

# The Invisible War: When Soldiers Rape Soldiers

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Women victimized by sexual abuse speak out in a poignant, powerful documentary that just might change the system

Courtesy of  
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Kirby Dick

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Cinedigm

The events described could be scenes from some lurid horror movie about girls attacked by psycho monsters at a summer



camp. Kori: "He hit me across the left side of my face... and my face hurt so bad." Lee: "He put his locked-and-loaded .45 at the base of my skull [and] engaged the bolt, so I knew there was a round chambered." Tia: "He slammed my head against the concrete wall and very forcibly had sex with me." Kori: "He screamed at me and he grabbed my arm and he raped me." Teah: "Within a two-week period, he raped me five times."

And with the sexual violation comes the next onset of horror: the helplessness, the isolation, the knowledge that things can only get worse. Hannah: "The entire time I was screaming and yelling for help, and for him to stop, nobody came to the door, nobody came to help me." Valine: "When I got tested, I had trich [trichinosis] and gonorrhea, and I was pregnant." Trina: "They made it very, very clear that if I said anything they were going to kill me." Ariana: "He said that if I told anybody, that he was gonna have his friend Marv, from Indiana, kill me and throw me in a ditch, 'cause that's how they took care of things in Indiana."

The brave women speaking in *The Invisible War*, Kirby Dick's documentary about sexual abuse in the U.S. armed forces, are American soldiers: Kori Cioca of the Coast Guard; Lee Le Teff, Teah Bedney and Valine Demos of the Army; Tia Christopher, Hannah Sewell and Trina McDonald of the Navy; Ariana Klay of the Marine Corps. Their devotion to military service was tested, perhaps shattered, first by the sexual abuse they endured and then, when they dared report the crimes, by their superiors' hostility or smirking indifference. Really, they were raped twice: once by their assailants, a second time by the tough-boy network of commanders protecting this man's army. "The thing that makes me the most angry," says Lieutenant Klay, "is not even the rape itself; it's the commanders that were complicit

in covering up everything that happened.”

In his previous docs, Dick has probed the abuse of power in the Roman Catholic Church (*Twist of Faith*), the public homophobia of right-wing politicians thought to be closeted gays (*Outrage*) and the double standard in the movie classification system (*This Film Is Not Yet Rated*). In *Sick*, he memorably profiled the performance artist and cystic-fibrosis sufferer Bob Flanagan. Heroic underdogs on one side, the criminal, misguided or ignorant guardians of society on the other: these are Dick's subjects, which clash with awful power in *The Invisible War*.

**(READ: Corliss on [Kirby Dick's This Film Is Not Yet Rated](#))**

Dick's films often strut with a lilting impudence, but his new work is dead-serious, as suits the subject. Through a rigorous accumulation of evidence — the victims' testimony, elicited by producer Amy Ziering, but also the U.S. government statistics (that “over 20% of female veterans have been sexually assaulted while serving”) and the blithe denials by Pentagon brass — *The Invisible War* becomes the scariest, most emotionally draining film you must see this year. And the most haunting, because the horrors are true, they're still occurring and little has been done to stop them.

Over the years, members of the Senate and the House, on both sides of the aisle, have asked tough questions about the Tailhook, Aberdeen and Air Force Academy sex-abuse scandals and heard only reassuring lies in return. Like the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the military brass thought it their duty to protect the guilty — essentially, protect a corrupt system — and punish the victim. Most victims “suck it up,” in that delicate military phrase, and keep quiet, often because the person they were obliged to report the rape to was the rapist.

Others do their moral duty and suffer the consequences. When Andrea Werner reported her rape to her Army superiors, she was charged with adultery, though she wasn't married (her assailant was) and the sex was nothing like consensual. The investigation into rape charges brought by Lieutenant Elle Helmer against her Commanding Officer at the elite Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C., was closed due to “lack of evidence” (he denied it); a new case was opened, charging Helmer with conduct unbecoming an officer and public intoxication.

What the military denied in public, it suppressed in the field. Soldiers who had been raped had no recourse outside the chain of command. Ariana Klay was told to do “what a Marine officer should do, and that's to ignore it and move on.” Some do complain. When she was told that the evidence of her assault — rape kit, nurse examiner's report and photographs of arm bruises — had been “lost,” Hannah Sewell contacted the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS). Lo and behold, the evidence was there. But life is not a CBS prime-time series: the NCIS. “The case is already closed,” Hannah was told. “There's nothing they can do.”

