

Narrative for Inspire Seattle

I graduated from High School at age 17 and went to nursing school at the Albert Einstein Medical Center School of Nursing in Philadelphia, PA. While in school, at age 19, I told my classmates, "If there is ever another war and I am single I will go." Then in 1966 after working for six years as a pediatric, orthopedic, and medical nurse and then in Intensive Care, I was hearing on the radio about a place called Vietnam that I had never heard of but our soldiers were being hurt and killed there. I realized that if I meant what I said at age 19—that moment had arrived.

I wanted to be an Air Force Flight Nurse but was too short so left the Air Force Recruiter and went to the Navy to be on a hospital ship. I was told I needed to serve for two years at a land based Naval Hospital first and in my own naïveté I thought the war would be over. I then went on to the army recruiter who told me they needed operating room nurses in Vietnam and the army would train me, then after the war I could go to school for my degree on the GI Bill. I was commissioned as a first lieutenant, because of the six years nursing experience I already had and went to basic training at Fort Sam Houston, TX.

In May of 1966 I went to Letterman General Hospital at Presidio of San Francisco for five months of operating room (OR) nurse training. There it begins. I had to walk down a long corridor to get to the OR and lining that corridor were our returning wounded warriors. They were in their wheelchairs, in the army patient royal blue pajamas and many of them were amputees. All of them had a "look" that later was named the 1000 yard stare. I could not simply walk by eyes forward so began to leave earlier so I could stop and talk with them and I began to hear their stories of Vietnam and how they were wounded. They were very young, probably 19 and struggling with their wounds; the ones that we could see and the ones we could not see.

Near the last month or so of my training I was scrubbed in on an open-heart surgery case when the Lt. Colonel, the head heart surgeon had completed the actual technique on the heart and his assistant was closing the patient's chest. The Lt Colonel came around behind me and blatantly put his hands under my scrub gown and onto my breasts. I was stunned and shocked and said to him, "Sir if you don't take your hands off me immediately I will break scrub!" He did and from that day on I was never allowed to work in his operating room again. That was a sexual assault, albeit minor, and the retaliatory response.

I went on to complete the course and help a young soldier to stand on his artificial limbs and be the "Best Man" at his buddy's wedding and then was sent to Vietnam.

I was stationed at the 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi—truly the worst place anyone could be. We were on the edge of the Iron Triangle beside the Hobo Woods where all the fighting was going on in 1967. Our hospital was the largest user of fresh blood in all of Vietnam at the time and we had mass casualties coming in weekly. We were mortared frequently and I have a story about the first mortar attack that I told on Veteran's Day at the Vietnam Women's Memorial in 2013. I will post the link for that at the bottom in case you want to see the YouTube clip of that.

We had a great crew of committed medical personnel and did everything humanly possible to save everyone, which, of course, was impossible. One day in the year I met a nurse named Linda Howard and she told me in glowing terms about the Pacific Northwest, her home, and how green it was, she told me about Puget Sound and the Salmon and about Mount Rainier, the Cascades and Olympics and every other sentence she repeated that it was, "God's County." I told her, "If I live through this, I will go there." She then told me about Madigan General Hospital (MGH) and to sign up for that as my next assignment because from Vietnam they will give me any assignment I ask for. I did do that. I still remember the day I first saw Mt Rainier. I had been there since January and it was now March and the sun came out one day and it looked like Mt Rainier was at the end of the street at Fort Lewis. I stopped the car in total awe of that mountain. I then camped on it, hiked on it, took pictures of it and even had a picture painted of it that still hangs in my living room. I fell in love with Mount Rainier and Washington that first spring and knew it was my home, so never left.

I was in Vietnam for a full year and after coming home for a short leave I flew to the Pacific Northwest and was the head nurse of the orthopedic ward at MGH. I loved it. I was able to greet the guys coming home from Vietnam, see and talk to them, care for their wounds inside and outside and provide for them. I noticed that their physical wounds were not healing as expected and that many were impotent for no apparent reason. I intuited that they were disturbed internally by the war itself and their experiences, the lack of support back home for them and the war, and for whatever their specific thoughts and feelings were about their part in the war. I began to work with them privately in the doctor's office on my ward and they were getting better. No one really understood PTSD at that time or even had a name for it.

