

# Sacramento Bee

March 19, 2005

## Assault Policy Altered; Military Increases Victim Confidentiality

By Pamela Martineau and Steve Wiegand, Bee Staff Writers

Stung by reports of hundreds of sexual assaults on women in the Iraq combat theater and at U.S. military academies, the Pentagon on Friday announced a new policy designed to make it easier for victims to seek treatment and counseling while keeping their cases confidential.

Department of Defense officials said the new policy should alleviate victims' fears that reporting an assault automatically would result in a potentially traumatic criminal investigation.

The policy still would allow victims to seek a criminal probe after they had received medical aid and counseling.

"Providing confidentiality to victims will actually increase the probability that cases will be reported, cases that are currently unknown to us," David Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said at a Pentagon press briefing.

"While we want to sustain good order and discipline by holding those who assault their fellow service members accountable for their actions, first and foremost we want victims to come forward for help."

The new policy, which goes into effect for all military branches in 90 days, is a marked departure from the services' current practice of requiring reports of sexual assaults to be forwarded to criminal investigators and commanding officers.

The policy does contain exceptions. For example, a commander would be notified without the victim's consent if it is deemed necessary for protection of the victim or others.

Critics of the current policy say that mandatory reporting to commanders and mandatory criminal investigations discourage victims from seeking help because they want to avoid damage to their military careers or their reputations.

"There is a real fear that reporting an assault is going to trigger questions about their own behavior," said Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for the Miles Foundation, which aids victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in military families. "So they don't report these cases."

The Miles Foundation says it has received reports of 316 cases of sexual assault in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait from August 2002 through this week. Foundation and Pentagon officials agree those numbers do not match reality - in fact, one Department of Veterans Affairs study found nearly 75 percent of military women who said they had been assaulted did not tell their commanding officer.

In a four-part series published in The Bee earlier this month, called "Women at War," dozens of female military personnel said their experience in the combat theater was marred by a sexually charged atmosphere that made them continually afraid of being harassed, or worse, by male colleagues.

They also said they were reluctant to formally report such incidents because the assailants often were their superiors in rank, or friends of those in charge of the investigations.

Sanchez said that such concerns mean many women who were assaulted in the combat zone do not seek medical help or counseling until they return to the United States, often months after the event.

"They are not getting tested for sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy or HIV," she said. "In addition, 90 percent of victims experience what we call 'rape trauma' within 30 days of the assault ... and without treatment, the symptoms can go from anxiety and sleeplessness to suicide."

Announcement of the new policy came as the Pentagon released results of its first comprehensive study of assaults at military academies. The report by the Defense Department's Office of Inspector General said that more than half of the women enrolled and 11 percent of the men reported some form of sexual harassment.

Respondents said they had experienced 367 cases of sexual assault at the academies between 1999 and 2004. More than 80 percent of the incidents were aimed at women, who represent about 16 percent of the student populations. Less than one-third of those incidents were reported to authorities, the survey found.

The survey and new policy came amid increasing criticism of the Pentagon's ability to manage the country's two-gender military. Women now make up about 15 percent of active duty military personnel and about 17 percent of the National Guard and Reserves.

In October, an eight-person military team called the Joint Task Force for Sexual Assault Prevention and Response was formed. The group has announced new policies that require more support for victims and more awareness training.

While praising the reporting policy announced Friday as "a definite step in the right direction," Sanchez also pinpointed its flaws. For one, she said, it covers only women in uniform and does not extend to civilian employees of the Department of Defense or to spouses or children of military members.

Susan Avila-Smith, a Washington state-based advocate for victims of military sexual trauma, said she is concerned about those provisions in the policy that would allow commanders still to be notified without victims' consent. The policy, she said, contains no assurances that a victim's privacy would be respected in those instances.

"I don't have high hopes for this," said Avila-Smith, adding that "commanders will probably still talk" about the assaults.

Both Avila-Smith and Sanchez said the policy also fails to provide adequate resources to ensure that assault victims who seek assistance in the Iraq combat theater can get it.

"We still have instances of women being handed high doses of antibiotics in assault cases and being told, 'Don't worry, this will kill anything,' or being handed something as an 'emergency contraceptive' without being told what potential effects it might have," Sanchez said. "They have to do better than that."

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For more information: read The Bee's special report "Women at War," about the military's failure to address the issues presented by a two-gender force, please go to [www.sacbee.com/projects](http://www.sacbee.com/projects).

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