Hidden Casualties
An Epidemic of Domestic Violence When Troops Return from War

After a spate of wife killings at Fort Bragg, domestic abuse in military families is under new scrutiny—but the Defense Department still turns a blind eye on key causes.

By Jon Elliston and Catherine Lutz
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One novel way news reporters have tried to pinpoint the start of major U.S. military engagements is to monitor pizza deliveries at the Pentagon. It’s been called the “Domino’s theory”: When the generals and their staffs go into imminent-war mode, they stay at their posts late into the night, and the pizza orders shoot up.

There are more grim indicators that a military operation is nigh. As the war in Afghanistan began in October 2001, for example, “We could literally tell what units were being deployed from where, based on the volume of calls we received from given bases,” says Christine Hansen, executive director of the Connecticut-based Miles Foundation, which has assisted more than 10,000 victims of military-related domestic violence since 1997. The calls were from women who were facing threats and physical abuse from their partners—the same men who were supposedly being deployed on a mission to make America safer. “Then the same thing happened on the other end, when they came back,” Hansen adds.

Hansen and other domestic violence workers say that such patterns of abuse are signs of how issues of gender, power and control are magnified in the military, making domestic violence an even more extensive and complicated problem than it is among civilians. And while recent events have sparked an unprecedented amount of official soul-searching about domestic violence in military families, those key issues have rarely entered the discussion.

It took the rapid-fire deaths of four women to turn national attention to this oft-overlooked form of domestic terror. The problem forced its way into the headlines last July, following a spate of murders by soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina. In the space of just five weeks, four women married to soldiers were killed by their spouses, according to the authorities. Marilyn Griffin was stabbed 70 times and her trailer set on fire, Teresa Nieves and Andrea Floyd were shot in the head,
and Jennifer Wright was strangled. All four couples had children, several now orphaned as two of the men shot themselves after killing their wives. The murders garnered wide attention because they were clustered over such a short period, and because three of the soldiers had served in special operations units that fought in Afghanistan. (The throat-slitting murder of Shalamar Franceschi a few months before by her husband, a just-released Fort Bragg soldier, might also have been added to the tally, but wasn’t.)

The murders have raised a host of questions—about the effects of war on the people who wage it, the spillover on civilians from training military personnel to kill, the role of military institutional values, and even the possible psychiatric side effects of an anti-malarial drug the Army gives its soldiers. On the epidemic of violence against women throughout the United States and on the role of gender in both military and civilian domestic violence, however, there has been a deafening silence.

Another Kind of Casualty

In the wake of the domestic murders, defense officials have focused on “marital discord” and “family stress,” and have fiercely contested the notion that domestic violence is a more severe problem in the military than in civilian populations, although the Pentagon has not invested much in finding out what the comparison would look like. One Army-funded study, however, found in 1998 that reports of “severe aggression” against spouses ran more than three times higher among Army families than among civilian ones.

The military nonetheless maintains that violence against spouses is no more prevalent in the armed forces, arguing that it uses different criteria than civilian authorities for identifying domestic violence, including severe verbal abuse. “People have been throwing some wild figures around,” says Lt. Col. James Cassella, a Defense Department spokesman. “My understanding is that it’s kind of an apples and oranges comparison.” But the military’s method may actually underestimate the problem, since it ignores violence against a legion of non-married partners, an especially important omission, considering that one recent study found that single men represent nearly 60 percent of soldiers using a gun or knife in attacks on women. And there is no way to independently corroborate the figures the military releases on domestic violence cases that are handled through military judicial processes, since
they are shielded, as civilian police records are not, from public view. The cited studies did attempt to control, however, for the most important demographic differences—the apples and oranges—in military and civilian populations.

