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Service Women's Action Network – Truth and Justice: The 2012 Summit on Military Sexual Violence (My Personal Recap)

Posted by Sarah Plummer on 11 May in Semper Sarah |



(An updated, better edited version of this post can be read [here](#). Below, you will find the unedited version I wrote immediately after the event.)

I could hear the rain brushing the screens of the windows by my bed as the clock radio began squawking at me at four in the morning. I lingered under the covers as a fuzzy version of NPR and the muffled precipitation seemed to converse with one another. Then, I rolled over, turned on the lamp, a dim light crawled out from under the lampshade to fill my half of the room, and I got out of bed.

“This is going to be a long day,” I thought. I put on a bright blue dress and red scarf, knowing I would not blend in with the black, gray, and beige crowd that populated the city for which I was destined. Despite the meager amount of sleep on which I functioned, I felt surprisingly alert, and although fully aware of the intensity soon to envelope me, I felt upbeat. Pete drove me to the airport, and within minutes I was checked in and at Gate 24B with a Starbucks paper cup in hand, filled with sweet, hot liquid. It was a short flight to Washington DC from Columbus Ohio. Instead of napping, I decided I would read to pass the time. I had just finished *The Celestine Prophecy* at about 11pm the night before. It was the second time I read that book, with the first time being nearly 10 years ago but its effect on me just as powerful (and a perfectly timed reminder to try to keep my energy level lifted/positive as I began a challenging day). Since it was time to start a new book, I began reading *Angela's Ashes* (a book I've wanted to read for a long time) on the one hour flight to our nation's capital.

About 60 pages into the Irish memoir, my plane touched down on a sunny Reagan National Airport runway. I always enjoy the approach to DCA. I look out the window like a little kid, enthralled with the Lego-land world below. Tracing the Potomac, I can easily site the historical landmarks of DC to my left and my old stomping grounds of Northern Virginia to my right, and directly below the belly of the aircraft snakes the paved path which borders the river and on which I've logged so many miles over the years. Every time I fly into DC, I have to consciously recall whether I am arriving for a visit or returning home because I've done both so many times that I often get mixed up as to what exactly my resident status is. I catch myself thinking through exactly this dilemma and smile as my internal voice reminds me, “You are not catching a cab south to Shirlington; get off the plane and catch the metro north, into the city.”

It was a logistical piece of pie as I deplaned with carry-on in tow, bought a metro ticket and jumped on the yellow line toward Gallery Place/China town and switched to the red line. My destination was between two stops, and I decided to get off at Union Station instead of Judiciary Square because I always find that walking through the luxurious marble foyer imbues me with a rich respect for the city. I made a mistake, though, and got off the train in the wrong direction, exiting through some strange back/side door that I never knew existed before and did not get the scenic route I had hoped for. “Oh well,” I thought. “It's nice outside so no biggie,” and I soaked in my surroundings during the five block walk to the Washington Court Hotel, site of Truth and Justice: The 2012 Summit on Military Sexual Violence organized by [Service Women's Action Network](#) (SWAN).

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The keynote speaker of the event was Mary Lauterbach whose daughter was murdered at Camp Lejeune in 2007. The distinguished guests who were presented awards by Anu Bhagwati, founder of SWAN, were Senator John Kerry, Senator Susan Collins, Representative Niki Tsongas, Representative Mike Turner, Sharon La'Tise Morrison, and Susan Avila-Smith. I was impressed by the class with which these people spoke on a sensitive subject and the grace with which they accepted their awards. Additionally, the event included two panels, one with veteran service members who survived sexual trauma and another of legal professionals who discussed the current laws and how to get them changed. The featured speakers included: Lawrence Korb, Representative Chellie Pingree, Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, Representative Bruce Braley (self-ascribed "Pissed-Off Congressman"). I found what Susan Park, a staff attorney in the ACLU Women's Rights Project, had to say about Title 7 enlightening; from my understanding of it, application of Title 7 principles to military law would be beneficial. I also respected how Elizabeth Hillman, a USAF veteran and professor of law at UC Hastings College of Law, handled the situation when some members of the audience became irate with a retired (male) Army General on the panel. I definitely understand the anger, frustrating, and pain, but felt the outbursts were disrespectful and unwarranted. What was the point in yelling at an elderly man who could not enact any change even if he wanted to? Unfortunately, the truth of the message can get lost among angry words, and we do ourselves a disservice – right, wrong, or otherwise – when lose we our bearing in that type of setting. I was happy to see, though, how the SWAN moderator adeptly handled the crowd, and restored calm to the room.

