Specialist (Spc.) Rebecca Smith entered the military March 2006 at the age of 41. She has served with the 5th Engineer Battalion with the military occupational specialty of combat medic. Spc. Smith served in Balad, Iraq from 2008-2009 and Herat, Afghanistan from 2011-2012.

Transcript:
Caviness: And, um, thinking back, is there anything about your experiences in the Army that you absolutely did not expect before you went in?

Smith: Probably the biggest thing is, I see that there's—not only there's competition between soldiers, but then there's competition between the female soldiers, and that really took me off guard, 'cause I was like, I never feel threatened by anyone, and my opinion, if, you know, if you want somebody to succeed, then you—you show them how to do it. But there are people out there who also don't want you to succeed, so they try to step on you. So, I didn't expect that from the Army.

Caviness: Um, was that one of the more gendered experiences you had in the Army?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, um, 'cause we are treated differently between the male and females, but then there are females out there that just—I don't know if they think they're better than you, I—I don't know. I—I don't really care what they do, how, you know, how they do what they do, why they do it. I'm just gonna do me.
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/opinion/women-in-combat-policy-catches-up-with-reality.html?_r=0

Tanya L. Domi, a former Army captain, is the director of media relations at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

At his confirmation hearing on Jan. 31, Chuck Hagel, President Obama’s nominee for defense secretary, stated unequivocally, “I will work with the service chiefs as we officially open combat positions to women, a decision I strongly support.”

The word “officially” was illuminating: a subtle acknowledgment, whether intended or not, that women have already been fighting, and dying, in combat roles.

As an Army veteran — I left in 1990, with an honorable discharge — I was struck by the close, if indirect, association between the role of women in the military and that of gays.

More than 20 years ago, when President-elect Bill Clinton first announced that he would lift the ban on gay men and lesbians serving in the armed forces, I wrote an essay for the Op-Ed page of this newspaper, urging that women be permitted to serve in ground-force combat duty in the Army and the Marines, with “tough but fair physical and mental standards” that men and women alike would have to reach.

“The military does not have the luxury of discounting the nearly 11 percent of its forces who are women,” I wrote. “They have risen to each challenge, with a sterling record in Grenada, Panama and the Persian Gulf.”

As we know, the role of neither gays nor women would not be settled for another two decades.

In 1993, Mr. Clinton agreed to an uneasy “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise on gays in the military, a policy that led to hypocrisy, dishonesty and preposterous outcomes, not to mention gross examples of blackmail and abuse. That same year, the Pentagon allowed women to serve as combat pilots. But the following year it formally restricted women from artillery, armor, infantry and other such ground-combat roles.

When President Obama signed legislation repealing “don’t ask, don’t tell” a little more than a year ago, allowing gays to openly serve, I knew that the moment
would pave the way for removing the remaining barrier to equality in the services. The timing is a belated recognition of women’s valor: since World War II, when civilian women served as test pilots, trying out aircraft that could be flown in combat only by male aviators, many have died in risky yet unofficial missions. More than 800 women have been wounded in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than 150 have been killed.

The decision last month by Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta to allow women in ground-combat roles may have surprised the public. But since the draft ended in 1973, the Pentagon has been steadily expanding the role of women — who now make up 14 percent of our armed forces — across all of the services. Women were progressively integrated into the regular forces as the Pentagon dismantled the gender-segregated units that had existed at least since World War II.

But because of outmoded Pentagon bureaucratic regulations, the military failed to reform its personnel assignment policies, even as more and more women came into the line of fire, with the emergence of “asymmetrical warfare.” Consequently, military women have been denied formal recognition for their combat experience, even though they have served as medics and intelligence officers, participated in convoys, accompanied infantry troops and searched civilians. These are just a few examples of the varied roles that have exposed women soldiers to hostile forces and armed combat, despite the official policies that insisted that women be assigned exclusively to noncombat jobs.

Making matters worse, a structural military “brass ceiling” has frozen women’s leadership potential, because female officers with real but unacknowledged combat experience were effectively denied career advancement and training.

