

Leading the Change

The Field Grade Leader's Role in Responding to the Fort Hood Report



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In mid-2011, a group of Army officers serving in a combined arms battalion gathered in the unit's conference room for a Friday afternoon officer call. Several topics were served for discussion, including a controversial one: the potential integration of women into combat arms. A heated debate ensued, with some officers pointing to the merits of women's admission while others argued for their continued exclusion.

Throughout the discussion, the battalion commander sat listening quietly. Once the chatter died down, he rose to give his final remarks before releasing everyone for the weekend. "The change is coming," he began, "and women will be a part of combat arms." Some of the officers who had voiced their opposition to this possibility squirmed in their chairs. And yet, what he said next I will never forget: "When it happens, there will be two groups of officers: those who resist the change, and those who help figure it out. The first group will become irrelevant; the second will be the next generation of rising Army leaders."¹

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Ten years later, the prophetic assertion made by this battalion commander has come true. Released to the public on 8 December 2020, the *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee* argues that

"providing a culture and climate that is characterized by inclusion, commitment to diversity, freedom from sexual harassment and sexual assault, and adherence to Army Values is key to successful gender integration."² In a subsequent press conference announcing the Army's acceptance of all seventy of the report's recommendations, senior Army leaders made clear that the time for confronting the underlying cultural issues that lead to sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination is now.³

Field grade leaders play a critical role in leading the Army's efforts to build a culture in which each soldier is treated with the dignity and respect befitting his or her service. Over the next several years, field grade officers in every battalion, brigade, and division in the Army will advise commanders on how to implement the seventy recommendations of the report down to the soldier level. The task is immense, outweighed only by the severe consequences of failing to act. For officers who have chosen to make a career of the Army out of a sense of obligation to the soldiers we have the privilege of leading, the stakes could not be more personal. Incomplete or poorly considered policies will have lifelong consequences for the soldiers in our formations, along with their families and loved ones. As in combat, preparation for this task is key. What follows is an overview of three initial steps that will help field grade leaders prepare to confront the problems identified in the *Fort Hood Independent Review*.

Step 1: Internalize the Problem

The single most important action every field grade leader must take regarding sexual harassment/assault response and prevention (SHARP) can hardly be called an action at all. Instead, it is the adoption of a mindset. The problems presented in the Fort Hood report and their significance for the future of the Army must be “owned” as a personal and professional responsibility. Failure to do so will only exacerbate the problem, not solve it.

It is impossible to internalize the problem without having an accurate sense of the leadership failure that occurred at Fort Hood. In the opening pages of the report, the authors gave us a succinct, “bottom-line up front” statement outlining three key elements of this failure:

During the review period, no Commanding General or subordinate echelon commander chose to intervene proactively and mitigate known risks of high crime, sexual assault and sexual harassment. The result was a pervasive lack of confidence in the SHARP Program and an unacceptable lack of knowledge of core SHARP components regarding reporting and certain victim services.⁴

First, the actors most responsible for the problems at Fort Hood are identified: commanders. This identification is rooted in the guiding assumption that leaders at the top of a formation produce a decisive impact on unit climate, for better or worse. Second, rather than indicting these commanders for what they did wrong, the report instead emphasizes what they failed to do right. Third, it tells us the result: a SHARP program incapable of gaining the confidence of the soldiers it was designed to protect. The problem, then, can be defined

succinctly: commander inaction led to an environment at Fort Hood in which soldiers were not able to carry out their service with dignity and safety.

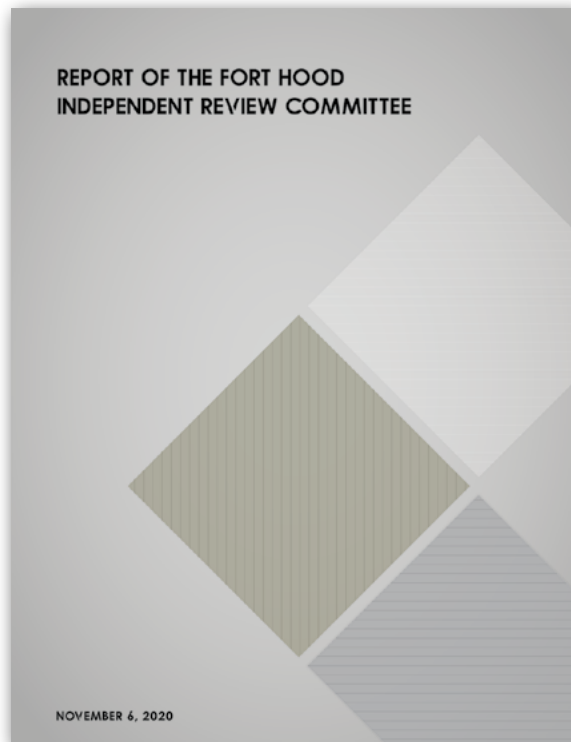
Such a definition makes the imperative of internalizing the problem all the more important. Field grade leaders who have put in the hard work to understand what occurred at Fort Hood will be better equipped to identify warning signs within their own formations.

