



Sexual Abuse Allegations Persist in U.S. Military

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MADELEINE BRAND, host: From the studios of NPR West, this is DAY TO DAY. I'm Madeleine Brand.

LUKE BURBANK, host:

And I'm Luke Burbank. We're going to spend the first part of this show talking about female soldiers in Iraq and sexual harassment and assault that they've been facing not by Iraqis but by Americans, their fellow male soldiers. Coming up, I have a conversation with specialist Mickiela Montoya. She served in the National Guard in Iraq in 2005. She told me the guys looked at her and other female soldiers in one of three ways.

Specialist MICKIELA MONTOYA (Former National Guard Soldier): You're either a bitch, a ho or a dyke. In the beginning, I was considered a ho because I was nice, and then later on because I realized what they were saying about me, I became a bitch because I was not mean, but I didn't go along with what they were saying.

BRAND: First, though, the big picture. There are more women serving in Iraq than in any other war. They make up 15 percent of the troops there, and because they're on the front lines in a war that doesn't really have front lines, they find themselves working closely with men, and that can cause problems. Journalist Helen Benedict interviewed 20 female soldiers for her story on salon.com called "The Private War of Women Soldiers."

Ms. HELEN BENEDICT (Journalist, Salon): All of them had heard of rapes and sexual assaults on their bases in the companies around them, and so they were already on the alert, and because of the climate of sexual harassment that most of the women endure in the military, they felt very threatened.

And then on top of that, a lot of them were told that once they were Iraq, by their commanders, not to go out at night, not to go to the showers, not to go to the toilets alone, that they should always go with a buddy, which the men weren't being told. And so all those things together would make them very wary.

BRAND: They were told to go to the latrines and to the showers with someone else, with another female, because there was a very real threat of being sexually assaulted there by fellow soldiers?

Ms. BENEDICT: Yes, and it's so widely recognized that they were told this by their commanders, yeah, by the sergeants and so on.

BRAND: Well if they were told this by their sergeants and commanders, why weren't those commanders doing anything about it?

Ms. BENEDICT: There's of course been a long tradition of the military being all male, and there's a reluctance to change. There's a reluctance to cause any trouble or alienate soldiers by telling them that they have to treat women like equal and they can't behave as if they're in a frat house or a brothel because that makes you unpopular when you say things like that to the men.

Now that doesn't mean that there aren't commanders and sergeants and so on who don't say that. There are, and they seem to make a big difference when they don't tolerate that kind of behavior, but a lot of them aren't willing to make those waves.

BRAND: Let's talk about Iraq veteran Jennifer Springer. She was with the military police, and you interviewed her. She told you about being Iraq during the early days of the invasion. It was a violent night with bombs going off around them, and let's hear what she told you.

Ms. JENNIFER SPRINGER (Iraq War Veteran): It was – yeah, it was really, really cold that night, and they had told us, well, you know, sleep closer together. So everybody put their sleeping bags right next together. It just amazed me that – men are such pigs – that they would – this one guy in particular actually tried to do something. Like I was just scared to death. I really thought we were going to and here he was...

Ms. BENEDICT: Making moves on you.

Ms. SPRINGER: Making moves, yeah.

BRAND: So Helen Benedict, tell us more about this incident. What happened with Jennifer? Did she ever report that to anybody?

Ms. BENEDICT: Well firstly, they were in a huge tent where they would all sleep together, and there were only a handful of women, and all the rest were men. And there were mortars coming in, which is why she was so terrified, just to clarify that. She thought they were going to die because of the mortars coming in, and this guy is trying to climb into her sleeping bag.

No, she didn't report it. She said to me, as have many soldiers, you don't even know who to go to report. You sense right away that you would become ostracized, seen as a traitor by your fellow soldiers. You'd probably be dismissed. You might even be punished for making waves, and there was no way that she felt comfortable telling anybody about it at all.

BRAND: Of course the military says it has put in a program, a confidential reporting program, on its Web site for anyone to report incidents such as these, and does that, in effect, work?

Ms. BENEDICT: Those weren't in place yet when Jennifer was there, which was 2003. They were put in place later. But the trouble is that military platoons and units are small, insular places where gossip flies, and everybody knows everybody's business. Everybody is living with each other all the time. You know, it's like a huge dorm, and so – even a small dorm. So if you go and tell this, word spreads immediately. So the idea that you can actually remain anonymous and turn in a fellow soldier for a sexual assault or a rape is a myth.

BRAND: Are there any statistics or official numbers or even unofficial estimates as to how many women have suffered sexual assault by fellow members of the military in Iraq?

Ms. BENEDICT: There's none of Iraq alone yet. Nobody's looked at just Iraq. The doesn't isolate one war or the other. It puts together all the numbers in all the Middle East.

BRAND: Any idea, though, from your reporting how widespread the problem is?

Ms. BENEDICT: I would say that sexual harassment is ubiquitous. It could be 90 percent or even higher. Sexual assault – my guess is one in three or one in four. Rape, I think, is lower. Sexual assault is everything but rape, and attempted rape included. But it's really hard to guess. It always is with rape statistics, even in civilian life, because so many people don't want to report them.

BRAND: Helen Benedict, thank you very much for speaking with us.

Ms. BENEDICT: Thank you.

BRAND: Helen Benedict's article, "The Private War of Woman Soldiers," is at salon.com, and she's also writing a book about female veterans of the Iraq War.

BURBANK: You know, Madeleine, one of the female soldiers that Helen Benedict interviewed for her story on salon.com, she actually lives out in Rosemead.