In 2011, the Pentagon’s Military Leadership Diversity Commission recommended eliminating combat exclusion policies for women in order to remove structural barriers and open traditionally closed doors, especially in assignments. As with the issue of gays in the military, which was studied for decades, the Diversity Commission’s recommendations followed numerous reports over the years finding that women were qualified to serve in an ever-expanding number of roles. In 2007 the RAND Corporation studied the issue; other reports have been conducted by the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces and the Defense Advisory Commission on Women in the Services, which was established in 1951. All reports found that women were making important contributions to the military readiness of the United States. The only barrier to their service has been an equal opportunity to compete.

The lifting of the ban, which will not be fully phased in until 2016, was made with the unanimous support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its chairman, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey.
Because women are central to the continued effectiveness of America’s military force and have proved themselves to be vital to combat and unit effectiveness, lifting the combat ban is a belated but essential step. And as I argued in my Op-Ed article in 1992, the military’s high standards for mental acuity and physical fitness should not be diminished to integrate women into combat units.

With this momentous shift, America once again reaffirms its core values of equality and respect — values predicated upon a person’s capabilities and demonstrated competence, not an immutable characteristic like gender. This is good for our military, and our country too.
There was a lot of excitement about military combat jobs opening up to women when the announcement broke on Jan. 24. Politicians, military members, and even a majority of the American public support the decision. Yet many, including some female troops, are worried about how the change will play out.

Capt. Katie Petronio served as a combat engineer officer on deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and in her last deployment with a Female Engagement Team (FET) attached to the infantry, she gained insight into what it may be like. In the Marine Corps Gazette, she writes:

"...some of these [female] Marines may feel qualified for the chance of taking on the role of 0302 [Infantry Officer]. In the end, my main concern is not whether women are capable of conducting combat operations, as we have already proven that we can hold our own in some very difficult combat situations; instead, my main concern is a question of longevity. Can women endure the physical and physiological rigors of sustained combat operations, and are we willing to accept the attrition and medical issues that go along with integration?"

And she brings up an interesting point that has hardly been discussed. What will the long-term effects be on the female body? I served in the Marine infantry for eight years, but after losing count of the number of 10 and 15 mile road marches I've done with an 80 pound pack, I developed serious back pain that affects me to this day.

The Army and Marine infantry is a much different beast from the rest of the military. It is arguably the most grueling and difficult combat duty troops can face (outside of special operations).

One of the biggest reasons for the policy change is that combat experience often factors into promotions. The reasoning goes that giving women the opportunity to serve in the infantry will lift a "glass ceiling" within the military, but Petronio also takes issue with this:

"Even if a female can meet the short-term physical, mental, and moral leadership requirements of an infantry officer, by the time that she is eligible to serve in a
strategic leadership position, at the 20-year mark or beyond, there is a minuscule probability that she'll be physically capable of serving at all."

Retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant Jessie Jane Duff opens her piece with a comparison of the infantry to the National Football League, asking when the ban on women in the NFL will be lifted. She writes that it's not likely to happen:

"There's simply too great a disparity in body mass and strength between NFL players and women, and the physical demands are too great."

And she echoes Capt. Petronio's concerns over long lasting physical injury:

"Currently, women have higher rates of discharge for medical disability that prevents them from finishing their enlistment, or re-enlistment. Stress and muscular deterioration in women comes on faster and harder due to the heavy gear and physical duress in the field environment. Muscle atrophy, hip displacement, and arthritis in knees and joints are common ailments. Spinal compression occurs from long periods of heavy combat loads."

As long as the high standards of Army and Marine infantry are kept that way, I don't personally see a huge problem in allowing women into the infantry. But a drop in standards is the fear of many infantrymen who remain skeptical.

Especially when General Martin Dempsey alluded to that possibility:

"Importantly, though, if we do decide that a particular standard is so high that a woman couldn't make it, the burden is now on the service to come back and explain to the secretary, why is it that high?"
Analysis Questions

1. Which do you think would be more prominent: Women competing against each other or women supporting each other in the military? Why?

2. How would the competition Spc. Rebecca Smith discussed affect a female soldier’s experience in the Army?

3. What is Tanya L. Domi’s position on women in combat? Why?

4. What are pros and cons Domi discusses about women in combat? Use examples.

5. What is Paul Szoldra’s position on women in combat? Why?

6. What are pros and cons Szoldra discusses about women in combat? Use examples.

7. How does Spc. Smith’s experience of competing against women relate to the ban on women in combat?

8. Do you think the lift on the ban will increase or decrease competition between females in the military? Why? Use examples from the articles.