

# Arizona Daily Star®

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## Focus on military sexual assault

**S. Arizona bases in step as U.S. increases scrutiny**

**By Carol Ann Alaimo**

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Cindy hasn't taken a bath in the 43 years since she was gang raped at knifepoint by three military men.

Sitting naked in a bathtub makes her feel too vulnerable. She takes showers instead, so if a rapist ever breaks in she can dash for the loaded gun she always keeps nearby.

That four decades have gone by without another break-in does not comfort the 61-year-old, one of dozens of female veterans being treated for military sexual trauma at Tucson's veterans hospital.

Years later, they are still haunted by monsters wearing service uniforms.

And they are being joined by casualties of more recent conflicts, according to a Tucson agency that says more military veterans are reporting sexual trauma when their tours of duty end. This scrutiny also comes as the federal government is giving increased attention to the problem of sexual assault in the military.

Under pressure from Congress, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has ordered an investigation, and a report is due by the end of the month. So far, the added attention has revealed some of the problems critics say the military must confront.

They include:

- ° Current combat issues - The stress of war can trigger an increase in reported sexual assaults and sexual harassment, some research has shown. People attacked in war zones over the last year say they did not receive thorough medical care, information on their rights or access to chaplains.
- ° Lack of reporting - Studies suggest many victims keep quiet for years because they fear it will hurt their careers.
- ° Poor record keeping - Critics say the military can't begin to solve the problem without hard numbers, and keeping track is critical in an environment where victims and suspects are often moving around the globe.

The impact of the issue is being recorded more locally as 17 Southern Arizona veterans in the past six months reported sexual trauma. That's one more case than Tucson's Vet Center saw in the previous 12 months, the agency's director said.

At least four of the men and one of the women said they served in the current wars based in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Ken Mroczek, director of the Vet Center, which assists service members transitioning out of the military.

### Local reports rising

The Tucson Vet Center is seeing an increase in reports of military sexual trauma.

**2002: 10 cases**

**2003: 16 cases**

**2004: 17 cases\***

\*2004 figure is for the first six months of the fiscal year that began October 2003. Source: Tucson Vet Center

### Get help

°The following agencies offer aid to survivors of military sexual trauma. It is not necessary to have reported a sexual attack to receive help.

**Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System:** Offers outpatient therapy and inpatient treatment to veterans who qualify. To inquire about eligibility, call 1-800 827-1000 .

**Tucson Vet Center, 3055 N. First Ave.:** Offers group or individual counseling to any veteran who reports military sexual trauma. Call 882-0333.

**Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault:** Offers counseling, victim advocacy and 24-hour crisis hotline. In Tucson, call 327-7273, elsewhere, call 1-800-400-1001.

Nationally, U.S. military personnel have reported 129 cases of sexual assault to the Miles Foundation - a group that tracks cases of sexual assault - in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Bahrain. Only 27 were reported to military officials, according to its executive director, Christine Hansen, who spoke before members of Congress on Wednesday.

The Pentagon says it has received more than 100 rape reports in the last 18 months from servicewomen who say they were attacked by colleagues in war zones.

Numbers go up in wartime

Military sexual trauma includes rape, sexual assault, or persistent sexual harassment that was "threatening in nature," according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The 17 recent local reports were all collected during outreach sessions at Tucson's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, at Fort Huachuca Army post in Sierra Vista, and at the Marine Corps installation in Yuma, Mroczek said.

Many of the vets at the sessions were recent arrivals to the Arizona bases, he said.

No breakdown was available for how many reports came from each base or where the sex attacks took place.

According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, part of the federal veterans department, "the stress of war may be associated with increases in rates of sexual harassment and assault."

A study of Gulf War veterans found such complaints rose several percentage points during war compared to peacetime, the center's Web site said.

