“The integration of our services is important. We are a country that believes that every individual deserves the same opportunities if you’re capable and can do the job.”
–Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive order 9981 integrating the military and mandating equality of treatment and opportunity. Sixty-two years later, under orders to integrate women into new positions and into units no later than Jan. 1, 2016, the Department of Defense conducted assessments to develop, review and validate gender-neutral individ-
ual occupational specialty standards. During the Revolutionary War, women served the U.S. Army in traditional roles as nurses, seamstresses and cooks for troops in camp. Some courageous women served in combat either alongside their husbands or disguised as men, while others operated as spies. More than 400 women disguised themselves as men and fought in the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War.

Some inside and outside of the military oppose opening up combat roles to women due to concerns they will not measure up and it will challenge or harm unit cohesion – historically, the go to battle cry of “change’s” opposition. Ultimately, both our standards and unit cohesion survived desegregation in 1948, the Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell policy in 1993, and later its repeal in 2011, allowing the lesbian, gay and bisexual population to serve openly. A study published by the Palm Center (a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that produces scholarships designed to improve the quality of public dialogue about critical and controversial public policy issues) found that openly gay service had not resulted in a negative net impact to the U.S. military. There is no reason to believe that gender integration into combat arms would produce any different results. There is no more open-minded system than the Department of Defense and specifically the United States Army. The U.S. Army has led the charge on every one of the previously mentioned challenges.

What has produced the best results? Unflinching equality backed by a sincere, mature team of leaders. Expectations and the commander’s intent are just that, regardless of sex. From the time of any service member’s reception, the unit’s standards and what is expected of them as member of the unit is clear and no different than any other paratrooper. The unit’s hardships and burdens are shouldered by both sexes equally, not unlike its victories and failures. No matter if its living conditions, accommodations or access to facilities, if it’s available to one Soldier, it’s available to all. Standards will not be changed or relaxed. Warfare will not be taking a break any time soon, neither should the ruler by which we measure our service men or women’s performance.

One would be hard pressed to find a more aggressive test bed than the world’s only “always” forward deployed airborne Field Artillery battalion, 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne). The 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, the “King of the Herd.” Having been assigned three of the Field Artillery Branch’s first female Field Artillery officers in the summer of 2015, the 4-319th AFAR is at an advantage in the gender integration arena. Immediately assigned to separate firing batteries as FDOs, our female FDOs found themselves out in front of their sections and platoons. Within 12 months of arrival, the battalion’s three female FDOs participated in 18 airborne operations, led their sections through two section certifications, attended the United States Army’s Jump Master School, and participated in numerous named operations and live-fire exercises through five countries. Responsible for the safe, accurate, and timely firing of over 4,800 artillery rounds. Like their male counterparts, the battalion’s newest FDOs proved to be combat multipliers.

When dealing with living arrangements (undoubtedly one of the loudest arguments against gender integration), we found that it was detrimental and even disruptive to the planning and execution of operations when we did polarize one sex or the other in the rare instances we coordinated for separate living quarters for our male/female personnel. On numerous occasions and as a direct result of the living arrangements one or the other was not present for those extremely vital epiphanies that occur without warning in team quarters. The situation is further exasperated when the individual missing is a leader. Understanding and breakthroughs of our Army culture and norms happen every day. Gone are the days where we segregate our female populace to “protect them.” What, or better yet, who are we protecting them from? Who are we then labeling the possible offender that our female or male paratroopers need protecting from? Who are we villainizing or victimizing? To the contrary, we as a battalion leadership team feel that our paratroopers regardless of sex are
more vulnerable when they are isolated away from those that care about them the most, their teammates.

It is not going to be an easy process, and it will not come naturally to many of us. As recently as my last exercise with the battalion, Summer Tempest ’16 in Sardinia, Italy, during our after-action review I was asked why I had separated our female paratroopers from their male counterparts and teammates. A question posed by three of our female combat medical specialists and a female radar operator. I didn’t have an answer for them, not a good one anyway. My response — I did it because the four-man tent math lent itself to what I felt was an easy answer. In hindsight and more likely the truth — I did it because that’s how I had seen it done and grew up doing it for the past 17 plus years of my career. I did it without thinking about it twice because it’s what felt right to me … at the time. I had inadvertently reverted to the “old way of doing business.”

Four months leading up to this incident I felt I had done everything right in regards to promoting a healthy approach and pace towards fostering a positive gender integration. I should have taken an extra moment to consider the second and third order effects that my decision to separate these troopers would have on their teams and ultimately the battalion. I cheated my subordinate leaders of an opportunity to grow and mature via the need to negotiate a new “problem set,” further hindering our progress toward the pursuit of gender integration. This process will not be without relapse. A conscious, selfless effort must be made to mitigate these setbacks.

Our FDOs have since become platoon leaders and fire support officers in our sister infantry battalions and cavalry squadrons. It’s only a matter of time before we see our first female section chiefs and they graduate to platoon sergeants. It is imperative that we as leaders build the systems now that will facilitate familiarity and trust in both the policy and the leadership. Like so many challenges the armed forces has overcome in the past, gender integration is going to take time to phase into the Army. In the end we will be a stronger, more adaptive fighting force for it. It’s not going to happen overnight and there are going to be setbacks. A conscious effort must be made in order to change the culture and it starts with us — the leadership. The effort must be sincere and above all else, professional. We are ready.

Master Sgt. Jesus Robles was recently asked to write a paper for 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, which he was assigned to from 2014-2017. He is now a senior military science instructor with the Army ROTC at City University of New York.

References
