

The Invisible War

By: Elizabeth Green

Living in Hampton Roads, chances are you know someone who is in the military. You lose sleep at night worrying about a loved one's safety when deployed, even though they go through rigorous precautionary training to minimize risk. But still, stories of IED's and rogue bullets pervade our minds, and increase our fear that a loved one may become injured while protecting this great nation.

But did you ever worry that a loved one would be sexually assaulted or raped by a fellow American while serving in the armed forces? No? Well, you should. According to *The Invisible War*, over 20% of all active duty females are sexually assaulted, which is more than the amount of our men killed in combat.

Yes, you read that right. Now let it sink in.

Sexual assault and rape in the military was one of our nation's best kept secrets, up until Kirby Dick wrote and directed *The Invisible War*, a documentary film released in 2012 that exposed the sordid details of many female veterans' horrific encounters with trusted and respected commanding officers, military police, classmates and friends.

The investigative interview style of the film details multiple women's assaults: including the physical act, the painful injuries, the attempt to report the crime, the shame, the PTSD, and the refusal from the Department of Veteran's Affairs to cover on-going medical difficulties that have resulted from the assaults.

The documentary sheds light on the history of sexual assault in the military, including decades of attempts by the those highest in government to keep the issue hidden. ABC World News exposed "Tailhook," the 1991 Navy sex scandal where female officers were set up as bait at a convention, and assaulted by 30-40 men at a time. The Navy stonewalled that investigation.

In 2009, the news broke of a female Marine in Barracks Row in Washington D.C., who was forced to drink excessively at work, and then fell victim to rape by her company commander. That investigation ended after only three days, when the Marines concluded there was no evidence, due to the "accidental" loss of the rape kit. That same case was reopened weeks later, and the female victim was instead charged with adultery (despite not being married), and conduct unbecoming of an officer. That same year, five additional female Marines in Barracks Row reported crimes of rape. Four of the five women ended up being charged and punished for their allegations. None of the accused rapists were punished.

It is estimated that over 500,000 assaults happen annually in the military, to both men and women. Of those that are reported, a little over 3,000 are opened for investigation. Of those cases, less than 200 resulted in the attacker serving jail time for a federal crime. In many cases, the military courts deemed sexual assault or rape to be an "occupational hazard" of serving in the armed forces.

When interviewed for *The Invisible War*, Dr. Kaye Whitley, Former Director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, claimed that SAPRO and the military have done everything they can to prevent sexual assault. What did they do, you may ask? They hung posters that said, "Wait Until She's

Sober!", and told females to use the buddy system, walking in pairs of twos, when on base. And that's about it.

When a civilian is raped, she calls the police, who then open an investigation. The case moves to a prosecutor, and may result in a full trial by judge or jury. But when someone in the military is raped, she can only report the complaint to her commanding officer. The problem is, 33% of the time, the CO is friends with the accused rapist, and 25% of the time, that same CO IS the rapist. The CO holds all the power and, as *The Invisible War* has proven, often makes the decision to silence the victim entirely.

Hearing the specifics of the assaults within the documentary made me sick. It made me angry. And to be honest, it made me question some of the decisions made by our military leaders. How can the United States of America have a military that allows the process to exist where a commanding officer can potentially be the rapist, yet he alone makes the decision to erase the accusations of the horrific acts? America's NATO allies clearly saw the flaw in their own systems, and many no longer allow their commanders to decide the fate of a victim's claim of assault.

In 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta watched *The Invisible War*. Just two days later, Secretary Panetta issued a directive, ordering all sexual assault cases to be handled by senior officers at the rank of colonel or higher, which effectively ended the practice of commanders adjudicating these cases. This was one small step in the fight against military rape culture, yet we have so much farther to go to let each victim know that she or he is not invisible.

If you would like to watch *The Invisible War*, you can check out a copy at your local Virginia Beach Public Library, or watch the full documentary online at:

<http://www.documentarytube.com/videos/the-invisible-war>.