The recent rape reports from combat zones come on the heels of a sex scandal last year at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., where dozens of female cadets alleged sexual assaults were ignored or covered up by academy leadership over the past decade. The Air Force woes were the latest chapter of a lengthy sex saga that started with the Navy's 1991 Tailhook scandal and continued in 1996 with a similar episode at the Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground.

In all those cases, the services involved vowed zero tolerance for sexual assault and pledged corrective action.

Yet the Miles Foundation says that in addition to the recent wartime complaints, 215 rape complaints have come from military bases across the nation in the past 18 months.

Tucson program illustrates issue

In Tucson, the ongoing national issue is highlighted by the experiences of female veterans who agreed to let a reporter sit in on a recent group therapy session at the Southern Arizona VA Healthcare System.

"Every time this comes up in the news they say they're going to take care of it," said Cindy, the former Navy woman who showers with a gun close by.

"Well, it happened to me in 1961. What I'd like to know is, when the hell are they going to take care of it?"

Women in the group spoke on condition that their last names aren't printed and their faces aren't shown. The Arizona Daily Star doesn't identify rape survivors.

Panic keeps them awake at night. Some drink trying to fall asleep, or drug themselves to forget.

When nothing else works, they sometimes try to kill themselves. They are never truly free of their attackers.

"You're constantly reliving it," said Jo-Jo, 44, a former soldier who said she was raped in Aberdeen, Md., in 1978 and endured an attempted rape during the 1991 Gulf War.

"Every day is a fight and you have to accept that," she said. "It's a struggle just to survive."

Some of their stories sound similar to recent reports from the Middle East.

Elea, 47, was born at Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista where her sister still serves. Their dad was a career soldier who always wanted a son but got daughters instead.

Elea remembers shining her father's Army boots as a child and vowing that she'd join the Army when she grew up. "I wasn't the son he wanted so I wanted to make him proud of me," she said.

She enlisted after high school and was raped during her first year of service in San Antonio, Texas, in 1974, she said. She reported it, underwent a hospital rape exam, then watched in horror as the Army let her attacker off the hook.

"They were within five minutes of catching this person and they did nothing. Nothing!" Elea recalled, her voice shaking with anger.

No one offered her help or counseling. Instead, she was transferred to Germany. Isolated and afraid in a strange place, Elea couldn't sleep and started drinking wine to sedate herself.

Soon she drank a bottle every night. Later, she became a cocaine addict and twice attempted suicide.

When her dad died she fell apart inside, she said, weeping at the memory. "He never understood why I didn't re-enlist, and I could never tell him."

#### Support sometimes lacking

Not all the women who are raped have symptoms this severe, experts say.

But the chance of long-term suffering is higher when victims don't get adequate support, a frequent complaint among military rape survivors.

Kate, 54, who served from the Vietnam era until the 1991 Gulf War, said she was raped twice and fought off two more attempted assaults during her Army career.

"I love my country. I wanted to be a soldier since I was 9 years old," she said. To keep the job she adored, Kate said, she kept quiet about the incidents and wore a false face to hide her terror and depression.

Experts say such silence is common among rape victims, and especially so in a military culture that values loyalty to one's colleagues.

Jane Gersmeyer, a nurse therapist who runs the sexual trauma group at the Tucson hospital, said the women's stories are typical of those she's heard from the 60 or so other female vets she's counseled in the last three years.

Their symptoms mimic those of combat veterans suffering from wartime trauma, she said.

Gersmeyer, an adjunct professor at the University of Arizona who lectures there on mental health, said she's often struck by the public's lack of awareness about the prevalence of military sexual trauma.

At the UA, she gets blank stares when she mentions the topic to students about to enter the military through the ROTC program. "You should see the looks on their faces," Gersmeyer said. "It's like, 'Oh my God.' They never, ever even stopped to think that this was something that could happen to them."

#### Fear of reporting

Military sex scandals may be shocking to the general public, but they hardly raise an eyebrow at Tucson's veterans hospital.

"This is a lot more common than most people realize," said Tracey Geer, military sexual trauma coordinator for the hospital.