After about six hours of meeting others, listening to panelists, doing a brief interview with FOX News, and witnessing awards ceremonies, we were served lunch, given cursory instruction on how best to approach our Senators and Representatives, then set lose to "attack the Hill." ;p The weather had shifted since the morning, and our pack of swanlings were caught in the rain during our walk from Hotel to Hill, but did not let it deter us from taking a smiling group photo in front of the Capitol building right after which I finally got to meet the amazing Anu Bhagwati in person. I introduced myself and she actually said she knew who I was! I was shocked and honored when, after we embraced and I thanked her for the positive difference she has made and the tireless work she has accomplished, *she* thanked *me*. That really made my day to meet such a distinguished woman. I stood anchored to the wet grass for a moment, fully appreciating exactly where I was, before our crowd scattered into mini-groups, organized by state, to descend upon our elected officials.



Anu Bhagwati, founder of SWAN, & Sarah Plummer, founder of SemperSarah.com --- Both USMC Captain Veterans

And up the Hill we went...

Although not *from* Ohio, I am now registered to vote in the state, and thus set out to spend my afternoon talking to Representative Patrick Tiberi, Senator Sherrod Brown, Representative Steve Austria, and Senator Rob Portman. A News-TV crew from ZDF (like German CNN) followed me throughout the day. To my disappointment, we (me and another Columbus'ite and a Navy veteran, Tiffany) were unable to speak directly to the officials and were side-armed into conversing with their staff. It was an exhausting afternoon walking from office to office, telling our stories repeatedly, and in between those meetings recalling our experiences with the hallowed walls as naturally as possible to the camera in our faces.

I do not know if we made a difference in the mindset of the representatives, the congressmen, and their staff, but I believe our action is at the very least a step in the right direction toward changing the culture of acceptance of rape and assault in the military (both of military and non-military members). I assume in this day and age, people have heard stories like ours, but perhaps they have not; and if they have not, then that was the day for them to put a face with a fact. If nothing else, the summit and the

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movement on the Hill provided survivors and advocates with a real voice for the first time in history and displayed the solidarity of the veteran community.

Among a day filled with meetings, speeches, and discussions, one of my DC friends, Tim, informed me via text that he and I had been personally invited to a private screening of the documentary *The Invisible War* (which is about rape and sexual assault in the military) later that evening. I had heard nothing but amazing things about this film, which was critically acclaimed at Sundance. Naturally, I was ecstatic at the opportunity to attend. However, it made an already long, intense day that much longer and that much more intense. After walking back to the Hotel from the Hill, retrieving my bag, and realizing it was already 6:00 and the movie started at 6:30, I opted for a cab vice walking or metro'ing for that leg of my journey.

I arrived at the Truman National Security Project, waited outside the building for a bit for Tim who was running late (on account of the typically insane DC traffic), then decided to head on up. To my pleasant surprise another friend (also a West Point grad like Tim) was at the screening, as well: Christy. The other 15 or so strangers in the room might have thought I was being insensitive given the nature of the film and my contrasting buoyancy at meeting my friends there; but it was an unexpected treat to see Christy and a joy to see Tim, so I didn't hide my smiles. Once the film began, though, sobriety reconvened.

Honestly, I was surprised at what portions of the film affected me the most. The part where the father of one of the main subjects of the documentary speaks on his daughter's behalf broke the seal for my silent, tearful outlet. Watching her dad get choked up as he recalled his daughter's rape made me remember the letter my own father wrote me in 2001, imploring me not to join the Marines, guaranteeing me it would be an unhappy, unjust life. How could he know that although he described certain horrors in his note to me – descriptions of war tragedies and sexist treatment – that an even worse nightmare would happen to me in 2003, mere weeks before my Commissioning? I cried at the thought of how my parents were first in disbelief and then heartbroken and furious when I told them about my assault and months later came crawling home to ask for their help in my survival. It hurt to realize that even now I still felt like a disappointment to them because of what had happened to me. I reflected upon how all members of my family have handled "it" differently at various points in time over the last nine years. It's been a fluid thing, really, so I guess that makes sense. "It" reared its ugly head on so many different occasions in the remaining six years in which I served, I never quite got the aftermath of "it" under control until I left the service. Sometimes its remembrance incited rage from my family and friends, other times indifference, still other times utter pain, sadness, and a feeling of loss. I suppose that's fair, given that my own emotions have had a similar fluctuation, as well.

