



# The U.S. Military's Invisible War: Midshipmen Perspectives

*Sexual assault is an issue that seems to be swept under the table rather than eliminated in our military. In other words, it is handled and we are aware of it, but we try to hide and mitigate the reality of how bad sexual assault is. We find that those in charge want to maintain an image of heroism and portray military members as almost perfect. In reality we know that military members are people too, and they may not be as perfect as made out to be. We all have goals and aspirations that we want to achieve, and sexual assault is something our military needs to focus on more in order to help us excel towards those goals.*

Sexual assault is a recurring issue that arises in both the military and civilian sector. Over the years, military personnel have applied various training techniques in order to help minimize the number of sexual assaults within military life. This training, though beneficial, may be more effective if it was conducted on more military recruits, particularly, college students who are in training to enter military service. As a member of the military, I understand that not everyone comes from the same walk of life, and not everyone is instilled with the same morals and respect for others. These differences make the need for sexual assault education and training in the military paramount to

establishing and maintaining a culture of respect that all military personnel must uphold regardless of prior educational experience.

As a college student I am aware that sexual assault occurs on and off campus. Sexual assault is an issue that has to be dealt with on an individual basis because not every sexual assault situation is the same. Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) students may have a bit more training than regular college students because they are required to undergo specific courses in leadership and sexual assault. But how does this training help or hinder the transition into the military? If the military trains all recruits on subjects such as sexual assault, why do service members continue to commit sexual crimes? Is it the sheer lack of care for others, or are military personnel placed in situations where they feel compelled to dominate through sexual violence?

I interviewed two female and one male ROTC members about the annual training that they attend on sexual assault to discover what kind of impact this training has on participants. Each responder disclosed different experiences regarding sexual assault; some felt comfortable speaking about the topic, some had no experiences at all, and others explained what occurred

to a friend. None of the participants disclosed being victimized or suffering from a sexual assault occurrence.

I am interested in using the experiences and perceptions of sexual assault training within the military to identify trends and possible alterations in current training procedures. The goal is not to recreate what training standards ROTC students have prior to entering the military, but rather, to identify ways to make it better and more adaptable to everyday life of a college student entering military service. Whatever training approaches the military uses, there should be no differences in what knowledge is obtained by ROTC cadet/midshipmen or brand new privates just completing boot camp training. This research seeks to identify new ways of presenting training on sexual assault to ROTC students in an effort to reduce sexual violence in the military. My research asks:

- What is the perception of sexual assault within the military as viewed by students in the ROTC program?
- Does the current training requirement for sexual assault help limit its occurrences in the perception of ROTC students?
- What level of awareness does an

ROTC student have on how to make a report in the event a sexual assault was to occur in their presence or happen to them?

To add texture to a traditional research approach I weave into my research paper a fictional story that depicts the life of a young woman who wants to enter the military through an ROTC program. For the purpose of creating a visual identity that the reader can identify with, I call the young woman Susan. Susan is an African American female growing up in a poverty stricken neighborhood. Her story begins in her high school years and is told using first person so readers can empathize with her character and the experiences she endures.

### Prologue

The military has battled an invisible war for over ten years. This war termed as unseen is “sexual assault.” But in the eyes of others, the question that arises is whether or not this war truly is invisible? To understand the circumstances the military has to overcome, I have decided to tell a story of an ROTC student who is faced with this oppression. Some of the story that is depicted may or may not be fictional. My goals for this essay writing are not to prove that sexual assault in the

military is an invisible war, but rather to show that this is a war that can be fought from within. Just like any other war we’ve experienced throughout our history, it takes time to fully identify the enemy and their capabilities. Unfortunately, the enemies we are fighting in this war are the same men and women who have promised to serve and protect the country we love.

### Before the War

I can remember the days as if they were yesterday. I started my high school days happy as ever, but the days leading up to my graduation didn’t end the same. I was a college athlete on the girls’ varsity softball team for four years. I did really well until my senior year when I met Jay. Jay was so sweet to me and I just wanted to give him all my time. He attended every game up until my senior year. I often worried about where he



(CTBYTHENUMBERS.INFO, 2014)

was and what he was doing? Not knowing where my boyfriend was (the

love of my life, so I thought) left me feeling bothersome and depressed most days. I started to seek attention from unwanted places and that's when I learned that I could have the attention from other boys if Jay wasn't going to give it to me.

