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“Cutting Through the Fog of War”

What Did They Die For?

Life's Little Ironies

By: Niranjan Ramakrishnan

“Veterans feel sting of Ramadi and Fallujah losses”, runs the USA Today headline. “The images of Al Qaeda militants surging back into cities that were secured at an enormous sacrifice has chilled Americans who fought in Iraq”, the story reads. For one of the veterans, “seeing the images of Al Qaeda flags flying over buildings in Fallujah and Ramadi in recent days has been devastating”.

This particular ‘surge’ in Al Qaeda’s Iraqi fortunes has been facilitated by the turmoil in Syria, with which Iraq shares a long and largely uncontrolled border. NPR had a report yesterday on how Al Qaeda in Syria has proven to be too much even for the Syrian rebels, though neither would yield anything to the other in the matter of its ostensible enthusiasm for getting rid of the common enemy, the government of Bashar al Assad. According to National Public Radio, eastern Syria and western Iraq are now a kind of Al Qaeda administered territory.

A few longitudes to the west of Iraq and Syria lies Libya, another country where there was no trace of Al Qaeda a decade ago, now reportedly home to a thriving Osama franchise.

How did things come to such a pass? In each case, the violent overthrow or weakening of the country’s leadership created a big chaos which helped Al Qaeda establish a foothold it was unable to gain earlier. In each case, the United States took a large interest in engineering the ouster of the existing regime. In Iraq it did so by a direct, massive, invasion. The experience that followed induced a growing degree of skittishness within the United States, although the old maxim, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is still a far cry from informing American policy. Thus in Libya some eight years later, America contented itself with arming the rebels and supplying Britain and France with aircraft and missiles to dismantle the Libyan regime. The ensuing mayhem still consumed the life of the American ambassador among thousands of others, splashing a further jug full of cold reality on a blithe American establishment steadfast in its refusal to learn.

Fast-forward a couple of years to Syria, where a simmering political unrest surfaced last year. Once again the niranjangandhiAmerican impulse was to intervene militarily to help the opposition. Popular opinion was virulent against any such idea, and prevailed over the establishment. Still, enough was done via scarcely concealed arms supply and military training to the rebels in that country as to destabilize the government and dislodge its authority over large portions of the land. Once more, a raging civil war has meant an excellent opportunity for Al Qaeda to establish itself in a new place.

In all three countries, the rulers against whom the United States pitted itself were native strongmen with one thing in common: whatever their other proclivities, they were broadly secular; not even their severest critics could accuse them of being partial to Islamic militancy, least of harboring a soft corner for Al Qaeda. Ergo, the way to winning the “War on Terror” made it imperative for America to topple all three! Even Jude would have found the logic somewhat obscure.

Al Qaeda is America’s Enemy Number One, every American president since Clinton has declared over and over. After trillions of dollars in debts, hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of human beings displaced, and millions more suffering from war caused disease, Al Qaeda’s flag now flutters over Fallujah.

Just one more of life’s little ironies.

On April 4, 2014, it will be 10 years since Army Specialist Casey Sheehan was killed in Iraq. His mother, Cindy Sheehan, used to go across the country repeating the famous question she wished to ask President George W. Bush, “Mr. President, for what noble cause did my son die?” A hardy soul from West Texas (often pronounced Wessexes), untrammelled by doubt or guilt, Bush slithered away, far from the madding crowds and into the world of book deals and speaking fees, without ever gathering up the gumption to face Cindy Sheehan.



The Journey of Forever

By John Mulloy

II.

FOREST FIRES

(Below is the second in a series of episodes in the life of John Mulloy, a VFP56 member. The first of several forthcoming serialized chapters is found in the January 2014 Foghorn.)

During my childhood in the 1950's, a firefighter was seen as a heroic role model. The big red fire trucks are still viewed with respect and awe, especially by youngsters. I was blessed with the opportunity to spend three fire seasons (1964 thru 1966) employed by the California Division of Forestry (CDF), allowing me ample scenarios to work my boyhood fantasy into a resumé of reality.

