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The Military's Secret Shame

When men in the military rape other men in the ranks, no one wants to talk about it. Why the sexual assault of males in the service is finally being confronted.

by [Jesse Ellison \(/authors/jesse-ellison.html\)](/authors/jesse-ellison.html) April 03, 2011



Marcia Lippman / Gallery Stock

Greg Jeloudov was 35 and new to America when he decided to join the Army. Like most soldiers, he was driven by both patriotism for his adopted homeland and the pragmatic notion that the military could be a first step in a career that would enable him to provide for his new family. Instead, Jeloudov arrived at Fort Benning, Ga., for basic training in May 2009, in the middle of the economic crisis and rising xenophobia. The soldiers in his unit, responding to his Russian accent and New York City address, called him a “champagne socialist” and a “commie faggot.” He was, he told NEWSWEEK, “in the middle of the viper’s pit.” Less than two weeks after arriving on base, he was gang-raped in the barracks by men who said they were showing him who was in charge of the United States. When he reported the attack to unit commanders, he says they told him, “It must have been your fault. You must have provoked them.”

What happened to Jeloudov is a part of life in the armed forces that hardly anyone talks about: male-on-male sexual assault. In the staunchly traditional military culture, it’s an ugly secret, kept hidden by layers of personal shame and official denial. Last year nearly 50,000 male veterans screened positive for “military sexual trauma” at the Department of Veterans Affairs, up from just over 30,000 in 2003. For the

victims, the experience is a special kind of hell—a soldier can't just quit his job to get away from his abusers. But now, as the Pentagon has begun to acknowledge the rampant problem of sexual violence for both genders, men are coming forward in unprecedented numbers, telling their stories and hoping that speaking up will help them, and others, put their lives back together. “We don't like to think that our men can be victims,” says Kathleen Chard, chief of the posttraumatic-stress unit at the Cincinnati VA. “We don't want to think that it could happen to us. If a man standing in front of me who is my size, my skill level, who has been raped—what does that mean about me? I can be raped, too.”

In fact, it is the high victimization rate of female soldiers—women in the armed forces are now more likely to be assaulted by a fellow soldier than killed in combat—that has helped cast light on men assaulting other men. For most of military history, there was neither a system nor language in place to deal with incidents of soldier-on-soldier sexual assault. It wasn't until 1992 that the Defense Department even acknowledged such incidents as an offense, and initially only female victims were recognized. But last year more than 110 men made confidential reports of sexual assault by other men, nearly three times as many as in 2007. The real number of victims is surely much higher. Even among civilians, sexual assault is a vastly underreported crime. In the military the silence is nearly complete. By the Pentagon's own estimate, figures for assaults on women likely represent less than 20 percent of actual incidents. Another study released in March found that just one in 15 men in the Air Force would report being sexually assaulted, compared with one in five women.



From left: Courtesy of Greg Jeloudov; Courtesy of Blake Stephens; Courtesy of Jamey Michael Harding

Victims speak out: (from left) Greg Jeloudov has debilitating PTSD; Blake Stephens twice attempted suicide; Jamey Michael Harding saw a drill sergeant go on to rape underage cadets.

While many might assume the perpetrators of such assaults are closeted gay soldiers, military experts and outside researchers say assailants usually are heterosexual. Like in prisons and other predominantly male environments, male-on-male assault in the military, experts say, is motivated not by homosexuality, but power, intimidation, and domination. Assault victims, both male and female, are typically young and low-ranking; they are targeted for their vulnerability. Often, in male-on-male cases, assailants go after those they assume are gay, even if they are not. “One of the reasons people commit sexual assault is to put people in their place, to drive them out,” says Mic Hunter, author of *Honor Betrayed: Sexual Abuse in America's Military*. “Sexual assault isn't about sex, it's about violence.”

According to Hunter and others, the repeal of the military's policy of “don't ask, don't tell” might actually help the institution address the issue. Under that rule, being gay meant being fundamentally unfit to serve; it meant you didn't belong. It also meant that victims were even more reluctant to report their attacks. “I wouldn't say that the repeal is going to make it safe,” says Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center, a think tank on gays in the military. “But male victims will be a little bit less reluctant to report their assaults.” Belkin notes that it's not just the military that avoids the issue: even gay-rights organizations are wary of it. “We don't like to talk about it because it makes rape look like a gay issue,” Belkin says. “The military doesn't want to talk about it because, as embarrassing as male-female rape is [from their perspective], this is even worse. The very fact that there's male-on-male rape in the military means that there are warriors who aren't strong enough to fight back.”

Blake Stephens, now 29, joined the Army in January 2001, just seven months after graduating from high school. The verbal and physical attacks started quickly, he says, and came from virtually every level of the chain of command. In one of the worst incidents, a group of men tackled him, shoved a soda bottle into his rectum, and threw him backward off an elevated platform onto the hood of a car. When he reported the incident, Stephens says, his platoon sergeant told him, "You're the problem. You're the reason this is happening," and refused to take action. "You just feel trapped," he says. "They basically tell you you're going to have to keep working with these people day after day, night after night. You don't have a choice." His assailants told him that once deployed to Iraq, they would shoot him in the head. "They told me they were going to have sex with me all the time when we were there," he says.

Stephens twice attempted suicide. His marriage fell apart. He became paranoid and explosive. In June 2003 his mother wrote a letter to Sen. Barbara Boxer, detailing her son's "continued humiliation." "Congressional inquiries have been know [sic] to jeopardize a soldier's rank and standing," Boxer's office responded. "There is no way for our office to administratively protect your son's military standing once a congressional examination is in progress." The following August, Stephens was discharged for his "physical condition."

