

She Didn't Act Like a Rape Victim

Rape victims must yell, cry and fight, says the Army that trained us for years to be silent, strong and obedient.

By Ryan Leigh Dostie

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Last month, three judges on an Army appeals court — two women and a man — overturned a 2017 rape conviction at West Point. They did so on the grounds that they did not believe there was sufficient evidence to show that the sex had not been consensual. One key piece of exculpatory evidence, the judges found, was that Cadet Jacob D. Whisenhunt had made no effort to avoid being detected, or even to clean up his semen from the sleeping bag of the woman who had accused him of raping her — a sign that he thought he had nothing to hide.

But why would he hide? He had nothing to fear.

I was raped during my first year as a military linguist in the United States Army in 2002. So were at least two other women in our camp in Baghdad, but only one specialist and I had the audacity to report it. I spent years wishing I hadn't.

The first woman's story I only know about through Rumint — rumor intelligence, the surprisingly accurate mill around which the entirety of a low-ranking soldier's existence revolves.

The specialist was a kind woman, soft-spoken. Not meek exactly, but gentle. Every line of her body declared this, from the rounding of her shoulders — perhaps an apology for her intimidating height — to the way she tended to grasp her fists together, as if she were holding her own hand.

She reported — and then the Army said it wasn't rape. They said that this shy, happily married woman simply had sex with four different guys at once in a wild orgy under the Iraqi night sky. Sure, she'd reported it herself — but only because she might get caught, the reasoning went.

Worse, she hadn't acted like a rape victim. She'd had a rifle. Why didn't she just shoot them? A *real* rape victim would have fought back. This ignores the obvious, of course: she did have an M-16. Her rapists had four.

If I had thought about it then, I would have seen that the story we heard didn't make sense. But I didn't think about it. I didn't connect her rape to my own; I didn't go to her and gather her in my arms, gently pat her on the head, and whisper that nothing would be all right. Instead, I believed the story because that's what everyone did, because my loyalty was to the Army. I ignored it because I was tired of fighting my own battles to be believed.

Every rape in the Army is unreal, unbelievable — but only because we already know that almost no one will believe. It's easier not to. How exhausting rape is for everyone involved, the paperwork and the sneers, followed by the investigation that ultimately will go nowhere. We who have been raped don't want to be reminded. We want to think our own story is abnormal, because what does it mean if it is not? What of my beloved Army then?

So I didn't think too hard; I didn't look too deeply. I avoided the truth by avoiding the conversation. And by avoiding this specialist. I think she did the same. I'm sure she must have heard about me, but we never talked about our rapes.

Later, another woman in our camp, a staff sergeant, was raped by a translator in a shed after a game of chess. She didn't report it. She had been around longer; she knew better. She didn't want to jeopardize her security clearance or her career. A female command sergeant major suspected what had happened, but refused to move the sergeant away from her rapist. Then a female chief warrant officer threatened to report the *victim* when she learned the staff sergeant had been in the shed with the translator, because she felt a woman shouldn't have allowed herself to be alone with a man. Whatever had happened, that was on her. So the staff sergeant kept her head down. She remained silent for years, through her military career, finally admitting the truth to me only when the Army was long behind her.

Our rapes were on us, the Army was telling us, and neither I, nor the specialist, nor this staff sergeant acted enough “like a rape victim,” a mantra often repeated by the investigators in my own case. The sergeant went back to work, did her job, and didn't openly fall apart. The specialist didn't uncurl her fists and shoot her rapists. Despite my own visible, documented injuries, I didn't cry hard enough, loud enough, in the military police station in the hours after my rape, in front of a group of men who had no intention of believing me anyway.

As for the recent West Point cadet, according to the United States Army Court of Criminal Appeals, her mistake was that she didn't scream for the attention of the rest of the unit sleeping nearby while she was assaulted. If she didn't yell, she must have wanted it. Rape victims must yell, cry, fight — says the Army that has trained us for years to be silent, to be strong, to be obedient. It's as if there is a list somewhere about how we, the raped, are supposed to act, how to play our parts for those who will judge us. We're failing a set of standards that we have no idea even exist.

And if we, the victims, know how the system treats those who report, so too do our rapists. Decades of continual evidence have shown that our reports will be met with derision, our careers will be threatened, and we will endure alone. Even others who have been raped will not come to our aid.

And so of course Cadet Whisenhunt didn't bother to clean up his semen. That he didn't do so says nothing about his guilt or innocence. What did he have to fear from his actions? Even when the ruling panel is two-thirds female, the system prevails.

When we stay silent to protect ourselves, we perpetuate our own isolation. We are a sea of women, and yet we make islands out of each other. Something has got to break, and it shouldn't be us anymore.

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