**(MORE: [Sexual Assault in the Military...Again and Again and Again](#))**

The military does acknowledge some cases. In 2010, it catalogued 3,158 reports of sexual assault, of which only a sixth came to court-martial and for which a mere 175, or one in 20 of the perps, did jail time. Major General Mary Kay Kellogg, Director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, told Dick that assault victims should petition the Defense Department's Attorney General; yet of 2,994 cases forwarded to the AG, the number investigated was exactly zero. (California Congresswoman Jackie Speier said the Attorney General's office told her, “We have other, higher priorities.”) Kellogg also suggested that victims should “go up to your Congressman or Congresswoman” — because soldiers, among all law-abiding U.S. citizens, may not bring charges through the civilian legal apparatus.

Myla Haider, a member of the Army Criminal Investigation Division, says that checking on rape cases was usually a man's job. “I was told I should have been a social worker,” she recalls, “I had no business

being in a police field. There was a lot of resistance there toward the idea that victims should be afforded some sympathy. It was almost a laughing matter.” Haider was raped by her superior officer, who she says was a serial offender: “He’s probably doing the same thing right now.” Finally, she observes, “I was administratively discharged with no benefits after nine-and-a-half years of service.” Chatting with other rape survivors, Haider notes plaintively, “Suicide or AWOL — those are your only two options.” Several women in the film did try to kill themselves, from the shame or frustration.

All the rapists mentioned here are males. (Dick, who in *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* spent plenty of screen time tracking down the identities of the previously anonymous members of the MPAA ratings board, should have shown the same resourcefulness in locating and confronting at least some of the alleged predators.) But men are among the direct or indirect victims too. Michael Matthews speaks of his Air Force stint in the 1970s, when he was held down and raped by two men. Indeed, because men still outnumber women six to one in today’s military, the majority of sexual abuse victims are men — perhaps 20,000 a year. Yet raped women suffer more: they have a rate of post-traumatic stress disorder higher than men in combat.

As wrenching as the women’s tearful declarations is the spectacle of grown men crying. After Hannah Sewell was locked in a room and raped, injuring nerves in her spine, she called her father, Sergeant Major Jerry Sewell, a career officer just back from Iraq, asking if she could still call herself a virgin. The elder Sewell dissolves into tears as he recalls telling Hannah, “You’re still a virgin, ’cause he took something from you that you didn’t give.” Ariana’s husband Ben, a Marine Captain, recalls her post-rape suicide attempt — “To call the police with one hand, while you’re restraining her from killing herself with the other...” — and collapses in agony. For these men, no less than their women, rape was a double betrayal: of the ones they love and of their belief in the service to which they had given their lives.

#### **(MORE: [Service Members Sue Pentagon over Rapes](#))**

“In the military, when we’re functioning at our best — a band of brothers and sisters — we’re like a family,” says Brigadier General Loree Sutton, a retired Army psychiatrist. “When that band of trust is violated, the wound penetrates to the very most inner part of one’s soul, one’s psyche.” And the villains keep on penetrating. If they are not found guilty, they can continue preying without fear of retribution. Jessica Hives’ assailant, a closing credit tells us, “is still in the Air Force and was awarded ‘Airman of the Year’ during her rape investigation.” Myla’s Haider’s assailant “became a supervisor at a major U.S. corporation and sexually assaulted a female employee. He was never charged and now lives in Queens, N.Y.”

Is there hope at the bottom of that despair? Marine Captain Anu Bhagwait, director of the Service Woman’s Action Network, and attorney Susan Burke, who brought a class-action suit against the military on behalf of several male and female assault victims, have tried to help. Yet last December, “the Court dismissed the survivors’ lawsuit, ruling that rape is an occupational hazard of military service.” The predators are rewarded, the victims ignored or overruled.

What can change the horror of sexual rape in the military? Maybe, this movie. On April 14th, three months after its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival (where it won the audience award), *The Invisible War* was shown to Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta. “Two days later, he took the decision to prosecute away from commanders.”

That is the first act of overdue reparation to the valiant victims who risked their lives for a military that did everything possible to rob them of their honor. Repressing its rage to tell an important story, *The Invisible War* identifies soldiers who are true heroes because they dared to fight for justice. Visiting the Women in Military Service for America Memorial in Washington, Kori Cioca wonders, “Do you think that we deserve Purple Hearts because we were wounded in a time of war?”

