

Sexual Harassment

A rat in wolves' clothing

by Capt Arion J. Friday

“**Y**ou’re done, you hear me? Get out of my sight, and you’re not going back to your unit. I don’t want you around my Marines!” That was the coldest I’ve ever seen the old man, his eyes wide and frigidly serious. Was he really doing this? Is this really happening? Next, the sergeant major escorts me to a waiting room across the hall and then locks the door behind me. Silence. Then it hits me. I’m screwed.

But wait, how did I get here? I’m still a good Marine. I’ve earned my rank—doesn’t that count for something? Why am I locked at parade rest in this crappy room, while in the other room my life is being stripped away? What am I going to tell my friends, my family, my loved ones? Am I going to jail?

Command Responsibility

The hypothetical scenario above isn’t such a farfetched one, and it’s vague enough to apply to almost any non-judicial punishment or court-martial where the consequence is severe enough to evoke the tremendous power burning beneath the gavel of any commanding general or commanding officer. But, because it isn’t specifically attached to an actual event, it doesn’t create a sense of *empathy* strong enough to convince any reader of an imminent, personal danger or concern. Instead, it’s more likely to create the less involved “sucks-to-be-that-guy” response, detaching the reader from the scenario almost immediately after reading it, similar in fashion to the responses associated with the topic at hand, which is likely to turn off ears and roll eyes at its mere and unrelentingly repetitive mention recently: sexual harassment and assault. But I’m not writing today to beat the dead horse of statistics and clichés; instead, I urge you—no, I *beg* you—as individuals, to get involved as best you can when the

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Are Marines convinced there is a problem? (Photo from www.marines.mil)

existing opportunities present themselves. I hope the following words are at least thought provoking, because like it or not, we *will* continue to meet this age-old foe on this highly relevant and intangible battlefield.

The zero-tolerance sexual assault prevention response (SAPR) approach to sexual assault and sexual harassment (SASH) is meant to be a proactive measure, but it really implies itself as just a reactive certainty of punitive action. Sadly, the fear of punishment isn’t a potent enough deterrent for offenders, especially since that punishment is usually ambiguous or completely left up to the

imagination when mentioned during annual or Secretary of the Navy–directed training. The “that’ll never happen to me anyway” attitude nests itself in the mind, brooding complacency until an offender inevitably finds himself in a scenario like the one that opened this article. Mistakes happen as Marines journey along the learning curve, but SASH is no mistake. It’s a *crime*. It’s a premeditated *choice* to pursue selfishness over loyalty at the expense of a weaker target for temporary or enduring control and/or pleasure. It’s an issue of character for all concerned (i.e., the offender, the victim, and any third party involved).

As with the taking of any physical combat objective, we must apply maneuver warfare. To combat offenders at their emotional, root-cause inspirations, we need psychological fires. In conjunction, we need to train potential victims and third parties (which are *all hands*, until an incident) to recognize the offender profile so that they can appropriately escape and evade *before* an unfavorable situation develops. This puts a heavy responsibility on all hands to always and faithfully look after one another, but also to maintain constant vigilance against an unseen threat by readily recognizing (as muscle memory) the dangerous trending conditions that facilitate these incidents (e.g., alcohol, attempts to isolate individuals, inadequate prior planning, or even just the lack of simple GOTWAs ((G) where I'm going, (O) others I'm taking, (I) time of my return, (W) what to do if I don't return, (A) actions to take if I'm hit or actions to take if you're hit (5-point contingency plan)), etc.). It's starting to sound more like counterinsurgency operations the more it's described like in a combat context, I know. But that's just it—we're Marines 24/7 and our enemy in this case is very close to home, not only blending into the population but laying dormant in the mind, like a sleeper cell waiting for the right conditions and a target of opportunity.

