

Critique of Marines' combat endurance test sparks debate, but no change

By Hope Hodge Seck Staff Writer

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Retired Army Col. Ellen Haring, whose op-ed appears in the July 14 issue of Marine Corps Times, raised hackles in May when she called the combat endurance test — the grueling first exercise in the Marines' Infantry Officer Course — an "initiation rite" and proposed that female volunteers might have a better chance of graduating if it was not mandatory to pass the endurance test on the first day.

But Marine officials said the test reflects the realities of combat, and the Corps has no intention of changing it.

In an op-ed published on the military opinion website **War on the Rocks**, Haring said the ability to pass the 14-hour trial — which includes tests of upper body strength, obstacles and navigational challenges, all aimed at testing Marines' ability to operate under stress — is unnecessary for success as an infantry Marine, particularly considering that enlisted grunts have no test so arduous. To date, 15 female officers have attempted IOC, and all but one have failed to pass the CET.

"Unlike other occupational qualification tests that must be revalidated every year, like weapons qualification, the Combat Endurance Test is never required again during an officer's career," she wrote. "The answer is that the Combat Endurance Test serves as an initiation rite and not a test of occupational qualification. ... But does an initiation rite that effectively filters out half the American population (all women) do the Marine Corps justice?"

Haring added, too, that the CET hadn't always been a first-day requirement: the Marine Corps had increased the priority of the test in recent years to make it the initial mandatory exercise.

In a rebuttal also published in **War on the Rocks**, active-duty Marine 2nd Lt. Emma Stokien wrote that it was right that infantry officers be presented with more rigorous challenges than their enlisted counterparts. The Marine Corps' practice of demanding more of its officers extends beyond training, she wrote.

"The runs are longer, the humps are heavier, and the days and nights spent in the field are more intense. This remains true in the fleet," she said. "While officers and enlisted have the

same scoring system for the annual Physical Fitness Test and Combat Fitness Test, as Colonel Haring pointed out, officers are in fact required to attain a higher score."

Giving female volunteers a chance to attempt and re-attempt IOC until they passed would delay the training they need for their permanent jobs, she said.

"Eventually, Marines not bound for the infantry must be trained for and perform the jobs they have been assigned to fulfill the needs of the Marine Corps. Attempting and reattempting IOC can take the better part of a year on top of an already long training pipeline," Stokien wrote.

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Asked for comment on Haring's proposal, Marine Corps spokeswoman Capt. Maureen Krebs said the Marine Corps did change the CET four years ago to make it an initial requirement (it has always been an IOC graduation requirement), but isn't about to change it again.

"The number one reason [for changing the test] was due to lessons learned from, at the time, nine straight years of combat. For Marine infantry units, combat in Iraq and Afghanistan was (and still is) incredibly intense, often in close quarters, and filled with uncertainty, in morally, mentally and physically demanding environments," Krebs said in a statement. With platoon commanders distributed across the battlespace, far from senior officers, "the moral, mental, and physical stress on these junior leaders will increase even further," she said.

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Nor is the CET the most physically challenging exercise within the Infantry Officer Course, she said.

"It has nothing to do with a level or not level playing field and is not meant as an indoc into the course," Krebs said. "The CET is designed as a formal training event that marks the first day of the IOC program of instruction used to evaluate whether a student can successfully complete numerous essential and previously trained infantry training and readiness tasks to standard."

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