Books

Betrayal in the Field

Female soldiers are confronting danger not only from the enemy, but from their brothers in arms. Drawing from her new book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, Journalism school professor Helen Benedict reports on the abuse that thousands of U.S. servicewomen endure.

By
Helen Benedict
|
Spring 2009



Janet Hamlin

The stench was overpowering, strong enough to make Specialist Jen Spranger recoil as she stepped out of the military plane into the Kuwait night. Was it rotting garbage? Burning oil fields? Dead bodies? She knew only that the air was black with filth and smelled nothing like her hometown of Racine, Wisconsin.

Cramped and exhausted from 18 hours of flying from the U.S., she and the other fresh soldiers filed down the airplane stairs and into a waiting bus. It was February 2003, the month leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the soldiers were being driven to Camp Arifjan, a huge military base south of Kuwait City, to wait for the war. Spranger, her blond hair tucked under her army beret, huddled her small frame into her seat, wishing she could at least peek outside. But she and her comrades were forbidden to open the curtains even a crack. She felt as if she were being delivered to war blindfolded.

When she reached the camp and climbed off the bus, she was ordered into a long metal warehouse stuffed with roughly 1000 green army cots, almost every one occupied by a man. The building reeked of sweat. There, she was to sleep an arm's length away from her neighbor on either side, face to foot to minimize the spread of disease. If she needed a bathroom, she would have to weave her way across the room with all those men watching her. She lay down and changed her clothes inside her sleeping bag, feeling a long way from home.

Spranger was 1 of only 4 women in a platoon of 34 men, and 1 of 20 women in a company of 213. She was to live and work in close quarters with those men for the next seven months.

After she had spent several weeks at Camp Arifjan, during which time she turned 19, her unit was ordered to form a convoy of 175 trucks and Humvees and drive into war. The date was March 22, 2003, two days after the U.S. had bombed Baghdad, and one day after it had hurled 1500 bombs and missiles at other sites in Iraq.

Spranger's unit belonged to the 822nd Military Police Battalion, and its mission was to set up the first U.S. prison camp in Iraq, Camp Bucca, near the Kuwait border. Although Bucca was only 100 miles away from Arifjan, it took the convoy several days to get there.

"The first thing we did was get lost," she says. "We didn't have any maps, and our radios were all old and broken. We didn't have nearly the equipment we should

have. In fact, we got lost numerous times.”

As Spranger hunched in the back of her unarmored Humvee, the lone female among the five soldiers stuffed into the cramped vehicle, she tried to get a sense of what kind of country she was in. All around her the dun-colored desert stretched to the horizon, scattered with garbage and tire shreds. The carcass of a cow would occasionally come into view, bloated to twice its normal size, its legs stiff as sticks; or a cluster of small, yellow brick buildings, pockmarked and crumbling. But sometimes the convoy would drive through a border town that had just been bombed, where hardly a house was standing and where blackened corpses lay stretched out on the ground, their skins split open, guts trailing. A dog chewed on a dismembered foot.

On March 25, Spranger’s unit reached a former Iraqi military air base just outside of Nasiriyah, the city where Private Jessica Lynch had been ambushed two days earlier in an incident that was to become international news. Nasiriyah is an ancient city of squat, flat-roofed houses built of yellow mud or cement. Interwoven by narrow, twisting alleyways, it rests on the northern side of the Euphrates River, and is one of the most picturesque areas of Iraq, with lush grass, waving palm trees, and grazing water buffalo. But when Spranger got there, the U.S. had just finished blasting Nasiriyah for over 36 hours with explosive rounds and cluster bombs. All she could see were buildings smashed into heaps of smoldering rubble, bodies lying in the roads, run over by so many trucks that they were flattened, and heaps of garbage as high as her head.

At the air base, she and the other soldiers were ordered to set up their quarters in what had been a jail. “We had to clean it up, shovel out human feces,” she says. “God, it was disgusting. There were electric torture devices hanging from the ceiling. If this is what they did to their own people, I thought, maybe we are saving them.”

A couple of days after they arrived, the soldiers had just settled down for the night when there was a blinding flash, followed by silence. An instant later, the loudest noise Spranger had ever heard exploded around her, so loud it felt more like a physical shock than a sound. The building was being barraged with Iraqi mortars in what turned out to be one of the deadliest nights of the early war. Spranger curled deep into her sleeping bag, rigid with terror. Then, right in the middle of the attack, a man climbed on top of her and began groping her.

“Get the fuck off of me!” she yelled, and pinched his thigh so hard he rolled away. She knew who the soldier was. From then on, they avoided one another.

This was only the beginning of the harassment Spranger endured at war. “My team leader always made sure that we were out together when we had to do guarding, and he would say disgusting things.” He offered her money for a sexual favor. “I told him to kiss my ass.” In response he became vengeful, watching her constantly and trying to get her into trouble by reporting everything she did, no matter how trivial, to the platoon sergeant.

