

THE REVIEW

Women in combat decision draws mixed reaction

By Mallory Evans The Review Published: January 25, 2013 3:00AM

Lacey T. Sanor received some surprising news on Wednesday when she visited her local recruiting office.

Sanor, a 2009 graduate of West Branch High School, recently enlisted in the U.S. Army and will leave for basic training at Fort Sill in Oklahoma on Feb. 4.

When she enlisted Sanor was not eligible for combat duty. But Thursday's announcement by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta that the Pentagon would train women for combat action changed all that. Sanor said, in fact, she wasn't aware the Pentagon was considering the decision until told about it by her recruiting officer.

Sanor said she is excited about the Pentagon's announcement because it will offer women new opportunities.

She believes the lifting of the ban is a positive development, but Sanor also expressed nervousness at the prospect of serving on the front lines.

"Before I had no worries that I would be in a combat zone," she said. During her recruiting office visit Sanor's recruiting officer explained the new policy and described the latest advancements in technology and protective equipment. Sanor said that just like the men, women will now have to carefully consider whether or not to sign up for combat positions.

After nine weeks of boot camp in Oklahoma, Sanor will go to Fort Huachuca, Ariz., for 34 weeks of AIT training. She said her training of choice is as an unmanned aerial vehicle operator. She will operate small drones used for surveillance. Job security was a large factor in Sanor's decision to enlist.

She is the daughter of Leatta Davis, of Kensington, and Bruce Sanor, of Homeworth.

Davis said that she hopes her daughter will not see combat during her six-year enlistment.

Sanor received mixed reactions from her family when she announced her decision to enlist in the Army. One side of her family has a strong naval history, while the other side is rooted in the farming industry. Sanor said that some family members were surprised at her decision to embark on the male-dominated career path of armed service, but they all support her nonetheless.

During the recruiting process, Sanor said she was never treated differently because of her gender.

"It was nice to not have to worry because I'm a girl. It wasn't even an issue," she said.

Over the last 10 years more than 255,000 women have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and many of these women have experienced combat scenarios. Combat necessities of these wars resulted in women filling jobs that were sometimes attached, but not formally assigned, to battalions. This meant

THE REVIEW

that a woman could not be assigned as an infantryman in a battalion going out on patrol, but she could find herself near the front lines.

They were assigned to fill support roles, but more than 150 female soldiers have died in these wars.

One of these fallen soldiers was Ashley White Stumpf, a 2005 Marlinton graduate. White Stumpf died Oct. 22, 2011, while serving in Afghanistan when enemy forces attacked her unit with an improvised explosive device, or IED.

Even though the 1994 Pentagon policy prohibited women from being formally assigned to battalions, White Stumpf was assigned to the 230th Brigade Support Battalion, 30th Heavy Brigade Combat Team, North Carolina National Guard in Goldsboro, N.C.

Her mother, Debbie White, said her daughter was in combat on the front lines. White said women like her daughter Ashley can be valuable in military operations.

"They (women) do things that men can't. Men can't talk to Afghan women or children. That's where we're making huge strides in the war," Debbie White said. Ashley's ability to gather intelligence was a valuable asset to her brigade.

Debbie White believes her daughter would be proud of the Pentagon's decision.

"She'd be very happy for the women because this opens doors of opportunity for them," she said. "The laws of war hadn't caught up with today's times, but now they have."

According to Anuradha Bhagwati, executive director of the Service Women's Action Network, there have only been two female four-star generals in history. With the lifting of this ban, higher level military positions will be more accessible to women.

Debbie White encouraged parents of female soldiers to be as supportive as possible when their daughters are serving in the military.

"Just pray for them and be there for them. Every day is a gift," she said.

On Thursday, while making the announcement, Panetta said not everyone can be a combat soldier, but everyone should have the chance. Panetta also said that the military's qualifications will not be lowered, and with women playing a broader role, the military will be strengthened.

Women make up 15 percent of today's U.S. military. According to the Service Women's Action Network, more than 356,000 women currently serve in active duty, National Guard and Reserve capacities.