

In the military invasion of Panama several years ago, women military personnel performed flawlessly in action. Captain Linda Bray led the 988th into battle, storming the gates of a Panamanian defense forces kennel in an armored jeep. Bray's troops captured the area after a fire fight in which three of the defenders were killed. Private Christina Cabido led the charge with a machine gun. According to a Pentagon report, 600 of the 26,000 U.S. troops which took part in the invasion were women, and none were killed.

These women in combat violated a law banning females from combat service. The law bans women from infantry, armored, paratrooper, and special forces likely to be in combat, but allows women to return fire if shot at -- as was the case in Panama.

Should there be law banning women from combat? Why or why not?

ANSWER: The rule banning women from combat is an unjustifiable form of gender discrimination. The only relevant criteria for military service in combat roles are those relating specifically to the kinds of abilities a person needs to carry out the roles. The evidence, in Panama and, in all likelihood in other circumstances as well, establishes that some women have these abilities. It would be unfair to bar these women from combat roles if they wish to assume them on the irrelevant ground that a greater number of women do not have these abilities. There is no greater justification for banning women from combat roles in the military than for barring women from professions such as law or medicine, or from entering politics. Furthermore, some critics of the ban on combat roles for women in the U.S. military point out that ban keeps women military personnel from getting promotions, and that women often end up in combat anyway.

Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, 1994

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