

An Air Force War on Sexual Assault

By Anna Mulrine

USAF is stepping up its prevention efforts after finding nearly one in five female airmen has been sexually assaulted since joining the service.

It was in 2006, after eight years in the US Air Force, that SSgt. Marti Ribeiro was raped by a fellow airman while on guard duty in Afghanistan.

She didn't report the assault immediately. Rather, she waited until the end of her shift, and in the meantime, did what she thought she should do.

"I didn't take a shower; I didn't wash my hands," Ribeiro remembers. "I'd watched 'Law and Order' and thought to myself, 'I'm going to do exactly what [lead character] Detective Benson says, ... so they can swab and do the rape kit.'"

That's not what happened, however.

After her guard shift, Ribeiro searched for the Air Force's sexual assault response coordinator (SARC) at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, where the assault took place just 10 feet from the guard station, and not much farther from Disney Drive—the main road running through the heart of the base.

The SARC sat her down in the middle of a room with other people and asked her what happened. After Ribeiro finished sharing her story, "her first question was, 'Where was your weapon?'"—implying, it seemed to Ribeiro, she should have been able to defend herself. She had left it in the guard post, along with her radio, when she went to have a cigarette break on a smoke deck a few feet away.

"Because I'd left my weapon in the guard shack, she told me I would be charged with dereliction of duty," Ribeiro recalls. "She told me to 'think about it.'" Ribeiro did. She returned to her base housing, showered, and did not

speak about the attack to another soul for six months.

Scenarios such as Ribeiro's are the ones the Air Force seeks to prevent as it moves to launch programs addressing not only root causes of sexual violence, but also leading to a more widespread awareness within the force of the crime itself.

In a push to more honestly address sexual crimes within the military, the Air Force in March 2011 released a groundbreaking survey, revealing that nearly one in five service women say they have been sexually assaulted since joining the service. The military definition of sexual assault includes a range of behaviors, among them sexual contact without consent.

Of the 18.9 percent of female airmen who reported being assaulted, 58 percent said they had been raped and 20 percent said they had been sodomized, which the military defines as nonconsensual oral or anal sex. Two percent of men surveyed reported having been sexually assaulted since joining the military.

Studying the Problem

While the data suggest the sexual assault rate in the Air Force is roughly equal to what it is in the broader civilian population, the survey also points to unique challenges presented by the military's culture. The vast majority of crimes identified in the survey are com-

mitted by male airmen on female airmen, and nearly half of rape victims said they did not report the crime because they "did not want to cause trouble in [their] unit."

The Pentagon has long wrestled with sexual assault in its ranks and at the military academies. Yet it had no clear picture of the pervasiveness of the crime.

Defense officials routinely release figures showing the annual rate of official sexual assault reports. When those figures go up—as they did between 2009 and 2010 when there was an 11 percent spike in reports—officials are often quick to respond that those figures don't necessarily represent an increase in incidents. It may simply mean, for example, victims feel more comfortable reporting them.

The Air Force survey, to which 18,834 male and female airmen responded between July and August 2010, had a response rate of nearly 19 percent and is expected to serve as a new baseline for tracking the crime. The survey, conducted by Gallup, will likely be repeated every 18 to 24 months, said Charlene M. Bradley, the Air Force's assistant deputy for force management integration.

It is one of the most comprehensive studies ever undertaken of sexual assault within the Department of Defense, and could ultimately become a model for how the military as a whole begins to address the problem, Pentagon officials say. "If we're ever going to get to the point where

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we know how much progress we're making or not making, our leadership has to find out the extent of the problem," said Bradley.

Air Force leadership for its part was "very concerned" when they reviewed the survey's findings, she added. "They were concerned before, but they were very concerned when they saw this." Along with the troubling knowledge that sexual assault is pervasive in the ranks, defense officials were particularly concerned that in the vast majority of the assaults against women—more than 80 percent—the perpetrators are fellow service members.

Top Air Force officials openly acknowledge the need for change. "This crime threatens our people, and for that reason alone it is intolerable and incompatible with who and what we are," said Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz. The results have also prompted the formation of an Air Force task force, launched early last year.

Officials acknowledge they had some reservations about embarking on the survey, largely because of what they might discover. "You want to know what's wrong," Bradley observed. "But it's hard to know what's wrong."