Codes of Silence

Spranger’s experience is hardly unusual among military women. According to several recent surveys conducted by researchers at veterans centers, nearly a third of female troops are raped by their comrades, while some three-quarters are sexually assaulted, and 90 percent are sexually harassed. “The harassment got to be so commonplace that I didn’t even think it was wrong,” Spranger says. “Anyway, it went up so high in the ranks there was nobody to tell.”

This is a widespread sentiment among women soldiers, especially as most of the perpetrators are older and of higher rank than the women they target, so they can threaten or intimidate their victims into silence. In 2005, the Defense Department tried to remedy this by creating the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), offering soldiers the choice to report assaults anonymously, and by hiring sexual assault counselors. But these reforms made hardly any difference, according to many soldiers who have served since then. Military platoons are enclosed, hierarchical societies, rife with gossip, so any woman who dares to report sexual harassment or assault has little chance of remaining anonymous. She will probably have to face her assailant every day and put up with resentment and blame from other soldiers who see her as a snitch. She risks being persecuted by her assailant if he is her superior, as Spranger described, and punished by any commanders who consider her a troublemaker. And because military culture demands that all soldiers keep their pain and distress to themselves, reporting an assault would make her look weak and cowardly. The Defense Department acknowledges that, despite its reforms, some 80 percent of military sexual assaults are still never reported.

Sergeant Marti Ribeiro, a wife and mother who entered the Air Force to follow family tradition, was relentlessly harassed throughout her deployment in 2003. So when she was redeployed in 2006 and sent to Afghanistan as a combat correspondent with the Army's all-male 10th Mountain Division, she resolved that this time would be different.

"Excuse my language," says Ribeiro, "but I decided to be a bitch. So I stepped off the plane into my own personal hell. Yes, I was able to put up a wall, but at a price. My wall became thicker and thicker. I'm normally a very bubbly person, but that disappeared behind the wall, and to this day I don't know if I've ever regained that part of my personality."

One night, while Ribeiro was on guard duty, a man in a U.S. military uniform crept up behind her, seized her in a choke hold, and dragged her behind a building. She did her best to fight him off, but he overpowered her and raped her. When she tried to report it, she was threatened with court-martial for having left her weapon behind during the attack.

"That would have ended my career," says Ribeiro, "so I shut up and didn't tell anyone. It's taken me more than a year to realize it wasn't my fault. The military has a way of making females believe they bring this upon themselves. That's wrong."

Watching the Watcher

Jen Spranger's unit stayed in Nasiriyah for two weeks, then moved to Camp Bucca, its original destination. Bucca is the biggest U.S. prison in Iraq, but in 2003 it was nothing but rows of dusty tents in the desert, surrounded by razor wire. (Bucca, which had its share of Abu Ghraib–style scandals throughout the war, will soon be handed over to Iraqi control, the Pentagon recently announced.) For most of her deployment, Spranger spent 14 hours a day alone in a watchtower, guarding a block of those tents, which housed the prisoners. This exposed her to yet more abuse.

"They would stand by the wire and mess with me all day, from saying that they were gonna hurt my family to taking out their thing and masturbating. And there was absolutely nothing I could do."

The prisoners not only hurled threats and insults at her, they flung feces, scorpions, and snakes at her, too. “There was one guy who would just stare at me for a couple of hours every day. It irritated me worse than the guys who would expose themselves or yell things. He knew it got to me. There was a point when I couldn’t look at him anymore ’cause I couldn’t stand him staring at me straight in the eyes. Actually, I wanted to shoot him.”

As Spranger relates this, her voice trembles, her hands shake, and her breathing becomes rapid: symptoms of anxiety and trauma that continued for years after she returned from war.

“I’m ashamed to say that I started to go crazy along with everyone else,” she continues once she has calmed herself. “I started to *hate* those prisoners. I used to sit there and fantasize about what I’d do to them. One time I had to put very slow country music on my radio and look down at the floor of my tower, ’cause I knew if I saw them looking at me with that look like they’re undressing you, I would put my gun on ‘fire’ and go nuts. Never in my life had I thought about hurting anybody before that. But I truly wanted to kill them. I scared myself how much I hated those people. That was the day I stopped feeling numb.”

Meanwhile, the treatment she was getting from her own comrades only made things worse. The men looked down on her as a female, the women were more competitive than friendly, and although she had a few friends, she was still being victimized by her team leader and relentlessly harassed by many of her male comrades.

No Battle Buddy

One of the reasons sexual harassment and assault are so common in the military is that women are so isolated. Over 206,000 women have served in the Middle East since March 2003, more than in all American wars since World War II put together; yet in Iraq they still make up only 1 in 10 soldiers. Furthermore, they are unevenly distributed. Some serve with only three or four other women, some with none at all.