Nationwide, more than one-third of female vets treated at VA hospitals report they were sexually violated

while serving their country, said Geer, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology from the UA.

A 2003 VA survey of 506 military women who served from Vietnam to the present found 30 percent reporting rapes or attempted rapes in the line of duty.

By comparison, 20 to 25 percent of all women report a sexual assault or attempt during their lifetimes, according to the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault.

The Pentagon's official number is much lower: It pegs the rate of sexual assault at 3 percent for military women, based on its 2002 survey.

In Tucson, more than 80 veterans who are victims of sexual assault have been treated at the VA hospital in the past three years, VA officials said.

Geer's current caseload includes at least 21 cases of military sexual trauma - a syndrome so well-recognized by the VA that the federal agency sometimes provides disability payments to victims who can't function normally after the attacks.

Geer said the majority of military victims - studies suggest up to 74 percent - keep quiet for years about the attacks. Many say they were hushed up by their superiors or threatened with dismissal if they made waves, she said.

Men occasionally report being raped by male service members. But it is rare for military men to come forward in a macho culture that often labels them as weaklings for allowing attacks to occur, local therapists say.

"As terrified as women are of coming out and talking about this, men are much more so," said Robert Kafes, clinical director of the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault, Tucson's main rape crisis agency. "They're afraid of being labeled as sissies or that they're less of a man."

#### Assaults reported locally

The sexual assault center has seen 16 military clients in the past three years, agency officials said. D-M, Tucson's air base, sometimes refers airmen to the civilian agency.

D-M recently underwent a review of its sexual assault procedures as part of the servicewide probe ordered by the Pentagon.

D-M's response programs are generally "tremendous," said base commander Col. Larry Stutzriem, but the review revealed a lack of coordination among some D-M departments that needs to be fixed to provide better service, he said.

Stutzriem said the base hasn't had any reports so far of its airmen being assaulted overseas. He vowed to correct any problems so that if it does happen, victims get the best care possible.

"I don't care if there's only one case left on the base of sexual assault. It's too much," Stutz-riem said.

The base has had eight sexual assault cases in the past two years, three of which led to courts-martial, with the others receiving administrative discipline.

D-M couldn't provide any further details about the cases, or about what has happened in previous years. Base officials said the data weren't available and would take a long time to reconstruct.

Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista said that from 1999 through March 2004, 27 rape cases and 37 indecent assault cases were reported. Of those 64 cases, 13 were unfounded, Fort Huachuca officials said. They could not provide further details.

Fort Huachuca says a victim advocacy program coordinator is on call at all times. The coordinator has been in place at Fort Huachuca since 2000. A victim/witness liaison is also present to guide victims and witnesses through the legal process.

#### Bad record keeping common

Critics say lax record keeping is common throughout the military in sex cases, and is a big reason the services don't deal effectively with such crimes.

"Sexual assault happens everywhere so of course it happens in the military," said Kate Summers, victim services director for the Connecticut-based Miles Foundation. But the military keeps itself in the dark with its lack of data, she said.

The Miles Foundation has made a long list of proposals for how the services can improve.

It includes everything from modernizing military criminal law - which still uses 1940s terms like "carnal knowledge" to describe some sex crimes - to a computerized tracking and reporting system that follows the outcome of every case.

Kafes said recent events have given him cause for hope - and for skepticism - when it comes to rape in the military.

He's hopeful because some changes are finally happening. For example, D-M recently agreed to have its legal staff join a community group that monitors the adequacy of sexual assault response. On the other hand, none of the changes might be happening if it weren't for congressional pressure.

Kafes likens military sex scandals to the Catholic Church's woes: "The military is an institution, just like the Catholic Church, that has a vested interest in protecting itself."

"These are dynamics we have seen before - over and over again."

*° Reuters News service contributed to this report. ° Contact reporter Carol Ann Alaimo 573-4138 or caalaimo@azstarnet.com.*

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