It is important for the military to explore the extent of its own problem, says David Lisak, a clinical psychologist who specializes in sexual assault, from the University of Massachusetts at Boston and consulted by the Gallup poll. "It certainly puts the Air Force in an uncomfortable position, because now they are going to very publicly say, 'Here's the scope of our problem,' and frankly, that takes guts," he said. "There's no longer a way of saying, 'Maybe it's a big problem out there, but I don't think it's as big a problem in the Air Force,'" Lisak added.

"It's sort of a last bastion of denial. The next question is, so what are you going to do about it?"

The survey was designed to help the Air Force evaluate its prevention programs to find out "how much progress we're making or not making," Bradley noted.

Plenty of barriers remain to confronting sexual assault, the survey makes clear. For one, Gallup recommended to the Air Force that it begin to take a closer look at why only a small percentage of victims in the Air Force report the crimes, including less than one in five women and less than one in 15 men.

Though these numbers are similar to the findings of other national studies, some of the reasons why airmen may be reluctant to report the crime are also unique to the military. While the majority

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of those who endured unwanted sexual contact said they did not think it was serious enough to report, another trend emerged as well: Nearly 50 percent of women who were raped said they did not want their superiors to know, and an even greater number, 63 percent, said they "did not want their fellow airmen to know." Nearly half said they "did not want to cause trouble in [their] unit." Such barriers to reporting in the military can be "a little harder" to overcome, Bradley said, particularly when the findings are at odds with the way the force is supposed to function. "You come into the Air Force as a family—you take care of one another," she added.

As a result, in the months after the survey's release, Air Force officials have been consolidating recommendations from sexual assault specialists within the military. Bradley said, "We visited different commands and installations to talk to commanders, to find out what from their perspective is working from the field." They have also coordinated with investigators, sexual assault coordinators, and chaplains who focus on spiritual support. "How can we continually keep this as a focus?" Bradley asked.

"Proactive leadership is absolutely the key to attacking this."

At the grassroots level, the Air Force is also concentrating its efforts on a large-scale bystander training program.

Better Training

The findings suggest that many people who are assaulted do tell a friend or fellow airman, whether they officially report the crime or not. "Every airman has the moral obligation and professional duty to intervene appropriately and prevent an assault, even when it means taking difficult or unpopular actions," said Schwartz and Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley in a statement.

USAF needs to examine its training—and try to change attitudes and behaviors, Bradley said. This includes "training everyone to recognize behaviors

that are inappropriate and how to act in those situations—how to do it smartly and appropriately."

The Air Force has full-time, trained sexual assault response coordinators at every installation. Most are GS-12-level hires, but more than 30 are military positions the Air Force is keeping filled for deployment capability, said Bradley. "A lot of those folks are in overseas areas."

Some of the changes are simply logical, said Bradley. Though she argues the majority of sexual assaults in the Air Force appear to happen in the continental United States, not when troops are deployed, senior officials are in the process of speaking to commanders about areas around latrines and showers—to make sure they have enough lighting. Commanders are also being asked to reinforce concepts such as the buddy system.

The Air Force is also focusing on better training for military lawyers, who in many cases have little experience prosecuting such cases. This stands in contrast to the specialized civilian sexual-assault defense lawyers many accused perpetrators hire, says Lisak, who helps to train military lawyers. "All of us who work with the military in this respect, we see [young military] lawyers taking on these cases, and frankly it always seems to me very unfair that very young, relatively inexperienced lawyers are having to go into courtrooms and prosecute cases that are very, very complicated and require a lot of specialized knowledge," he observed.

Pentagon officials agree, and as a result USAF has begun to send its judge advocate general corps to receive additional training through the US Department of Justice, said James W. Russell III, associate chief of the Air Force's Military Justice Division. Here, they receive instruction in prosecuting sexual assault. "We do lawyer-specific training in terms of litigation techniques of addressing special issues—like alcohol issues in sexual assaults," he added.

Such training may be particularly necessary, say victim's rights advocates,

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in light of findings that among those few troops who do report sexual offenses, even fewer see their attacker face justice—a fact that has come to the attention of some lawmakers on Capitol Hill. US Representatives Nicola S. Tsongas (D-Mass.) and Michael R. Turner (R-Ohio) have proposed legislation to address the crime and to encourage more victims to come forward. While 40 percent of civilian allegations are prosecuted, “this number is a staggeringly low eight percent in the military,” they said in a joint statement. A bill aimed at protecting US troops who have experienced sexual assault ensures that conversations between assaulted service members and victim advocates remain confidential. Currently, those conversations can be subpoenaed.

The bill also calls for more training of SARC and requires them to hold full-time DOD positions, not to be hired as contractors. The legislation would also allow victims of sexual assault to transfer out of their base or unit. DOD has recently implemented a policy to judiciously expedite requests from sexual assault victims to change units.

