

Speaking Out: US Military Sexual Violence and Trauma Against Women

Tuesday, 15 March 2011 19:48

John Lasker



Carri Leigh Goodwin

Former US Marine Carri Leigh Goodwin was like many young Americans from Alliance, a small town in Ohio. She was self-reliant, teaching herself to play guitar at 15. She wanted more out of life than the limited opportunities offered in her home town.

So like many teenagers from the American heartland with limited career prospects, the 18-year-old joined the military, seeking to earn the military's most sought after benefit, college tuition. She also confided to her family that enlisting would help her escape the traps that plagued her small, rural community; namely alcoholism and drug abuse.

Yet what she soon discovered, as many female U.S. soldiers have before her, is the unexpected cost of seeking military-sponsored tuition: being sexually assaulted or harassed by a fellow soldier.

Carri first revealed to her family that just before boot camp a recruiter had exposed himself to her. Then while stationed at Marines Corp Base Camp Pendleton near San Diego, she told them a fellow Marine raped her.

What happened after the alleged rape is in dispute, mainly because Marine investigators at Camp Pendleton offer little information about Carri's time there to anyone, even her family, and never responded to written questions submitted by this reporter.

Her family, however, believes Carri alerted her chain of command about the alleged rape, pressed charges, and also sought medical attention.

But her commanding officers, Carri told her family, scoffed at the rape accusation and tried to intimidate her into silence. A complaint often heard by what advocates and victims refer to as Military Sexual Trauma, which also encompasses sexual harassment.

"She said they laughed at her at the military hospital," says her father Gary Noling, a former Marine who is also from Alliance. "A sergeant major believed her, but she must have been overridden. But I will be heard, because I plan on going to the top of my roof and shouting it out to the entire world my daughter was raped in the military, and she's not the only one."

The Department of Defense's own statistics bear out the problem of Military Sexual Trauma, also called MST. In 2008, 2,900 sexual assaults were reported across the armed forces. This was a nine-percent increase and a 26 percent increase in war zones from 2007. For 2009, there were 3,230 reports of sexual assault, an 11 percent increase across the armed forces from the previous year, with a 33 percent increase in war zones.

In February of 2009, the Marine Corps released Carri with an Other Than Honorable discharge, on the grounds she had a drinking problem, a personality disorder, and non-combat related post-traumatic stress disorder.

She immediately came home after the discharge, but within five days she was dead. Carri had binged on alcohol and her body was found in the back of a friend's car outside a local Alliance bar. An autopsy revealed her blood alcohol was six times the legal limit, with the cause of death acute alcohol intoxication and hypothermia.

Therapist notes given to Carri's family by the Marines following her death revealed Carri admitted she drank regularly as a teenager, but that the rape and its aftermath had brought her drinking habit to another level. To curb this, the military prescribed the drug Antabuse for Carri, which hinders the body from processing alcohol, but Noling said he was unaware of the diagnoses.

After his daughter's death Noling also discovered a journal Carri had kept. In it she expressed mental anguish over the alleged rape and that the Marine Corps' unsupportive response was unbearable. She also drew a picture of a hand with a slashed wrist with the date of the alleged rape written nearby.

"I don't know why I'm blaming myself," wrote Carri on a separate page. "I didn't ask for this, and he can deny it all he wants. I know what happened."

Noling contacted a Marine Corps prosecutor at Camp Pendleton asking if the alleged rapist had been held accountable.

"I asked about whether he had been court-martialed," Noling said. "He was rude and even laughed once during our conversation."

However, the prosecutor admitted Carri's commanding officers – which are judge and jury when issuing criminal charges against enlisted soldiers that commit criminal offenses while on duty – had given the suspect Non-Judicial Punishment for the incident, and the sex probably was consensual. Non-Judicial Punishment is a disciplinary action for minor offenses with punishments ranging from confinement to quarters, diminished rations, extra duties and forfeiture of pay.