As our prom approached I found out that Jay was seeing another girl. I didn't know who she was but found out through a friend that she was attending a cross-town high school. I fell into a mode of not wanting any contact from the outside world after finding out Jay cheated on me. Missing classes and not attending softball practice, I wept in my room and hid from my mom and dad, but soon they found out about my despair. I was taken to a psychiatrist and eventually able to insert myself back into being a high school student.

A week away from prom I was approached by a guy on my high school baseball team. He invited me to the prom with a note he slipped to me in class. The guy's name was Nicholas. He seemed respectful and worth my time, but I told him I didn't want to attend the prom because I knew my old boyfriend Jay would be there. We started to hangout after the prom passed, and I started to attend all of his baseball games. We would celebrate his games with a kissing session under the



(Boston Holistic Psychiatrist, 2015)

bleachers, and I couldn't believe how respectful he was to me, never trying to force me to do something with him that I didn't want to do.

After several weeks of seeing each other, Nicholas asked me to attend an after-party. He came to pick me up around 11 p.m. on a Friday. The party was loud and everyone was drinking. Though I smelled a strange odor that I've never smelled before, I thought it was exciting to be around everyone dancing and having a good time. I thought about how I was once a depressed girl trapped in her room, but now I'm on a dance floor at a house party with over one hundred other teenagers. After a few dances and drinks I could feel that I was intoxicated and I could barely keep

myself from swaying back and forth. Nicholas held me up and often placed his hands on the small of my back; it made me feel wanted and protected. We walked towards a part of the house that had the weird smell coming out of it. I never smoked before so the effects of the smoke that I inhaled as I entered the room started to make me feel sleepy and I began to lose consciousness.

Some things I do remember. I remember that I was in a room with Nicholas, more baseball players, and a few girls. As time went by and I became more and more sleepy, people started to leave the room. Girls left in pairs and some of the guys escorted their girlfriends or dates out of the room. I didn't care. I had Nicholas holding me and often asking if I was okay. I felt my

eyes close and began to feel that I couldn't move my body. I was awake but my eyelids didn't want to open and my body was as if it was completely numb. I could hear Nicholas and the other remaining boys joking about other girls and their bodies.

One of the boys talked about how he got a girl drunk and raped her, another talked about how all girls are sluts and we deserve being raped. I tried to move and get out of the room but my body wouldn't let me. I became scared as I heard some of the boys telling Nicholas to undress me and show my body to them.

Luckily Nicholas didn't give in to the demands he received. He held on to me tightly and rejected the other boy's wishes for him to undress me and to



STAND. SPEAK. ACT. (2012). "There is no question that men's violence against women is a serious problem in the male sports culture -- at all levels" (Katz, 2006).

rape me in front of them. They began to call him names and say “he’s not a man.” Boys and men are continually subject to having their masculinity questioned with misogynistic taunts that they are girls, ladies, wusses, female cats, female dogs, etc. and Nicholas was no exception (Digby, 2014). He picked me up and carried me out of the room, house party, and into his car. I woke up in his bed fully clothed and wrapped in a blanket. I had no idea where I was and I was scared something had happened. I saw Nicholas laying on the floor cold, so I grabbed the blanket and wrapped him up in my arms and fell back to sleep happy I wasn’t taken advantage of by someone who I now love and trust.

### **The Beginning of the War**

With my high school diploma I decided to sign up for a college scholarship with the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). I joined the ROTC right after high school. I was a midshipman in the midst of those who will also be some of the future leaders of our military’s fighting force.

During my time as a midshipman I often felt discouraged and discriminated against because I was a female amongst many men. I was on my college softball team but was haunted by seeing some

of the baseball players of my high school. Though I didn’t know them, I remembered my experience at that party, and I knew some if not all of the guys on this team were probably still committing the same crimes. During my college days I often heard stories of women being raped on campus and how we could report such a crime.

In general, there are three locations on a college campus where a victim can officially report sexual assault: campus police, judicial affairs, or a rape crisis/counseling center. Of these, only the first two keep records on the perpetrator. However, at nearly all institutions neither campus police nor judicial affairs offices indicate whether an alleged perpetrator is a student-athlete (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1998, p.196).

I never knew that I would need to use one of these services one day, nor did I ever want to. But the college ability to spread this knowledge to all students would prove to be a valuable tool in the events to come.