I served as a member of a 'hotshot' crew. Stationed at a base camp in the northern Sierra Mountains, our primary mission was to rush into offensive mode against fires raging 'out of control' in northern and central California, infernos that were beyond local resources. Our camp had three trucks and fifteen firefighters.

I loved this job and often think of it as the one profession I could have stayed with for a career. I certainly would have approached it with zest and dedication. Three primary aspects of being a firefighter drew me. I loved the comradery, the tremendous strengthening of the physical self, and the adventure of going into combat against the holocaust of rolling infernos.

The comradery existed within a virtually military framework. Clear lines of organization and intensive training as a team were of a necessity in order to be effective. We shared a barracks and meals. On the fire line, each member's welfare was in all of our hands, with the smoke thick and the flames raging. Working through the turmoil of a fire was a tremendous bond. We loosened up by playing volleyball and card games.

On large fires, we worked closely with minimum security prisoners who came in behind us to cut fire containment lines that we were busily marking. Back at the fire's temporary base camp, we'd share meals and rest areas with the inmates. We related to them within a shared and dangerous fire situation. Psychological barriers crumbled and a sociological perspective evolved that allowed me to see these young men, my age, in a truly human way. An eye opener for someone seeking knowledge of the human societal condition. We were all temporarily in the same boat and our lives could depend on each other. Stress creates an opportunity to see deeply into one another.

During these fire seasons, I developed a level of physical strength, agility, and endurance that was optimal. We lifted weights and ran miles through the forest. I was 19, 20 and 21 when I did all this,

the last formative years of body development. I brought myself up to a level of performance that would benefit me for decades to come.

And, of course, I loved the adventure and drama of the whole fire fighting experience. Heading toward the fires in our big four-wheel drives, sometimes several hundred miles, was always a 'rush'. Riding 'shotgun' (seated next to the driver) was a sought after position, so as to operate the CDF radio and the truck siren.

At the fire's base camp, we'd grab logging company maps showing 'back country' logging roads that would get us closest to the expanding fire lines. Our trucks had excellent water pumps and several thousand feet of hose, so that if we could access streams or bodies of water, we were in business. Usually, there was no water source, so hand tools were in the fore. We carried brush whackers, axes, chain saws, and other aids to cut fire lines. Our truck could only go to certain limits in a roadless, steep wilderness, so eventually we had to move forward on foot, carrying our tools and supplies.

We'd sometimes do battle for twenty-four hours before relief forces came in and we could seek rest. Our primary focus was coming up one flank of the moving fire, in tandem with a crew on the other flank. Then we would cross the head of the fire and snuff it out. On paper, this always looked good, but in reality it was a tough, frustrating task. We'd do continual reconnaissance, looking for good containment line possibilities, and then cutting what we could, to get the ball rolling. An inmate crew or National Guard would follow us and cut wide lines down to bare earth.

Smoke and flame would be omnipresent, but severe injury or death never descended on my fire crew. The same could not be said for other fire crews during those three years. My fire mates and I enjoyed the combat against the raging power of fires. We'd always win the war, but the battles could be intense, lasting up to a week and leaving 'A-bomb like' devastation. These were years in which I learned a great deal about remaining calm under stress, not panicking, coming up with solutions to evolving problems, and understanding the character of others. My experience helped develop me as a human being in ways that imprinted on my soul. My inner map was expanded. Who I am and what I could achieve was broadened. I love telling stories from this period, especially to youngsters. It gets their attention.

* * * *

A). The MIRACLE

In mid August of 1966, we faced off against a tough fire northwest of Weaverville, California in rugged, steeply inclined mountains. After a week, it was seemingly fully contained. My truck and crew of 6 were in a position forward of the line, ready to react if the fire sparked up. We hoped to be released soon, so we could go home. Mother Nature had other plans.

