

DefenseWatch *“The Voice of the Grunt”*

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Hack's Target

Other Priorities



By David H. Hackworth

By April 2004, rapes and assaults of American female soldiers were epidemic in the Middle East. But even after more than 83 incidents were reported during a six-month period in Iraq and Kuwait, the 24-hour rape hotline in Kuwait was still being answered by a machine advising callers to leave a phone number where they could be reached.

“Nobody had a telephone number, for crying out loud,” says Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, then commanding general of the 800th Military Police Brigade, who was in Kuwait preparing to bring her unit home after running the military prisons in Iraq.

Military stupidity at its finest, or senior male brass who chose to shrug and look the other way?

Karpinski believes the latter. “Reports of assault ... were mostly not investigated because commanders had other priorities,” Karpinski says. “The attitude of Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez,” then the ground commander in Iraq, “permeated the entire chain of command: The women asked to be here, so now let them take what comes with the territory.”

According to Karpinski, Brig. Gen. Michael J. Diamond, then commander of the 377th Theater Support Command in Kuwait, followed Sanchez’s lead and refused to take any proactive steps toward stopping the rapes.

“When I tried to discuss the gravity of the situation with him, he responded, ‘It’s not always easy being me, you know,’ ” Karpinski says. “My recommendations for some easily implemented actions to reduce this serious problem fell on deaf ears.”

It's an essential priority of a leader, from corporal to four-star general, to look after the troops. In today's military – like it or not – that includes females as well as males. And in relatively safe Kuwait, Karpinski notes, women were frequently assaulted on the way to the latrines. There were no lights near any of their facilities, so women were doubly easy targets in the dark of night.

"I reminded BG Diamond he was in Kuwait, not the middle of Iraq," Karpinski told me, "and there was no excuse for not lighting up the walkways to the showers and latrines. He said he had other priorities, and he didn't want to call attention to the locations of the facilities."

Meanwhile, the male latrines were well-marked and well-lighted.

"A female soldier coming off night shift took a shower and was standing at the sink brushing her teeth," Karpinski says. "A male soldier entered the tent brandishing a long blade knife. He had a scarf ... over his head. He threatened her, and she tried to run. Another female soldier heard her scream and nearly bumped into the would-be attacker as he was running out of the tent. They actually cornered him, but CID (military cops) released him the next day because the intended victim was not certain she could identify him."

"I told BG Diamond to post notices everywhere alerting women to this attack and reminding them to take a buddy everywhere after dark. He refused. He once again didn't want to call attention to the attack! These were male soldiers attacking female soldiers."

Only after abused soldiers started calling home and contacting the press, their parents and Congress, did the secretary of defense finally appoint a Sexual Assault Task Force last February to "undertake a 90-day review of all sexual assault policies and programs."

The Pentagon report – wrapped up in thousands of words of butt-covering politically correct double talk – contains sentences like the following: "It must develop performance metrics and establish an evaluation framework for regular review and quality improvement." And probably nothing much will come out of this exercise in bureaucracy except the creation of yet another costly, ineffectual head shed. But it does confirm that in the past two years alone, there were more than 2,100 sexual assaults throughout the U.S. military.

Karpinski says: "There were countless such situations all over the theater of operations – Iraq and Kuwait – because female soldiers didn't have a voice, individually or collectively. Even as a general I didn't have a voice with Sanchez, so I know what the soldiers were facing. Sanchez did not want to hear about female soldier requirements and/or issues."

Of course, this problem would go away in a drill-sergeant minute if the guys wearing eagles and stars had the proper incentive - such as promotions based on who has the lowest rape numbers.

-- Eilhys England contributed to this column.

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