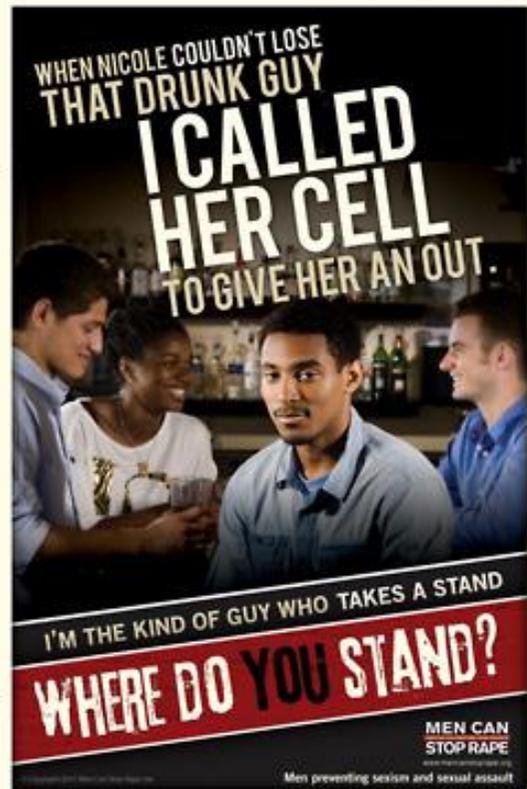
### **During the War**

Our sports teams were keen on holding parties and gatherings every weekend. I lived in an all female dorm, so I heard some of the horror stories that resulted from each party. Just like high school,

# 4 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO TAKE A STAND

- 1 Distraction**  
Call your friend's cell to ask her a question or suggest it's time to go. You can also distract the guy harassing her: "Hey man, didn't I see you at [fill in the blank]?"
- 2 Group Intervention**  
Ask your/her friends to help out with distraction or separation. They can pull her aside to check in. Or they can say to him: "We see what you're doing and it's not okay."
- 3 Get an authority**  
Ask the bartender, bouncer, or any other authority figure to help support the intervention
- 4 Prepare Yourself**  
Be aware of the pressures men face not to take a stand and choose what kind of man you want to be.

## WHERE DO YOU STAND?



(Colorado State University Women and Gender Advocacy Center, 2015)

drugs and alcohol were present at these parties. My roommate was a small, petite, nice girl who was naive to sexual assault. I taught her some of the lessons that I learned in my military training at ROTC. But often it resulted in us getting off topic and talking about school, family, or work. My roommate was invited to attend one of the college parties. I wish I could have gone with her, but I had ROTC obligations that night.

Sad to say, my roommate was raped that night, and there was nothing that I could do but try to help her report the incident to the college authorities. She cried day to day after the assault and never wanted to talk about the horrific details. Another friend told me that an aggressive and persistent male took advantage of my roommate and that he didn't want to leave her alone. He kept offering her drinks and made several attempts to kiss and grab her.

No one intervened, and no one viewed the actions of the perpetrator as wrong. Needless to say, the failure of others to step in and say something or escort my roommate home led to her rape not being stopped before the war occurred.

The homosocial culture of male sporting teams can at times encourage males to believe that it is *manly* to be stoic, play when injured, not express emotions, drink lots of beer, and be aggressive. *Some* sporting males can also develop beliefs that they are superior to females and better than *softer*, less-athletic males. I am, accordingly, concerned that sport can help build sexist, homophobic, and violent characters (Tarrant, 2008, p. 239).

One cannot simply blame sport culture for the rapes that occur on a college campus entirely. It is the mindset we have as individuals to allow someone to take advantage of another without saying something that should be questioned.

### **After the War**

My roommate no longer attends the university she was raped at. She has transferred to an all-girl school where she feels more protected and safe. I now have a new passion to educate

both males and females on the occurrences of sexual assault within the college atmosphere and in the military as well.

One government official who feels strongly about sexual assault on college campuses and in the military is Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York. She is



(“Gillibrand addresses military assault”, 2013)

a big advocate for preventing sexual assault and wants to make major changes to both college and military cultures. Senator Gillibrand serves on the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. This is a committee that is empowered with legislative oversight of the nation’s military including the Department of Defense, military research and development, and nuclear energy (pertaining to national security) (OpenCongress.org).

I also feel strongly in leading the fight against sexual assault on college campuses and in the military. As I transition out of the ROTC and into the military, I will use the knowledge

and experiences I've gained to educate others on sexual assault.