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We noticed a strong buildup of smoke coming up the opposite side of the ridge across from our position. You halt a mountain fire when it is headed downhill, not uphill. Flames and heat rise upward, preheating brush and trees above the moving fire. A fire races uphill and backs downhill. We were ordered to get over to the downhill side of the opposite mountain ridge. We were to mark out a defensive line to stop the large breakaway tongue of fire that had jumped the previous containment line. A team of minimum security inmates was dispatched to back us up, ready to cut line.

An air tanker was sent in our direction, prepared to drop a load of fire retardant on the head of the inferno. These tankers were B-17's, the workhorse bombers of World War II. Thousands of these planes had been built during the war. The CDF planes had been retrofitted to drop fire retardant instead of bombs.

Making our way over to the opposite slope, on foot, we started marking a defensive line. We took immediate notice that the fire was cresting the ridge at a tremendous speed- and not slowing as it headed downhill. A freakish downdraft was responsible. Flames were being pushed downhill, preheating the brush and trees around our position. We backed off considerably, to a new potential line. Where were the inmate crew and air tanker? Stay calm!!

The fire was racing. We could hear the crackle of the flames as brush exploded. Trees were igniting, like Roman candles. Our position was looking bleak. We kept backing up, waiting for assistance that wasn't materializing. We were trained not to run; fire can overwhelm you. Once the flames reached the bottom of the ravine, they would race uphill again.

Working as a team, we picked a small open area and started to clear a space to lie down in, face to the ground, hoping that the roaring monster would race over you and that you would neither ignite nor have the fire consume all of the oxygen. Things didn't look good. Twenty-foot flames were no more than 10-20 seconds away. "Don't panic! Stay calm!!"

Suddenly, we heard the heavy sound of plane engines. We looked up to see a B-17 coming in just above tree top level, aiming at the head of the fire, which was where we were. The bombing doors opened and a huge load of orange fire retardant came down in a cloud, all over us and the massive tongue of fire. A 'first team', ALL-PRO performance by the pilot!! We were covered with the sticky stuff- and we loved it. In W.W.II, the opening of the bomb doors meant DEATH. For us, it meant LIFE. A wild juxtaposition of realities.

At the time, there was no moment to ruminate on what had happened. Back to plotting out the line. The inmates showed up, fifty strong, and we all busted butt to get a wide line cut before the fire could gather its strength.

It is still an emotional feeling when I reflect on what had gone down. So close to death the cutting edge of adventurous danger had been reached. I learned a lot about my character and those of the other team members. And, this being a powerful story to tell, I often revisit the episode. LUCK, KARMA, DIVINE INTERVENTION? I'm still pondering the supporting matrix of the event. Someday, maybe I'll come to a definitive answer. But, I'm pretty sure 'luck' didn't have much to do with it.

The Golden Rule Progress Report for January 2014

By Chuck DeWitt

I've heard it said that it never rains in sunny California, well this year they are pretty much right on. Unfortunately the missing rain has been replaced with near freezing temperatures that is preventing us from finishing the fiber glass job we started in October. The glass is on and sanded but with temps in the 40's we've only just today been able to finally put on a filler coat of resin. The temp. never got above 55 degrees so it may take a few days for the resin to set up and then a few more days for it to set hard enough to sand but at least it's on and curing. So we've adapted and been working on other things.

The first Trinidad Skiff that Mike built has been raffled off and once expenses are deducted we expect over \$1,000.00 to be added to our Treasury which we dearly need. The winner of the first skiff was local logging magnate Mr. David Schneider, congratulations to him and a huge thank you for the support of the project. The second skiff is as I said last month 98 percent finished, it only needs

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Next VFP56 meeting will be held
on Thursday, February 6th at
7:00 PM.
Meeting will be held in the
Commons Room at 550 Union
Street in Arcata.
Veterans and non-veterans are
more than welcome to come and
help us dialogue about what we to-
gether can do to bring about peace
in this complex world.



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some fancy knot work which Daisy does so well. She will add Turks heads to the oars and a really nice eye splice on the bow line. Mikes third skiff is more of a work of art than an actual boat. He has infused half a dozen types of exotic hard woods together and once he's sanded and varnished it'll be ready to show in any first rate museum, almost a shame to put it into the water.