Mary Beth Loucks-Sorrell, interim director of the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a state-wide umbrella group based in Durham, is convinced that women partnered with soldiers face disproportionate risks of domestic abuse, a conclusion reached through years of fielding reports from abused women (and occasionally men). Reports from military communities are not only more frequent but the level of violence they describe is more extreme, she says. Some soldiers also terrorize their partners in unique ways, reminding the women of the sniper and bare-handed killing skills they acquire in training. Her anecdotal accounts are backed up by studies that found military men are more likely to use weapons than are civilians, and more likely to strangle their wives until unconscious.

On hearing of the four murders, many people in the general public and media asked whether the soldiers might have suffered from post-combat trauma or simply, as the military suggested, from the stress of deployment and its disruption of family life. Some commentators on the right went so far as to suggest these killings are another kind of war casualty and give us one more reminder of how much soldiers suffer on behalf of the national interest. On the left, the combat stress explanation can draw on the notion of the soldier as a victim of class violence and reluctant imperial tool. In both these views, the soldier’s home front violence is the traumatic outcome of “what he saw” in combat, rather than the much more significant trauma of what he did—and indeed, what he is trained to do.

Stan Goff, a veteran of several of special operations units who today is a militant democracy activist in Raleigh, scoffs at the “TV docudrama version of war” underlying this view. “Go to Afghanistan,” he says, “where you are insulated from outside scrutiny and all the taboos you learned as a child are suspended. You take life more and more with impunity, and discover that the universe doesn’t collapse when you drop the hammer on a human being, and for some, there is a real sense of power. For others, for all maybe, it’s PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] on the installment plan.”

A distracting side show to the murder investigations has been a UPI report suggesting the soldiers might have suffered side effects of Lariam, a drug the Army gives prophylactically to all troops.
going to malarial areas. Prescribed to 22 million people since 1985, Lariam is known to have neuropsychiatric effects in a tiny percentage of cases, found in one large study to be 1 in 13,000. In the wake of Pentagon stonewalling on the health effects of anthrax inoculation and depleted uranium weapons, Defense Department denials that Lariam is a problem might justifiably be taken with a grain of salt, but the epidemiological numbers suggest the Defense Department is probably right in this case. An Army epidemiological team, discussed in greater length below, concluded after an in-depth investigation at Fort Bragg that Lariam had been given to only two of the soldiers, and “was unlikely to be the cause of the tragic clustering of domestic violence incidents.”

Some of the more likely causes of military-related home violence have received far less attention. In the Pentagon’s approach to the problem and in virtually all media accounts, gender has been left hidden in plain sight. As in the 1990s schoolyard shootings, where a rhetoric of “kids killing kids” disguised the fact that boys were overwhelmingly the killers, here the soldiers are seen simply as an occupational group and the problem, at most, as one of an institutional culture where soldiers have difficulty “asking for help” from family service providers abundantly available on installations like Bragg.

Hidden in Plain Sight

Not only does the military remain by reputation the most “masculine” occupation available, but people in Fayetteville, and in the armed forces generally, consider Special Forces and Delta Force, where three of the four men worked, the Army’s toughest units. Special operations units are some of the last in the military to exclude women, and they also specialize in unconventional warfare, which is combat that often follows neither the letter nor the spirit of the rules of war. As a sign in a Special Forces training area says: “Rule #1. There are no rules. Rule #2. Follow Rule #1.” Such a macho, above-the-law culture may provide not a small part of the recipe for domestic violence. Combine this with a double standard of sexuality, one in which, as many soldiers and their wives told us, infidelity is to be expected on Special Forces deployments—where the men operate with unusual autonomy and are often surrounded by desperately poor women—whereas the infidelity of wives, reactive or not, real or imagined, gets punished with violence.
If there was a common thread that tied the murdered women’s lives together, it was the one identified by Christina DeNardo, a Fayetteville Observer reporter: All four of them, DeNardo reported, had expressed a desire to leave their marriages, a situation that domestic violence workers have identified as the most dangerous time for women in abusive relationships. That is when the control these men tend to insist on in their relationships appears about to dissolve. Christine Hansen, of the Miles Foundation, says that military personnel are controlled from above at work more than most U.S. workers, and many come home looking to reassert control, often with violence. The anxieties about control, and consequently the violence, flare up most before and after military deployments, Hansen says, as soldiers lose and then try to reinstate control. That’s why her foundation got a spike in calls before and after the Afghanistan deployments.