In the book, *For Love of Country: Confronting Rape and Sexual Harassment in the US Military*, T. S. Nelson (2002) states that two-thirds of U.S. women soldiers say they have experienced unwanted, uninvited sexual behavior. Research from the Miles Foundation, which specializes in services to victims of violence linked to the US military, shows that 30 percent of female veterans have reported rape or attempted rape while on active duty. A U.S. Department of Defense investigation found that women of color and women who are younger, poorer, and lower in rank are "more likely to be assaulted" (cited in Dowell, 2008, p. 220).

Being a woman of color, young, poor, and lower in rank are some of the variables that make me more vulnerable to be victimized or subject to sexual assault in the military. I hope I am able to overcome these statistics and help lead a change to the invisible war.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Susan's story of her experience with sexual assault while a member of the ROTC is fictional, yet it corresponds with many truths and facts that I have gathered on the perception of sexual

assault in the military as viewed by college students in the ROTC program. Capturing the perception of sexual assault within the military as perceived by ROTC students contributes something new to the field, because the views come from college students who are not yet identified with the military. They bring an outsider lens to an insider problem. My approach to this issue will open new unexplored territory. I am seeking information and knowledge of the matter not from those within the military, but from those on the way to joining the military. I believe if we educate and present the issue of sexual assault before a citizen reads the oath of office or enlistment, we can then combat sexual assault way before it impacts our service members. We will be able to fight this issue on college dorms and frat parties that ROTC members attend.

Each branch of the military has its own division of what's called SAPR (Sexual Assault Prevention and Response). The SAPR office (SAPRO) serves as the oversight agency for all sexual assault and harassment cases within each branch of service. This military branch has to then report each occurrence or report up to the United States Department of Defense. The Department of Defense reports all

cases of sexual assault to our Congress and Commander-in-Chief. They are also responsible for implementing new training regiments and ways to get rid of or improve sexual assault within the military.

Women constitute 13 percent of the U.S. military but [only] 21 percent of Department of Defense discharges (Stiehm, 1996). The Sexual Assault Prevention Office in the military has taken up the question of sexual assault as it occurs in civic life and within the military, but there has been little work that looks at sexual assault from the perception of ROTC students. I believe that sexual violence can't be resolved without first eradicating the norms of hegemonic masculinity, which in my own words, means males dominating over all other genders in our society. Data from a year-long case study of Men Against Violence, a peer education organization at a large university in the South, demonstrates the feasibility of meaningfully expanding male students' conceptions of manhood and appropriate gender roles and, thus, reducing the likelihood of men engaging in sexually or physically violent behavior (Hong, 2000). If the issue of violence and sexual assault can be eliminated on campuses and in our training

environments, then why does it exist? As stated by Doctor LouLou Hong (2000), we have to eliminate the gender roles that exist in our society which is the hegemonic masculinity that exists today. This dominance, or drive for it, continues to hurt women and we need to identify ways to stop it.

We know that sexual assault happens to both men and women, but it is a proven fact that it happens more to women regardless of race and class (United States Department of Defense [U.S. DoD SAPRO], 2015). This doesn't mean men are the only ones who should receive the training or extensive training. But it does mean we must identify methods for relating this sexual assault information to men.

How do women negotiate gender identities within the "masculine" military institution, and what types of transformations in their gender ideology and practices does this negotiation entail? I find that ROTC women's transformative agency is limited by the cultural imperative of performing gender. That is, because their very identities as women are called into question in the military sphere, ROTC women must privilege traditionally feminine aspects of themselves in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. Through this process, these women

ultimately reproduce traditional femininity and male privilege (Silva, 2008, p. 937).

We have to research and discover new ideas of how to have the knowledge of sexual assault permeated into the men within our military. My research is one step to achieving this goal because interviewing the young men who are joining the service and giving them the knowledge and resources on sexual assault will give them the opportunity to fight against sexual assault. We already conduct training annually for ROTC students as well as within the military, but I want to ask the interviewees how can we improve that training and make it relatable to everyday livelihood.

We know that men view other men in two ways: weak or strong (Katz, 2006). This notion gives the implication that if we question another man's being then we are not men ourselves. When a man's sexuality comes into play, he is called a homosexual, or in others terms, "gay". This sexual marking as it exists in heteropatriarchy inverts masculinity into a space of weakness. Why does this occur, and why does our society allow it?

