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Sexual Assault in the Shadows: Male Victims in Military Cite Devastating Impact on Career, Life

By Sally Jacobs, Globe Staff

EVANSVILLE, Ind. – The call came shortly after dinner on a raw night this winter.

Mark Partridge sprang to the phone, eager to talk to his 20-year-old son, Brian, who had been based for more than a year on the USS Ardent, a minesweeper patrolling the Persian Gulf. Fulfilling a childhood dream to follow his father into service, it had been a moment of triumph when Brian landed a berth on the sleek gray ship.

But what his father now heard on the other end of the line was anything but triumphant. His only child was nearly hysterical, on the brink of tears.

“Dad, I’ve been raped,” the young man shouted, as both men recall it. “There’s blood all over the place.”

“Who did this?” demanded his father. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” said Partridge, standing in the apartment of the man he says assaulted him. “I beat him up bad.”

“Go to the base security,” his father commanded. “Right now.”

Partridge did just that. And then, almost immediately, he found himself caught in a legal labyrinth: Partridge’s account met mounting skepticism from military investigators, and he soon faced charges himself – a familiar pattern, according to other servicemen who have alleged abuse and some counselors who treat them.

In the end, humiliated and terrified of what might await him in the brig, Partridge agreed to an other-than-honorable discharge, abandoning his military career.

His case is unusual only in that he is talking about it. At a time when sexual assaults on women in uniform – from the Air Force Academy to Iraq – have scandalized the public

and put the Pentagon on the defensive, the troubling incidence of sex crimes against men in the service has languished in the shadows, comparatively unremarked.

It is well-populated shade. A Pentagon study of sexual assault in the military released in May found that 9 percent of the 2,012 reported victims of sexual assault in the armed forces in 2002 and 2003 were men. Most said they were assaulted by fellow servicemen. Those figures include 118 service members, some of them men, who say they were sexually assaulted during the current conflict.

In addition, the US Department of Veterans Affairs has found more men than women reporting that they experienced unwanted sexual attention during their service years – from rape to verbal harassment.

In fiscal year 2003, for example, 10,693 male veterans told the VA they had experienced such treatment, compared with 9,348 women.

The gender gap between those totals isn't surprising; far more men than women are served by the VA. Still, the sheer number of men who raise this issue with the VA screeners hints at the magnitude of the issue the military confronts.

“This is a subject that has been vastly overlooked,” said US Representative Louise M. Slaughter, Democrat of New York, and a strong advocate for sexual assault victims in the armed services. “I don't think any of us think of men as being rape victims, and certainly the military does not. I suspect men are quiet about it, because they want to preserve their career in the military.”

The US Department of Defense declined to discuss the incidence of sexual assaults on men or how the armed services are addressing the issue. But the department did express concern that the number of male rapes may be underreported.

“We recognize that sexual assaults are seriously underreported,” said Charles S. Abell, principal deputy under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in a statement, “and we have no reason to doubt that it is even more so in the case of male victims.”

The Globe interviewed eight men who said they were victims of sexual assault while in the military. While four of them said they never reported the offenses during their time in service, the other four said they did and wound up facing penalties themselves.

One, a former US Marine who said he was beaten and sexually assaulted in 1975 while in basic training, said he was dubbed a “training failure” after he complained and was required to leave the service.

Another, a Boston man who said he was raped while in basic training in the Army in 1978, was fined for an offense he says his commander never specified. Partridge was apparently the only one of the eight whose alleged assailant faced charges.

All of the men were reluctant to be named, in part out of fear that going public could jeopardize their VA benefits, in part out of embarrassment or shame. For if male rape is a topic that causes squeamishness in civilian society, it is, the men say, nearly taboo in the overwhelmingly male and hierarchical culture of the military, where two men having sex remains a crime. In the end, only four of the eight would consent to be quoted by name.

Met with Disbelief

Petty Officer 3d Class Brian Partridge says he did precisely what a rape victim in the military is supposed to do.

After hanging up with his father, he called his superior officer and remained in the apartment until two officers from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service arrived. He told them that after a night of drinking with other sailors at several local bars, he returned to the apartment of one of them for the night because the base curfew had passed.

Shortly after he went to sleep in the guest bed, he woke up to find his friend sexually assaulting him. Partridge, a slender man with trim blond hair, said he threw off his assailant and, enraged, beat him until the other man fled.

The following day, Partridge was questioned again at length. But this time, he said, the investigating officers did not seem to believe him.

“They were making sly comments. They asked me three or four times if I was sure I wasn’t gay, which I most definitely am not,” Partridge said. “They were just not listening to me.”

Several weeks later, Partridge said, his story had been “completely turned around” by investigators, and he was given a choice: admit to participating in consensual sodomy and to beating up the other man, or face court-martial on both counts. If convicted, he would probably have received a prison sentence and dishonorably discharged.