“It seems really simple, but when you start to get into the reassignments process, it’s not really simple,” Bradley said. “So that’s the kind of collaboration we’re getting together and trying to implement across the services.”

Troops of junior rank today have “few privileges and barely any freedom of movement to flee their perpetrators, to seek help when they need it most, or to leave the units or bases where they are being brutalized,” said Anuradha K. Bhagwati, a former Marine Corps captain and executive director of the Service Women’s Action Network.

Driven by interest on Capitol Hill, the military has begun its own changes to address sexual assault. Victim advocates must now volunteer for the position. Previously, it was an assigned job, sometimes used as extra duty or punishment.

Tsongas said she became particularly interested in the issue of sexual assault in the military during a wounded warriors luncheon on Capitol Hill. “A nurse who had deployed a number of times to Iraq and Afghanistan said she was actually more afraid of our own soldiers than she was of the enemy. As she traveled around

the base, she was always sure of what she had to do to defend herself. She had never been assaulted, but she felt the constant presence of a threat,” Tsongas recalled.

Such stories are not isolated events, she added. “We hear from a variety of sources about the prevalence of it—and the fact that it’s vastly underreported. The victims often feel very much at risk, after the assault, about coming forward. We hear testimony from the services about all of their preventive measures, but despite that, their numbers are very high.”

Such testimony mirrors the experience of many service members, Tsongas noted, including Ribeiro’s. Particularly striking to Ribeiro was the response of the sexual assault response coordinator, which she found to be “cold.” This was especially difficult given the fact that she was deployed.

“When you’re deployed, I don’t know why, it gets a million times worse,” she says. “You get this whole ‘boys will be boys’ mentality, because you are there in a combat zone and serious things like lives are at stake. It seems like sexual assault, it doesn’t really get the attention. If you were going to make a complaint, they’re not going to take you seriously because it’s this idea that ‘we’ve got bigger things to worry about.’”

Paying a Price

Even if she had been advised about a way to report the crime and gather information without going public—as exists in the military—much of the frustration from fellow female airmen Ribeiro has spoken with comes from the fact that they did report it, but nothing happened, she said. There is a “keep it to yourself culture” that continues to exist around sexual assault and the military, Ribeiro says, despite the Air Force’s outreach efforts. In her base housing in Afghanistan in 2006, Ribeiro lived with six other women.

“We talked about everything—absolutely everything. We’d talk about creepy guys, but never about assault. I felt like it was my dirty little secret. If I didn’t verbalize it, if I didn’t tell anyone about it, it would go away.” Ribeiro says that

for that reason, she believes the numbers surrounding sexual assault, particularly when it comes to reporting, “are way off” and quite low.

Bradley said the SARC behaved in a way inappropriate to what Air Force training would direct, in Ribeiro’s case. “I would hope that we would never have an Air Force SARC respond in that way,” she said. “That is certainly contrary to all of the training the SARCs receive.” What’s more, she said, there is now a two- to three-day course specifically focused on SARC duties in a deployed environment, she added. “You would never ask a victim, ‘Where is your gun?’ It’s irrelevant. That person just got assaulted, and you’re not responding to what that victim needs. I would hope that we would never talk to a victim in the middle of a crowded room, either.”

As the Air Force publicly grapples with the problem of sexual assault within its ranks, Bradley has found other services are coming to the Air Force for advice.

“The other services do research. They just do it internally,” she said. “In the other services, there are people just like us who work this program. We do a lot of collaboration. We have given them a copy of the Gallup poll, and they give us from time to time different things that they have done.”

In addition to the harm to the victims of sexual assaults, the military as a whole pays a price for these crimes in losing dedicated and skilled personnel, Pentagon officials acknowledge. Ribeiro was a third generation service member whose grandfather was in the Army Air Corps and whose father had served in the Air Force for 28 years. One heartbreaking aspect of the rape, Ribeiro says, “is that I absolutely loved my job.” She would have been interested in a military career, she adds, were it not for the assault.

As the Secretary of the Air Force receives the recommendations of the task force, “we’re going to have a lot of priorities,” said Bradley, who added that the key is to continue to seek new solutions to sexual assault.

“What I really want to emphasize is that it’s an ongoing thing, especially with the turnover in the military, which is tremendous every year,” she said. “It’s a constant process. We try to go out and say, ‘What’s not working, guys?’ We just have to keep after it. We can’t let it go.” ■

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