



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Kimberly Lessmeister, 69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade PAO)

Soldiers from 69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade intervene during a sexual harassment scenario in which a senior noncommissioned officer sexually harasses a private first class 29 April 2015 on Fort Hood, Texas. The scenario was a part of the brigade's training for Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

# Winning the Fight on Sexual Assault in our Army

## Starting in Basic Combat Training

Col. Bryan Hernandez, U.S. Army

**T**he rise in reported sexual assaults within the military has caused concern amongst senior military leaders and lawmakers—as well as parents contemplating allowing their sons or daughters to serve in the armed forces.<sup>1</sup> These concerns have translated into policy changes and increased scrutiny

of how the military approaches sexual harassment and sexual assault, and the culture of personal conduct, within its ranks.

Over the past few years, the focus on preventing sexual assault and harassment has led to new training programs, reporting processes, and engagement by

military leaders at all levels. As the former commander of a basic combat training (BCT) brigade at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, responsible for gender-integrated initial entry training (IET) for thousands of new soldiers every year, I have seen a positive change occurring in combating this critical issue within our Army. Although the campaign to rout this problem fully from our formations will be long, every day our soldiers and leaders are winning small battles in this fight through a series of actions to prevent sexual assault and harassment and, when such incidents do occur, with methods to respond more effectively.

In IET, we have the primary mission to transform civilians into soldiers. It is within this transformative process that setting the proper conditions and culture for the prevention of sexual assault and harassment begins. In BCT, there is a critical window of opportunity to turn the tide against sexual assault by establishing a proper moral foundation for the newest soldiers in our Army. However, this can only be successful if there is a collective group of professional cadre enforcing proper systems and procedures, operating within a healthy, disciplined organization, and climate. Further, commanders cannot solve this problem on their own; they need partnerships with key supporting organizations on their installations, such as Medical Command, the Criminal Investigation Command, and Army Community Services, as well as local civilian hospitals and universities, to fully leverage critical resources in their Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) campaigns.

By utilizing multiple lines of effort, commanders, senior noncommissioned officers, drill sergeants, and instructors can be successful in reducing sexual assaults and harassment in their organizations. This requires carefully taken steps to create a professional climate focused on respect, standards, discipline, and trust. The process of combating sexual misconduct must be holistic and deliberate, with a body of engaged leaders at every level.

At Fort Jackson, we achieved encouraging results from the intensive efforts across our installation and within our units to tackle this issue. During my tenure in a BCT command, I found that focusing our organization's efforts on its culture, reception and integration processes of new soldiers and cadre, systems and processes, and engaged leadership was instrumental

in reducing sexual misconduct.<sup>2</sup> Although not fully inclusive or applicable to every unit, the following points may assist others in charting their own paths to addressing this complex problem.

## Indoctrination

The IET environment, as the first experience of the Army for new recruits, must imbue them with the highest standards of professionalism and conduct. New soldiers will emulate what they see their leaders say and do; therefore, IET leadership and cadre must exemplify those standards in all their actions.

Recruits enter the military with a wide variety of moral and ethical beliefs based upon their childhood, education, and culturally accepted behaviors of their previous social groups. Many times their individual value system is not congruent with Army values or the military's accepted norms. In BCT, the majority of SHARP reports involve trainee-on-trainee incidents related to acts of unwanted physical contact, inappropriate sexual comments, unacceptable "gym locker room" horseplay, and fraternization. Many of these incidents occur during the early stages of basic training as young men and women are put together into an integrated, controlled training environment for the first time in their lives.

The range of reports and their earliness in basic training are symptomatic of cultural variances and the divide between previously assumed tolerable behavior back home for some trainees and those of the Army. Therefore, it is paramount to introduce them to the Army's norms of behavior and values very quickly after their arrival.

Closing the gap between the Army's value system and that of the new recruits requires both a short-term and long-term plan of adjustment. Within a trainee's first twenty-four to forty-eight hours of arrival at our BCT, he or she is assigned a battle buddy and given instruction on SHARP.<sup>3</sup> This immediate training establishes acceptable and nonacceptable behavior, together with standards of personal and professional conduct, and provides education about sexual assault and harassment. The intent is to rapidly expunge previous perceptions regarding acceptable norms of civil behavior derived from trainees' past backgrounds and to indoctrinate the soldiers with the Army's values and standards of conduct.