Victims of MST and their families are now mobilizing behind a federal lawsuit suing the DOD seeking to change how the military deals with sexual assault committed within its ranks. Washington D.C.-based attorney Susan Burke, who has previously taken on the military regarding torture at Abu Ghraib, filed the class-action suit on February 15th, with Noling and Carri named as Plaintiffs, but in a separate wrongful-death suit.



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Retired US Army Col. Ann Wright, a MST victim advocate, says the way Marines investigated and prosecuted Carri's charge is typical of how the military handles alleged sexual assaults.

In 2007, she says, out of roughly 2,200 sexual assaults across the armed forces investigated, just 600 suspects were punished. Of these 600, a third was given Non-Judicial Punishment. Because a majority of predators go free or are essentially slapped on the wrist, she says, victims simply accept the rape and deal with it on their own and for the rest of their lives.

In 2008, the Government Accountability Office, after surveying 103 military sexual-assault victims, reported over half said they never bothered to report the crime because they felt nothing would come of it.

"This matter is a laughing stock among men in the military," says Wright. "It's a joke for the guys because they know they'll never get prosecuted. The atmosphere in the military is you know you can get away with it."

The DOD insists it is taking the issue of sexual assault seriously, establishing in 2005 the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), which leads the DOD's effort to prevent sexual assault and set policy across the armed forces.

SAPRO soon established a 24-hour global hotline, given to all soldiers before being deployed overseas. In 2005, SAPRO began training 1,200 Sexual Assault Response Coordinators or SARCs, while the Army has 4,000 of its own SARCs mobilized or in training.

MST advocacy groups such as VETWOW (Veteran Women Organizing Women) claim not allowing a victim's chain of command know of the rape is vital, considering the military's culture of "re-victimization". Responding to this issue, SAPRO initiated a new two-track sexual assault reporting policy called Restricted and Unrestricted reporting.

Restricted reporting allows the victim to by-pass their chain of command and permits a SARC to field the complaint. This will trigger healthcare and counseling for the victim, but cancels out any investigation.

SAPRO director Karen Whitley says since 2005 an estimated 3,500 soldiers have utilized Restricted reporting. She calls it "remarkable progress."

"That's 3,500 people we feel we're helping who would never come forward if not for restricted reporting," she says. "And that tells me it's working."

VETWOW director and US Army veteran Susan Avila-Smith and the 3,000 MST victims she represents see it another way: that's 3,500 predators walking free.

"Restricted reporting? It's a joke," says Avila-Smith, who left the military after her Army husband stomped on her pregnant stomach killing their baby and threatened with being discharged by commanding officers for speaking out.

Restricted reporting also allows alleged rapists to still interact with their victim.

Carri filed an Unrestricted report because she alerted commanding officers. She also told her family she had to continue to work with the alleged rapist, which intensified her anxiety.

U.S. Army veteran Olga Ferrer, director of A Black Rose, a nonprofit MST advocacy group, says Carri's story may inspire serious change. For instance, the military allows civilian elements to field sexual assault allegations.

"Every military site — overseas or in the U.S. — should have a unit or group, that includes doctors, nurses, therapists, that investigates sexual assaults and does not fall under the DOD or military," she said.

She said restricted reporting makes her anger boil.

"The alleged rapist should immediately be removed from the victim's unit, and the victim should also be placed somewhere else. They should not be working together — period. The only one being restricted is the victim."

John Lasker is a freelance journalist from Columbus, Ohio. This story was partially funded by [Spot.us](#), a crowd funding site for independent journalists.

Links for More Information and Resources

[Military Rape Crisis Center](#)

[Veteran Women Organizing Women](#)

[A Black Rose Advocacy Group](#)

[In Memory of Carri Leigh Goodwin Facebook Website](#)

[Memorial Video for Carri](#)



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The most ironic thing about this situation is that military commanders are the judge and jury. What hope of a fair trial can a victim have under these circumstances?

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Last Updated on Tuesday, 15 March 2011 19:48