When Mike is done with the skiffs we were hoping he could start on the main mast. We checked the moisture content last week of the mast wood we've been drying and it came up at 10 to 12 percent which is exactly the same as the moisture content of the original mizzen mast that we've had hanging in the rafters for about two years. The tests we did were surface samples so before we start we will do some in depth testing to make sure the wood is ready to work. Eric Almquist of Almquist Lumber has agreed to help us with this testing.

Two of the partitions for the wet locker and starboard cabinet have been cut and fitted and are currently being painted in the wood shop where it's warmer and the paint dries quickly. Marine plywood for the facing has been purchased and is waiting to be cut asscrewed into place.

Luke is getting things ready for the forge we're building. A 120 gallon propane tank is set up behind the Heyboy storage shed and we have 90 plus pounds of brass to melt for rudder gudgeon's and belaying pins. Dennis is having trouble finding good quality bell brass but is still working on it. Most all of the molds have been formed and we got every thing else assembled so we can start pouring liquid brass perhaps next week, weather permitting because we're doing all this outside for safety reasons.

Skip Oliver and Julie Cairns have working on new brochures for the project. Our contact information as well as our mailing address have changed so the brochures need to change also. I'm told they will be going to press this week. I'm also informed that our web domain has expired so Janet Wood and Breckin are working on this as well as restructuring our web site.

Bill Eastwood has located a source of free, sawed and cured Madrone wood for the folding table that Bud Rogers is putting together, but I don't know how far along they are. Bud not only has his musical instrument building business, he also spends a good deal of time on the radio and Bill of course is still mapping water sheds so I try to stay out of their way. Chris Berry said last night that he expects to be finished with the butterfly hatch for the top of the cabin by February some time. The monthly committee meetings have been moved to the conference room at the Harbor Districts complex on Woodley Island. This gives us more room and also access to their conference calling equipment which is important since some of our members live as far away as Ohio. It also makes room for guests who at the moment are not currently members of the com-

mittee but have good advice or information we need to move forward and make decisions. One example of outside help is a great letter we just received from Chris Jannini of the San Francisco Maritime Museum concerning rigging. How to, whats needed and who we might contact for help. Chris owns a sister ship of the Golden Rule and is also in the process of restoration.

To close out this report we are still looking for any one to help. We need some one to build two doors in the cabin, four bunks, two bench seats, an engine box with sink, a galley area for a stove, wiring, some plumbing, a hatch on the fore deck as well as a sliding hatch into the main cabin, port holes. most of these items can be built in the work shop and then installed but not all. We have tools and materials and there's almost always some painting or sanding to do.

Respectfully, Chuck

U.S. Has Deployed Military Advisers To Somalia, Officials Say

By Craig Whitlock

The U.S. military secretly deployed a small number of trainers and advisers to Somalia in October, the first time regular troops have been stationed in the war-ravaged country since 1993, when two helicopters were shot down and 18 Americans killed in the "Black Hawk Down" disaster.

A cell of U.S. military personnel has been in the Somali capital of Mogadishu to advise and coordinate operations with African troops fighting to wrest control of the country from the al-Shabab militia, an Islamist group whose leaders have professed loyalty to al-Qaeda, according to three U.S. military officials.

The previously undisclosed deployment — of fewer than two dozen troops — reverses two decades of U.S. policy that effectively prohibited military "boots on the ground" in Somalia. Even as Somali pirates and terrorists emerged as the top security threat in the region, successive presidential administrations and the Pentagon shied away from sending troops there for fear of a repeat of the Black Hawk Down debacle.

In recent years, the Obama administration has slowly and cautiously become more directly involved in Somalia.

Drones from a U.S. base in Djibouti — a neighboring Horn of Africa country — conduct surveillance missions and occasional airstrikes from Somalia's skies. Elite Special Operations forces have also set foot on Somali territory on rare occasions to carry out counterterrorism raids and hostage rescues, but only in the shadows and for no more than a few hours at a time.

