

Marine veteran sees her story as cautionary tale

By **LINDSAY WISE HOUSTON CHRONICLE**
March 24, 2010, 8:23PM

Share

[Share](#)

[Del.icio.us](#) [Digg](#)

[Twitter](#) [Yahoo! Buzz](#)

[Facebook](#) [StumbleUpon](#)

Resources

RESOURCES FOR SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS

Department of Defense: www.myduty.mil/

Texas Veterans Commission: Call 800-252-VETS (8387) or go to www.tvc.state.tx.us/

Service Women's Action Network: Call 888-729-2089 or write to peersupport@servicewomen.org. Make sure to leave a name, telephone number, and the best time to call you. A caseworker will return your call within 24-48 hours.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE

Department of Veterans Affairs: Military Sexual Trauma counselors are located at both the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and Houston-area Vet Centers. At the medical center, contact Audrey Dawkins-Oliver, LCSW, 713-791-1414, ext. 6881. At the Vet Centers, contact Helen Civitello, LCSW, 713-523-0884. Online, visit <http://www.womenvetpsd.va.gov/>

Incident ended her career

Last year, the Department of Defense launched a prevention and awareness campaign to reduce stigma and encourage victims of sexual assault to come forward. The department also intensified training for commanders and publicized a confidential "restricted reporting" option that gives service members access to medical and mental health care without notifying the chain of command or initiating an investigation.

That's not good enough, said Rachel Natelson, legal and policy adviser to Service Women's Action Network, a New York-based advocacy group. Natelson said service members need to be able to take their complaints to an outside body such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Natelson said if victims could sue the military for damages, their cases would be taken more seriously. "Right now the military is pretty much left to police itself," she said.

Sarah said she knew her career was over as soon as she walked out of that senior NCO's office.

"You report a rape or a sexual assault of any kind, or a sexual harassment, and nobody wants to have anything to do with you," she said. "You are labeled, you are isolated. I've seen it happen to several Marines. ... Everybody knows what is going on and everybody talks about it."

Sarah had to live and work on the same base as the man who had assaulted her. She became withdrawn and depressed.

"You know steel wool? We would use those in our barracks to clean our rooms," Sarah said. "I would go in the shower and scrub myself with those pads because I felt so horrible and I felt so disgusting."

She later learned the Marine who had assaulted her also attacked several other women.

"If I would've yelled just a little louder or if I would've said something to somebody else, maybe he wouldn't have been able to do anything to them," Sarah said. "I still carry that guilt around."

Her assailant eventually was court-martialed and sentenced to a lengthy prison term for assaulting Sarah, three other female Marines and one female sailor, she said.

Finally found her voice

Sarah took an honorable discharge and moved back to Texas.

"All I wanted was to be a Marine," she said. "That's all I ever wanted and I knew after this happened and after that morning, I knew it was over. And I would give anything in the world to be back in the mindset that I was

Sarah had been stationed at Camp Pendleton in California for less than a week when a fellow Marine crawled through her barracks window and sexually assaulted her.

The next morning, Sarah reported the assault to a senior noncommissioned officer.

"He's a good Marine," the supervisor told her. "It was a misunderstanding."

Sarah just turned around and walked off. "It was pointless," she said. "I knew nothing was going to be done."

While some friends and relatives are unaware of what happened at Pendleton four years ago, the 27-year-old Marine Corps veteran from the Houston area agreed to share her story because she hopes it will encourage other survivors of military sexual trauma to pursue justice and get help.

"Otherwise it's going to end up eating you alive," she said.

("Sarah" is not this woman's real name. The Houston Chronicle typically does not identify victims of sexual assault.)

Reports of sexual assault are up 11 percent in the military, and 30 percent in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to Department of Defense statistics released last week.

There were 3,230 reports of sexual assault involving military personnel as either victims or perpetrators in fiscal year 2009, including 215 in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Military officials attribute the rise to an increase in reporting, rather than more incidents. Critics complain the Pentagon is trying to put a positive "spin" on the data.

"We're not spinning anything, and there is no way to make sexual assaults positive," said Dr. Kaye Whitley, director of the Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. "I can tell you that it's just something that we're not going to tolerate in the military. ... We're putting a lot of resources toward (reducing) sexual assaults and putting a lot of resources into making sure victims are being taken care of."

Search [advanced search](#) | [archives](#)

Chron.com Web Search by **YAHOO!**

Get TV Weekly for the most complete cable & TV listings

[Houston man charged with Valentine's Day murder](#)

[Cars burn on 7th floor at Galleria-area garage \(w/video\)](#)

[Man gets death in HPD officer's killing](#)

[HPD investigates two deadly crashes along South Main](#)

[Charges filed in fatal Houston crash](#)

[Coffee Party Houston lays out goals to make politics civil\(680\)](#)

[Analysis: 149 years on, Dixie decree stirs debate\(176\)](#)

[Armed suspect steals Jacinto City patrol car\(170\)](#)

[Panel not ready to say when recession ended\(162\)](#)

[Prosecutors request death for HPD officer's killer\(118\)](#)

before that day, and be a Marine again.”

At first Sarah couldn't move on. She couldn't even bring herself to leave the house.

“I spent every day on a computer researching sex offenders and where they lived,” she said. “I can still tell you every address in my hometown where sex offenders live, their names, their date of birth.”

Sarah was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. She receives treatment and disability compensation through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

She started a support group with other survivors of sexual assault. And she found a voice.

“If you don't report it, you're going to be a victim for the rest of your life,” she said. “And it might be harder to report it at the time, but in the end you do start to get closure and you start to trust people again, by talking about it.”

lindsay.wise@chron.com

CHRON Home Houston & Texas Nation Business Sports Entertainment Life Travel Corrections Blogs	Weather Chron Commons Traffic TOPICS PetsHouston MomHouston HoustonBelief Houston gardening 29-95	NEIGHBORHOODS Aldine/North Houston Alief/Southwest Bellaire/West U/River Oaks Clear Lake Conroe Cy-Fair East End/Third Ward Fort Bend Heights/Neartown Katy	Kingwood Humble/Lake Houston Memorial/Spring Branch Pasadena/Baytown Pearland area Spring/Klein Tomball Magnolia The Woodlands	MARKETPLACE Jobs Homes Cars Classifieds Personals Place a classified ad Place a retail ad Contests	SERVICES Help Business directory Legal notices Contact us Send us tips About the company Employment opportunities Advertise with us Buy a banner ad	MEMBERSHIP Sign up Log in OTHER EDITIONS Home delivery Mobile RSS feeds Chronicle In Education e-Edition E-mail newsletters
LOCAL SERVICES Houston Attorneys Houston Salons						

[Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of service](#) | [About Our Ads](#)
 Copyright © 2010 The Houston Chronicle

