

For Assaulted Female Vets, New Hope

By Sara Foss

The first time Air Force Staff Sgt. Colleen Bushnell was sexually assaulted in the military, she decided not to report it. "I did not tell, out of fear," the Troy native recalled. Her assailant was a "co-worker, and he outranked me," Bushnell said. "Where he said to go, I went. For about a year, he controlled me. He raped me more than once." But when Bushnell was sexually assaulted by a woman a year later, she did report the incident, mainly, she said, out of concern for her perpetrator's health and well-being. However, her hope for justice and healing was dashed when the woman committed suicide two days later. In response, Bushnell's peers ostracized and mistreated her, and she faced charges of homosexual misconduct. These were later dropped. "I was harassed," Bushnell said. "People blamed me for her death. You become a cancer when you report. Everyone avoids you." The experience led to a long downward spiral. Now 39 and living in the hamlet of Speigletown, Bushnell has struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, lost custody of her children and been homeless. Her experience is not uncommon. Bushnell is one of the thousands of veterans and service members who have experienced military sexual trauma, or MST. The term is used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening acts of sexual harassment and the problems that can result, which include trouble sleeping, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and physical health problems such as chronic pain and numbness. According to a recent study by the Department of Veterans Affairs, about half of women sent to Iraq or Afghanistan report being sexually harassed, and nearly one in four say she was sexually assaulted. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that approximately 19,000 sexual assaults occur each year in the military, and that about 85 percent of them are never reported. The DOD's annual sexual assault response and prevention report found that in 2011 there were 3,192 reports of sexual assault involving service members as either victims or rapists, a 1 percent increase compared to fiscal year 2010. A 794-page study released last month by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies found that female veterans who suffered a sexual assault in the military are nine times more likely to develop PTSD compared to other female veterans. The report, which was mandated by the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, found high rates of military sexual trauma in both men and women. But because women comprise just 14.5 percent of the military, this means that they are sexually assaulted at a much higher rate than men. **Many Outrages**

"You can hardly talk to a woman veteran without finding out that they've had that experience," said Ellen Schell, the director of the military families program at The Legal Project in Albany. Last month the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel, which is chaired by New York's junior senator, Kirsten Gillibrand, held a daylong hearing on the issue of sexual assault in the military. The impetus for the hearing was an Air Force general's decision earlier this year to reverse the sexual assault conviction of a lieutenant colonel under his command, which Gillibrand described as a "travesty of justice and an outrage." Under military law, a commander who convenes a court-martial has the sole discretion to reduce or set aside guilty verdicts and sentences, or to reverse a jury's verdict. The Oscar-nominated 2012 documentary

"The Invisible War" has also gotten people talking about the issue of MST. The film, which provides a broad overview of the problem while also focusing on the struggles of some of the men and women who were sexually assaulted in the military, was screened by former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. One of the more troubling assertions in the film is that victims who complain are likely to be shunned, demoted and punished, while their perpetrators remain free. The issue of military sexual assault is not new. In the 1991 Tailhook scandal, more than 100 U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps aviation officers were accused of sexually assaulting or engaging in "improper and indecent" conduct with at least 83 women and seven men. In 1996, a dozen commissioned and non-commissioned male officers were charged with sexually assaulting female trainees under their command at Aberdeen Proving Ground, an Army base in Maryland. One of the biggest military sexual assault scandals of recent years began unfolding in 2011, when a female cadet claimed she had been sexually assaulted by her trainer at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. Since then, an investigation has found that 32 basic-training instructors victimized at least 59 recruits.

New VA Awareness

In recent years, Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany has stepped up its efforts to serve female veterans and address MST. In 2011, Stratton opened a women's wellness center that is staffed entirely by women; the VA also has an MST coordinator, a psychologist who sees both men and women. "We asked women what they needed, and they said they wanted to see women providers," said Peter Potter, a spokesman for Stratton. He said that the number of female veterans visiting the VA is growing, and that the VA has made an effort to accommodate them. "We have mammography here, gynecology, a lactation room," he said. "Ten years ago, you wouldn't think about getting a gynecology appointment at the VA." Jane Weber, female veterans program manager at Stratton, said that veterans are screened for MST multiple times. Staff are aware that victims might not always want to talk about rape or sexual assault on their first or second visit; making multiple inquiries makes it more likely that veterans will open up about their experiences, she said. "We present multiple opportunities for them to disclose what happened," Weber said. "We're hearing many more disclosures than previously." Weber said that for many women the trauma of sexual assault was made worse by the way they were treated after it happened. "In some cases, they were told to keep quiet or there would be serious repercussions," she said. "People who went to their superiors to report things were brushed off." Weber said that the number of MST disclosures being made at the VA is growing, and that she expects it to continue to grow. Increased awareness of the issue is bringing in younger veterans, as well as older veterans whose trauma have gone unaddressed. "We're seeing a change in society, in how people view this," Potter said. "There's more knowledge, more education, more understanding."