I was pleased to learn that SgtMaj Michael P. Barrett, 17th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, is working to develop a "scared straight" video that bears resemblance to the first-person narratives from convicted drunk drivers, but with SASH offenders. It would be a definite step up from the hypothetical SAPR videos, the efforts of which I applaud, but the acting and plot so poor that they greatly detracted from the message within. Perhaps I just saw a bad one, but nonetheless, we could do better, and I'm glad we're already trying. In an age where we are all immersed in an electronic sea of information streaming its way into our daily professional and personal lives, educational and professional military education efforts must improve in order to compete with the bandwidth we consume every hour of every day. In following SgtMaj Barrett's



There is a heavy responsibility on all hands to take care of each other. (Photo from www.marines.mil)

nontraditional approach, a SAPR lesson should be taken from the page of consumer analysts who have created a \$5 billion market to the subconscious with extreme proficiency via a method called "consumer priming." Priming is an implicit memory effect in which exposure to a stimulus influences a response to a later stimulus.¹ For example, if a person reads a list of words including the word *table*, and is later asked to complete a

. . . the person almost reflexively sees what they are implicitly told to see.

word starting with *tab*, the probability that he or she will answer *table* is greater than if they are not primed. In other words, the person almost reflexively sees what they are implicitly told to see. An effective application, though certainly not the only one, could be improving SAPR posters from the routine group of servicemembers in uniform or victim advocate's picture and contact information to a poster with added priming: Imagine how much more effective subconsciously it would be to see a picture

of a distressed female (for example) being suggestively engulfed by darkness by an attacker with a caption of "YOU COULD SAVE HER. . ." and then the uniformed victim advocate's point of contact and picture in a corner at the bottom.

Not only does it provide the necessary information but it also subliminally plants a visual reference to the very type of warning signs and dangerous trending conditions mentioned earlier. Viewers can identify with that kind of visual cue, if properly primed. The caption also reminds Marines of our inherent devotion and desire to help those in need. If the imagery is strong enough, viewers are more likely to recall it when invited to an isolated area for whatever reason. The keys to success are fresh, new formats for the information that breach the desensitization of the topic due to PowerPoint Land, and immerse the audience into difficult situations. MarineNet does a decent job of creating near-real training with its new virtual survival, evasion, resistance, escape (known as SERE) training module. With some creativity, that's a potentially excellent medium for practicing tough, realistic decisions, from multiple perspectives, while subconsciously cultivating uniformed responses to relatable scenarios and locations. It may require pushing the boundaries of the

accepted norm, but with the Corps' available resources, I'm sure we can create an effective-yet-tasteful realism. Ultimately, Marines need to be able to identify threats, sense danger areas, and recall their rules of engagement and training regardless of time or circumstance. The institution must provide the trend analysis and tools to enable these objectives. Additionally, the command is responsible for screening the uniformed victim advocates who are selected to represent us all. These personnel should be subject to in-depth psychological screening during their selection process in order to facilitate preventing the provision of authority to the very types of profiled individuals we're trying to combat. Qualification for appointment should not be taken lightly, as these individuals tackle some of the toughest issues that warriors cannot handle themselves. Uniformed victim advocates must be absolutely devoted to their billets, not just arbitrarily filling a collateral duty. With the wide range

of victims and affected personnel in the Operating Forces and Supporting Establishment, it shouldn't be hard to find passionate volunteers whose personal incentive might match the effort required.

To Victims

With a rise in reported sexual assaults in the military from 3,192 in 2011 to 3,374 in 2012 (as cited by a *New York Times* article (Jennifer Steinhauer, "Sexual Assaults in Military Raise Alarm in Washington," 7 May) and reportedly stated in a recent Pentagon-released finding), it's staggering to realize that the numbers represent the much smaller fraction of total assaults. The vast majority still go unreported. I said no statistics, so I'll leave the numbers there. I mention the unreported incidents, though, to highlight a few commonplace ideas that address the lone-wolf trends in victims that I suspect, but cannot confirm without a history of analysis:

- Do not make yourself an easy target.
- Be responsible with and around alcohol.
- Ignorance is only bliss when there is no consequence—there is always consequence.
- Do not take unnecessary risks.
- Have a plan.
- Have a buddy.
- Know the "enemy's" tactics, techniques, and procedures.
- *Never* be complacent!

Victim counts are rising—a tragic idea, but one of hope and strength as well, because you are not alone.

There is strength and recovery in numbers. I urge you to seek counsel in support groups and those who you trust. Uniformed victim advocates and Military OneSource are free and helpful sources for relief. Emotional suppression has proven unhealthy in other areas like substance abuse, domestic violence, and posttraumatic stress disorder; this is no different. There is always help available to those in need, and you're



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Marine Corps Gazette • December 2013

www.mca-marines.org/gazette 53

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never alone, despite what you may feel. In fact, you have the greatest power of the three SAPR incident-related personnel categories (victim, offender, and third party) because you hold the key to prevention and analysis for future victims. Your extraordinary bravery in facing your fears, reporting the incident (restricted or unrestricted), and enabling the trend analysis necessary to create accurate criminal profiles can help authorities, trainers, and potential future victims identify offenders before the next incident. Your selfless sacrifice would be immeasurably important in making things as right as possible while empowering you and potentially saving countless others from the same fate. You have the power—I pray you have the courage. Accurate, truthful reports truly do help, no matter how old the incident or how much time has passed.

