

PERSPECTIVE

You've come a long way, baby

By Julie L. Kessler

As many of you who now possess reading glasses will recall, back in the 1970s the advertising gurus of Madison Avenue came up with quite a catchy slogan for the makers of Virginia Slims, a cigarette marketed to appeal to women. That often-used slogan, "You've come a long way, baby," lasted a whole lot longer than the popularity of that skinny cigarette.

Nowhere may the application of that slogan be more apropos than to the news last week that three women became the first ever to successfully complete the punishing U.S. Marine Corps infantry course. Their matriculation will likely advance considerably the issue of gender equality in the U.S. military, and that of complete integration of women into our combat units. A long way? I'll say. Long like a few thousand trips around the sun.

Unsurprisingly, the naysayers have commenced their artillery barrage: Women are not as physically strong as men, women do not have the requisite stamina, women are too emotional to withstand the horrors of front-line combat.

If you are nodding your head in agreement with any part of the last paragraph, keep in mind that these three enlisted women, Pfc. Julia Carroll, Christina Fuentes Montenegro and Katie Gorz, completed almost two months of specialized training that included, among other tasks, living in harsh field conditions designed to replicate combat, and completing 12.5 mile hikes carrying backpacks weighing 80 pounds. This rigorous training was identical to that undergone by their male counterparts.

Despite the fact that these women completed this intensive training, they were not assigned to infantry units like the men with whom they trained; instead, they were given other jobs until the Marines decide whether to open their infantry units up to women. Given the speed at which the military often makes these types of decisions, this could take a very long time indeed.

A couple of weeks ago I wrote an article titled "Practice... if you can get to the courthouse" about the first four women in Saudi Arabia to be licensed to practice law in the kingdom. As I wrote then, because of strong resistance from judges and clients, the Saudi women's licenses could be rendered useless, and what a Pyrrhic victory that would be: to have worked so hard and come so far against all odds, and be at the very precipice only to be prevented from doing your job. And to know that the sole reason for the prohibition has nothing to do with your competence,

served this country alongside their male counterparts in both Iraq and Afghanistan, thus comprising more than 11 percent of the forces deployed there. Additionally, women have served as combat pilots in the military since the early 1990s. Does anyone need to be reminded of the undeniably heroic bravery of Tammy Duckworth, the U.S. Army combat pilot who lost both of her legs and

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your talent, your stamina, or your perseverance, but instead with the Las Vegas-style crap shoot of your completely random chromosomal inheritance.

The situation involving these incredibly courageous, intensely strong, kick-butt military women is not so far from the experience of those Saudi women. Except, of course, for the minor detail that

