

This Week

CLEARED FOR COMBAT



Times photo by Steve Eilers

Taking off: CW4 Sandra Beebe is a C-12 pilot for the Capital Region Flight Detachment, Operational Support Airlift Command, Fort Belvoir, Va.

Move expected to add talent to aviator ranks

By Bernard Adelsberger
Times staff writer

WASHINGTON — The immediate impact of admitting women into combat aviation will be increased quality through increased competition, according to some involved in or affected by the policy change.

"The services will be able to call on a much larger pool of talent to perform the vital tasks that our military forces must perform," Defense Secretary Les Aspin said April 28 in announcing the policy change that will allow women to fly Apaches, Cobras and Kiowa Warrior helicopters.

Some troops echoed Aspin's words. "With women being allowed in, you increase the pool of pilots to draw from, and therefore increase the level of quality available," said Sgt. Billy Rives of the 761st Chemical Company, 7th Infantry Division (Light), Fort Ord, Calif.

The new policy will allow female pilots to enter the aviation field they're best at or want to serve in, several women said.

For many female aviators, though, the major impact is the realization that they can compete for career-enhancing combat positions, and that their contributions over the years finally are being recognized.

"We've been doing it all along," said CW4 Sandra Beebe, a C-12 pilot based at Fort Belvoir, Va. "We've already been in combat. Instead of just being there, [now] we can shoot back."

Women say they will be able to serve longer in aviation. Several said they saw limited career opportunities without

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Aspin completes change he started as congressman

By William Matthews
Times staff writer

WASHINGTON — Two years after Congress decreed that women should be allowed to serve as combat pilots, the Defense Department has decided to go along.

It took a new administration and a new defense secretary — who helped shepherd the change through Congress when he was House Armed Services Committee chairman — to turn the law into policy.

But there has been a change in the military as well. Publicly, at least, the four service chiefs now pledge full support for letting women serve in additional combat billets, and downplay the potential problems.

The change came April 28 when Defense Secretary Les Aspin ordered the services to let women fly combat planes

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and serve on more — but not all — Navy ships. He also ordered the Army and Marine Corps to study whether women should be allowed to join field artillery and air defense artillery units.

Flanked by his service chiefs in a Pentagon briefing room, Aspin proclaimed his decision “historic” and said, “I want to thank the military chiefs who are here with me today for helping us get to this point.”

In reply, Air Force Gen. Merrill McPeak, who has argued persistently and publicly against letting women into the fraternity of combat warriors, conceded “There’s always a small chance I was wrong.”

The chiefs of the Navy and Army sounded almost eager to throw most jobs in the military open to the best qualified applicant — male or female. And Gen. Carl Mundy, commandant of the Marine Corps, promised to comply with the order.

Defense Secretary Les Aspin ordered the services April 28 to let women fly combat planes and serve on most — but not all — Navy ships. He also ordered the Army and Marine Corps to study whether women should be allowed to join field artillery and air defense artillery units.

“The Navy is ready to go,” said Adm. Frank Kelso, chief of naval operations. Women should be flying Navy fighters and bombers in a matter of months, he said. And if Congress acts promptly to lift a legal prohibition on women serving on combat ships, women pilots will be serving on aircraft carriers in less than six months, he said.

Training for women who qualify to be Apache and Cobra attack helicopter pilots will begin immediately, said Gen. Gordon Sullivan, Army chief of staff.

Aspin drew the line on ground combat, however. Women will not be allowed to serve in the infantry or in other jobs where they cannot meet strenuous physical requirements. Women are barred from infantry, armor, cavalry and special forces units.

Panel ignored

The decision to let women fly warplanes overrides the

recommendation of a presidential commission that said in late 1992 that women should be allowed to serve on more types of Navy ships, but should not be allowed to fly combat aircraft or serve in ground combat units. The panel was closely divided on many issues, and former members remained divided over Aspin’s action.

The Defense Department “seems to have largely ignored the \$4 million study,” said Kate O’Beirne, a member of the commission appointed by former President George Bush.

Opening combat jobs to women will degrade military readiness and further demoralize a military already disheartened by downsizing, budget cuts, the Navy’s Tailhook scandal and the prospect that homosexuals may be allowed to serve openly, she predicted.

But another commission member, retired Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Thomas Draude, said he is “delighted” by Aspin’s decision. It will “recognize and utilize the tremendous talent, dedication and bravery of a significant number of our population,” he said.

Draude predicted “improvement in our armed forces,” and called the decision to let women serve in more combat jobs “what is right, good and fair for the country. It is the right decision,” he said. His daughter is a Navy F/A-18 pilot, and could be among the first women to benefit from the rules change.

The decision to let women become combat pilots, but not serve in the infantry is ironic, O’Beirne contended. “Pilots become infantry when they are shot down. Who is better suited to survive when they land [in enemy territory], men or women?” she asked.

The decision to make women eligible for combat assignments is likely to discourage women from joining the Navy at all, O’Beirne said. Knowing they may be assigned to combat jobs whether they want them or not, many women will opt not to serve, she said.

Aspin’s ruling will advance the careers of a few ambitious women, but at the expense of the military as a whole, she said.

“There will be some leadership challenges” as the first

The new policy on women in combat announced by Defense Secretary Les Aspin:

- The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps must drop the ban on women flying combat missions.
- The Navy will draw up legislation to repeal the ban on women serving aboard warships. The legislation is expected to pass before the end of the year.
- Infantry, armor and cavalry will remain off limits to women, but the services must justify why they want to put any battlefield roles, including service in ground combat units, off limits to women.
- The Army and Marines must study roles for women in field artillery and air defense combat units.
- Women will begin training for the Navy’s and Air Force’s top fighter aircraft slots within weeks.
- Female helicopter pilots will begin training for combat missions in the Army’s Apache and Cobra attack helicopters by early May.
- It will take longer for female Marines to join helicopter and fixed-wing combat units because the Corps has no female pilots, even in noncombat slots.

women enter combat aircraft squadrons and move onto combat ships, Draude admitted. But after the novelty wears off “People are going to say, ‘Gee, what was the big deal,’” he said.

When he announced the change, Aspin presented it as a way to “ensure that we have the most ready and effective force possible.”

Despite a shrinking force, the military still must deter aggression, fight wars and carry out humanitarian missions, Aspin said. “We need to recruit the best talent available. Right now we are not able to do that” because so many jobs are closed to women, he said.

“We need to draw from the largest available talent and select the most qualified individual for each military job,” he said. Women have proven they can fly high performance aircraft, serve ably on ships and perform well in the most severe environments, he said.