The Pentagon says it is waging a determined campaign to curtail risks to military spouses and non-married partners. In a widely disseminated directive issued in November 2001, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz declared that “domestic violence is an offense against the institutional values of the military.” But some analysts have countered that domestic violence, rape, and male supremacism itself are not anomalies or sideshows to war; instead, they lie near the center of how it is prosecuted and narrated. Like gender and control issues, military culture’s institutionalized promotion of violence, and its effect on life at home, has gone unaddressed by the military brass.

When the subject of how military service might promote violence against women is raised, it proves to be a touchy one. In 1996, Madeline Morris, a Duke University law professor who specializes in war crimes issues and served as a consultant for Clinton administration Secretary of the Army Togo West, argued in the Duke Law Journal that “the norms currently prevalent within military organizations include a configuration of norms regarding masculinity, sexuality and women that have been found to be conducive to rape.” Those norms, she wrote, include “elements of hypermasculinity, adversarial sexual beliefs, promiscuity, rape myth acceptance, hostility toward women, and possibly also acceptance of violence against women.” Morris’s thesis, which was bolstered by a good deal of military and academic research, was hotly contested by conservative commentators, but it launched little actual dialogue about the potential ties between military values and domestic violence.

Morris is not quite a lone voice in the wilderness. A few rare reporters and commentators have
pointed out the obvious social costs of training millions of men to kill. “There’s nothing to equal the military as the incubator of violence,” Alexander Cockburn argued in a New York Press column after the Fort Bragg murders. He placed the killings in the context of the war against terrorism, in particular a Special Forces search and destroy mission that left dozens of Afghan civilian noncombatants dead, wounded, and roughed up. “The villagers of Hajibirgit paid the price,” he wrote. “The four murdered women in Fort Bragg paid another installment, and the payments in terms of rage, drunkenness, drug addiction and antisocial behavior will be exacted month after month for years to come, amid the resolute determination of the press not to connect up the dots.”

**Downplaying the Violence**

“Army accepts role in 4 domestic killings,” read a headline in the Raleigh News and Observer on Nov. 8, 2002, when the Pentagon concluded a special investigation that was supposed to connect the dots. In the face of intense questioning about how they would account for the cluster of killings and seek to ward off such tragedies in the future, Defense Department officials dispatched a 19-member epidemiological team to Fort Bragg to get to the bottom of it all. Staffing the team were behavioral specialists from the Army and the Centers for Disease Control.

In addition to finding that the drug Lariam was probably not a determining factor, the team’s investigative report concluded that “marital discord,” and family problems exacerbated by the stress of deployment, were the main aggravating factors. The report, Hansen says, “diminishes the violence these women suffer” by failing to pay much attention to victims and their search for security. It likewise fails to look at the factors that make military women especially vulnerable to abuse, which include their financial insecurity as individuals, their geographical and social isolation from family and friends, and, most importantly, their living cheek by jowl with men trained in extreme violence and in the idea of their superiority as men and as soldiers.

The special investigation was just the latest in a long line of commissions established over the course of the many gendered military scandals of the last 15 years, from Tailhook to Aberdeen to the dozens of women cadets raped at the Air Force Academy. Such investigations have neither stemmed the problem nor prompted the military to recognize the fundamental role of gender in crimes like the Fort
Bragg killings. This would entail seeing the murders as a piece of the larger, epidemic problem of violent abuse by men within the military, including rape of female (and some male) soldiers and civilians, lesbian and gay bashing, and brutal hazing rituals.