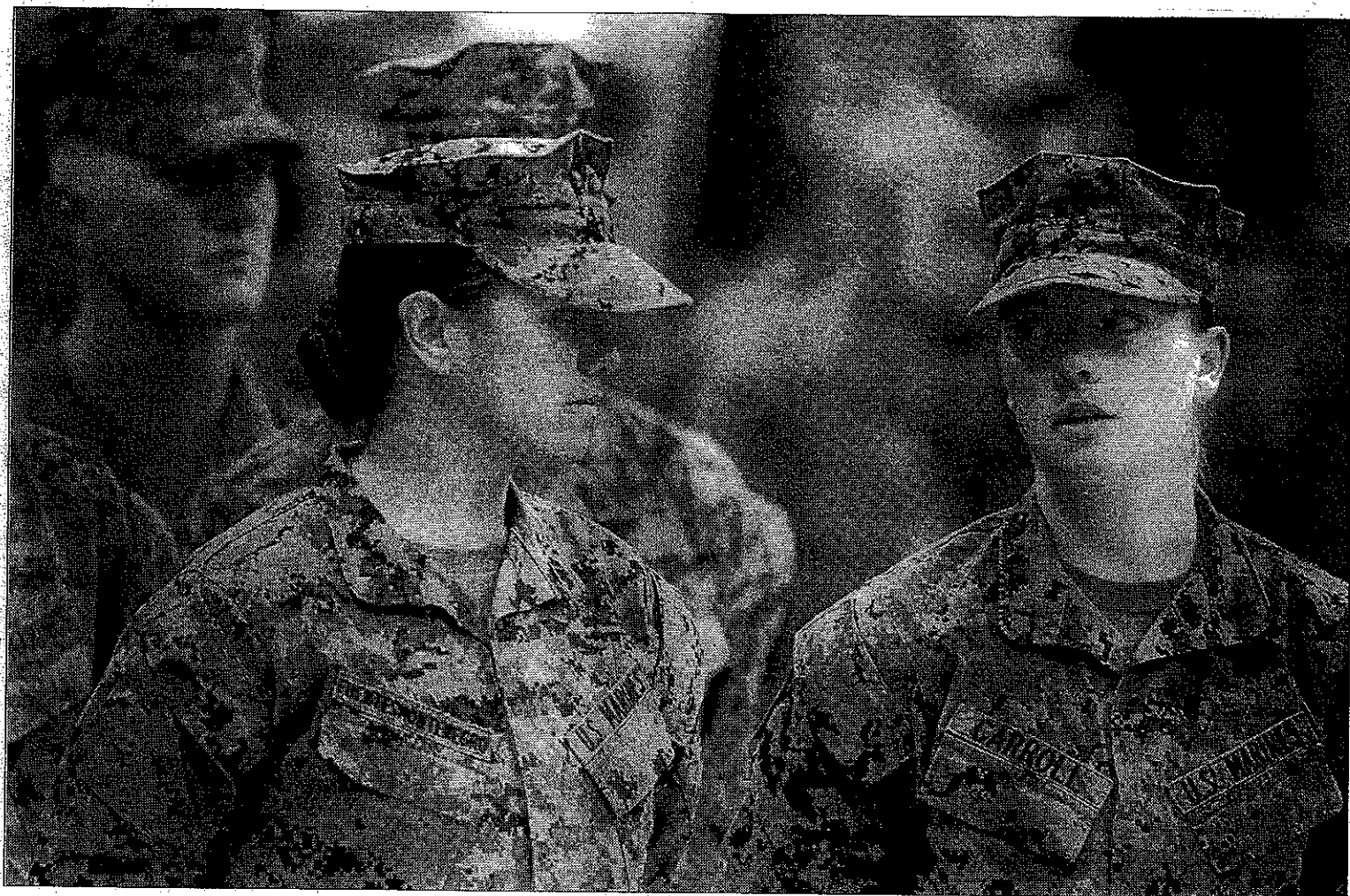
damaged her right arm while serving in Iraq? Talk about courage and bravery. Duckworth was commended with a Purple Heart and in January of this year was sworn in as a congresswoman from Illinois. And if that's not enough, she still serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Illinois Army National Guard, along with her husband, who also happens

to be an Iraq War veteran.

To be sure, women have made impressive strides in the U.S. military. The U.S. now boasts 69 female generals and admirals in our military's midst (though women in the Marine Corps still comprise the smallest group, at just over 14,000). That said, the Marines have been the first branch to test women in these intensive training programs to determine if they can keep up. And keep up these three enlisted women clearly did. The good news is that there are 40 more in-line for the next training program; women who want to be tested to see if they too have what it takes.

we here in the U.S. happen to live not in an Islamic theocracy, but in a secular democracy committed to principles of equality — racial, religious, gender and sexual.

This is not of course only about these three women. Women comprise approximately 15 percent of current active-duty military in the U.S. and well over 280,000 have



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Private First Class Cristina Fuentes Montenegro, 25, left, shares a moment with Pfc. Julia Carroll, 18, during a graduation ceremony held on Camp Geiger in North Carolina Nov. 21.

The ability to perform in combat along with their male counterparts is, to a degree, the final frontier for women in the U.S. military. If the women who take these training courses pass all the same muster and have what it takes to make the cut (not to mention schlep those 80 pound backpacks on the hikes from hell), then by all means, those courageous women should be assigned to infantry units and be permitted to perform in combat side-by-side with those brave men who join them. Ultimately, we will see that the military, like other fields in which substantial numbers of women participate (law

and medicine just to name a couple), will benefit from women's presence. Though we will see that the true beneficiaries, of course, will be all Americans and the U.S. as a whole.

You've come a long way, baby. Semper fi.

Julie L. Kessler is an attorney based in Manhattan Beach and is the author of "Fifty-Fifty, The Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at www.JulieLKessler.com.

