

## FEMALE MARINES GETTING BETTER FIT FOR SERVICE

*The Corps is leading the U.S. armed forces in introducing combat uniforms and boots tailored especially for the women in its ranks.*

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*By Elise Castelli, Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON — Cpl. Mary A. Simmons says she no longer feels like she's playing dress up in her brother's closet when she goes to work, now that the Marine Corps has introduced combat uniforms and boots designed to fit women.

"You don't look like you are wearing a sack," said Simmons, who helped field-test the new uniforms last year. "The old uniform looked like I didn't care about how I looked. But these make you look sharp and professional."

There have been women in the Marine Corps since 1918. But for the first time, they will be getting combat uniforms and boots specially designed for them.

New gear tailored to women has been in the works for more than two years, the result of female Marines who voiced their concerns — and the change is being followed by similar efforts in other military branches.

The changes represent one way the U.S. military is adapting to a fighting force in which women are playing larger and more crucial roles. Twenty-one U.S. servicewomen have been killed in action in Iraq.

"Women are taking on increasingly diverse roles in the military, and there are more of them every day," said Nancy Duff Campbell, co-president of the National Women's Law Center, which advocates equal treatment of women in the military. "And particularly now, when the military is stretched in many ways ... women are more important than they have ever been."

Suggestions for changes in the cut and fit of the uniforms and boots came at the first Female Uniform Symposium in 2002. The four-day meeting was called by the former Marine Corps commandant, Gen. James L. Jones, to address complaints by women about their dress, said Mary Boyt, program manager of the Marine Corps Uniform Board.

Before the changes, women's dress uniforms were available, and they had access to jackets and maternity clothing. But when it came to boots and combat utility uniforms, women wore scaled-down versions of outfits designed for men, which often left women with clothing that had too much room in all the wrong places.

In remaking the uniforms, material was removed from areas such as the shoulders and sleeves and added to the length of the blouses so they fit more comfortably over the chest and hips. Likewise, material from the waist and legs of the pants was added to the hips for comfort, said Dee Townes, Marine Corps combat utility uniform project officer.

"It's more comfortable and it gets rid of excess material that bunches under gear," Townes said. "But when you see female Marines compared to male Marines, it doesn't accentuate the female physique at all; it just fits properly."

Of 100 female Marines who tested the new design, about 90 thought it was an improvement, Townes said.

For Simmons, who is 4 feet 8, wearing the unisex uniform caused problems in the office and in the field because of her height.

"I'm an admin clerk, and if you are doing files, this and that, the excess material can get in your way," she said.

And at the firing range, the reinforced knees of the camouflage trousers often failed to do their job of cushioning the women while they were kneeling.

"The unisex 'cammies' were made to fit all. If you were small like me, you get a bulge at the knees that hangs down to the middle of my shins, and that doesn't help," said Simmons, 21, who is based in Quantico, Va.

Boots were also a key issue for women. Even in smaller sizes, the men's boots were too wide to offer the proper support, causing blisters and other foot injuries, said Christie Foster, the technical advisor for footwear at Marine Corps Systems Command in Quantico.

"Part of it was the shoes and part of it was the rigors of the training," Foster said. "There are foot problems across the board, and we're finding ways to alleviate some of them. Hopefully it will accommodate the female foot better with width and length, and hopefully they fit better and they will get less blisters."

The Marine Corps tested the boots in 2003, and received positive feedback from 75% of the 135 women who tried them.

"They felt like the shoe fit them better as they were doing the training," Foster said.

Capt. Alexandra Davis, 26, field-tested the new boots when she was based in Quantico.

"Whenever I had to wear the old combat boots, I had to get inserts because they didn't fit my arch quite right. I always had to compensate," Davis said.

The new sand-colored suede boots look better too, she said.

With the old footgear, "It looks like you have clown boots on because they are much wider," said Davis, now a public affairs officer at the Pentagon.

The boots, designed by Bates Uniform Footwear and Danner Inc., are available online and at some base exchanges, and will be issued to female Marine recruits in May or June, Foster said.

Townes said the uniforms have also been available in the exchanges, and will be issued to recruits beginning later in the year.

Female Marines will not be required to wear the specially designed items, which run \$75 to \$125 for the boots and \$35 each for the pants and blouse, the same as the unisex gear.

Foster said it may take awhile for the new gear to gain acceptance among women because they don't want to be perceived as being treated differently than men in their units.

"A lot of them don't want to be associated with the specialized group, with the stigma associated with female items," she said. "We're making it optional, not mandatory."

Simmons still wears the old camouflage gear along with the new uniform she received during the field test — not to avoid any possible stigma, but because she is about to change bases and needs to save money.

She said that once she arrived at her new base in Hawaii, however, she would purchase the new uniforms and boots.

“I have always had to wear two pairs of socks to make my boots fit,” said Simmons, who has a size 3 foot. The new boots, she said, “won’t be clunky, like I am wearing my big brother’s shoes.”

To Marines like Simmons, the new uniforms and boots are another sign of the services’ growing acceptance of women among the ranks.

“It’s an affirmation for females in the military,” Simmons said. “They are recognizing we are here, and they’re changing a little. Our uniforms aren’t supposed to be form-fitting, but we don’t have to wear potato sacks.”