



Translational Research Group

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL)

Does Combat Increase the Risk of Sexual Assault? A Brief Appraisal

Wendy Chambers, Ph.D.

BLUF: Authors of a recent Department of Defense (DoD) study of 13,362 female warfighters claim an increased risk of sexual assault associated with combat,ⁱ but the results are actually inconclusive.

Problem – Variable Definitions of Sexual Assault and Combat: In this study of females across the services, the authors did not define “sexual assault” for the participants,ⁱⁱ leaving it to self interpretation. They also considered participants to have experienced combat if they had exposure to one or more of the following six “combat” experiences: “witnessing death; witnessing physical abuse; dead and/or decomposing bodies; maimed soldiers or civilians; or prisoners of war, or refugees.”ⁱⁱⁱ Though these experiences are possibly traumatic, they are not all specific to combat. Participants could witness death and physical abuse stateside, for example, yet nondeployed military members either did not receive these questions or their data were not reported. Definitions of combat experiences also did not include the historical characterization of experiencing enemy fire, capture, or non-fatal personal contact with the enemy.^{iv}

Suggestion - Provide Detailed, Justifiable Definitions of Sexual Assault and Combat: The annual DoD surveys of sexual assault^v provide detailed, comprehensive definitions of sexual assault.^{vi} To provide an equally detailed, comprehensive definition of combat, DoD should assemble premiere combat historians across the services and key figures in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) to review definitions of combat.^{vii}

Problem – Inconclusive Results about Sexual Assault and Combat: In the all-female study, only one of the six combat experiences - “witnessing physical abuse” - was positively associated with sexual assault.^{viii} As the authors noted, the timing of the assault also did not clearly correspond to actual time in combat – it could have taken place just before or after a deployment that included the combat experiences.^{ix} Lastly, having ever experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault in one’s lifetime, youth (born 1980 or later), and membership in the Marine Corps had stronger associations with sexual assault than combat experiences.^x Therefore, this study does not provide evidence of any solid relationship between combat and sexual assault. Furthermore, the fact that other studies of both general and specialized military populations show a greater incidence of sexual assault for males and females prior to any military service than during service^{xi} or a greater prevalence of sexual assault for both sexes when not in combat,^{xii} should make any currently proposed relationship between combat and sexual assault questionable at this time.

Suggestion – Clearly Identify the Timing of Sexual Assault and Combat: Anonymous surveys need to include additional questions for participants who indicate experiencing sexual assault or include anonymous follow-up interviews with these participants, if possible. Questions should focus on when (e.g., year/month/time of day) and where the sexual assault occurred, the latter ideally drilling down to whether on base (what type of base, where on base) or in the field (general nature of operations – e.g., house clearing) or en route to field operations. Understanding the nature of their actual duties both in general and during the time of the assault would also provide much-needed context. The best answers would be obtained from an open-ended format, whether survey or interview.

Suggestion – Include Both Male and Female Warfighters: Sexual assault is not just a concern for females. While sexual assault disproportionately affects female warfighters when compared to male warfighters in terms of actual reports and anonymous survey responses,^{xiii} sexual assault affects male warfighters more than these numbers reveal. For example, a roughly equal number of men and women disclose sexual assault experiences at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).^{xiv} Most of the barriers to reporting sexual assault for men are not gender specific and therefore might also apply to women.^{xv} Consistently including both males and females in studies would contribute to a more complete portrayal of any relationship that might exist between combat and sexual assault.

DISTRIBUTION: UNLIMITED

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Government, Professional Solutions, or ProSol Associates.

Center For Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL): 1019 Elliot Road (Bldg 711, 6th Street), Quantico, VA 22134 703.432.1504

Lead Researcher: Wendy Chambers, 703-432-0222, WChambers@prosolassociates.com

16 December 2013

Page 1 of 2

ⁱ Cynthia A. LeardMann, Amanda Pietrucha, Kathryn M. Magruder, Besa Smith, Maureen Murdoch, Isabel G. Jacobson, Margaret A.K. Ryan, Gary Gackstetter, and Tyler C. Smith for the Millennium Cohort Study Team, "Combat Deployment Is Associated with Sexual Harassment or Sexual Assault in a Large, Female Military Cohort," *Women's Health Issues* 23, no. 4 (2013): e215-e223.

ⁱⁱ LeardMann et al., 2013: e216. Participants were asked if they "suffered forced sexual relations or sexual assault." Authors did note this lack of a definition was problematic, see e221.

ⁱⁱⁱ LeardMann et al., e216.