Regarding Offenders

I can't stress enough how important it is to be able to better-identify potential offenders as early as possible. I'm not arguing for a scarlet letter or sexual predator registration, instead I reiterate the need for educating servicemembers on the criminal profile, specific trends, and tactics, techniques, and procedures adopted by offenders of these heinous crimes. Not only would this make the offensive traits easier to identify, but it would force Marines to be more introspective in examining their own actions as they compare themselves to the traits and actions they learn during training, thereby helping us to sharpen ourselves and our perceptions of ourselves through more tough training, showing us the hard-to-swallow dark sides of human nature on a personal level.

A similar effect of personal shock and awe was achieved in 2007 when we all saw the graphic and real horror of the beheadings in Iraq. Marines experienced a huge surge of patriotism and sense of righteousness. We each immediately confirmed who our enemy was and why. The violent act itself became the symbol of injustice that we rallied against for years. SASH offenders have collectively and individually done more than enough damage to inspire a similar

response if audiences are armed with more information to rally behind the cause. So much is left to the imagination for the sake of censorship that it's hard to see the real terror and disgusting truth behind these SASH incidents.

To add to the already appalling nature of all the aforementioned fears and facts are the recent developments that are centered on SAPR personnel who themselves commit sexual assault or sexual harassment. Air Force LtCol Jeff Krusinski and an Army specialist first class (whose identity has not yet been released by the Army) were both SAPR representatives, yet both have very recently been arrested in sexual assault-related incidents. This further reinforces my suggestion for the intense psychological screening of the personnel selected to protect and advocate on our behalfs.

To Third Parties

"Hurts one, affects all" is the appropriate tag that captures the truth of these incidents. I say "appropriate," but is it adequate? From every discussion I've sat in on, the primary focus for this tag is the affect on operational tempo, such as the effect caused when a victim is gone from the workspace following an incident and coworkers have to step up to cover the loss. Is that really the intent of the tag? Instead, I submit that we may be missing the gravity of the situation. Think about the husbands and wives and boyfriends and girlfriends who must face the unwarranted-but-justified reclusiveness of their victimized loved one. Think about the rumor mill at work, as coworkers piece together gossip about the events that may have happened, which probably detracts more from operational tempo than an absent person. Think about the awkward affects on small unit leadership as a courageous victim returns to work to lead Marines or be led by seniors who are too cautious to truly help with the transition. Think about the effects on SAPR training when they are ramped up at the next earliest opportunity, fire-hosing more information in an effort to reeducate with an increased quantity—but not quality—of training. We can be repeatedly told how important this

is, but until we can find the true reason *why* for ourselves, we'll never possess the full belief in the content we attempt to learn. Until we invest our faith and willingly submit to the empathy of the training, it will become more and more of a chore than a useful medium for education, protection, and readiness.

Ofentimes we get caught up with the idea that there are too many permutations, too many different circumstances, to truly forecast these types of incidents. I say "no." If you take the time to work through every incident, you will absolutely find that there is definitely a way to prevent each one. The current problem is a lack of actionable information. Without good intelligence on the enemy, we'll never see him coming. Even still, the proverbial hair stands up on the back of your neck when you sense danger in these instances too. When we choose to disregard potential dangers, or just don't see them coming, we create the opportunities the offenders desperately need for success. We walk right into their center of gravity and find ourselves making tons of excuses for why we shouldn't get involved when something seems awry when it's equally simple to at least ask a question or make a bold call reinforced with good intentions.

>Author's Note: On multiple occasions, I have had second- or third-hand exposure to the effects that sexual assault can have on loved ones and/or friends. It is an inescapable reality that requires decisive engagement, patience, and genuine and lasting concern.

Note

1. The definition of "priming psychology" is available at www.wikipedia.org.



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Go to www.mca-marines.org/forum.
Don't forget our blog at mcgacttc.blogspot.com.