And it would also require much greater involvement and investment in protecting military families. A relatively new Army program provides $900 a month plus health care for the few abused women whose husbands are removed from the force for domestic violence. But Fort Bragg has no domestic violence shelter, though for many years the base was donating a paltry $10 a day to a local shelter when military wives fled there. Tellingly, both enforcement of domestic violence laws and information about such proceedings appear to be woefully inadequate. When domestic violence is confirmed by military authorities, case review committees staffed by officers often recommend such meager “punishments” as anger management or stress reduction courses, or treatment for alcohol abuse. Even severe felony assaults often result in non-judicial sanctions such as demotion or extra work assignments. Of the 1,213 reported domestic violence incidents known to military police and judged to merit disciplinary action in 2000, the military could report only 29 where the perpetrator was court-martialed or sent to a civilian court for prosecution. The military claims to have no data on the disciplinary outcome of the much larger number of domestic incidents—12,068—reported to family services in that year. They also have no record of the outcome of 81 percent of the police cases.

This poor record-keeping and apparent reluctance to prosecute offenders can be explained in part by the military’s institutional interests in burying certain potentially controversial aspects of its domestic violence problem. The first is public relations. To recruit and retain a 1.4 million-person force, including women and married men, remains a monumental task that would only be made harder by widespread knowledge of the extent of the violence. Second, there are financial motives. Each soldier costs more than a hundred thousand dollars to recruit and train, money that goes down the drain if a soldier is discharged or imprisoned. Finally, there is the continuing, if waning, power of a belief, still widespread in the pre-volunteer and mostly unmarried force, that “If the army had wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one.” Protecting women from domestic violence in this environment falls even farther down the list of missions to be accomplished than it does in the civilian sector.
Aftermath

In the aftermath of the tragic string of murders, some attitude and policy shifts have buoyed the hopes of battered women in Fayetteville. Some women who have been trying to get help for years noted there were some at least temporary changes made on post in the wake of the killings, including a greater urgency about sending women to court in town to get protective orders. And both before and since the murders, many women have successfully left their abusive husbands. One of them described how, for the ten years of their marriage, her husband had controlled her through constant belittlement, forbidding her to drive or have a job, and ultimately, through rape and other violence. “I have a lot of hope now,” she said. “The people at the Care Center [the domestic violence shelter] were a godsend, and the victim's assistant at the sheriff’s department. Those are strong women, and I said, ‘I want to be like that.’ So now I have a job, I go to school, I’m on the Dean's List.”

A few women, their identities protected, testified before a special congressional panel that came to Fayetteville in the fall of 2002. They hold out some hope that through some allies in Congress, and with more of the type of media coverage that stirs national attention—like a special show that Oprah Winfrey recently did on military domestic violence—civilian laws and policing practices, at least, will be forced to change. This, they hope, can mitigate future violence, particularly since the military, when it does anything, passes most cases on to the civilian courts.

In other ways, however, life in Fayetteville goes on as usual in the months since the murders. Women married to abusive soldiers have been calling the Fayetteville newspaper and domestic violence shelters around the country in sharply higher numbers since the Fort Bragg killings were reported. They have spoken out about the frequent failure of commanders to take their calls for help seriously. And they have complained that they were often sent to military chaplains, some of whom advised them that suffering is a woman’s lot or that their husbands were just “working off some excess energy” through violence. One counselor employed at Fort Bragg was quoted in the Washington Post describing how she tells women to prepare their partners returning from deployment for changes they have made in his absence, like cutting their hair short: “He might be thinking about running his hands through that long, luxuriant hair,” she said. “Don’t surprise your husband.”

The difficulties women have in leaving their abusers are well known. Military wives have
additional disincentives. The unemployment rate for military wives is extremely high—hovering around 20 percent for those living at Fort Bragg—and those who do find employment are often stuck in the minimum wage retail jobs that are the main work available in the satellite economy around most large posts. (That economy, it should be noted, is suffering from even higher unemployment rates in the current recession, a problem exacerbated by the deployments for the Bush administration’s war with Iraq. And the recession has also sapped the budgets of many domestic violence shelter and service providers throughout the South.) If military wives report abuse, they risk not only retribution from their husbands, as do women in the civilian world, but loss of their total family income, health care and other benefits, and even their housing and neighbors if their husband is discharged.

