

Commentary

Troop Talk

This week, I want to focus on the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program at Fort Bliss. This is a DoD/DA directed program, which falls under the Army Community Services, Family Advocacy Program. A recent news article reporting on a single case has, I believe, led to some myths and misinformation about our program. I would like to try and clear up some of those misconceptions in this week's column.



The program's primary target is the active duty Soldier. First and foremost, any Soldier, including those in Advanced Individual Training, is encouraged to report an assault. We have invested in highly trained Installation Victim Advocates and Unit Victim Advocates for the entire installation. Installation Victim Advocates are the primary advocates for cases of sexual assault. These advocates provide each victim with support through medical exams, by identifying the support needs of the victim and their family, by providing support through the investigation interviews, and by acting as the liaison between the victim and the involved agencies and unit. The program also utilizes Unit Victim Advocates who are specially selected and highly trained individuals who provide sexual assault victims with the same support and advocacy services on the installation and in deployed settings. This is to say that when units deploy, a trained unit victim advocate deploys with them and can provide the victim with the needed support and advocacy services in theater.

The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program has a special aspect specifically designed to encourage victims to come forward and seek services. Many of you are aware of this component that affords the victim the ability to report a sexual assault in a restricted or unrestricted manner. Each of these reporting avenues allows the victim to report a sexual

assault and receive all medical and advocacy services without triggering an investigation (restricted) or receive support and advocacy services with an investigation (unrestricted). A desire for privacy should not cause victims to be silent. The critical decision for any victim is to report the assault immediately.

Many Fort Bliss agencies have a crucial role in the comprehensive program to include the installation sexual assault response coordinator, the victim advocates, the Medical Treatment Facility, chaplains, Criminal Investigation Division, military police, sexual assault nurse examiners and commanders. All involved are required to go through extensive training and certification in order to properly assist victims of sexual assault. In many cases, they are the first ones to be involved when an assault occurs.

The Criminal Investigation Division has the responsibility to do a complete investigation to determine the guilt or innocence of all involved when a sexual assault case is presented. The initial interview may entail several hours of questions, plus time allowed to be taken for medical observation and treatment, if necessary. William Beaumont Army Medical Center has four highly trained sexual assault nurse examiners to assist in the examination of a sexual assault victim. One of these nurses is always on duty or on call. During the CID investigation, the victim is always treated and considered the victim in sexual assault cases, until proven otherwise. They may leave at any time and are accompanied by a victim's advocate at all times. They are never denied food, water or restroom privileges. Even if the victim chooses not to press charges, CID will continue to pursue the case until their findings are complete, which could take several months. They will also do follow-ups with the victims every 30 days.

In the same article referred to earlier, there was a case described in the press in which the chain of command opted to use a summary court martial to come to a decision about a case. Some may have a misconception that the accused in a summary courts martial does not have a right to counsel. While counsel is not present at the courts martial, the accused has access to the Trial Defense Service, or they may hire a civilian attorney. The Staff Judge Advocate has an appointed victim witness liaison to assist those victims or witnesses about their rights and refers them to Army or civilian services.

We have a robust, highly trained and competent professional staff on board to assist in sexual assault cases. Currently, there are 187 unit victim advocates and 19 deployable sexual assault response coordinators trained in assisting sexual assault victims on the installation. We also have 102 of our trained unit victim advocates providing education, awareness and support services in deployed settings around the world. In addition, chaplains, nurses, unit commanders and CID are all committed to ease the trauma and ensure the needs and wishes of the sexual assault victim are met, regardless of the circumstances. I personally encourage anyone who is a victim of sexual assault to immediately come forward. There will be no retaliation. The deputy commander chairs the Sexual Assault Review Board, which meets monthly. She will take immediate action, when required, to make sure a case is being handled properly and in a timely manner. For further information, call 568-5868 or the installation sexual assault hotline anytime, day or night, at 490-3896.

Maj. Gen. Robert P. Lennox
Fort Bliss Commanding General

Captain reviews past year for 2-12 Cavalry as they prepare for Iraq

CAPT. TYLER ABERCROMBIE
2nd Bn., 12th Cavalry Regiment

I have had the incredibly good fortune to have spent a year with the "Thunder Horse" Battalion while they stood up from nothing, built a combat team, conducted vigorous training, stormed the National Training Center and now prepare to depart overseas in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

When I first arrived last October, Lt. Col. James Nickolas and Command Sgt. Maj. Charlie Payne had already stood up the battalion with a hand full of dedicated Soldiers, noncommissioned officers and officers. I arrived too late to have witnessed the early struggles they went through working out of overcrowded trailers without the ability to purchase basic supplies such as pens and paper, let alone computers and printers.

During my first week as a Thunder

Horse, we began to receive rifles which we immediately put to use on marksmanship ranges. Our leaders had to be creative when planning training because they did not have many resources to work with. By November, our Soldiers built lanes in order to begin training stability, support and transition to reconstruction lanes. They used whatever scraps they could salvage or have donated from other units and agencies at Fort Bliss.

During this period, I was put to work planning the Thunder Horse Dining-In. With a tremendous amount of Thunder Horse help from the personnel, operations and others, we managed to successfully pull off the event Jan. 6. 1st Sgt. Bill Lindsey tortured and embarrassed Soldiers as 'Mr. Vice', and few of us will never forget the notorious toilet punch bowls.

Following the Dining-In, our unit

dove-in head first into Bradley and tank gunnerys. Most of our crews were brand new to the mechanized Army and had never worked with these vehicles before. We were also

experimenting with brand new technology such as the common remotely operated weapons system, or CROWS. Despite being

See **REVIEW**, Page 6



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