer here for an assignment deep in the woods. It is the initial gut-check at IOC, which is widely considered one of the most difficult courses in

the Corps. It falls under the command of TBS, which is led by Col. Todd Desgrosseilliers, who earned a Silver Star for valor in Fallujah, Iraq, as a major in 2004.

Desgrosseilliers and Cuomo said they haven't changed anything at IOC as a result of women attending. The curriculum for male and female Marines alike is an extension of what lieutenants learn while at the BOC, a six-month class that all Marine officers must complete before hitting the fleet. The attrition rate at IOC is typically about 20 percent to 25 percent. Of those, about half do not make it past the CET, said Cuomo, who commanded Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marines, out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010.

To cover the course, Marine Corps Times agreed to not disclose a variety of details about the CET, including its duration, sequence of events and how Marines can prepare for it. The secrecy helps the Corps evaluate how its students will perform in combat, where there are no certainties and leaders must find more than one way to succeed, Desgrosseilliers said. In a speech to students, one instructor, Capt. Robert Paulus, even compared IOC to the 1999 cult classic film "Fight Club," reminding them of its famous Brad Pitt line: "The first rule of Fight Club is — you do not talk about Fight Club."

"There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty that the officers have to deal with on the battlefield, and so we want to get them some sense of what it's like to deal with that," Desgrosseilliers said. "By not knowing what is going to happen, there's some uncertainty there. They are all perfectly capable of completing the tasks, but they don't know what they are until they are confronted with them."

In a predawn brief, nervous lieutenants sat and listened as Capt. Jeff Cummings, a 6-foot-4, 245-pound instructor, barked instructions and ran through a list of items required for the course. Students are not allowed to help or talk to each other for the duration of the course, he warned.

"You have about four-and-a-half minutes to pack up your sh--," he said as the brief concluded. "Your glow-belt should be around your day pack."

Moments later, the Marines hopped into trucks on the way to the field. Disoriented and uncertain of their location, they fanned out into a soggy forest to find a series of markers distributed to test their land navigation skills. The students checked their maps silently while crouched in the dark, using red light to show them the way.

The class thins

The Combat Endurance Test progressed through a series of other events: weapons assembly; swimming in body armor; pullups and other exercises measuring upper body strength, and more.

In between, the lieutenants crisscrossed Camp Barrett and the surrounding terrain here in the rain, pushing over oozing mud, shallow ravines and steep hills. Some Marines hustled with a shuffling run while carrying their gear. Others hiked silently from one station to the next. Downpours came periodically, darkening each of the lieutenants' woodland camouflage uniforms.

Over time, the 79-Marine class began to thin. Several lieutenants got lost during the land navigation period and never caught up. Others fell back as exhaustion set in or as injuries occurred. At least three Marines had blood oozing down their faces from undisclosed head injuries as the CET concluded, and at least two vomited.

The stations were managed by the captains who serve as instructors at IOC. The course itself employs 13 of them, each of whom has excelled as a platoon commander, Cuomo said. He cited as an example Capt. Ben Stafford, a Yale graduate who played in the American Hockey League and scored the winning goal for the Philadelphia Phantoms in the 2005 Calder Cup Series. Stafford retired from professional sports to become an infantry officer and served in Iraq as a platoon commander with 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif.

The instructors received assistance from about 20 other officer and enlisted personnel with IOC, and an additional 20 Marines from The Basic School who assist as needed when the CET and other events are held, Cuomo said.

Like many IOC classes, the latest iteration also has standout performers with impressive backgrounds. One example is 2nd Lt. Jeff Schuller, a prior-enlisted sergeant who earned a Silver Star for valor in Iraq in 2005 as a corporal. Afterward, he went to Cleveland State University and joined the wrestling team, then returned to the Corps as an officer. He bench-presses more than 400 pounds, Cuomo said. He whipped through the obstacle course at the CET.

Reality sets in

The students were split into two groups after the CET concluded. One included those who will continue with IOC, eyeballing their shot at becoming a platoon commander of infantry Marines. The others congregated in a smaller room, debating their futures in the Marine Corps and whether they want to take another crack at IOC in the future.

Several officers, including Cuomo, addressed the students who made it through the CET, still sitting in wet boots and dirty uniforms. Cuomo delivered a fiery speech urging students to remember that if they become infantry officers, they will be entrusted to lead grunts like Sgt. Dakota Meyer and the late Cpl. Jason Dunham, the two Marines who have earned the Medal of Honor for combat valor since 9/11.

"This is not about who? Us," Cuomo said. "Congratulations on taking one step closer to the privilege of serving infantry Marines. That's what you can pat yourself on the back about. Nothing else. Nothing in here, and nothing over the next 13 weeks, is about you."

Leading a platoon means confidently taking on challenges and building trust both with enlisted Marines and officers higher in the chain of command, Cuomo told the students who survived the CET. It is assumed that infantry officers can keep up with their Marines physically, but they also must make good choices for them in difficult times, he said.

Over and over, infantry officers must ask a simple question in trying circumstances, Cuomo said: "How do I win?"

"For the next three years, God is going to hand you 41, 42, 43, 44, up to 60 of America's sons," he said. "There is nothing more precious than that on the entire planet. The expectation is that every single day you are going to understand that you are here, and we are putting you through challenges, so that you can serve that platoon by leading them to win in combat. Simple enough?"

Afterward, Cuomo and Desgrosseilliers visited the Marines who didn't pass, including the two women. Cuomo praised them all for showing the "moral courage" to attempt IOC and observed that across the board, only about 20 percent to 25 percent of students at TBS are willing to do so.

"You gave it a shot," Cuomo said. "You made a call, some of you, as we were going along, that this isn't for you. And that's OK, because the prize at the end of this is [leading] Marines."

Some students who failed the CET but did not ask for a drop on request will be allowed to try IOC again in the fall, Cuomo said. They will spend the summer months in a preparatory Marines Awaiting Training program overseen by TBS to keep them fresh and ready. Others will move on and take another MOS.

The female volunteers will head next to their MOS schools and prepare to lead Marines in the specialties they had already selected. They have nothing to be ashamed of, Cuomo told them, and should be praised for their courage and dedication.

"You guys said, 'Bring it. Bring the pain. What do you got, commandant? Because I'm here to do whatever it is you need me to do,'" he told the pair. "You guys are special."