Four means to achieve this internal ownership are offered here for consideration.

The first, which experientially has proven the most powerful tool for developing a sense of ownership of the problem, is also the most difficult: hearing firsthand from women and men who have experienced sexual harassment or assault. For those of us who have had the privilege of hearing some of these survivors bravely recount their stories, it is a life-changing experience. Any superficial preconceptions about SHARP fade away in the face of the basic human impulse to recognize suffering in another person. This strategy, however, requires survivors willing to speak out about a deeply personal and traumatic

experience. We can be grateful for their courage when they do but cannot expect it to be the norm.

Therefore, the second, more accessible strategy is to “Read the Report,” a refrain adopted by many senior leaders in the wake of the release of the Fort Hood report.⁵ At this point, reading the Fort Hood report is as much a basic professional responsibility for field grade leaders as the customary purchase of the dress mess uniform upon promotion to major; failure to do so sends a message about the seriousness with which an officer approaches the profession. Though written from an organizational perspective, significant human elements stand out in the Fort Hood report that are



To view the *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, visit https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/fort-hoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf.



difficult to forget. One that strikes particularly hard is the observation made by several NCOs: “They believe the junior enlisted Soldiers do not trust field grade leaders because they see some of those individuals actually committing the acts of misconduct.”⁶ If such a statement from an enlisted soldier about one of our peers does not inspire a strong resolve to lead from the front on SHARP, it is difficult to imagine what will.

Third, history serves a vital role in helping understand the deeper legacy of diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity in the Army. In 2016, the Congressional Research Service published a straightforward, easy-to-read overview of the U.S. military’s steps toward reflecting the diversity of American society.⁷ By situating the Fort Hood report in the context of this larger history, the gravity of our current “moment” becomes clear. The Army, like our country, has struggled to fully live up to the ideals we espouse. As senior leaders acknowledged in a service-wide message sent during the mid-2020 protests over racial divisions in America, “Just as we reflect the best of America, we reflect its imperfections as well. We need to work harder to earn the trust of mothers and fathers who hesitate to

Alleged military sexual assault survivor Myla Haider speaks at a press conference 15 February 2011 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Members of the U.S. military held the conference to address allegations that they were raped or sexually assaulted during their international and domestic military service and to discuss the then forthcoming federal court litigation. Haider said she initially decided not to report that she had been raped because “I’ve never met one victim who was able to report the crime and still retain their military career. Not one.” (Photo by Mandel Ngan, Agence France-Presse)

hand their sons and daughters into our care.”⁸ History equips leaders with the wisdom to see where we are, as an Army, on our journey to representing the broad diversity of American society.

If none of these strategies evoke the internal ownership that is key for effective leadership on SHARP, one final, Machiavellian option remains: understanding the extent to which failing to adequately address sexual harassment and assault can undermine the Army’s long-term viability as an institution. Every major attending intermediate level education must complete a block of instruction on force management, including a class on the planning, programming,

budgeting, and execution process.⁹ A key takeaway from this block of instruction is to understand just how dependent the Army is on a steady stream of congressional funding to maintain readiness for combat while investing in modernization and ensuring our sol-

into the specific challenges that installation is grappling with. Relative to other major Army posts, Fort Bragg has one of the lowest rates of first-term enlisted soldiers and NCOs with founded sex offenses.¹⁰ Fort Bragg also has a comparatively low rate of on-post sexual assault

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diers and their families are afforded a high quality of life. In a democracy, the erosion of trust in the Army directly impacts our ability to procure funding necessary to achieve progress on all of these priorities.

This is a reality most officers are already used to. Every company commander who takes the guidon knows that one of the key tasks of command is the proper oversight of the Command Supply Discipline Program (CSDP). This is because our culture has helped company commanders internalize the importance of the CSDP with a simple but powerful ethical statement: CSDP stewards “taxpayer dollars.” If an officer can internalize the connection between his or her property book and the Nation’s investment in defense, it is reasonable to expect that same officer to also recognize the higher imperative to effectively steward the most precious resource entrusted to us: America’s daughters and sons. Failure to do so, even for one soldier, erodes America’s trust in the force.

Step 2: Understand Your Environment

The Fort Hood report offers a tremendous amount of timely data on SHARP patterns at installations across the Army. This is why the refrain “Read the Report” is so important: it provides crucial insight into the specific issues a field grade leader will have to address to help develop an effective SHARP program.

