

Women veterans weigh in on Hegseth's views

Say removing women from combat would harm military effectiveness



Donoho



Scott



Motupalli

BY EMILY WAX- THIBODEAUX WASHINGTON POST

The Army veteran and Fox News Channel host who could be the country's next defense secretary has strong views on a decade of women serving in combat

positions in the U.S. military – strong and negative.

“I’m straight up just saying that we should not have women in combat roles,” Pete Hegseth said on a podcast early this month, just days before President-elect Donald Trump nominated him for the crucial Cabinet post. “It hasn’t made us more effective, hasn’t made us more lethal, has made fighting more complicated.”

That’s far different from how women who have filled such roles see their achievement. These are veterans who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan during the wars there. Some were part of specialized female teams; at times, their gender enabled them to do searches and gather intelligence that their male counterparts couldn’t.

With thousands of women in combat units past and present, Hegseth’s “notions” – as one Army veteran recently labeled them – could affect many futures. The Washington Post spoke to numerous female veterans whose careers benefited from the Pentagon’s decision to expand the jobs they could do, including with the country’s most elite forces. While acknowledging that conversations about military readiness are always important, they called Hegseth’s views on what women in uniform contribute outdated, uninformed and inaccurate.

Here are three of those veterans. Their remarks have been edited for clarity and length.

Riane Donoho, 35, Richmond, Virginia

Donoho is a former Marine Corps corporal who was part of a Female Engagement Team in Afghanistan and adjunct to a male infantry unit before women could officially serve in such capacity. She now hosts the Dollhouse Institute: War Women, A(n) Historic Record.

I’ll just be candid with you, it’s a mixed bag in our community as far as how people feel. And I think that that’s OK. I mean, I want people to have their own opinions, and all these women have their own personal experiences that draw them to those opinions.

A lot of women, myself included, do not think that the readiness of

America's fighting force should be diminished. The standards certainly should not be diminished so we can say that women can (serve in combat positions). I think our priority should be having a fighting force.

Not all men can meet the standards. It is very, very difficult. A lot of men won't try for it; they don't meet the qualifications. And a lot of men who try for it don't make the cut. (But) the truth is, there are women who can meet those standards, and they should be celebrated. There are females who can complete infantry courses. I know women who would have been great at it if they had the opportunity 15 years ago.

A couple of weeks ago, I was at Fort Liberty and there was a woman who is still active duty and in the Army, who is the first to receive her ranger job. She's a petite little thing – a total powerhouse. And there is a female Marine who graduated from infantry officer course in like 2017. There are chicks out there who can do it. I applaud them.

Our team had four female Navy corpsmen. Not only did they carry their own weight, they carried the weight of medical supplies – lifesaving supplies – that you would need in combat. One in particular wouldn't just carry all her weight plus all her medical kit and everything else, but she would also carry a gun.

You want to know that you have confidence in the person next to you, to the left and to the right of you, having the best capabilities that you could possibly have. Training, training and more training is really what prepares you for combat. So celebrate the women who can do the supreme.

Jasmine Walker Motupalli, 40, Centennial, Colorado

A West Point graduate and former Army major, Motupalli commanded combat units during deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan – receiving a Purple Heart for injuries suffered during one of those tours. She later worked in Army intelligence at the Pentagon.

As a company commander and the sole woman among 32 commanders in a light infantry brigade, I couldn't ignore the ways I stood out. Unlike my peers, who were all infantrymen, I came from an intelligence officer background – an unconventional path in a combat-heavy environment. But I realized I had to lead with the strength of my differences.

There was an initial assumption that women couldn't pull their weight. That

assumption was quickly dispelled. We could hang with any patrols and, what's more, we were value added to any operation. We moved away from the traditional female engagement team dynamic and just fully integrated women into the formation – as gunners, squad leaders, team leaders, medics, etc. This change made us more agile, approachable and impactful overall.

I think if you asked men who have served with women in combat roles and you took a survey, it would be a big net positive. There was at first a pushback, yes, but when you are together every day, and you watch each other try to pass physical tests, a connection is formed. And as the women proved themselves time and again in combat and leadership roles, resistance and skepticism gave way to respect and camaraderie. Inclusion strengthens military effectiveness.

Hegseth's statement that women shouldn't serve in combat roles stems from outdated assumptions about physical capability, cohesion and mission effectiveness. These views ignore historical and contemporary evidence of women excelling in these roles. That's something Hegseth would have to see to recognize.

In a world where so many can discount the abuse of women, where organizations trying to close an equity gap are sued for their work, where diversity has become a dirty word, then it isn't surprising that we are now seeing rhetoric that aims to knock women down a few pegs, to undo the amazing progress we've made.

There seems to be a rise in rhetoric that "because you are doing well, it must mean that I am doing worse." But this has never been my belief. I believe that all ships rise with the tide.

Jaclyn 'Jax' Scott, 41, Raleigh, North Carolina

Scott did two rotations in Afghanistan as part of Army Special Forces teams. She was in more than 20 combat operations and received a Bronze Star Medal and Combat Action Badge. She still serves in the Army Reserve as a chief warrant officer but spoke to the Post as a civilian, not a member of the military.

In the military, you give your life – not just in the literal sense but through your commitment when you sign on those dotted lines. I knew that going to war meant I could die, and I accepted that. The mission was always at the forefront of my mind, above anything else. Being a combat veteran is one of

my proudest accomplishments of my life. Being a veteran is rooted deep inside me.

Hegseth's recent claim that women shouldn't be in combat roles reeks of ignorance and outdated thinking, ignoring the realities of modern warfare and the invaluable contributions of female operators. Women have been a cornerstone of success in unconventional and conventional operations. They have consistently proved they're not just capable but often critical in roles where men fall short.

Programs like the Army's Cultural Support Team highlight this. Female CST operators embedded with Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan and broke cultural barriers that male soldiers couldn't, gathering lifesaving intelligence. One member uncovered a hidden cellphone on a local woman during a raid, which led directly to the capture of a high-value target.

Such results aren't hypothetical. They're documented successes that would have been impossible without women on the front lines.

For Hegseth to dismiss the value of female soldiers also shows a refusal to adapt to the realities of asymmetrical warfare, where diversity in skill sets often determines victory. Critics like him often lean on archaic stereotypes, but here's the reality: Women bring unparalleled advantages to the fight. They exploit implicit biases to remain undetected, engage communities to extract intelligence and navigate complex environments with nuance and empathy – skills increasingly vital in modern warfare.

The military's future isn't male or female; it's about who gets the job done. Women have proved time and again that they do. Leaders should stop questioning their value and instead focus on creating the conditions for all warriors to thrive.