^{iv} Now rescinded, the historical definition of direct ground combat included enemy engagement per Secretary of Defense 1994 memo: <http://www.govexec.com/pdfs/031910d1.pdf>. The female plaintiffs in the lawsuit filed against then-Defense Secretary Leon Pannetta regarding the combat exclusion referenced engaging or in danger of engaging the enemy in all of their accounts. See American Civil Liberties Union, *Hegar, et al. v. Panetta – Plaintiffs*, November 2012 <https://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/hegar-et-al-v-panetta-plaintiffs>

^v The referenced studies include other measures, such as sexual harassment, but the results of the sexual assault findings are the focus here.

^{vi} Sexual assault was referred to as "unwanted sexual contact," defined as the following: "intentional sexual contact that was against a person's will or which occurred when the person did not or could not consent, and includes completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually-related areas of the body." See Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention, "Annex A: 2012 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members" *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2012, Volume II, 1*; Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention, "Annex B: 2012 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members" *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2012, Volume II, 1*. Note: Sexual assault assessed only over the past 12 months.

^{vii} E.g., From Gail R. Janes, Jack Goldberg, Seth A. Eisen, and William R. True, "Reliability and Validity of a Combat Exposure Index for Vietnam Era Veterans," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 47, no. 1 (January 1991): 8: *combat items included "in artillery unit; fired on enemy; flew in aircraft; flew attack gunships or medvacs; at forward observation post; tunnel rat in enemy base camps; served in river patrol or gunboat; demolitions expert in field; retrieved dead bodies from field; served as medic in combat; received incoming fire; encountered mines and traps; received sniper or sapper fire; unit patrol ambushed; aircraft shot down; engaged enemy in firefight; saw soldiers killed; was wounded; was captured"*; From Han Kang, Nancy Dalager, Clare Mahan, and Erick Ishii, "The Role of Sexual Assault on the Risk of PTSD among Gulf War Veterans," *AEP* Vol. 15, No. 3 (March 2005): 192: *Combat for a Gulf War veteran sample was defined as anyone who endorsed wearing chemical protective gear or heard chemical alarms sounding being involved in direct combat duty; and/or witnessing any deaths.*

^{viii} LeardMann et al., 2013, e217.

^{ix} LeardMann et al., 2013, e219.

^x LeardMann et al., 2013, e220.

^{xi} Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention, Annexes A and B, 2012, 4.

^{xii} Maureen Murdoch, Melissa Polusny, James Hodges, and Nancy O'Brien, "Prevalence of In-Service and Post-Service Sexual Assault among Combat and Noncombat Veterans Applying for Department of Veterans Affairs Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Disability Benefits," *Military Medicine* 169 (2004): 393; Daniel W. Smith, B. Christopher Frueh, Craig N. Sawchuk, and Michael R. Johnson, "Relationship Between Symptom Over-Reporting and Pre- and Post- Combat Trauma History in Veterans Evaluated for PTSD," *Depression and Anxiety* 10 (1999):121.

^{xiii} Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention, *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2012, Volume II*, 81, 86-88; Department of Defense, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention, Annexes A and B, 2012, 1-3 and 3-4, respectively.

^{xiv} Veterans Health Initiative, "Military Sexual Trauma: Independent Study Course Release," *Department of Veterans Affairs* (January 2004): 3; Department of Veterans Affairs, "MST National Report: Fiscal Year 2002." *U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs* (2002) and Department of Veterans Affairs, "MST National Report: Fiscal Year 2003," *U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs* (2003) as cited in *Melissa A. Polusny and Maureen Murdoch, "Sexual Assault Among Male Veterans," Psychiatric Times* XXII, no. 4 (April 2005) (reports could not be obtained).

^{xv} Variety in screening processes: C. Newell, P. Rosenfeld, R. Harris, & R. Hindelang, "Reasons for Nonresponse on U.S. Navy surveys: A Closer Look," *Military Psychology* 16 (2004): 265–276 as cited in Tim Hoyt, Jennifer Klosterman Rielage, & Lauren F. Williams, "Military Sexual Trauma in Men: A Review of Reported Rates," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 12:3 (2011): 253. Desire to preserve unit cohesion: R. Niebuhr, "Sexual Harassment in the Military," in *Sexual Harassment: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, ed. W. O'Donohue (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), 250–262 as cited in Hoyt et al.,(2011): 254. Fear of violent or fatal reprisal: H. Nuwer, H., "Military Hazing," in *The Hazing Reader*, ed. H. Nuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004): 141– 146 and M. Hunter, *Honor Betrayed: Sexual Abuse in America's Military* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2007) as cited in Hoyt et al., (2011): 255. Cultural pressure to be stoic warrior: N. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) as cited in Hoyt et al.,(2011): 255.