For example, a field grade leader stationed at Fort Bragg who “Reads the Report” can gain several insights

reporting and a comparatively high rate of soldiers who knew their rights to a special victim counsel, though the E1-to-E3 rate still lands at a dismal 50 percent.¹¹

However, Fort Bragg does poorly in one critical area: the case-processing time for sexual offenses. From 2015 to 2020, the average time between preferral of charges and termination of courts-martial related to sexual crimes at Fort Bragg was 224 days, fourteen days longer than Fort Hood’s average and a whopping fifty-six days longer than the post with the fastest processing time, Fort Carson.¹² This number must be added to the average rate at which the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) is able to present a case to a commander for adjudication. The CID office at Fort Bragg has the slowest rate in the Army, 316 days.¹³ Taken together, this means that if a soldier experienced a sexual assault on New Year’s Eve 2020 and reported it the following day, he or she would likely not see his or her abusers brought to justice until sometime after 25 June 2022, if at all. It is a tremendous burden to ask that soldier to place his or her trust in the chain of command, and in the Army, for so long a period.

These data points should drive several conclusions for field grade leaders serving at Fort Bragg. First, they should anticipate that sexual assault and harassment cases will require active engagement with CID and the staff judge advocate to ensure the process beats the 540-day average. Command channels can and should be leveraged to expedite these cases. Without revealing the identity of the victim, staffs can track processing



times to help commanders advocate for higher priority. Second, field grade leaders must ensure that the victim advocate receives routine updates to communicate to the survivor, should the survivor choose to remain in the unit after reporting. Finally, just because the rate of sex offenses in the enlisted ranks of Fort Bragg are lower than other posts does not mean that SHARP programs are not in need of significant improvement. If even one sexual assault can be prevented by an investment into a better program, it is worth it.

Step 3: Develop an Initial Strategy

A third step naturally follows ownership and understanding: crafting a strategy for leading the change. The Fort Hood report identified some very clear areas in which field grade leaders can achieve immediate impact on the problem now, without waiting for Army-wide policy changes to come into effect.

Field grade leaders must recognize that commanders at every echelon are the center of gravity for an effective SHARP program, not the sexual assault response coordinator (SARC). While the SARC serves an essential role, the commanders own the “critical capability” of

Soldiers review a vignette describing a sexual harassment or assault incident and discuss possible actions 29 June 2019 during Task Force Cavalier’s third quarter Sexual Harassment Assault Response Prevention leaders training at Camp Taji, Iraq. (Photo by Sgt. Roger Jackson, U.S. Army National Guard)

developing and implementing a strategy, or “way,” to combat sexual harassment and assault in their ranks.¹⁴ Field grade leaders must work with their commanders to ensure this strategy encompasses every facet of the problem.

In undertaking such a planning effort, it is critical to treat prevention and response as two independent lines of effort. The report identified confusion of the two as a key error at Fort Hood: “Conflating response and prevention, without respecting the marked differences between the two, compromises the ability to adequately focus on each.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the report discovered that of these two lines of effort, prevention has proven the most difficult for the Army to pursue effectively. The reasons are clear:

Prevention is social, involving a group or groups, of different sizes and attributes.

Prevention is a sophisticated undertaking, requiring data informed modification of cultural norms and priorities. Effective prevention improves group dynamics such that instances of sexual harassment and sexual assault are unacceptable.¹⁶

Collective behavior modification is a tricky beast to wrangle and will not succeed without an iterative,

Army, the SARB requires commanders and their staffs to drive an effective, outcome-based process. The best way to accomplish this is deceptively simple: ensure the commander is in attendance at the monthly SARB fully prepared with both the data and the action items necessary to leverage installation resources for the unit.

Finally, the organizational focus of this strategy must be on training and empowering the NCOs that

“Field grade leaders must recognize that commanders at every echelon are the center of gravity for an effective Sexual Harassment Assault Response Prevention program.”

thoughtful campaign that continues to develop over time. It will also fail if not informed by clear evidence of the state of a unit culture.

This is where the next planning tip comes in: developing clear mechanisms for understanding the quality-of-life dynamics of a unit. Command climate surveys can and should be tailored across a formation to answer specific questions for a commander's decision-making in a similar manner that priority intelligence requirements drive decisions on the battlefield.

The means of collection should become more diverse as well. The inspector general, staff judge advocate, SARC, victim advocates, unit chaplains, command sergeants major, mental health professionals, subordinate leaders, and even the young staff duty officer walking through the barracks on a weekend all play roles in helping commanders “see” their formations. And yet, without specific guidance on what to look for, none of these entities will be empowered to identify cultural problems in need of correction.

