



On a daily basis our Soldiers and Civilians deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq face danger on many fronts. Overt and covert acts of terrorism, combined with the rigors of maintaining a continual battle posture, can cause visible and invisible wounds that may take years to overcome. We have an infrastructure in place to help our Soldiers overcome injuries and, where necessary, to adapt to a new way of life caused by their injuries. Invisible wounds are much harder to detect, and can be extremely hard to heal.

An unnecessary source of invisible wounds, and a troubling trend, is sexual assault in the combat zone. Last fiscal year there were 163 sexual assaults reported in Iraq and Afghanistan — up almost 25% from the 131 sexual assaults reported in fiscal year 2007. That's 163 of our fellow Soldiers harmed not by an enemy of the United States, but rather by a fellow Soldier.

Our senior leadership put in place the Army Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Program (SHARP) to reinforce the Army's commitment to eliminating sexual assault through a comprehensive policy centered on awareness and prevention; training and education; victim advocacy; and response, reporting, accountability and program assessment. The Army's SHARP Program (www.preventsexualassault.army.mil) promotes sensitive care and confidential reporting for victims of sexual assault and accountability for those who commit these crimes.

The Army recognizes we have a problem and is acting to reduce and ultimately prevent sexual assaults. Our senior leaders cannot do this alone! We must all take proactive steps to stop sexual assaults and sexual harassment not only in the combat zone, but throughout the Army.

Sexual assault upon a Soldier in a combat zone represents an egregious affront to our Army Values, and the Soldier's Creed. Soldiers and Civilians who live the Army values must react immediately to stop sexual assaults before they start and take steps to make sure their battle buddies avoid situations where such assaults can occur.

Army leaders are entrusted with the physical and mental well-being of the Soldiers and Civilians placed under their command. Leaders establish a command climate of prevention that is predicated on mutual respect and trust, recognizes and embraces diversity, and values the contributions of all of its members. Further, leaders are responsible for assuring those under their command know what to do and where to turn when acts of sexual assault/harassment/ innuendo occur.

According to the Department of Defense, 79 percent of women and 78 percent of men who experience unwanted sexual contact failed to report it. We cannot allow this to continue. Leaders must maintain an environment that rejects sexual assault and attitudes and behaviors that promote or accept such acts. Individuals must be trained to understand their role in combating this crime. Soldiers must intervene to stop behavior that leads to sexual assault. In essence, Soldiers must protect and take care of each other as our Soldier's Creed states, "Never leave a fallen comrade."

The vast majority of Army Soldiers are committed to the safety and well-being of fellow Soldiers in any situation or circumstance. We must move aggressively to weed out those who do not share this commitment.

Sexual assault is a crime and has no place in the Army. We must continue to address sexual assault issues aggressively to maintain a mission-ready fighting force, with all members looking out for the welfare of their teammates. From Commanders to witnesses, all involved in our system of justice must be free from any intimidation, discouragement or any other influence that interferes with the free exercise of responsibilities and rights in our military justice process.

SECURE THE HIGH GROUND!