

New York Times Op-Ed

What Happens When a Rape Goes Unreported

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I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy when one day at lunch the nine men with whom I shared a table started discussing sexual assault. It was February 2003, and seven current and former Air Force Academy cadets had just appeared on “20/20,” shocking the country with their stories of having been raped and then punished for reporting the rapes.

The senior cadet at the table asked, “What do you think of those whores who are tarnishing our academy?” The first-year across from me answered, “Sir, I think a woman who gets herself raped isn’t strong enough to defend herself, let alone the country, and shouldn’t be in the military.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” the senior cadet said.

This one conversation among my classmates, my “brothers in arms,” helped me to fully understand why I had remained silent after my own rape. My classmates had made the implicit cultural belief explicit: Victims were to be blamed for their rapes, and if they lost their military careers for it, all the better.

It had been a snowy Saturday evening when, two years earlier, a senior cadet who had offered to help me study raped me in a secluded area on the library floor. I was 18 and had been a cadet for only six months. I told no one, not even a few days later when I developed symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease — herpes. Not even two weeks later, when the herpes virus traveled to my nervous system and spread to my spinal cord and the tissue around my brain, causing meningitis. I was immediately admitted into the academy’s intensive care unit, but when the Air Force doctor asked me if I was sexually active, I said no. I wouldn’t dare risk my career by telling him the truth of what had happened to me; so the virus that caused my infection went untreated.

Over the next several years, I spent hundreds of days in and out of hospitals. I developed what may be a lifelong, chronic daily headache disorder. Several years ago, I got a device called a peripheral nerve stimulator implanted near my brain, which made it possible for me to work and exercise again, but I am still in pain daily.

I also lost my career and my dream of becoming a pilot, and the Air Force lost a competent and devoted officer candidate. Two years after my first hospitalization, in 2004, I was medically discharged from the military. The consequences of not reporting my rape were direct, to me and to my country.

Not all Air Force Academy cadets believe victims are to be blamed, and not all commanders — or future commanders, like the one at my table — promote misogyny and sexual harassment. But during the 2003 scandal, the voices of those who did become deafening to me. Research shows that in military units in which commanders initiate or even just tolerate sexual harassment, the likelihood of sexual assault triples or quadruples. What is clear is that the cultural belief systems trickle down from commanders.

Leadership matters, especially at a time when the commander in chief of our armed forces is a man who thinks it acceptable to brag openly about sexual assault and who has numerous accusations against him. I worry what will happen to the estimated 20,000 service members who are sexually assaulted annually — men as well as women — under the Trump administration.

Recent studies have found that roughly a third of rapes and sexual assaults are reported to the police. In the military, the number is even lower. This should come as no surprise, when the culture minimizes sexual assault, disbelieves survivors and pardons perpetrators. Victims can’t be forced to file charges; we have to change this culture.

My attacker was accused of raping at least two more women in just the four months after my attack, before he was ultimately incarcerated for another assault. And while the consequences of

unreported, untreated rapes are not always as obvious as in my case, they are often devastating. How many women and men will stay silent as I did? How many will get ill as a result? How many will develop post-traumatic stress disorder?

At the Veterans Affairs Center for Sexual Trauma Services at Bay Pines, Fla., I got to know a woman who had been raped when she was in the military during World War II. She kept her rape secret for decades, until the year before we met, when one of her doctors asked her if she had ever been raped. I was 21; she was in her 80s. Her post-traumatic stress disorder nearly destroyed her life.

We have no way of knowing how many competent service members the military loses every year to sexual assault. Many then turn to Veterans Affairs for health care. My rape alone has already cost the federal government more than a million dollars. We can't afford this. The military needs strong leaders who will loudly counter the normalization of sexual violence, who appreciate the contributions of service members of any gender and who recognize the costs of staying silent.

Lynn K. Hall is the author of "Caged Eyes: An Air Force Cadet's Story of Rape and Resilience," from which this essay was adapted.