

Extending SHARP Best Practices

Does a Dearth of Published Lessons Learned Reflect Disinterest in the Ranks?

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Two weeks ago, I told my commanders that combating sexual assault and sexual harassment within the ranks is our number one priority. I said that because as chief, my mission is to train and prepare our soldiers for war.

Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, chief of staff of the Army, during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 4 June 2013

BOTH SECRETARY OF the Army John McHugh and Gen. Raymond Odierno have been clear and forceful in their proclamations that the Army's top priority today is combating sexual assault and harassment within the ranks. But has the message truly taken root outside the Pentagon?

The Army's two flagship professional journals—*Military Review*, published by Fort Leavenworth's Combined Arms Center, and *Parameters*, published by the U.S. Army War College—provide a sense of the state of the profession and its priorities from the field at any given time. During the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they offered some of the best ground-level observations and lessons learned from implementing counterinsurgency doctrine. Today, contributors wrestle with topics such as the future of land power, regionally aligned forces, and adaptation in an age of austerity. Yet, largely missing from these pages is any independent thought, reflection, and critical thinking devoted to tackling the Army's number one priority of preventing sexual assault. In fact, since the Army revamped its Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) program in 2008 under the "I. A.M. (Intervene-Act-Motivate) Strong" campaign,

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only one article has appeared in either journal on the topic.¹

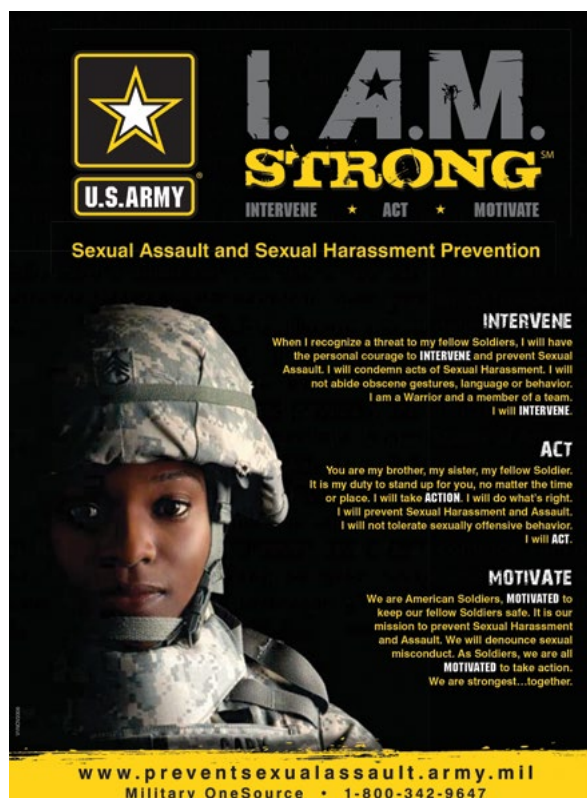
Taken at face value, this could suggest a growing gap between what senior Army leaders are saying about the institution's priorities and where the rest of the institution is focusing its intellectual energy and thought. Could it be that the secretary of the Army and chief of staff's message just is not resonating—that the rest of the Army thinks the institution's top priority should lie elsewhere? Certainly. But history has shown that innovation happens mainly at the grass-roots level, and, undoubtedly, units *are* identifying smart, effective initiatives at the local level—initiatives that are not being shared as widely as other best practices that more directly relate to warfighting functions.

This article challenges Army leaders at the levels of brigade and below to more vocally share lessons learned in the campaign to eliminate sexual assault and harassment. It offers three simple considerations for leaders as they continue to implement the SHARP program at the unit level.

Build Ownership—of the Problem and its Solutions

If Clemenceau was right that war is too important to be left to the generals, then a similar statement can be made about SHARP: it is too important to be left to our sexual assault response coordinators (SARCs) and unit victim advocates (UVAs). Yet, this is largely what we have done—delegated our SHARP training to well-intentioned SARCs or UVAs who lead us through three-hour PowerPoint presentations directed by Headquarters, Department of the Army.² While such centralized training probably has helped increase awareness of reporting and response procedures, it has done little in terms of establishing ownership at the unit level or helping prevent incidents of harassment and assault.

First and foremost, SHARP must be a commander's program. While SARCs and UVAs are invaluable enablers, commanders must own and direct SHARP training. In this regard, the Army should loosen two restrictions to further enable commanders to own and direct their programs. First, it should lift the rank restriction for who can serve as a UVA, especially at the company level. If we truly are committed to breaking down barriers to reporting alleged incidents of harassment and



SHARP poster

assault, allowing carefully selected junior soldiers to attend the Army's 80-hour SHARP training and serve as UVAs would be an important step. With junior soldiers comprising the majority of alleged sexual assault victims and perpetrators, such a move will help establish ownership among a key demographic.³

Second, the Army must move beyond its dependence upon prescribed, one-size-fits-all SHARP training. We are at the point in this campaign when units must tailor SHARP training to their own formations, and a continued reliance on training materials developed at the Department of the Army level implies detachment and disinterest at the unit level (which is not the case). Such training had value at the outset, as it ensured a consistent approach across formations. Today, it runs the risk of turning into white noise. As with anything else, commanders must plan, lead, and inspect SHARP training to make it truly their own.

