

Q&A with Col. Michael Hudson, SAPR Branch Head

May 1, 2014

1. Does the command still further victimize the victim by hitting them with NJPs, or ignore their complaints initially or have other retribution for "putting them on the skyline?"

Sexual assault is a crime that we take very seriously. Marine Corps policy is to never ignore or minimize a report of sexual assault or any other crime. If you feel this has happened to you, contact your Uniformed Victim Advocate or Sexual Assault Response Coordinator. These credentialed personnel are properly trained to provide assistance and coordinate support through the investigative and legal processes. The top priority of the Marine Corps Sexual Assault Prevention and Response program is to support victims. In addition, retribution against Marines who file reports of sexual assault is strictly prohibited. Marines who feel they are being "punished" for filing a report should also confer with their Victims' Legal Counsel, another great resource for victims. Victims' Legal Counselors will staunchly advocate for victims' legal rights.

2. Accountability: Do officers have a different set of punishments than enlisted for crimes of a sexual nature? Who will enforce these policies and the consequences for a violation? Is there prison time?

With the initiation of the Commandant's 2012 Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Campaign (SAPR) Plan, we have made great strides in holding offenders accountable, regardless of rank. This is a direct result of engaged leadership. Commanders are responsible for enforcing SAPR policies designed to ensure that offenders are held accountable while also ensuring that an accused receives a constitutionally fair trial. In FY13, we have seen increases in prosecutions, sexual assault convictions, and punitive discharges. This is a direct result of our enhanced investigative capabilities through the NCIS Adult Sexual Assault Program, the reorganization of our entire Marine Corps legal community, which increases the expertise and capacity for prosecuting sexual assault cases, and our Victims' Legal Counsel Organization (VLCO), which assists each victim through the process and makes sure that victims understand their rights and remain informed.

3. Attention needs to be called to the fact that men get assaulted in the military as well.

There is still a misperception that sexual assault is a women's issue and a women's crime. However, the Annual Report released 1 May 2014 shows that 17 percent of the Unrestricted Reports filed in Fiscal Year 2013 involved male victims. Encouraging more men to report sexual assaults is a difficult challenge because male victims often worry people will think they are weak or will question their sexual orientation. Sexual assault is a crime and has nothing to do with sexual orientation. We want all victims of sexual assault, regardless of gender, to feel confident in reporting the crime so that they can receive world-class care and advocacy.

4. What new training will SAPR mandate? Some Marines feel that there is too much SAPR training. Is that perception taken into consideration in planning the training initiatives?

Yes, it is certainly taken into consideration. One of the most challenging aspects of our prevention efforts is getting our SAPR message out there. To do this we are always developing new, innovative material customized to where a Marine is in his or her career. We have completed the development of a new program for junior Marines called "Step Up," which teaches bystanders how to intervene using specific methods. We have also completed a number of new video Ethical Discussion Groups (EDGs) to get Marines at all levels to think and talk candidly about what can be an uncomfortable topic. I understand the perception and risk of over-saturation, but sexual assaults are still happening. If this constant SAPR training prevents even one sexual assault from happening, then it was worth the risk of possibly being too repetitive.

5. What about false reporting? Are their protections in place for Marines who are falsely accused?

False reporting happens for all crimes, and anyone proven to have made a false official statement will be held accountable. It is important to note that, according to research, a very small percentage of reports of sexual assaults are false reports—that is, a deliberate deception made on the part of the person filing the report. It is also important to note that a report of sexual assault that was determined to be “unfounded due to lack of evidence” is not the same as a false report. It just means that not enough evidence was forthcoming to justify a conviction. In addition, sometimes victims opt not to move their case forward for a variety of reasons. Such instances are very different than false reports.

6. Why can't you remove the commanders from the investigative chain?

Commanders need to be a part of the solution. They have always been responsible for readiness, unit cohesion, and morale, including looking after the safety and well-being of their Marines. Our SAPR approach was built around the central role of the commander and the principle that decisive and engaged leadership is our greatest weapon in this battle. In taking this top-down approach, we have seen a continued, rapid increase in victims coming forward. In FY13, we saw 86% increase in reports of sexual assault, which continues a trend started in FY12, which saw a 31% reporting increase. Keep in mind that there is no indication that this increase in reporting constitutes an increase in crime. We assess that this unprecedented increase is consistent with a growing confidence in the response systems. These and other positive indicators show that we are moving in the right direction. Our goal is to change Marine Corps culture. This will take time, and it has to include everyone, especially leadership.

7. In light of the problem of sexual assaults, how will you ensure that women going into these units for the first time will be protected?

Sexual assault is a crime and has no place in our Corps. We are aggressively taking steps to prevent it. To date, the Marine Corps Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Campaign Plan has yielded significant indicators of progress, including a greater confidence in the chain of command, higher reporting rates, increased prosecutions, and more convictions. The units and MOSs we plan to open will have senior cadre (officers and SNCOs) who will guide and assist with the transition of women into these new billets. The individual Marine is our greatest asset regardless of his or her gender, and through our training, education and command emphasis, we are determined to reinforce our core values and maintain a culture that is intolerant of sexual assault.