Partridge decided to accept what he and his father concluded was “the lesser of two evils.” In March, he admitted to the charges and received an other-than-honorable discharge. Now living with his parents, he recently started work on a construction site.

Lieutenant Christopher Servello, a spokesman for the US Navy, said the other sailor was charged with an offense in lieu of a court-martial and discharged. Servello would not say what the charge was or what kind of discharge the sailor received. The sailor could not be reached by the Globe. Although Partridge authorized the release of his military records, the Navy declined to provide them to the Globe. Servello said that Partridge’s naval attorney and his sexual assault counselor were unwilling to be interviewed.

But one naval official, in a letter to US Representative John N. Hostettler of Indiana, who looked into the matter at Partridge’s request, said that service investigators “determined that the alleged sexual assault was actually a case of consensual sodomy.”

For Mark Partridge, a Navy veteran himself, the outcome has been shattering. Devastated by the emotional storm that engulfed their only child, he and his wife separated for four months before reuniting in July. But he wonders whether his son will ever recover.

“They ruined him for life, you know,” declared the elder Partridge. “What happens to you when they throw you out and make you look like the dirty guy? How do you explain any of this to an employer? How do you explain any of it at all?”

And then he cried.

Culture of Aggression

Male victims in the service tend to be young, often newcomers to the deck or the field. Some have experienced personal misfortune, such as a previous incidence of abuse or the breakup of their family, and may project vulnerability, according to therapists who work with them. But because so few cases are reported, little more is known about why some men in uniform become victims of sexual assault.

Like rape of any kind, male-on-male assault is viewed by specialists as, in most cases, an act of power, not sexuality. Only about 2 to 5 percent of the men assaulted in the military are believed to be homosexual, according to estimates by some therapists.

The therapists know less about the perpetrators; they rarely have clinical contact with them. But some believe that aspects of military culture may abet sexual abuses.

“Sexual assault in the military goes back to the beginning of time and mostly of men,” said John Carracher, a clinical psychologist with the VA Medical Center in West Palm Beach, Fla., who works with men who have been sexually assaulted. “The culture itself contributes to all forms of aggression, and that includes rape.”

Still, there is little, if any, evidence that male-on-male rape is more common in the armed services than in civilian society. The finding of the 2004 Pentagon Task Force Report on Care For Victims of Sexual Assault – that 9 percent of those alleging sexual assault are men – falls in the midrange of similar surveys outside the military. While the surveys cannot be compared directly, the US Department of Justice’s National Violence Against Women Survey conducted in 1995 and 1996 found that 17.6 percent of the women surveyed said they had been the victim of rape or attempted rape; 3 percent of the men said they had been similarly victimized. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey of 2002 found that 12.8 percent of victims of rape or attempted rape in 2002 were male.

Few believe those numbers fully reflect the scope of the problem, in either the civilian or military world. The Pentagon’s report cites several reasons that service men and women are often unwilling to report sexual assault, including fear of reprisals by the offender and concern that, “the chain of command . . . would not believe them and would ignore the

complaint altogether.” Also, the report found “a general perception that reporting a male-against-male sexual assault might cause people to question the victim’s sexual orientation.”

Carlos Guice had little doubt about that conclusion. And so he kept quiet for years.

“Why would I ever bring it up to anyone?” said Guice, 43, of Tampa, Fla., who said he was raped in 1983 by a superior officer while stationed at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. “People would think I was gay. You would be ostracized.”

And so, Guice, then 21, did what therapists say many victims do: He blamed himself. The victim of physical and sexual abuse as a child, he knew the risks of speaking up. Besides, he said his alleged assailant, an officer, had warned him that no one would take the word of an enlisted man.

In despair, Guice twice tried to commit suicide while still in the Air Force, swallowing fistfuls of Valium. Sent to a psychologist, he was eventually given an administrative discharge. Guice ultimately wound up at the VA hospital in Bay Pines, Fla., which has a residential program for men who have been sexually assaulted during military service.

‘A Walk in Hell’ Greg Helle didn’t tell for 31 years. He was 18 when he arrived in Vietnam in the spring of 1969, a scrubbed-face Iowa boy with coke-bottle eyeglasses. What he says happened to him in his first few months there would alter his life forever. On a hot night in June, shortly after Helle fell into a drunken sleep in his bunk, another soldier slid in behind him. Helle, now 53, wrote of what happened next in his book, “A Walk in Hell,” which was published two years ago.

“I remember my legs being forced apart,” Helle wrote. “I remember trying to turn over, but being forced back down. I will always remember his face.”

Helle didn’t speak up for several reasons. Ashamed that he had not been able to stop the attack, he knew that if anyone found out he would not be able to face them. There was also his assailant to consider, a large man who eyed him angrily from across the barracks.

