



Women vets' secret war: Sexual trauma



David Brewster, Star Tribune

Judy VanVoorhis, a major in the Guard, groomed her horse after a ride. She has begun to heal from an assault at officer training school.

66,342 female veterans report assaults from 2002 to 2008 -- by their band of brothers.

By **KIM ODE**¹, Star Tribune

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Judy VanVoorhis knew that some men thought she had no business serving in the National Guard. How? She smiled fleetingly.

"They told me." The military world often lacks the nuance of civilian life.

She had enlisted in 1985 and moved steadily through the ranks, becoming an instructor at an officer training school. In 1999, while at a conference, a group of instructors went out for supper.

"One guy seemed like he was trying to get everyone drunk, without drinking too much himself," she recalled. "I left, but he cornered me and tried to kiss me and I said I wasn't interested."

She went up to her room, only to discover that he'd followed her. She doesn't remember much about the assault that followed. "I was so shaken after it happened, I wanted to forget about it. You don't expect this from the people you're supposed to trust. I said no and that's all I had to say."

She might never have told anyone, had a male colleague not seen her flinch during a meeting when her attacker's name was mentioned. When he later pulled her aside to ask if she was OK, she told him everything. Turns out he had suspected as much.

"He told me, 'You're the fifth woman who's told me this same story.'"

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According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 66,342 female veterans reported being raped, sexually assaulted, or experiencing another form of military sexual trauma (MST) from 2002 through 2008. Almost 3,000 military sexual assaults were reported by men and women in 2008, with 163 sexual assaults reported in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another way to look at the numbers: More than 100 American women have died in Iraq; more have been sexually assaulted. As Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., a member of the House Homeland Security Committee, observed, "A woman who signs up to protect her country is more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire."

The problem has been evident for decades. One in three female vets from Vietnam through the first Gulf War said they were raped while serving, according to a survey by the American Journal of Industrial Medicine. Among civilian women, the rate is one in six.

For all veterans, the odds of developing post-traumatic stress disorder from sexual assault are higher than from exposure to combat, according to a report presented in 2008 as part of a Department of Defense conference for sexual-assault response coordinators.

Get female vets together over coffee, and some of them will describe a culture that can, at times, be startlingly hostile, such as something as humdrum as marching cadences. (*I've seen her stripped / I've seen her bare / I've felt her over everywhere.*)

Helen Benedict, who last year wrote "The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq," said that military culture is "as hypermasculine as you can get," having regarded women as prey or a spoil of war since biblical times.

The women in her book said they felt most uncomfortable around the older men, "men who may be just a decade older, but the type of men who don't believe women belong in the military," said Benedict, a journalism professor at Columbia University in New York City. "It's a sign of hope, really, in that once all those people have aged out and younger peers who are more used to seeing women as equal are in charge, there will be a generational change."

A father's warning

Here's another story. This woman, who attained the rank of lieutenant before leaving the service last year, would like to be more candid, but she doesn't want her young

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children to learn about their mother's trauma just now.

The day before she left for boot camp in 1992, all of 18 years old, her dad pulled her aside. He'd made a career of military service, as had much of her family. It was natural for her to enlist after high school graduation. "I was never raised that things were different for boys and girls," she said. "My father was, like, the original feminist."

Yet that day, her father felt like he needed to warn her. *Guys are going to like you*, he said. *A lot.*

"I'd never dated in high school, so I didn't know why he thought things would suddenly change," she recalled. "I was the youngest, so I figured he was just worrying."

Within a year of enlisting, his daughter became one of those statistics when her superior called her into his office, asking her to close the door.

"That was my first mistake, but he was my superior and I never thought anything of it," she said. "He shoved me up against the wall and told me exactly what I was going to do to him. I kicked him where it mattered and ran from the room."

She reported the incident but was told that it came down to her word against his. "So it starts when you're young and carries over," she said. "You start watching your back, being careful who you're alone with. Which just increases the isolation."