“I was the only female in my platoon of 50 to 60 men,” says Army Specialist Chantelle Henneberry, who, like Spranger, was 18 when she began her tour in Iraq. “One of the guys I thought was my friend tried to rape me. Two of my sergeants wouldn’t stop making passes at me. Everybody’s supposed to have a battle buddy in

the army, and females are supposed to have one to go to the latrines with, or to the showers — that's so you don't get raped by one of the men on your own side. But because I was the only female there, I didn't have a battle buddy. My battle buddy was my gun and my knife in my pocket."

When Henneberry, who served from 2005 to 2006 with the 172nd Stryker Brigade out of Alaska, complained to her commander about the assault, she was told she was the problem and was transferred to another camp, away from her friends. There, matters were no better. "My company consisted of 1500 men and under 18 women," she says. "I was fresh meat to hungry men." She was harassed so relentlessly that she cried every day and was close to mental collapse. "The mortar rounds that came in daily did less damage to me than the men with whom I shared my food."

Several researchers have documented that the military has long regarded women soldiers as sexual prey rather than as reliable soldiers, and the Pentagon maintains that America is not ready to see its mothers and daughters die in battle. For these and other reasons, the Department of Defense recently reaffirmed its long-standing ban against women in ground combat, even though women are in combat in Iraq every day.

Not all military men look down on their female companions, of course, but too many do, making it difficult for women to win acceptance, let alone respect.

A Double Betrayal

By the time Spranger's sixth month in Iraq rolled around, she was emaciated, anxious, and sick. Her fingernails were peeling off, she couldn't hold down her food, she fainted frequently, and her hands would not stop shaking.

For a long time she tried to "suck it up" and deny that she was ill. But finally she went to the camp medic, who discovered that her heart rate was so high she was in danger of having a stroke. She was sent to Kuwait for medical treatment, then to a German hospital, and then home, where she spent months spinning into depression, remorse, and self-loathing.

Like Spranger, Ribeiro and Henneberry were shattered by their experiences. Soldiers are taught to see their comrades as family, so the victims of military sexual assault are doubly betrayed. As a result, they tend to feel ashamed and terrified, to blame themselves in irrational ways, and to find it hard to trust anyone again. Many turn to drugs or drink to numb the pain, losing control of their lives: a 2007 survey found that 40 percent of homeless female veterans say they were raped in the military.

Ribeiro was so full of self-blame that for six months she couldn't tell anyone, not even her mother, about the rape or why she'd left the Air Force. "It makes me mad when I think about the fact that I let them get to me and left," she says. "I had dreams of becoming an officer one day, like my father and grandfather. Unfortunately, because I'm female, those dreams will not come true."

When Henneberry came home, she, too, was filled with self-recrimination. "I felt like I'd messed everything up," she says. "I'd let my mom and dad down. I'd let everyone down. I hated myself."

Shortly after her return, she tried to kill herself.

Tragically, many military women like these are not finding adequate help when they come home. Women veterans suffer much higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than do men, probably because of the combined traumas of sexual persecution and combat, yet the Department of Veterans Affairs has only a handful of residential PTSD programs exclusively for women. And although all VA hospitals serve women, most were built with large open wards intended only for men. Women who have been sexually assaulted often cannot face therapy groups or medical facilities filled with men.

Recently, the VA has opened more mental-health facilities exclusively for women, which it says are safe and adequate to meet the demand. But in 2009 alone, more than 30,000 female troops will return from war, adding to the 1.7 million female veterans already here. Whether or not all these women will really be able to find accessible and sufficient care will soon be put to the test.

New Approaches

In January, after several congressional hearings and pressure from representatives Jane Harman (D-CA) and Louise Slaughter (D-NY), the Army announced its own efforts to improve conditions for women, including new approaches to the prevention of sexual assault and the hiring of more litigators to prosecute it. These changes, too, will soon be tested. The Afghanistan war is escalating, and the economy is driving floods of new recruits to the military, 16 to 29 percent of whom are women, depending on the branch of service. It is open to question whether these new female troops will be as isolated and abused as so many are now, or given the respect they deserve.

The military has not always been so ready to embrace reform. On July 31, 2008, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a hearing to address military sexual assault, and subpoenaed Kaye Whitley, the director of SAPRO, to testify. DoD officials banned her from the hearing. It took an angry letter from Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), the committee chairman, threatening the officials with contempt of Congress, to make Whitley show up at a later hearing in September. Her main message was that SAPRO was doing a fine job, even though four years after SAPRO was created, there is no evidence that sexual assaults in the military are decreasing at all.

Spranger was a mess her first year at home. She moved in with a boyfriend, who turned violent, and she spent six months sniffing cocaine, continuing to grow thinner, unable to eat or sleep. Even by 2007, after she'd kicked the cocaine and the boyfriend, Spranger still shook and had panic attacks that left her struggling for breath.

"To tell the truth," she says, "my life has been an absolute wreck since I've been back. I remember being happy a couple of years ago, but I haven't been happy since. I wasn't like that before. I didn't want to give up, like I do now. Now there are days when I can't stand being in my own skin."

Read more from ***Helen Benedict***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Helen Benedict***