Helle went on to live an outwardly conventional life. He married, had two children, and settled in a comfortable suburb near Des Moines. If his family wondered why he always kept a pair of 4-inch knives strapped to his body, and a 6-inch hunting blade in his bedstand, as he still does, they did not ask.

Like many male rape victims, Helle struggled with a need to constantly reassert his manhood. In 2001, he was arrested in a prostitution sting. (“The more women I had,” he recalled, “the more manly I was.”) His daughter, an officer with the Des Moines Police Department, was on patrol that day. Afterward, Helle told his wife, Alice, what had really happened to him in Vietnam.

“He had told me years back this guy had tried to attack him and that he had leveled him,” recalled Alice, breaking into tears. “I think he told me the version he wished had happened.”

And so the facade of normalcy began to crumble. Shortly after her husband’s arrest, Alice Helle returned home from work to find him sitting in the garage smoking a cigarette and slashing his arms with a knife.

“He looked like he’d been in a fight with a cat,” said Alice Helle.

In 2001, Helle attempted suicide at least four times, according to his VA record, and was hospitalized repeatedly, ultimately landing at the Bay Pines program. Two years ago, Helle was diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and he now receives monthly VA benefits of \$2,318. In deciding to award him benefits, the VA concluded that Helle’s disorder was related to both his combat experience and “to the claimed sexual assault which were reasonably verified.”

Helle feels better now, thanks in part to an array of medications and to a support group for veterans called the PTSD Alliance which he started two years ago. But he remains consumed by what happened to him. He spends many afternoons in his basement office, a dim cubicle that he calls his “bunker,” searching websites for his assailant. He has tried unsuccessfully over the years to find him, unsure, at some level, if he really wants to.

“If I found him, I would have to kill him,” Helle said, fingering one of the three knives he keeps lined neatly near his computer. “When he breathes his last breath I want him to be looking at me.”

Specific Services

If Helle had sought help back in 1969, there would not have been much available to him. But much has changed in recent years. The growing ranks of women in uniform – now 15 percent of all service personnel – has, by many accounts, made the US military more responsive to issues of gender and sexuality.

“Women really dragged the men along on this one,” said Lisa Fisher, clinical director at the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Boston Healthcare System.

At the VA, for example, every veteran seeking services is asked if they were the victim of sexual harassment or sexual assault while in the military – the system calls it “military sexual trauma” or MST. The department has also begun to provide services designed specifically for men.

“These are people whose lives changed trajectory,” said Dr. Terence Keane, director of the National Center for PTSD in Boston. “It is incredibly complicated for a young man. Your whole sense of self is altered. It is shattering on many levels.”

What happens to men who do report sexual crimes while still in uniform is difficult to quantify. Pentagon investigators puzzled in their report over “why many initial reports of sexual assault do not result in criminal convictions” but said incomplete data made the question impossible to answer.

The report found that, in the last two calendar years, courts-martial were started in 26 percent of the cases involving military offenders in the various services, the army excepted. Military justice action was taken in more than 39 percent of the cases. But among the veterans interviewed by the Globe there was a clear sense that, as in the case with Brian Partridge, reporting an offense led to trouble not so much for their assailants as for them.

“Brian has repeated almost verbatim what has happened to many men I have seen,” said Roger J. Girard, a former VA therapist who started a men’s group at the VA hospital at Bay Pines in the mid-1990s. “The victim is portrayed as the perpetrator, especially with men, to save face.”

Partridge’s case is also similar to others in that it is hard to discern exactly what happened. As with many rapes, there were only two people present during the incident and their stories apparently differ.

As the Pentagon report points out, often in such cases the only indisputable fact is that sex occurred. Partridge believes military investigators decided that he had consented to have sex with his assailant and then changed his mind after it was over in order to save face.

But if that were so, as Partridge points out, would he not have kept quiet about the matter? Why would he have gone to authorities and drawn public attention to this case? Shortly after he was discharged, Partridge contacted the offices of Senator Richard Lugar and Hostettler, both Indiana Republicans.

Looking back, Partridge wonders if he made the right choice in signing papers that say he did something he insists he did not do.

“It killed me to sign this thing, just killed me,” said Partridge, clenching a copy of the agreement in his fist.

The other-than-honorable discharge that Partridge received still burns like shrapnel. It means that he is unlikely to receive any federal benefits for his two years of Navy service.

It means he will have to find something else to do with his life. And it means that when he passes the living room shelves heavy with his ROTC awards and photographs of him in the service he can no longer bring himself to look.

“When I was a little kid, all I wanted to do was go into the military, you know, like a little Rambo,” said Partridge, stubbing out his cigarette. “But it’s not like they show in the posters. It’s not like that at all.”

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