Community Help

Those who work with female veterans say they have observed high rates of MST. Kate Dahlstedt is the co-director of Soldier's Heart, a Troy-based organization that provides counseling, support and programming for veterans. She said that nearly all of the women who seek help from Soldier's Heart "come with stories of sexual trauma." She also said that they tend to be extremely mistrustful and isolated -- that they are "harder to reach than even the male vets." Dahlstedt said it's important that the military take sexual assault seriously, and make an effort to punish the perpetrators, rather than the victims. "Generally, it is not the perpetrators who suffer," she said. In 2011, Saratoga County Rural Preservation Corp. opened a home for homeless female veterans, called Guardian House. A.C. "Budd" Mazurek, the organization's executive director, said that female veterans face many of the same problems as male veterans, such as higher rates of joblessness and homelessness, as well as additional challenges stemming from sexual trauma and harassment. Sometimes the perpetrator is "still out there," and staff will arrange orders of protection for the women who need them. Wiawaka Holiday House, a women's retreat on Lake George, began holding

workshops for female veterans in partnership with the Keene-based group Creative Healing Connections about five years ago. The programming is arts-based, with an emphasis on storytelling, songwriting and reflection; the idea is to provide a safe space for self-expression in a beautiful natural environment. Female veterans "need connection and community, to know other women like them who are struggling," said Christine Dixon, Wiawaka's executive director. "The women who attend the retreats become very tight. They continue to help each other after they leave. ... Because the military is such a male dominated environment, one of their unique needs is the company of other women." **Military Law Gaps**

Greg Rinckey, a managing partner at the Albany law firm Tully Rinckey, appears in "The Invisible War." An Army veteran who served as a JAG attorney for six years, today Rinckey is critical of the way sexual assault cases are handled by the military court justice system. The Judge Advocate General's Corps is the branch of the military concerned with military law and justice. "A lot of things are swept under the carpet," Rinckey said. "There's not a full investigation. The commanders definitely influence the investigation. If the soldier is a good performer, they do not want to lose that soldier." Of his JAG experience, he said, "I got my marching orders from my commander. I was his lawyer. The commander controls the process -- he decides whether to prosecute or not prosecute." It was not uncommon, Rinckey said, for officers to be allowed to resign rather than face court martial. After watching "The Invisible War," then-Secretary Panetta announced that sexual assault complaints would be reviewed by higher-ranking colonels, rather than the lower-level unit commanders. In too many cases, according to the film, the perpetrator is the unit commander or a friend of the unit commander. Rinckey described this change as "a good first step." One of Rinckey's main areas of focus is military law, and he has represented a number of military sexual assault victims. He said that veterans who have experienced MST often struggle to receive service-connected disability compensation from the VA for the post-traumatic stress disorder that often results. Rinckey said that sex crimes are difficult to prosecute, because they often involve two conflicting accounts -- that the sex was consensual, or that it was forced. "You really have to look at these cases carefully," he said. "If you over-prosecute, you could send an innocent person to jail." He noted that he didn't receive any special training in how to handle such cases as a JAG attorney. "The military throws you right in," he said. **Fighting Back**

The daughter of a World War II veteran, Bushnell joined the Air Force in 1997 and became a public affairs specialist, a job she loved. "I was like a duck to water," she said. "I loved telling the stories of average Americans, of their hard work and dedication. I couldn't have been more honored." But in 2003, Bushnell was raped during the weekend of July 4th at Lackland Air Force Base, where she had recently been transferred. In 2005, she was transferred to the Defense Information School in Maryland, where the harassment, she said, continued: "They told me as soon as I arrived that I was not welcome there." A year later, she retired with a medical disability. Bushnell began to get her life together after losing custody of her sons. She read self-help books and sought treatment from Soldier's Heart. She began to connect with fellow MST survivors through social media, and to tell her own story. "I'm reconditioning my mind," Bushnell said. "My advocacy is helping with my recovery." Today, Bushnell is a member of the advisory board for Protect Our Defenders, a Washington-based organization that advocates for men and women who have been sexually assaulted by their fellow service members. Last summer, she and four other veterans biked cross-country to raise awareness of the challenges that veterans face when they return home. However, she remains haunted by what happened to her in the military, she said. "The person who raped me is out there."