

# Indianapolis Star

March 1, 2005

## Recruiter Accused of Sex Assaults; Counts Against Guardsman Involve 6 Young Women

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[NOBLESVILLE, Ind.] – Investigators say he picked out teens and young women with backgrounds that made them vulnerable to authority. As a military recruiter, he had access to personal information, making the quest easier.

Indiana National Guard Sgt. Eric P. Vetesy, 36, Westfield, was jailed Monday, accused of sexually assaulting six female recruits – most of them Noblesville High School students – he met during his 18 months as a full-time recruiter. Hamilton County investigators said Monday he is accused of raping at least one recruit.

Nationwide, military recruiters reportedly have been linked to at least a half-dozen sexual assault during the past few years, since the creation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. This broad education law requires, among other things, that high schools give military recruiters greater access to students.

The 31-count indictment filed in Hamilton Superior Court implicates Vetesy in a pattern of sexual misconduct during a period from May 2002 to November 2003. Authorities said the incidents occurred after his assignment as a recruiter in August 2001.

The six women identified in the indictment as his victims ranged in age from 17 to 21 at the time of the alleged assaults.

The Star generally does not identify victims of sexual abuse.

“These were very young women who are being recruited out of high school classes,” said Hamilton County Prosecutor Sonia Leerkamp. “Most of these activities took place either before they signed up as an actual recruit for the National Guard, or just after their recruitment.” Leerkamp said investigators suspect there may be more victims.

### Complains began in 2004

Vetesy was being held in the Hamilton County Jail charged with rape, sexual battery, battery, attempted sexual battery, official misconduct and corrupt business influence. Bond was set at \$100,000.

Noblesville Police Chief Richard J. Russell said the complaints against Vetesy began in January 2004, while he was assigned to the National Guard armory in Noblesville and the Guard's Castleton recruiting office. As a recruiter, he visited Noblesville and Westfield high schools. Guard officials transferred him to a recruiting post with a New Castle unit after an inconclusive inquiry into the first complaint. After two other complaints surfaced in May – one of them a claim of rape – all three cases were referred to police for criminal investigation. The Guard is cooperating with civilian investigators and will not seek to prosecute Vetesy under military law.

“Our normal procedures are that if charges are determined to be of a serious nature we will refer the case to civil authorities,” said a prepared statement from Capt. Lisa Kopczynsky, the Guard's public affairs officer.

Vetesy, who became a recruiter in August 2001, remains in the Indiana National Guard but is no longer assigned to recruiting.

Vetesy's attorney, Andrew M. Barker, said he had not talked with his client about the charges and could not comment.

“I do not know what evidence the state has utilized to persuade the grand jury to return an indictment,” he said.

#### Women called vulnerable

Leerkamp said the felon charge of corrupt business influence is based on “particular pattern of abuse” and Vetesy's position of trust. She said he preyed on young women whose background, as well as their age, made them particularly vulnerable.

For example, she said, most were in single-parent families with no father figure. Because Vetesy assembled background information on each recruit, she added, he was able to target those he most likely could coerce.

“This is one of the most heinous investigations of this type that I've ever seen, and one of the worst abuses of authority,” Leerkamp said.

Noblesville Police Detective Mike Sadler said his investigation showed that Vetesy, who is married and has children, quickly took advantage of his position of trust and authority. “Some of the incidents did occur at the armory,” said Sadler, alluding to at least one encounter in which Vetesy is accused of pushing a woman against the wall of a supply cage and trying to kiss her. “Some of them occurred when he would pick up the females and drive them down to what's called MEPS, which is the swearing-in ceremony.”

MEPS stands for Military Entrance Processing Station, the Indianapolis facility where recruits are officially enlisted.

According to the indictment, Vetesy put his hand on the woman's leg and touched her inappropriately while they were driving to the enlistment center. Later, after returning to the

armory, the charges state, he committed sexual battery by pushing her to a wall of the supply room and touching her inappropriately again.

Detective Sadler said most victims had been Noblesville High School students who first met Vetesy during a lunch break.

“We have recruiters from the armed forces and from college who come in on an almost daily basis,” said Noblesville Schools’ spokeswoman Sharon Trisler, who said each group sets up tables and answers questions for any inquiring student.

“The kids come up to them. They’re in full view. They’re not off in one room or anything like that,” said Trisler, who said no one had complained about Vetesy. “Whether there’s policy changes that need to be made, that’s something that we’ll need to look at.”

Military recruiters who visit Westfield High School have to request permission from the guidance department to set up tables in the cafeteria.

“That’s done in the cafeteria during lunch time only,” said Tenna Pershing, school district spokeswoman. “It’s up to the students to decide whether or not they want to approach the table.” One woman says she was raped by Vetesy at the Castleton recruiting center in Marion County in June 2003. Chief Deputy Prosecutor Barbara J. Trathen said that woman, who was 17 or 18 at the time, like others had resisted advances by Vetesy but did not quickly report them.

“It isn’t really that unique in these kinds of situations – authority figures,” Trathen said. “No one immediately reported because they have the authority issue, the trust issue and the what’s-going-to-happen-to-me issue in the National Guard.”