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In January 2013, the United States officially recognized a federal government of Somalia, reestablishing diplomatic relations for the first time since the country's political structure collapsed in 1991. The State Department has not reopened an embassy in Mogadishu, but U.S. diplomats often make brief trips to the capital.

The CIA has quietly operated a base in Somalia for years and finances Somali security forces, but largely keeps its activities there under wraps.

U.S. intentions to become more involved militarily became apparent last summer, when Gen. David Rodriguez, the commander of U.S. forces in Africa, visited Mogadishu.

In October, Amanda Dory, the Pentagon's top policy official for Africa, told Congress that the military would "increase our presence in Mogadishu in tandem with the State Department."

Although Dory did not provide details, the U.S. Africa Command around the same time deployed a handful of advisers to Mogadishu to establish a coordination cell with Somali security forces and a regional coalition of African troops, according to the three U.S. military officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because the mission had not been publicly announced.

In a statement late Friday, Army Col. Thomas Davis, a spokesman for the Africa Command, confirmed the deployment. He said a military coordination cell was established in Somalia in October "and is now fully operational."

October marked the 20th anniversary of the Black Hawk Down battle between a task force of U.S. Army Rangers and Delta Force commandos and fighters loyal to Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aidede.

U.S. military forces were in Somalia at the time to support a United Nations humanitarian operation. But the heavy losses — and haunting images of dead Americans being dragged through the streets — prompted a quick U.S. withdrawal and for years discouraged Washington from intervening in other conflicts.

Since 2007, the U.S. government has spent more than \$500 million to train and equip an African Union force of more than 18,000 soldiers that has sought to bring order to Somalia and strengthen the weak Somali national government. Most of the soldiers come from Uganda and Burundi and receive training in camps outside Somalia from U.S. contractors and uniformed military advisers.

The United States has also spent more than \$170 million to build up the nascent Somali national army, although that force is relatively weak and unreliable.

The African Union forces control most of Mogadishu and are making gradual headway in securing other territory. Ethiopia and Kenya have also sent troops into Somalia and control regions near their borders. Despite all the interventions, however, al-Shabab remains a potent force and in control of large parts of the country.

Al-Shabab, which means "the youth" in Arabic, has been leading an insurgency for several years against Somalia's Western-backed leaders. The militia imposes strict Islamic law over the cities and villages it controls. Its leaders announced a merger with al-Qaeda two years ago, although U.S. analysts differ on how much of a direct threat it poses to the United States.

The militia has organized several terrorist plots in other countries in East Africa, including a four-day armed siege of an upscale shopping center in Nairobi in September that killed dozens of people.

Somalia has been plagued by famine and civil strife for more than two decades.

For many years, Mogadishu was known as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, a symbol of the lawlessness that gripped the entire country. Conditions are slowly improving, and the State Department has said it wants to reopen an embassy in the capital, but is waiting for terrorist threats to subside further.

"We eventually need to establish a permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in Somalia," Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for African affairs, told a Senate panel in October. "Ultimately, it is the security conditions in Somalia that will dictate when we can establish a more permanent presence and we recognize that the time is not right to do this."

Stop Drone Warfare

By Heather Linebaugh

I worked on the US drone programme. The public should know what really goes on

Whenever I read comments by politicians defending the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Predator and Reaper program — aka drones — I wish I could ask them some questions. I'd start with: "How many women and children have you seen incinerated by a Hellfire missile?" And: "How many men have you seen crawl across a field, trying to make it to the nearest compound for help while bleeding out from severed legs?" Or even more pointedly: "How many soldiers have you seen die on the side of a road in Afghanistan because our ever-so-accurate UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicle] were unable to detect an IED [improvised explosive device] that awaited their convoy?"

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Few of these politicians who so brazenly proclaim the benefits of drones have a real clue of what actually goes on. I, on the other hand, have seen these awful sights first hand.

I knew the names of some of the young soldiers I saw bleed to death on the side of a road. I watched dozens of military-aged males die in Afghanistan, in empty fields, along riversides, and some right outside the compound where their family was waiting for them to return home from mosque.