Male-peer-culture has historically kept men silent. It is wimpy to confront other men's sexism. It is wimpy to

question men's enjoyment of women as sex objects. Men who treat women with dignity and respect cannot be real men (Katz, 2006, p. 209).

We already know it is men who criticize other men when it comes to women's fair treatment. We can assume that a majority of the sexual assault occurrences could have been alleviated if another man stepped in and did not worry about his masculinity being questioned. In other words, we have to get more men to speak up against violence and sexual assault against women. My interviews with young men and women in the ROTC programs illuminate this problem. We have to eliminate the idea of men having total control of women first within our society before we can do so within the military.

The ROTC students that I interviewed all have different backgrounds and experiences. So far, some have voiced that they understand the issue of sexual assault within the military, but many have voiced that it is a bystander issue that needs to be addressed. Katz (2006) expands on this:

In the field of gender-violence prevention, the idea of working with bystanders has gathered considerable momentum over the past decade. In

this educational context, a bystander refers to someone who is not directly involved as a friend or family member. A bystander can also be a member of a group, team, workplace, or any other social unit (p. 116).

Already the interviewees understand that the issue of sexual assault begins with those who are around or may know the perpetrators. It also begins with those who observe the signs and signals of a perpetrator but fail to act on their instincts. My interviews shed light on ways to educate ROTC students on how to identify these signals. It could be from how a person addresses someone to how aggressive a man is in trying to force a woman to leave a public space with him. Again, we know that sexual assault doesn't just happen to women, but we should better educate men because women are more frequently victims of male sexual assault (U.S. DoD SAPRO, 2015). Focusing education and prevention on men can better facilitate women's prevention and how a woman should fight back against male dominance.

One feminist research term that is relatable to my interviews is "standpoint epistemology" (Maynard 2004). Standpoint theory argues that those who have experienced or who are impacted by a researched phenomenon

such as violence provide an important source of knowledge. I use a standpoint approach because I want to focus on individuals who have experienced or witnessed sexual assault so that they can describe their own thoughts and experiences around this phenomenon. I have to remember that just because an individual may not have witnessed or experienced sexual assault does not mean they do not have the knowledge that I am seeking on the matter. Standpoint epistemology tells us that we have to be courteous to those we are talking to so that we have access to the knowledge that we seek.

Standpoint epistemology developed from feminist criticisms regarding women's absence from, or marginalized position in, social science. Although social science was supposedly objective and value free, feminists argued that it was conducted largely from male perspectives and male interests. In order to make the meaning of women's lives more visible, it was necessary to analyze it from their point of view (Maynard, 2004, p. 962).

A standpoint approach allows me to be more unbiased towards those I interview, in the hope that this will help maintain an open dialogue with my research data. My interviews with women are important because sexual

assault in the military, in a large amount, happens to women. It's less common that men report themselves as victims of rape. While the stigma and victim blaming around sexual violence make it hard for all victims to report a crime, it is even more challenging for men to come forward, because doing so threatens their masculinity and dominance (Katz, 2006). Even with this, the fact that women suffer greatly by sexual assault in and out of the military proves that women are important sources of knowledge.

### **Research Methods**

I chose to study ROTC students at the University of Rochester where I am a part of the NROTC unit. I have been a student here for the past two years and I play an integral role as a leader among the ROTC students in my group. I use interviewing as my primary method because it allows me to have one-on-one face time with each student where I can dialogue and listen with an unbiased approach. I conducted my interviews in a secluded but open environment where my participants felt comfortable. My participants did not have to wear their uniforms so the atmosphere changed from a controlled and dominate environment to one more laid back and friendly. When

conducting my interviews, I encouraged the ROTC students to speak freely and I made sure I allowed them opportunities to process emotional reactions to the topic. I audiotaped each interview so that I could maintain eye contact with the student being interviewed. This allowed me more time to listen to what each respondent had to say and develop a keen relationship with each participant.