Fear of a ruined career is a major factor preventing victims from coming forward. In 2010 the Pentagon anonymously surveyed active-duty soldiers who had been sexually assaulted about why they declined to report their attacks. Almost half the responding men said they kept silent because they didn't want anyone to know, a third said they didn't think anything would be done, and almost 30 percent said they were afraid of retaliation or reprisals.

In recent years the Pentagon has tried to show that it takes the issue seriously, defining sexual assault in broad terms as a "spectrum of offenses from rape to nonconsensual sodomy to wrongful sexual contact, as well as attempts to commit these offenses." In 2005 it established a special unit, the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, and provided training for 1,200 officers to handle incident reports. Yet critics believe that the Pentagon has moved too slowly and that military procedures for prosecuting such crimes are far less effective than civilian laws. In February, Jeloudov and 16 other former and active-duty service members filed a class-action lawsuit against Defense Secretary Robert Gates and his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld, charging they "ran institutions in which perpetrators were promoted...and Plaintiffs and other victims were openly subjected to retaliation."

Because reports of such crimes happen outside the reach of police and are handled by a unit's commanding officer, according to the Pentagon's own figures, last year just 15 percent of reported cases were actually prosecuted. "There's no investigatory training. They don't tell you to look for evidence," says Greg Jacob, who retired as a captain after 10 years in the Marines and is now policy director for the Service Women's Action Network. "Military justice imbued me with the ability to be judge and jury. Honestly, I had no idea what to do." Commanders often decline to take any action at all. "I have nothing bad to say about the military. There's sick bastards in all walks of life," says Michael F. Matthews, who was raped during basic training in 1972 but didn't tell anyone until 30 years later. "I get angry with the military system sometimes, but I understand it. What happens is on small levels. You take [a complaint] to your commanding officer. He doesn't want that black eye. He wants the promotion. So he tries to keep it under the carpet."

But dismissing such brutality can produce more victims. Twenty-two years ago, Jamey Michael Harding, then a baby-faced 17-year-old enlistee, says he was raped repeatedly by a drill sergeant at basic training. He attempted to report his assault, but his complaint was ignored, he says. The sergeant stayed in the armed forces, ultimately retiring as a decorated officer. Almost two decades later, the man whom Harding says raped him was arrested for raping multiple underage cadets at a junior ROTC program. He pleaded guilty to lewd and lascivious acts on a child and is now in prison. Harding, meanwhile, struggles with an array of mental-health issues he says stem from his attacks. "Many men and women will experience symptoms like PTSD or depression after experiencing sexual assault. But the experience seems even

more detrimental for men's mental health," says Amy Street, a psychologist with the Boston VA hospital who has worked with both male and female survivors. "The way I make sense of that is that women, for better or worse, live their lives with this idea that they might experience sexual assault at some point. There are public models of how to recover from rape. Men don't have any expectation that this might happen to them. It's very difficult to figure out how those experiences fit into your sense of self as a man."

What's clear is that the Pentagon has only just begun to figure out how to treat men who have been sexually traumatized. Until 2006, sexual assault was classified as a women's health issue, and even today, Pentagon awareness campaigns target women almost exclusively. Kathleen Chard, the Cincinnati VA psychologist who runs PTSD programs, says that more than 11 percent of the men she works with eventually admit that they were sexually victimized. Nationwide, there are just six programs like hers, and there is a single VA facility, in Bay Pines, Fla., that specifically treats male survivors of sexual trauma. When Matthews finally sought treatment for the PTSD caused by his rape, he says he had to wait six months for a space to open up. "I went to the group and there's all these guys from the Korean War through Desert Storm," he recalls. "And you say, 'Oh, my God.'"

Since Matthews served a full 20 years and sustained physical injuries during the course of his service, he receives 100 percent of his disability benefits. The others aren't so lucky. In order to receive full benefits for mental and physical health issues stemming from sexual assault, veterans must first prove that the assault occurred. Last year the VA loosened its rules pertaining to those who file claims for combat-related PTSD, reducing the burden of proof. But that change did not apply to sexual trauma. In March, Rep. Chellie Pingree, a Maine Democrat, introduced a bill that would make it easier for victims like Blake Stephens to get benefits and medical coverage. "It's the hardest thing we hear: people who have suffered a sexual trauma and then have to prove it," she says. "We can't leave them out there hanging. It's unconscionable." Even if the bill passes, it will likely be too late to help Jeloudov, the soldier who was raped in basic training. Shortly after his attack, with his assailants threatening to send him "back to Russia in half," his commanding officer told him to sign a document stating that he was a practicing homosexual. He was subsequently discharged under "don't ask, don't tell." Less than two years later, his wife has left him, he is unemployed, and he is racked by emotional problems. His VA doctors have prescribed him half a dozen psychotropic drugs that target, variously, his PTSD, insomnia, flashbacks, and depression. He receives a fraction of full VA benefits, which helps explain his determination to prove that he was raped. Embroiled in the bureaucracy of the VA system, he easily descends into despair. But he's insistent on telling his story. "America to me is justice, truth, and fairness," he says. "Everything that happened there, none of it had to do with any of that."

If you are the victim of a sexual assault and you're seeking assistance, go to the [National Center for PTSD \(http://www.ptsd.va.gov\)](http://www.ptsd.va.gov) to find a service provider in your area. For immediate help, contact the [Safe Helpline \(http://www.safehelpline.org\)](http://www.safehelpline.org), the Department of Defense's new crisis support service, via phone call, text, or instant message. Operated by RAINN, the nation's largest anti-sexual-violence organization, your information will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone on your chain of command.