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Reports of Rape in Pacific Spur Air Force Steps

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WASHINGTON, March 8 — At least 92 accusations of rape involving Air Force personnel in the Pacific were reported to military authorities there from 2001 to 2003, according to a new study by the service. The findings, which surprised some top Air Force officials, also singled out serious flaws in the reporting of sexual assault claims and assistance to victims.

The five-month review was the most comprehensive report of its kind by an Air Force command and has led to a servicewide investigation into how sexual assault is reported, how it can be prevented and how commanders deal with victims. Investigators said Monday that conditions varied among installations, depending on the services available on and off bases.

Last week, Gen. William J. Begert, the commander of Pacific Air Forces who sought the review, ordered broad changes in training, reporting of sexual assaults and assistance for victims.

He has also summoned his top field commanders to a meeting in April at his headquarters in Hawaii to discuss the problem.

“I found it disturbing,” General Begert said in a telephone interview on Monday, referring to the number of rape accusations, made mostly by servicewomen but some also by civilians. “We’ve got to take this on and lower the number of incidents. Our mission gets done by us trusting each other, and this undermines that trust.”

Of the 106 service members accused in the 92 cases cited in the report, 14 were tried by court-martial. Seven were convicted of rape and sentenced to an average of eight years in prison; for lesser, related offenses, more than 40 others received punishments like demotions, lost pay and letters of reprimand. No action was taken against 28, and many cases are still pending. The review was first reported Friday by The Colorado Springs Gazette.

The Air Force's Pacific command study comes as the overall military faces the most serious accusations of sexual misconduct in years. There have been at least 112 reports of sexual misconduct, including rape, in the past 18 months in the Central Command area of operations, which includes Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. Two dozen women at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas have reported to a local rape-crisis center that they were assaulted in 2002.

The Defense Department and the Army have opened separate inquiries in recent weeks, and last week the Pentagon established a toll-free number (800-497-6261) for people to provide information to the investigations. The individual armed services have already set up such numbers.

Senators Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California, and Olympia J. Snowe, Republican of Maine, introduced legislation on Monday to help military women who are victims of rape or incest. Under current law, those women can have abortions at military hospitals, but they have to pay for the procedure. The bill would allow for military money to cover the abortions.

The Air Force Pacific command's inquiry grew out of General Begert's desire to understand the problem in his area after the disclosure last year of more than 50 reported rapes or assaults over the past decade at the Air Force Academy.

The inquiry focused on the command's nine major bases, in Japan, South Korea, Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, Singapore and Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean.

Investigators immediately discovered a major problem: the Pacific command, and the Air Force in general, had no common standard for reporting rapes or other sexual assaults.

"Keeping track of the data is a real mess," Col. Steven J. Lepper, the command's top lawyer and leader of the review, said in a telephone interview on Monday.

Colonel Lepper said his team had to go by hand through every rape report filed in the command from 2001 to 2003, General Begert's time as commander. Colonel Lepper said he was "surprised a bit" by the figures, but not necessarily by the profile of those involved.

The majority of the cases involved Air Force men and women, age 25 or younger, and took place in the dormitory room of either the accuser or the reported assailant. Alcohol was often a factor.

Though in most cases male airmen assaulted female service members, some civilian women, including married women and prostitutes, also reported being raped.

The largest number of reported rapes — about one-third of the accusations — arose in South Korea, where about one-quarter of the Pacific command's 34,000 troops are

based. About 19 percent, or 6,635, of the command's troops are women. The report noted that most service members were on unaccompanied tours, with families remaining in the United States; that most lived in dormitories; and that alcohol was prevalent.

The number of rapes reported in the Pacific command seems to be increasing: 34 rapes were reported in 2001, 17 in 2002 and 41 in 2003. In the first four weeks of this year, 6 have been reported.

"Not a promising picture," said a briefing slide General Begert used in a presentation for senior Air Force officials last week in Washington.

The command's review also found that most bases had poor services to help victims with medical care and counseling.

"I was a bit disappointed by our apparent lack of a good, solid victims' assistance program that was proactive and had good follow-up," General Begert said.

In a directive to his commanders, General Begert ordered new sexual-assault awareness training for all airmen, written legal reviews of all sexual assault investigations, and more responsive victims' advocates, who are appointed immediately after an accusation is made.

General Begert also suggested that commanders improve supervision of dormitories and consider banning alcohol there, as Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska has done.

Victims' advocacy groups applauded these steps but said more was needed. "They're useful, but there are some elements still missing, including confidentiality to victims," said Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation in Newtown, Conn., a victims' advocacy group focusing on the military.

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