So it went for several years. Lonely, she married a fellow soldier. They had a child, but later divorced. In 1999, when she was 26 and attending officer training school in Rhode Island, a friend of her ex-husband's showed up under the guise of checking on her. He raped her. She didn't report it because he was a superior officer; she feared that no one would believe her.

Rape? It feels more like incest

Among female vets with post-traumatic stress disorder, most were sexually assaulted or raped while in the service. The physical harm of sexual assault is clear, but it's the emotional damage that lingers. Attackers aren't the enemy, but comrades -- battle buddies for whom they're prepared to sacrifice their lives. A woman can't help but wonder whether these guys also would be willing to die for her.

Reporting an assault takes a different sort of courage than that honed in boot camp.

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"Military sexual trauma isn't stranger rape, but incest," said the lieutenant, who is 36. "That changes things a lot. It's people we work with, people I thought of as brothers. No one [in a unit] wants to believe it, because if he turns out to be a bad guy, then it's like they've all been assaulted."

"Military culture is a part of American culture, but in many ways has its own values, rules, customs, and norms. Therefore, sexual assault in the Armed Services cannot be addressed in exactly the same way as it is in civilian society." So states the Defense Department's annual report on Sexual Assault in the Military Services.

Lt. Col. Cynthia Rasmussen says the culture is changing. She has seen it over her long career as a mental health nurse with the U.S. Army Reserves. She's currently the sexual assault response coordinator and director of psychological health for the 88th Regional Support Command in Minneapolis. She works with military personnel in 19 states from enlistment through reintegration. Her main task is helping a home community learn how to address the needs of its veterans. "If you don't understand the military culture -- that we'll die for each other -- if you don't understand that, how can you help?"

Rasmussen makes no excuses for the culture of the past, but says that "the military actually is talking about this more than people in general society." The official policy of the Veterans Health Administration is to provide veterans experiencing MST (military sexual trauma) with free care for all physical and mental health conditions related to MST.

More women coming forward

Rasmussen attributes the rise in reports not to an increase in assaults, but to more women (and men) feeling that it's safer to come forward because of a change in reporting policy. Before 2004, all reports of sexual assault were forwarded to law enforcement, which sometimes made the person complaining feel further victimized by others in their shattered unit.

With the Defense Department's own statistics indicating that only 20 percent of unwanted sexual contacts were reported, changes were necessary. In June 2005, the restricted reporting policy said that reports of sexual assault would be provided to a health care provider, the sexual assault response coordinator, or a victim advocate, but not reported to law enforcement without the victim's consent.

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"We knew numbers would go up," Rasmussen said. "But we were happy," because it meant that more people were willing to come forward and seek help.

As to addressing the necessary culture change, the department's slogan "Hurts one. Affects all" equates a safer military climate with mission readiness.

As this year's Department of Defense report on sexual assault states: "In the Armed Forces, sexual assault not only degrades individual resilience but also erodes unit integrity. ... Sexual assault is incompatible with military culture, and the costs and consequences for mission accomplishments are unbearable."

Seek help, no matter what

Despite learning of her rapist's past, VanVoorhis told no one. "You're afraid [reporting] will ruin your career, like reporting sexual harassment," she said. "People become afraid of you. You're a whistleblower."

She grew depressed, retreating into herself. VanVoorhis, 44, who lives in a Twin Cities suburb, saw her work begin to suffer; eventually she was diagnosed with post-

traumatic stress disorder. Currently a major in the Guard, she is getting professional help to treat her PTSD and encourages others to seek help "no matter what," adding that it's important to find a therapist with experience in treating sexual trauma. She credits her own therapist, Colin Hollidge, "with saving my life."

She applauds the formal reporting procedure now in place, but says it's only a first step. "That only means that you can report something that's already happened. How to keep it from happening in the first place -- how to change the culture -- that's the bigger challenge."

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