Michael Berg, director of the Carolina Peace Resource Center, an anti-war group opposed to military recruitments in schools, said “It does not surprise me. I don’t think, in general, we should disparage all recruiters as sexual predators. However, they have undue influence and access to our schools.”

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires high schools to give military recruiters access to juniors and seniors – names, addresses and phone numbers – unless written objection is made by parents.

“They can walk around our hallways and be involved with students the way others are not allowed,” Berg said in a telephone interview from Columbia, S.C. “Regulations to protect students go by the wayside when it comes to recruiters.”

#### “Reluctant to say anything”

Once Vetesy had access to students, they were hesitant to report incidents, Chief Russell said. “Some of those people were a little reluctant to say anything because this was a supervisor...and they were concerned about their military career,” he said.

The official state response said that, after Vetesy was transferred, restrictions were imposed to prevent him from interacting with female recruits in the Indiana Guard, which includes reserve Air Force and Army components.

“The nature and character of these allegations run counter to our organizational values and state policies,” said the statement, which spokeswoman Kopczynski released late Monday afternoon after it was approved by the Guard’s commander, Adjutant General R. Martin Umbarger.

“It is the policy of the Indiana National Guard to ensure that all soldiers are treated with respect and courtesy and to provide a working environment that is free of any overt or subtle form of sexual harassment or intimidation.”

Maj. Gen. Umbarger, who was unavailable for comment, was appointed commander just after Guard officials received the first complaint against Vetesy, and after controversy over recruiting practices under Umbarger’s predecessor.

The recruiting scandal exposed how more than 100 soldiers had been enlisted based on forged physical exam forms. In the house-cleaning that followed, with some recruiters being fired, Vetesy was hired.

Gov. Mitch Daniels said Monday that he wanted to talk to National Guard officials before discussing the allegations at length.

“If true, it’s horrible,” he said.

*Star reporter Barb Berggoetz contributed to this report.*

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## **RECRUITER FACES 31 CRIMINAL COUNTS**

- A grand jury indictment filed in Hamilton Superior Court charges Sgt. Eric P. Vetesy with 31 criminal violations as a recruiter for the Indiana National Guard between May 2002 and November 2003. According to the indictment, Vetesy:
- Forced himself on a woman inside a National Guard recruiting center in Castleton in June 2003, resulting in a charge of rape, a Class B felony.
- Engaged in a pattern of criminal activity in which he used his position as the victims' recruiting sergeant, resulting in a charge of corrupt business influence, a Class C felony. By force or threat of force, touched six women in a criminal act to arouse his sexual desires, resulting in a charge of sexual battery, a Class D felony.
- Tried to kiss a woman who crossed her arms over her chest and bent her head, resulting in a charge of attempted sexual battery, a Class D felony.
- Committed criminal acts prohibited as a recruiter and sergeant in the Indiana National Guard, resulting in a charge of official misconduct, a Class A misdemeanor.

- Rubbed a woman's thigh after she had pushed his hand away, resulting in a charge of battery, a Class B misdemeanor.

– James A. Gillaspy

## OTHER CASES LINKED TO RECRUITERS

High schools were required to grant military recruiters closer access to high school juniors and seniors – including their names, addresses and phone numbers – through the federal No Child Left Behind Act. College recruiters receive the same type of information. The federal legislation took effect July 1, 2002.

A search of national news articles turned up these incidents in the past two years:

- **July 2003:** A former U.S. Army recruiter based in Moreno Valley, Calif., was sentenced to 16 months in prison for the statutory rape of a 17-year-old girl who was joining the Army. He pleaded guilty to having sex with the girl in a back room of the Army's recruiting station and in a government-issued sedan. The girl told authorities the sex acts happened when the man was her recruiter. She later decided not to join the Army.
- **January 2004:** A former Marine recruiter in the Baltimore area who was convicted of fondling a teenage recruit was sentenced to probation and ordered to seek counseling. The judge was quoted: "You may have misinterpreted the actions of an outgoing, flirting teenager. She was a kid. You were her recruiter. You were her mentor. She looked up to you. She may have worshipped you from afar, but that doesn't mean she intended to act on it or wanted you to act on it."
- **May 2004:** A 34-year-old Marine recruiter in Blooming Grove, N.Y., was charged with six counts of rape, accused of having sex several times with a 16-year-old girl who wanted to enlist. The school superintendent said the man apparently got to know the student while recruiting at Washingtonville High School.
- **June 2004:** A military jury sentenced a Marine Corps recruiter to five years in prison for raping a 17-year-old high school student in a Riverside recruiting office. The recruiter asked the teenager, who was interested in joining the Corps and was participating in an after-school Marine exercise program, to enter a back room at the recruiting station, where he raped her, the girl testified.
- **November 2004:** An Army recruiter in Riverside, Calif., was arrested on suspicion of having sex with two 17-year-old Paloma Valley High School students. The 24-year-old recruiter was charged with four felony counts of having sex with and giving alcohol to minors. He met the two girls at an Army recruiting seminar at the high school.

– Dan McFeely

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