Soldiers were also integrated into the battle-buddy system in order to teach them how to work together as a team and how to look out for fellow soldiers at all times. The expected values and standards of conduct were then reinforced and demonstrated consistently throughout the ten-week training cycle in order to establish the appropriate ethical foundation for new soldiers.

## Reporting

A critical aspect of an effective SHARP program is training and enforcing proper reporting procedures. Reporting a SHARP-related incident must be more than encouraged; it must be demanded by all within the unit. Reporting timeliness, standards, and requirements must be understood by everyone in the organization, and commanders and supervisors must emphasize an adherence to those standards. When a soldier comes forward with an accusation or report, he or she must be treated with an appropriate level of respect by the other members of the unit rather than being stigmatized. Soldiers, regardless of rank and gender, must feel that their unit and its leadership promote an open system of reporting.

Although recent media attention on increased reports of sexual assaults in the military seems to suggest an increase in actual assaults, the increase may instead be indicative of improving confidence by soldiers in the reporting system because of increased efforts by leaders and units to support the SHARP program.<sup>4</sup> Results from numerous brigade- and battalion-level surveys and meetings with soldiers in basic training over the last year of my command made it clear that they were well educated on SHARP and how to report incidents of sexual misconduct—and they felt confident in the process. However, this confidence needs to continue throughout their military careers.

## SHARP Battle Drills

One of the underlying precepts of an effective SHARP program is taking the appropriate steps when an incident occurs. Unfortunately, some units fail to do so due to a lack of standardized operating procedures, minimal leader awareness, or personnel untrained in their requisite responsibilities. When it comes to sexual assault or harassment, there is little room for failure. Therefore, unit battle drills for SHARP must be

established with clear directions for both required reporting (informal, formal, restricted, and unrestricted) and actions to execute upon notification of an incident.<sup>5</sup> Developing a standardized format—understood by all, consistently reinforced by members of the unit, and taught to new members upon their arrival through a formalized training and reception process—is critical.

The battle drill format must be clear, with written instructions and graphical step-by-step directions. Further, these instructions must be placed in every unit's staff duty officer or charge-of-quarters book. After arriving at the brigade, this became a priority for me based upon the disparity I found in reporting across the battalions, incorrectly perceived required tasks from commanders and cadre, and improper actions taken by subordinates following an incident. Consequently, we quickly formalized a brigade standard for several different types of incidents beginning with those involving sexual misconduct, which clarified proper reporting procedures, protocols, and leader actions. More importantly, through its implementation and reinforcement, the battle drills eliminated confusion and missteps amongst the units and made the organization more responsive and effective.

## A Culture of Accountability and Transparency

One of the most crucial aspects of developing an environment free of sexual assaults or harassment is establishing a climate of individual accountability and unit responsibility to maintain the highest standards of personal and professional conduct. Commanders must create an atmosphere where all unit members are held accountable for their actions. It is essential for creating discipline and mutual trust between the unit's leadership and its subordinates.

Concurrently, commanders and units need to be absolutely transparent when allegations or incidents occur and must follow proper reporting and legal protocols. Commanders must remain neutral when an allegation is made, and they need to ensure they follow proper investigatory procedures once notified of an incident. There is nothing worse than a unit or commander that attempts to downplay an allegation, suppress a report, or hide the unit's "dirty laundry."

Unfortunately, some leaders attempt to discount an allegation because of the perceived negative impact on

their organization, cronyism, or because it involves an accusation against one of their *best* soldiers. Therefore, it is vital to reinforce professionalism over personal relationships among the cadre. If an allegation is made, the leadership must choose the hard right over the easy wrong. If the allegation is substantiated, then the leadership must take the appropriate action without any prejudice or parochialism. Leaders who fail to act, or who employ double standards and fail to hold culpable individuals accountable for their actions, are a detriment to their units. Rest assured that soldiers are always watching to see if their leaders do the right thing.