The US and British militaries insist that this is such an expert program, but it's curious that they feel the need to deliver faulty information, few or no statistics about civilian deaths and twisted technology reports on the capabilities of our UAVs. These specific incidents are not isolated, and the civilian casualty rate has not changed, despite what our defense representatives might like to tell us.

What the public needs to understand is that the video provided by a drone is a far cry from clear enough to detect someone carrying a weapon, even on a crystal-clear day with limited clouds and perfect light. This makes it incredibly difficult for the best analysts to identify if someone has weapons for sure. One example comes to mind: "The feed is so pixelated, what if it's a shovel, and not a weapon?" I felt this confusion constantly, as did my fellow UAV analysts. We always wonder if we killed the right people, if we endangered the wrong people, if we destroyed an innocent civilian's life all because of a bad image or angle.

It's also important for the public to grasp that there are human beings operating and analysing intelligence these UAVs. I know because I was one of them, and nothing can prepare you for an almost daily routine of flying combat aerial surveillance missions over a war zone. UAV proponents claim that troops who do this kind of work are not affected by observing this combat because they are never directly in danger physically.

But here's the thing: I may not have been on the ground in Afghanistan, but I watched parts of the conflict in great detail on a screen for days on end. I know the feeling you experience when you see someone die. Horrifying barely covers it. And when you are exposed to it over and over again it becomes like a small video, embedded in your head, forever on repeat, causing psychological pain and suffering that many people will hopefully never experience. UAV troops are victim to not only the haunting memories of this work that they carry with them, but also the guilt of always being a little unsure of how accurate their confirmations of weapons or identification of hostile individuals were.

Of course, we are trained to not experience these feelings, and we fight it, and become bitter. Some troops seek help in mental health clinics provided by the military, but we are limited on who we can talk to and where, because of the secrecy of our missions. I find

it interesting that the suicide statistics in this career field aren't reported, nor are the data on how many troops working in UAV positions are heavily medicated for depression, sleep disorders and anxiety.

Recently, the Guardian ran a commentary by Britain's secretary of state for defence Philip Hammond. I wish I could talk to him about the two friends and colleagues I lost, within one year leaving the military, to suicide. I am sure he has not been notified of that little bit of the secret UAV program, or he would surely take a closer look at the full scope of the program before defending it again.

The Rape of Petty Officer Blumer

By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

The first thing Petty Officer 2nd Class Rebecca Blumer realized upon waking was that she was freezing cold and naked. The second thing was that her body ached all over. Blumer groggily scanned the unfamiliar room for clues. She saw a concrete floor splotted with vomit, a metal door and a window onto a hallway, where a woman in an orange jumpsuit was sweeping.

"Where am I?" Blumer called hoarsely.

"Richmond County jail," the inmate told her.

Blumer shivered. "I need to see a doctor," she whispered.

The woman nodded. "You've been screaming that all night."

Blumer sat back in shock. She was a normally cheerful 23-year-old Navy intelligence analyst stationed at Fort Gordon, a vast Army base of 15,000 military employees in Augusta, Georgia. Blumer, whose job was to sift through top-secret data, was part of a thousand-member naval unit. The night before, February 12th, 2010, she and some friends had gone to a bar not far from base for a couple of beers. Three Army guys – one with light hair, the other two dark-haired – had sent Blumer a shot of Jägermeister, a drink she didn't care much for but had downed anyway. The light-haired man had rounded the bar to talk to her. The last thing Blumer remembered was being overwhelmed by a dizzy, sluggish feeling, her limbs and head too heavy to lift, the noises in the bar rising up and caving in on her. Only later would Blumer find out the rest: that at 1:40 a.m., police had noticed her driving with her headlights off. That she'd barely been able to stand upright during her field sobriety test, but when placed under arrest she'd gone berserk, trying to break free of the police car and screaming incoherently. In jail, she'd yelled for a doctor and fought with the cops so wildly that she'd been hosed down in an effort to quiet her. Now, crouching in her cell with a swollen jaw; bruises smudging her wrists, ankles and neck; her abdomen sore inside; and her lower back and buttocks afire with what felt like rug burn, it dawned on Blumer. She'd been roofied and raped.