Do a Little a Lot

A stumbling block to addressing sexual harassment and assault at the unit level seems to come

from the perception that the problems the military faces reflect larger, intractable societal issues (e.g., gender equality issues, the glamorization of alcohol and binge drinking, the hook-up culture, etc.). Reports of high rates of sexual assaults in colleges and universities reinforce this belief, leaving some to conclude that the problem of sexual assault is no worse in the military than in any other segment of society.⁴ Such conclusions can be troublesome because at best, they allow us to rationalize the extent of the sexual assault problem in the military, and at worst, they let us abdicate responsibility. How can we be asked to solve a problem that the rest of society or other institutions cannot solve?

Rather than trying to solve the Army's sexual harassment and assault problem overnight, units should set their sights on tangible goals and objectives. More importantly, we should strive to *do a little a lot*. If this truly is the Army's top priority, frequency is a must. However, meaningful engagement need not require intensive use of time or other resources. Brown-bag lunches, seminars, sensing sessions, and informal surveys go a long way toward continued identification of problems,

sustained command emphasis, and solicitation of new initiatives aimed at prevention.

I have witnessed too many fellow soldiers expressing frustration because solving the Army's sexual assault problem will require changing the Army's culture. The sentiment is well founded because solving the problem *will* require changing the culture, a process considered slow and difficult at best. However, we need not be resigned to this prospect or assume culture change occurs only over successive generations. We can change the Army's culture by doing a little a lot.

Listen More Than You Talk

Our unit has found it useful to conduct all of our SHARP training and engagement in small seminars with no more than 15-18 soldiers at a time. Moving away from mandated videos and PowerPoint presentations in packed classrooms to discussion-based seminars in a more intimate setting has not only resulted in a greater engagement among the training audience, but it has also unearthed a number of tangible initiatives we can implement at the unit level to help prevent



U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno gives his remarks at the Sexual Harassment/Assault Prevention Summit in Leesburg, Va., 8 May 2012. (U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. Teddy Wade)

harassment and assault within our ranks. From demanding more realistic, scenario-based training that focuses both on how to intervene and how to extract oneself (or others) from a potentially disastrous situation, to having candid discussions about alcohol consumption, we have found that junior soldiers are waiting to be engaged on this issue. We stand to lose their attention or stifle their good suggestions, however, when our SHARP engagement always consists of senior noncommissioned and commissioned officers lecturing them in formal settings. The more we listen, the more likely we are to get buy-in for the SHARP program within our ranks and learn a little along the way.

Conclusion

More than 12 years into sustained combat, the American public has a great deal of confidence in the military as an institution.⁵ Yet, no issue threatens to erode this trust and confidence more than our failure to truly address the epidemic of

sexual harassment and assault within our ranks. Warfighting is fundamentally a human endeavor, and our most precious resource is not a piece of equipment or a technological platform but individual soldiers—America's sons and daughters entrusted to our care. If we lose the trust and confidence of the public, we threaten to tear the social fabric of our institution and profession.

Few organizations place a higher premium on the publication and wide dissemination of after action reviews, lessons learned, and best practices than the U.S. Army. Few do self-critique better than the Army, and the quality of the Army's assessments proves the Army to be a learning organization that constantly seeks to adapt and improve. Let us approach sharing knowledge on combating sexual harassment and assault with the same rigor, passion, and intellectual energy that we have displayed in fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our soldiers deserve nothing less. **MR**

NOTES

1. Chad R. Christian, "Applying Principles of Counterinsurgency to the Fight Against Sexual Assault in the Military," *Military Review* (November-December 2013): 67-74. Retrieved from <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20131231_art012.pdf>.

2. The Army mandates that all soldiers and Army civilians undergo annual, standardized, three-hour, PowerPoint-based training, entitled "Face-to-Face," followed by online "Team-Bound" training available through the Army Learning Management System. See more about the Army's refresher training at <http://www.sexualassault.army.mil/ProgMgr_Tng_Annual-Unit-Ref-Tng.cfm>.

3. ALARACT 197/2005, "Subject: Use of Composite Risk Management to Reduce or Eliminate the Risk of Sexual Assault," retrieved from <http://www.sexualassault.army.mil/content/ALARACT_crm.cfm>.

4. A good example of this can be found in Rosa Brooks' article, "Is Sexual As-

sault Really an 'Epidemic?' The U.S. Military Actually Looks Pretty Good Compared to, Say, College," 10 July 2013, *foreignpolicy.com*. Brooks hardly denies that sexual assault is a real problem in the military but cites data on assault rates in the civilian population, including colleges and universities, that suggest civilian rates are comparable to or perhaps higher than rates in the military. While Brooks' analysis is on target, I worry such comparisons could cause the military to conclude the problem of sexual assault is overstated and thus not deserving of significant attention. Article found at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/10/is_sexual_assault_really_an_epidemic>.

5. Seventy-six percent of respondents in Gallup's annual poll on confidence in institutions reported having at least "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military. Source: Gallup poll, Confidence in Institutions (1-4 June 2013). Retrieved from <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>>.