(Photo by Capt. Edward Brown, First Army Division East PAO)

Soldiers from the 158th Infantry Brigade and sexual assault response coordinators rehearse scenarios that train proper response to reports or observation of sexual harassment or sexual assault 8 November 2015 on Fort Meade, Maryland, during SHARP Program Summit 1.

proper procedures were being followed at the lowest levels of the brigade.

## Assessing the SHARP Climate within a Unit

Because the SHARP program involves a myriad of variables within a unit, we used several tools to assess our organizational effectiveness at combating sexual assault and sexual harassment. At the IET-soldier level, the brigade conducted anonymous surveys with focused questions about SHARP in conjunction with end-of-cycle proficiency testing. These surveys provided feedback from the individual soldiers on their SHARP training, enforcement within their companies, and their general assimilation of Army values.

Within the BCT battalions, battalion commanders and command sergeants major conducted sensing sessions with their soldiers after each phase of training. These forums provided firsthand feedback on training, standards, and discipline, along with commentary on the conduct of their leaders and cadre. These sessions were mirrored at the company level by company commanders, first sergeants, and SHARP/unit victim advocate representatives to ensure leaders were engaged and constantly assessing the performance of their unit and its commitment to preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Additionally, in order to ensure the organization was taking timely and proper legal and administrative

## The First Right of Refusal Principle

In our unit, we had a policy of informing the sexual assault response coordinator, Criminal Investigation Command, or the military police first when an allegation was made by a soldier within the unit, depending on the type of report. Although this policy followed the Army's appropriate regulations and procedures, it addressed what I saw as an opportunity for failure by inexperienced or misguided leaders who, through poor decision making, had chosen not to take action or investigate the incident.

Allowing outside-of-the-unit organizations to review cases alleging sexual misconduct first and either taking the lead in the investigation or returning the responsibility back to the unit created a greater level of transparency and accountability for the unit and its leadership. We specifically adopted this method to ensure all units contacted the appropriate agencies when a report was made and to eliminate cases of subordinate units conducting cursory investigations and too quickly determining that *nothing happened*. This *First Right of Refusal* principle dramatically improved our unit's transparency, promoted fair and just treatment of both victims and alleged offenders, and ensured

actions, the brigade command sergeant major and I met with our brigade staff judge advocate weekly to conduct a review of all current legal actions within the brigade. A few key areas we focused on were the status of open legal cases and SHARP unrestricted reports: where these cases were in the adjudication or investigatory process; what administrative actions were required, such as flags or suspension packets for cadre; and, what the way ahead was for the cases. This review also provided a snapshot of any trends across our organization that we could then address with unit leadership. The staff judge advocate also consolidated data on the cases for a more formal analysis of our unit's operational climate on a quarterly and an annual basis. At the conclusion of each meeting, we followed up with commanders and key staff sections to check on the status of their respective actions on cases discussed. Through this process, we saw more timely results on unit actions and investigations with all stakeholders properly involved in the process.

## The Importance of Sexual Assault Review Boards

Monthly installation- or post-level sexual assault review boards (SARBs) are critical to the success of a

comprehensive SHARP program. SARBs provide the optimal forum for installation and key leaders to collectively review newly reported SHARP cases (retaining the appropriate level of confidentiality), evaluate reporting and required actions, identify trends and best practices, and most importantly, synchronize resources and victim care support.

Although each post may vary in the conduct of its SARB, the SARB is an integral part of leader engagement in the process of reducing and eliminating sexual assault and harassment. Leaders can share lessons they learned in this meeting and coordinate support assets from the multiple agencies on their installation and within the local community. At Fort Jackson, we were able to bring in local hospital providers, university representatives, and other community agencies to discuss ideas and establish mutually supportive plans to prevent and respond to assaults.

Additionally, every year we conducted a SHARP forum, bringing in several guest speakers, supporting agencies, and many others to discuss sexual assault and harassment from the barracks to the university campus. These venues produced greater partnerships between our organizations as well as allowed leaders to share ideas and plans to improve their programs. In many instances, we found that the military was not alone in tackling this complex problem, and being able to discuss issues with our civilian counterparts produced new insights and strategies.

## Establishing a Culture of Professionalism

The most critical focus area to reduce or eliminate sexual assault or harassment is the culture of the organization and the personnel within it. Soldiers will adapt to the level of conduct to which they are either required or allowed to conform. If a unit has a universal climate of high standards for both the personal and professional conduct of its soldiers, there is less chance of misconduct. Conversely, if low standards and indiscipline are permitted by its leaders, incidents of maltreatment will tend to permeate a unit's ranks.