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The Kill Team: How U.S. Soldiers in Afghanistan Murdered Innocent Civilians

She was desperate to get back to the safety of Fort Gordon. “I need to go to the hospital,” a panicked Blumer told the master-at-arms when he arrived to return her to base. Sitting in the car wearing the previous night’s turtleneck and jeans, Blumer reminded herself that she was in good hands. She came from a long military tradition; while in the cavalry, her great-grandfather had once been stationed at this very base. So Blumer was confused when, arriving at Fort Gordon, the master-at-arms drove her not to the military hospital but to the Judge Advocate General’s offices, where a half-dozen members of her chain of command were solemnly waiting in their black dress uniforms to discipline her for driving under the influence.

Blumer, a standout sailor with an unblemished record, was sure she could clear things up. She wrote a statement in the crowded office that described her suspicions about what had actually occurred, and her urgent need for medical attention. Then she obediently left the room so her superiors could discuss the matter. When she was allowed in a few minutes later, Blumer was told that she would be taken to the hospital – but with orders only for a toxicology report, to see if there really were date-rape drugs in her system. “Whether you get a rape kit is up to you,” the female JAG prosecutor cautiously told Blumer, who struggled to make sense of what was happening: The military she’d trusted to care for her wasn’t interested in caring for her at all. She was even more shaken by the JAG’s jarring question later on: “Did you inflict your injuries yourself?”

The implication floored Blumer. “How could anyone even think that I would do that to myself?” she says now. It was Blumer’s first glimpse of a hidden side of military culture, in which rapes, and the sweeping aside of rapes, happen with disturbing regularity. And it was her first sense of what lay in store after coming forward as a military rape victim: that she would be treated with suspicion by those charged with helping her, penalized by command and ostracized by her unit. “Once my assault happened,” Blumer says, “my whole future disappeared.”

The scandal of rape in the U.S. Armed Forces, across all of its uniformed services, has become inescapable. Last year saw the military’s biggest sex-abuse scandal in a decade, when an investigation at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio revealed that 32 basic-training instructors preyed on at least 59 recruits. In Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Army Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Sinclair is currently facing court-martial for sex-crimes charges, including forcible sodomy, for alleged misconduct against five women. In October, an Air Force technical sergeant filed an administrative complaint describing a work environment of comprehensive harassment – in which all women are “bitches”; and claimed that during a routine meeting in a commander’s office, she was instructed to take off her blouse and “relax” – edged with menace and punctuated by violent assaults. In December, a Department of Defense report revealed that rape is rampant at the nation’s military academies, where 12 percent of female cadets experienced “unwanted sexual contact.” And an explosive series of federal lawsuits filed against top DOD brass on behalf of 59

service members (including Rebecca Blumer) allege that the leadership has done nothing to stop the cycle of rape and impunity – and that by failing to condemn sexual assault, the military has created a predators’ playground.

“Sexual assaults make up the fabric of daily American military life,” says former Marine Capt. Anu Bhagwati, executive director of the advocacy group Service Women’s Action Network. Research suggests that one out of every three women in the U.S. military is the victim of sexual assault, making military women twice as likely to be raped as civilians. (Victims are disproportionately female, given that women make up less than 15 percent of the military, but men are victimized, too: More than 40 percent of vets receiving treatment for Military Sexual Trauma are men.) An anonymous DOD survey found that in 2010, an astonishing 19,000 service members were sexually assaulted; a mere 13.5 percent of those attacks were reported to authorities. Victims have little incentive to report, since the military’s insular justice system rarely holds perpetrators accountable. Of the sliver of sexual assaults reported last year, 92 percent never saw the inside of a courtroom but rather were dismissed or administered wrist-slap penalties like fines, reduced PX privileges or counseling – a prosecution record even outgoing Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has called “an outrage.”