BRAND: Rosemead, that's east of L.A., right?

BURBANK: Yeah, it's like 30 minutes. So yesterday, producer Neil Cruise and I, we went out to talk to her. Her name is Mickiela Montoya. She's 21, and like whatever stereotype you might have of a female soldier who's fought in Iraq, okay she is not it. She's got long hair and blonde highlights. And we showed up, she's watching "The Daily Show," and she's holding this teeny, tiny dog, a Chihuahua.

Specialist MICKIELA MONTOYA (Iraq Veteran): (Unintelligible) caller her the little baby. She's just a baby. Like, she has to be in my arms all day.

BURBANK: And she's got a real baby actually, too, a little girl on the way. The father is also in the military. Anyway, I asked her tell me about a time when she was in Tikrit walking back from her shift as a checkpoint guard.

Spc. MONTOYA: And Iraq, it's pitch black. You can't see your hand in front of your face. So I was walking back, and this guy mentioned to me – and there's generators. There's not electricity. So everything's like so loud, you can't hear anything.

And I was walking back to the thing, and he came beside me, and he said you know, if I was to rape you right now, nobody could hear you scream. You couldn't do anything because nobody would be able to see you. And I'm like what? And he's like what would you do, you know? And I'm like, I would stab you. I didn't have a knife, but I pretended like I did at that time. And he's like what? You don't have a knife. And I was like yes I do. And I just kept walking.

And this guy was (unintelligible) with me. I didn't tell anybody about that, but I just – from then on, I carried a knife, and I carried it, like, so that you can see it.

BURBANK: And you weren't carrying a knife because of the Iraqis.

Spc. MONTOYA: No. My M-16 was for that, but my knife was for, you know, people who were right beside me all the time.

BURBANK: Did you really feel like you might have to use it at some point or at lest it was really necessary to sort of sent a message?

Spc. MONTOYA: Definitely. I know how to, like, take it out of my pocket and sling it out fast. I was practicing that just in case I've ever – I ever needed to. I wouldn't carry it if I didn't think I really would have needed it.

BURBANK: Do you have the knife?

Spc. MONTOYA: Yeah, I was – it was over there on that table. I used to carry it – even when I came back I carried it with me. I kind of – I got caught in the club because they, you know, they do the metal detectors. With the – and they took it, but I showed them my military card. I'm like, I'm sorry, it's just something that I

feel comfortable with. And I slowly, slowly, slowly, a couple months ago I stopped carrying it.

BURBANK: So you're 19 years old. You're in Iraq. Are you constantly getting sort of hit on and comments made about you being a woman, or is it like that might happen once a day or once a week?

Spc. MONTOYA: No, it's constant. There's different people, like you see people – like the only time I would have other contact besides the people I was with would be when I would go to the lunch hall, and that's where a lot of times because you would be walking and then it just felt like you were like on stage or something. It made me uncomfortable when I got back into the United States. Now I'm dealing with men, like I forgot how to act around guys because I kind of kept myself so reserved.

BURBANK: Because people were taking it the wrong way in thinking that you're sort of interested in them romantically, or what sort of stuff happened?

Spc. MONTOYA: Yeah. They – I was being – like I had a lot of guy friends because there's mostly guys there. And they sort of like took it the wrong way. Later on I found out that they were saying that I was a stripper and that I was a hooker. So that's when I just decided that I can't have like that same personality with these people.

BURBANK: So obviously you're carrying a knife. Someone has alluded to the idea of raping you; this would be a very scary time. And yet you didn't report it to anyone. Why wouldn't you report that to your supervisors?

Spc. MONTOYA: Because in Iraq you deal with the same people every day, like I said. So it's not like they're going to get him and put him in jail. They're going to tell him and they would tell him that you said that and then you still have to deal with him. You still have to work with him. And if you don't have to work with him, then they'll put you somewhere else but you still got to live with him. That would just have to be another thing to worry about.

BURBANK: Did you end up feeling like you're sort of doing an act the whole time? Of like this girl who's sort of like it's okay to joke with and say sexually inappropriate stuff because you just thought the alternative was worse?

Spc. MONTOYA: Yeah, for sure. Like the whole acting – yeah, I definitely did that. Like, if you – the people over there, they don't even know me compared to the way I am here. I mean as a civilian I'm kind of crazy, you know, I'm a little outgoing, and over there I was just quiet. Like a lot of times they thought I was weird. But I would rather have them think I was weird than think I was a ho or try to come on to me even more.

BURBANK: Do you know if you're having a boy or girl?

Spc. MONTOYA: A girl. Know how I would – I already know your question. I don't even suggest my brother to join the military. That's your next question, right? Yeah. I'm not anti-military. I think that it could be good for some people, but I don't think that it's for everybody. I think that you need to be mentally strong. And I consider myself mentally strong and I think that's why I came okay. But like there's other people I've seen and I'm like this is not for them.

BURBANK: Specialist Mickiela Montoya, who served in the National Guard in Iraq in 2005. Thanks a lot for talking to us.

Spc. MONTOYA: Thank you.
(Soundbite of music)

BRAND: We asked the Pentagon to respond to this report. No spokesperson was made available but a statement was sent. And it reads, in part: We are removing barriers to reporting and creating a climate of confidence that encourages victims to come forward. And: Our training encourages people to report assaults because that is the only way to ensure that victims are treated and investigations can be initiated that will hold the offenders accountable for their crimes.

You can read the full statement on our Web site, npr.org.

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