Installation-level entities such as the Sexual Assault Review Board (SARB) can also be leveraged to provide a comparative perspective across multiple units of trends and best practices for both prevention and response. The SARB received extra attention in the Fort Hood report, which stated that the monthly meetings were “[focused] on mostly administrative matters and quantitative response dynamics regarding the SHARP Program ... at the expense of qualitative, proactive prevention driven outputs.”¹⁷ Like anything in the

interface with soldiers on a daily basis. If the Fort Hood report portrayed commanders as the center of gravity of SHARP programs, then empowering the junior NCOs in a formation with the knowledge, skills, and training to care effectively for their subordinates can be considered to be the decisive point. Every facet of a prevention program should be designed to support this effort.¹⁸

This is also where field grade leaders should feel tremendous freedom to innovate. The Army is searching for solutions that help build a more inclusive environment and has demonstrated a willingness to evaluate and overturn outdated policies that stand in the way of this effort. The recent revisions of Army Regulation 670-1, *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia*, testify to this willingness.¹⁹ And yet, policy changes can only go so far. The basic problem of how to develop a training program that effectively equips junior NCOs with the basics of prevention, including the skills of identifying unhealthy beliefs and behaviors in both individuals and groups, empowering bystander intervention, and creating an environment of dignity and respect, remains unsolved.²⁰ The backbone of our Army is also the backbone of our culture, and deserves the development necessary to lead in SHARP.

Conclusion: A Hard Fight Ahead

The three steps of internalizing the problem, understanding the environment, and developing an initial strategy barely scratch the surface of the

complex issue faced by our Army. Alone, they will not achieve the end state of creating a culture in which dignity and respect are so normative that any aberration cannot go unnoticed. They will, however, ensure field grade leaders step off in the right direction. They will also ensure that our leadership as “iron majors” not only gets the job done but also does so in a manner that inspires the company commanders, platoon leaders, and staff officers who observe it.

It is worth remembering the SHARP is not an isolated issue within our culture. It is intimately tied to the trust that is essential to any army’s ability to achieve victory in war. Those officers who argue for the false

dichotomy that pits readiness and diversity against each other will, as my battalion commander predicted, quickly find themselves irrelevant not only to the health of the institution but to the Army’s mission of fighting and winning our Nation’s wars. Those who lead the change will be able to say with confidence that they did their part to steward the profession through a critical stage of the Army’s history. ■

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views of the Command and General Staff Officer College, the Army University, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

1. This account is drawn entirely from the author’s personal recollection and should be attributed to him alone.

2. Christopher Swecker et al., *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense [DOD], 6 November 2020), 2, accessed 31 March 2021, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03-FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf.

3. Michael A. Grinston, James C. McConville, and Ryan D. McCarthy, “Message to the Force: Fort Hood” (Washington, DC: DOD, 8 December 2020), accessed 21 March 2021, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2020/12/08/39ec2079/message-to-the-force-ft-hood.pdf>.

4. Swecker et al., *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, ii.

5. Michael Grinston (@16thSMA), “I’ll start. #ReadtheReport,” Twitter, 9 December 2020, 6:47 p.m., accessed 31 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/16thSMA/status/1336834853162147840>.

6. Swecker et al., *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, 42.

7. Kristy N. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report R44321 (Washington, DC: CRS, October 2019), 11–42, accessed 31 March 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44321/12>.

8. Michael A. Grinston, James C. McConville, and Ryan D. McCarthy, “A Message to the Army Community About Civil Unrest,” *Army.mil*, 3 June 2020, accessed 31 March 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/236157/a_message_to_the_army_community_about_civil_unrest.

9. Louis G. Yuengert, ed., *How the Army Runs: A Senior Leader Reference Handbook, 2019-2020* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War

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10. Swecker et al., *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, 22–23.

11. *Ibid.*, 71, 79–80.

12. *Ibid.*, 75.

13. *Ibid.*, 69.

14. Dale C. Eikmeier, “A Logical Method for Center-of-Gravity Analysis,” *Military Review* 87, no. 5 (September-October 2007): 62–66, accessed 15 July 2021, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20071031_art009.pdf.

15. Swecker et al., *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, 52.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 33.

18. DOD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, *Department of Defense Report on Sexual Assault in the Military Fiscal Year 2019* (Washington, DC: DOD, April 2020), 13, accessed 31 March 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Apr/30/2002291660/-1/-1/1/1 DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FISCAL YEAR 2019 ANNUAL REPORT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE MILITARY.PDF>.

19. Headquarters, Deputy Chief of Staff, G1, “Army Grooming Standards and AR 670-1,” *Army.mil*, 27 January 2021, accessed 31 March 2021, <https://www.army.mil/standto/archive/2021/01/27/>.

20. Margaret Brome et al., *Sexual Violence Prevention: Beginning the Dialogue* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004), 4–10, accessed 31 March 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/svprevention-a.pdf>.