### **Preliminary Findings**

My research shows that not everyone views sexual assault as a major issue. The man that I have interviewed did not know of its trending occurrences in the military, and felt it was just training and had no idea how widespread it is amongst the branches of service. "I have never actually witnessed a sexual assault, or know of someone who was directly involved with a case" (Male interviewee #3). The females spoke of occurrences that are more commonly known, and it was astonishing to hear that a male did not have much knowledge of sexual assault occurring. It became bothersome as the interviews were concluded because the issue was being identified before I even started typing this paper. More and more men are not focusing on sexual assault as women do. Women have the fear of

being victimized while men sit back and worry about other issues. Women are also more likely to learn about sexual assault from the women who have experienced it occurring. A woman will feel more comfortable talking to another woman who will be able to identify what has happened and relate to her fears of being a woman. Some of the challenges that I will encounter in the future are how to make this issue relatable to men? And, as a man, how to identify myself as someone who will listen to this issue and help?

One of the female interviewees told of a story that was rare but not unheard of, and she spoke of an issue within our culture that may be one of the leading factors to sexual assault:

An officer on a ship that I was reporting to had cameras placed in her stateroom. The cameras were angled so that only the neck down was visible and had been there for many months. A male sailor had placed them there to watch her change and was only caught when the officer changed to another ship and someone else cleaning the stateroom found the cameras. The sailor was discharged from the Navy. How would I prevent this from occurring in the future? I think the person who placed the camera was probably exhibiting signs of unusual sexual behavior, for example, maybe a

habit of watching/reading pornography. Undoubtedly, one of his buddies must have caught onto his habits but didn't do anything about them. As a future division officer, it would be my job to encourage those in my division to have a zero tolerance to such sexual behavior, but also foster a climate where individuals can be approached and the problem resolved. (Female interviewee #1)

Knowing she was able to identify what some of the causes were within this form of sexual harassment gave me the sense that I am on the right track to identifying how to resolve this issue. This could be avoided only if someone with her knowledge was in charge and willing to talk about it to all within his or her command.

While conducting my interviews, I found the female participants had more experiential knowledge than the males. One of the female interviewees describes her experience with sexual assault and how she would mitigate this issue:

I encountered a case this year (post-event), in which a close friend had been drinking at a party and was no longer completely sober, and a male was being very forward with her. They had just met, yet he followed her around and even waited for her to come out of the bathroom before slyly

leading her away somewhere secluded. She was sexually assaulted yet nonetheless felt extremely guilty afterward because she was sober enough to know what had happened, although she clearly could not have gotten out of the situation the male had forced her into. Such cases are not uncommon where the victim is intoxicated to the point of not being able to fight back, and can be prevented by encouraging more safe drinking environments with friends instead of strangers. I would also encourage a policy of always having a sober buddy who doesn't drink that night for every member who does choose to drink. I would also discourage underage drinking overall, since it seems younger college students get taken advantage of more than older students, who may make wiser choices in planning ahead to set themselves up for success.” (Female Interviewee #2)

The two women I interviewed are aware of sexual assault and have experiential knowledge that will help in the future. Some have received training outside of the ROTC unit from family and friends, and others none at all. But with all the females that were interviewed, they all believe that men, as bystanders, need to speak up more and say something. So creating a bystander approach course of training can help in

the future to combat sexual assault within the military.

### **Epilogue**

My overall goal is to identify how to rid or minimize sexual assault within the military. Though this is a major feat that cannot be achieved within a semester of college, I believe this will put me on the right path. My research confirms that men lack knowledge about or experience with sexual assault prevention so training may not be enough. Maybe they are experiencing sexual assault, but because it's so common, they're unaware of what is actually happening right before their eyes. For example, a male following a female around ordering her drinks so he can get her alone would seem normal to these young men. But in fact, it's planned sexual assault because the female will not be able to consent once heavily intoxicated. The female interviewees were able to quickly identify ways around this issue but the men were not.

My results are important because they come from an outer source. They are the experiential knowledge that the ROTC students have or witnessed. We need to know how ROTC students perceive sexual assault within the military because they are the ones who

are volunteering to enter the military. Their views or beliefs on this topic may already be influenced by personal and social constructions. These beliefs are carried into the military and will allow or disallow this issue to continue depending on how each member feels. That those I interviewed were unaware of the seriousness sexual assault plays within our military shows that new training tools and techniques are needed.

To increase the readiness and training for sexual assault within the military, I

would propose a real life scenario to be acted out during sexual assault training. My fictional narrative of Susan is an example of this approach. These modern day paradigms can become an open and honest discussion that involves both males and females to identify as a whole how to mitigate sexual assault. For now, my research will help readers better understand the seriousness of sexual assault and provide the knowledge needed to make a report as well as understand how to help someone faced with this situation.

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