I was also upset as I stared at the glowing screen during the times the two female Marine Officers spoke about their vicious assaults at 8th and I. Somehow, for the first time, I realized I'd never met another female Marine who'd been raped, too. Was it because we didn't even trust ourselves to share the stories with our female comrades? The other survivors I'd talked to and mentored were from the other services. Although my best friend from the Marines, Theresa, knew what happened to me, and a then-close friend, Megan F, did as well, I had never heard of any other female Marine going through quite what I did before. I just assumed I had been the only one, which only added to the shame and embarrassment I harbored for years. But two days ago, I finally saw that I was not. On some level of course I knew I could not have been the only one, but it is not like it's something people openly discuss, so I never knew of a real-life, tangible example of a comparable story. But Tuesday evening, in Washington DC, there it was, blue and white light flicking its fingers toward me, touching me, telling me there were others.

After spending two more jam-packed days in DC linking up with more of my local peeps like Megan, Greg, and Cathal and even managing to have lunch with my father, brother, and sister down in Springfield VA after a family funeral, I flew home to Ohio last night, arriving close to midnight. I am not sure that I have fully processed the day yet...the Summit...the Hill...the documentary...and as worthwhile and admirable as all of the events and efforts of the various coordinators were, I would like to express my one disappointment in it all. For most of the survivors, there seemed to be no resolution. Clearly there was no justice served within the military judicial system, as it was not for me either, but in their personal lives, all of the survivors still seemed so filled with anger and pain. *That* broke my heart. *That* made me want to reach out and hug every single man and woman who shared their story. It made wonder, "What help do they have? What resources are they using? Have they thought of alternative therapies?" Surely some have, and we are all at different points in our pilgrimage toward healing, but on a whole, it seemed like victims were still basically being left to fend for themselves. In many cases, sadly, that is true; but in many cases it is not, and I just wish there had been a little more depicted about the healing side of things. There are groups out there

providing alternative health and wellness options for disabled veterans, for survivors of rape and assault, and for those battling with PTSD. In everything I participated in Tuesday, that point seemed a little lost in the shuffle.

So, on that note, for what it is worth, I am here to say there are ways to move past it. If you are familiar with my writing, you already know that I believe yoga is a cornerstone for this particular type of healing. Yes, as victims it was *not* fair what happened to you, but you *can* reclaim your life as your own again. You do not have to wait on the military or the VA to provide something for you which, in all reality, it likely will not. Seek out other options on your own. You simply *have to* in order to save your own life! What is it worth to sit back, disgruntled that the military continues to fail you time and again? They failed you once by mishandling your rape, assault, or harassment charges, right? What makes you think they are suddenly going to do right by you now? Hopefully, they will one day, and that is the purpose of these summits, meetings, and efforts in advocacy, but in the meantime, I encourage you to move forward with your life. Consider this "tough love" coming from someone who gets it. For me, realizing I had to do it myself was what made things click and started the deeper healing. No one is going to do it for you, even if you have an amazingly supportive spouse, family, or friends. I spent years wishing people would do something more for me, believing they *should* be doing more for me, until it clicked that in some ways, it almost did not matter what anyone did for me because ultimately true healing would only come from within me anyway. Only you can heal you, and believe me, you CAN. What you need is already within you, you simply need to look there. Whatever helps you "look" there is different for everyone...for me, God was my guide. My faith, my spirituality, my relationship with our Creator, with Christ, and the energy of the Universe have been absolutely critical in reaching the core of who I am and connecting with it so that I can become whole again. Additionally, the gifted mentors and teachers who helped me along the way were, I believe, God's perfectly placed angles along the path on which I stumbled, to help pick me up and set me right once more so I could continue walking.

Is this healing, this going within, as simple as the sentences I just typed? No, of course it is not. But why not start trying? What do you have to lose? Try yoga. Try running. Join a recreational sports team. Meditate. Eat better. Drink less alcohol. Buy a dog. Join a scrap booking group. Try painting. Write poetry. Do one, do some, do a combo of these things or something else altogether, but please, survivors, begin to move – metaphorically and literally – forward, begin to live, knowing that you have survived, knowing you can *thrive*.

Please feel free to leave comments below. If you attended the Summit, as well, I'd love to hear what you thought; or, if you had to miss it, what you would've said to a fellow survivor if you'd had the chance.

With love, compassion, and respect,

Sarah

(Also, I appear at around 4minutes and 30 seconds into the ZDF German Public Media Documentary <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/kanaluebersicht/aktuellste/332#/beitrag/video/1652650/Vergewaltigungen-in-der-US-Armee>)

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Just received this message from Senator Portman's Chief of Staff: "Sarah, I wanted to thank you for taking the time to come in earlier this week. For such an important and talked about issue, there seems to be very little engagement about it. In my year on the Hill, that is the first time I can remember that anyone has come in to discuss sexual assault in the military with me. I'm glad to see SWAN organizing that

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