

New assignments available to women

By Karen Parrish

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Policy changes announced in February opening more than 14,000 new assignments to women in uniform took effect May 14, according to Defense Department officials.

An April 26 Pentagon press release confirmed that two changes to the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule can now move forward since the Congressionally-mandated notification period has expired.

The biggest barrier the Department of Defense is lifting is a 1994 policy prohibiting women from jobs -- such as tank mechanic and field artillery radar operator -- that take place near ground combat units. With that restriction removed, 13,000 new assignments will be available for women. Nearly 10,000 of those new opportunities are in fields never before open to women.

The second change is an "exception to policy" that will allow the Army, Navy and Marines to open select positions at the battalion level in jobs women already occupy.

The previous policy, also set in 1994, barred women in jobs such as intelligence, communications and logistics from assignment at units smaller than a brigade. Nearly 1,200 assignments will open to female Soldiers, Sailors and Marines under the exceptions.

Navy Capt. John Kirby, Pentagon spokesman, said it is now up to the military services to make necessary changes in the ranks.

The change "doesn't mean that immediately, today, there will be 14,000 women in these jobs," he noted. "But these billets will now be eligible to be filled by women."

The services will train and assign women to jobs they haven't previously filled through their normal personnel management processes as the positions become vacant, Kirby said. Many of those positions may continue to be filled by men, he added.

"The point is that 14,000 positions ... are now eligible to be filled by female service members," he said.

Kirby said service leaders will update Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta in November on their progress in implementing the new policies, and any new policies they want to suggest to increase opportunities for women.

"The secretary was very clear ... that he wants to remove as many barriers as possible to service in the military for female service members," Kirby said. "He's very committed to that, and wants to continue to look at other ways we can lower those barriers."

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