Incredibly, this ugly picture comes after two decades of very public sex scandals – Tailhook in 1991, Aberdeen in 1996, the Air Force Academy in 2003 – after each of which the DOD swore “zero tolerance,” then resisted any meaningful reform. But as survivors have begun to speak up, and legislators resolve to take action, the military finds itself facing a public relations crisis at a time when it’s not only trying to justify its \$633 billion budget but also desperate to step up recruitment. Women, widely seen as a way to help stop attrition of troops – and now, for the first time, cleared to serve in combat alongside their male peers – are projected to make up one-quarter of the armed services by 2025.

“The military is changing. Military culture has to change, too,” notes Rep. Niki Tsongas, who co-chairs the new, bipartisan caucus on military sexual assault, and whose interest was sparked by an Army nurse who told her, “Ma’am, I’m more afraid of my own soldiers than I am of the enemy.” But as it stands now, “blue on blue” sexual crime has become utterly commonplace. Just ask 23-year-old Lance Cpl. Nicole McCoy, who was assaulted so often during her four-year stint that she came to regard it as an unavoidable, even sanctioned, part of service. “I thought it was just a normal thing in the military, almost like a hazing process,” remembers McCoy, who left the Marines in May 2012. “It seemed like everyone gets raped and assaulted and no one does anything about it; it’s like a big rape cult.”

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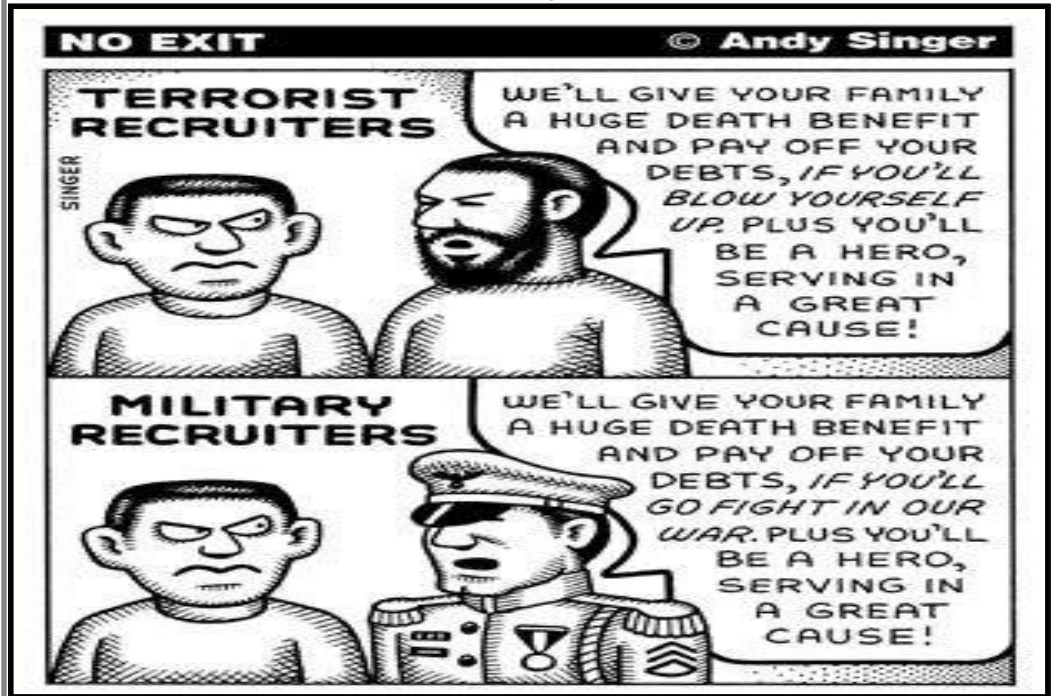
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If you would like to submit an article, opinion, comment or response to anything you have read which might interest the members of VFP-56, please e-mail it to turtldncer@aol.com, in word format, or mail to Jim Sorter at 1762 Buttermilk Lane, Arcata, CA 95521. Submissions will be included on a first come basis until the newsletter is full. Late arriving submissions will be archived for future issues.



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