The local domestic violence shelter continues to take in the refugee women and children who come to its door. One of the first shelters to be established in North Carolina by a group of feminists, prominently including some wives of soldiers, the Care Center struggles to keep its head above water, particularly given the torrent of people sent there for anger management classes by the courts in lieu of jail time. Virtually every weekday night, from two to four dozen people come for the multi-hour sessions, similar versions of which are also run on post.

The legal system, too, slogs through a high enough volume of cases that there are special domestic violence court sessions each week at the Cumberland County Courthouse. While a number of progressive people work there, including Judge Elizabeth Keever, and a victim's assistance worker, Norma Hall, who accompanies some women through the system, they, too, are overwhelmed with numbers. Some judges still remain disturbingly ambivalent about the seriousness of the problem. One woman described the difficult experience of convincing herself to bring her hospital records, photographs, and other documentation of abuse to court, only to be told by the judge that he was not going to hear her or any of the other 50 domestic violence cases that day. Instead, she and the other women were herded into another room to sign a paper indicating the abuser would plead guilty in exchange for the requirement to take anger management classes, and for waiving their right to a hearing before the judge or a trial.

In other quarters around town, there is defiance or denial. One woman whose husband worked at Fort Bragg with one of the killers reported that his unit had great sympathy for him. “They were all
convinced that he was the victim,” the woman said, “that she [the murdered wife] started it all.”

And the Fayetteville business community has responded after reeling from the months of intense media scrutiny—much of it superficially glancing at the city's main drag of strip joints and tattoo parlors and dismissing the vibrant community beyond them. A recently established booster organization, FYI Fayetteville, will have a “rapid response team” to immediately contest and counteract negative publicity about the city by calling media outlets and arguing the community’s attributes.

The people in Fayetteville most affected by these recent events are, of course, the hundreds of battered women still living in daily fear of their partners or ex-partners. Surprisingly, their stories often focus less on the violence itself (though some continue to live with scars, neurological damage, and other permanent signs of their abuse) than on the failures of the Army and others in the community to help them when they sought rescue. Other women noted the stark contrast of the severity with which the military judicial system deals with soldiers who attack and injure other soldiers of equal rank. These women's main refrain, repeated over and over again: “He was never held accountable for what he did to me.”

“With Us or Against Us”

The celebration of soldiers over the last several decades, grown more fervent since the war on terror began, has hampered attempts to address the problem by further elevating violent masculinity to a place of honor in the culture. In good times, critical views of military practice are not well received; in the intimidating, “with us or against us” atmosphere fostered by the Bush administration since 9/11, they may be considered tantamount to treason. Hansen, who has received death threats since her foundation appeared in news stories about the murders, notes that some civilian judges have been even more reluctant than before to convict soldiers of domestic violence, when doing so would trigger the Lautenberg amendment, a 1996 law that prohibits convicted abusers from owning firearms.

Wartime, it appears, is the hardest time to take stock of the real causes of military-related domestic violence. The idea that the soldier makes an unrecompensable sacrifice creates a halo effect, so that the murderers are painted as victims of the horrors of combat, while scant attention is paid to the women they killed or the failures of the system to protect them. As Stan Goff, the special operations
veteran, told us, soldiers living in this climate can turn to their wives and say, “The culture’s worshiping me. Why aren’t you?” While they may have provided a wake-up call of sorts, the Fort Bragg murders, and the official response to them, have resulted in little that will change the situation of militarism’s hidden casualties: The thousands of women who live in fear—in wartime and peacetime—and struggle each day, as Hansen says, “trying to provide for the safety of themselves and their children.”

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