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Hohman, 89th Military Police Brigade PAO)

Sgt. James Cancienne, a military police officer with the 410th Military Police Company, 720th Military Police Battalion, 89th MP Brigade, shares his thoughts regarding a scenario involving two soldiers of opposite gender working out at a gym 21 November 2014 at Howze Auditorium on Fort Hood, Texas. Brigade soldiers between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five observed and reacted to different scenarios during interactive SHARP training.

Appropriate soldier behavior stems from an underlying unit culture based on dignity and respect. The formation of culture starts with the small things, such as the language we allow to be used by our cadre towards their soldiers and the way in which soldiers are taught to treat their fellow comrades and their leaders. In BCT, this is complicated by the drill sergeant and soldier-in-training dynamic. However, treating soldiers with demeaning behavior and language does not create the professional climate necessary to inculcate our values as an Army—nor does it provide our young recruits with role models to emulate.

Therefore, in an effort to foster the proper unit culture of mutual respect among soldiers for each other, we applied an approach of treating soldiers with dignity and not disdain. This did not discount making training and the BCT environment both rigorous and stressful in order to prepare soldiers for the realities of combat, but it required our cadre—from company commander to drill sergeant—to ensure their conduct and their unit climate were professional. This process has not been easy, but by focusing on the culture of our organization, we saw a decline in both personal and professional misconduct.

## Conclusion

As the entry point of every newly enlisted soldier, BCT is the ideal starting point to dramatically reduce sexual assault and harassment throughout our Army. Winning this campaign requires a multifaceted approach to address the underlying causes that allow for such misconduct to occur in our ranks. Solutions can only come through engaged leaders at all levels who establish the necessary conditions of a professional force committed to the highest standards and our Army values. Sexual assault and harassment are a cancer to the good order and discipline of any unit, not to mention the strategic implications those crimes have on the credibility and pride of our force.

Fortunately, we have made great strides toward reducing this problem through concerted efforts across the Army. As a former commander, I look forward to the day when such incidents are extremely rare or no longer exist in our units. However, until then, we must continue step-by-step to shape the environment and culture of our Army to develop soldiers and future leaders who will stand ready not only to win our nation's wars, but to treat their fellow soldiers with dignity and respect. ■

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## Notes

1. Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2013*, 15 April 2014, 1–5, accessed 17 August 2015, [http://www.sapr.mil/public/docs/reports/FY13\\_DoD\\_SAPRO\\_Annual\\_Report\\_on\\_Sexual\\_Assault.pdf](http://www.sapr.mil/public/docs/reports/FY13_DoD_SAPRO_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault.pdf).

2. 165th Infantry Brigade [the author's brigade] substantiated cases of illegal association and cadre abuse declined 35 percent from July 2013 to April 2015.

3. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation (TR) 350-6, *Enlisted Initial Entry Training Policies and Administration* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 7 November 2013), para. 3-21a. The regulation states, "By congressional mandate, the initial SHARP instruction in BCT and OSUT must be presented during the first fourteen days of accession into training. Therefore, BCT/OSUT companies must ensure this training is scheduled during the first ten days of training. This takes into account the time the soldier spends in the reception battalion."

4. Jamie Crawford, "Reports of Military Sex Assault up Sharply," Cable News Network (CNN), 1 May 2014, accessed 6 August 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/01/politics/military-sex-assault/>.

5. TR 350-6, *Enlisted Initial Entry Training*, para 2-7e. The paragraph highlights actions to be taken by commanders following an unrestricted report of trainee sexual assault. These include: "determine if the victim desires/needs emergency medical care;" "notify law enforcement as soon as victim's safety is assured and medical treatment procedures elected by victim are initiated;" "notify SARC [sexual assault response coordinator];" "provide victim with emotional support and monitor victim's well-being, particularly if there are indications of suicidal ideation, and ensure appropriate intervention occurs as needed;" and "determine the need for temporary reassignment of victim or alleged offender giving, to the extent practicable, preferential consideration to the victim's desires."