In the fall of 1968 I was ordered to go to school for my bachelor's degree and opted to go to Seattle University and to do my psychotherapy affiliation at the VA in Seattle. I worked directly with Vietnam Veterans on their PTSD, not yet named, and they were getting better. I discovered I had a gift and decided a few years later after getting married and having two children, that I would get my Master's Degree at U.W. in psychosocial nursing. I did that with a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health and the GI bill. I was in graduate school in 1975 when Saigon fell and for a period of time I was becoming emotionally distressed believing all that we had done and all the losses of life, limb and land in Vietnam were all in vain. I rebuilt the wall, that was crumbling, that I had put up around my heart in Vietnam to survive. I was shocked that my instructors had no clue why I was reacting as I was, when they were teaching me psychotherapy.

In 1981 when the Iranian Hostages came home and were greeted with such joy and admiration by the people of the U.S.A., it felt like someone had pulled a zipper down the front of my body and all that I had felt for so long came bursting out. I was crying and shouting and saying, "What did they do? They didn't do anything, except get captured. What about all of us, the Vietnam Veterans who went to war for freedom?" We had to hide and were not treated well after our service. I began to have all the symptoms of PTSD and was fortunate to get into good therapy and for five plus years I worked in therapy to heal my own inner wounds. That process inspired me to dedicate myself to helping others heal

from PTSD, whether it was from a war or not, and I have been a nurse psychotherapist healing trauma for 29 years.

In 1996, I was on the first PeaceTrees Vietnam trip with Danaan Parry, Jerilyn Brusseau, and the EarthStewards Network. At our last gathering before the trip in November 1996, Danaan looked me in the eyes and said, "Sarah someone needs to write about the woman's experience in Vietnam and I think that is you." It was less than a week after he said that to me that he had a massive heart attack and died. The seed was planted. Ten years later while talking with a wise woman educator, who was very intuitive, she looked at me and said with great conviction, "You need to write about the women serving in the military. You have a soul mission to bring justice into our world and writing will help you fulfill that mission."

I took what she said to heart because I remembered what Danaan had said. I knew nothing about writing a book and decided I needed three things to actually succeed. I needed a title I could get behind, I needed to know I could write clearly and powerfully, and I needed to find women veterans who would tell me their stories. I started with the title and brainstormed until one of them lighted up for me and it was: Women Under Fire. Then I sat at my computer and said to God, OK show me that I can write. Let's write an introduction. My fingers were flying and when I had written about two long paragraphs I stopped to read what I had written and was literally blown away by the intensity and power in it. I then said to God, "OK let's do this."

Finding the women was a big challenge and it was very slow. I started in September of 2006 and gradually found more and more. I was looking for any woman who served in any time period and from any branch of the military. I made appointments to interview them in person if they were local and on the phone if not. The interviews were 90-120 minutes or longer if needed. I would listen, write and record at the same time, because I knew I could not write as fast as they could speak so could go back to listen, correct, and fill in as needed. From 2006 to 2009 I did that and continued to work as a nurse psychotherapist, transcribed their stories and read what I could about women in the military.

In 2008 I learned about the Pacific Northwest Writer's Assn. Conference and went. I learned a lot and was affirmed in what I was doing and given much positive feedback and support. In fact I was offered an agent contract immediately. In 2009, I returned to the conference, learned more and turned over what I had to Jason Black, a book doctor. He gave me a huge amount of very detailed feedback and one specific thing stood out to me immediately. He said, "Look at these stories of abuse you have. (There were several of those stories in amongst the other stories.) You need to narrow your focus to the culture of abuse in the military this is too general and diffuse and will not go anywhere." I was overwhelmed by the amount and detail of the feedback and totally distressed about changing the focus. I cried and struggled emotionally for about three months. A big issue for me was that I was very connected to all the women who gave me their stories and they had done that because I told them I wanted all the stories so the public could know what their service was like. I did not want to betray their trust. I also did not want to lose all the stories I had, including my own. I was not prepared to focus on a culture of abuse that I did

not even know existed. I cried and released anger and confusion for three months until one day while at the computer I felt like it was all out of me and I opened up to ask what do I do now? The answer came quickly and clearly, "You have two books and a website." Say what? "*Women Under Fire: Abuse in the Military* and *Women Under Fire: PTSD and Healing*. Any story that does not fit into one of those can go on the website, women under fire." Since I had not thought if that before I knew it must be divinely inspired and with that I relaxed a bit.

In 2009, I had to split/part the book and moved about 2/3 of it over to another folder I titled *Women Under Fire: PTSD and Healing* and created a new one called: *Women Under Fire: Abuse in the Military*. Here is what I discovered as I was writing.

There is a culture of abuse toward women in the U.S. Armed Forces and it has been going on for decades— undermining readiness and morale, while destroying the health, lives and careers of valuable women soldiers.

Sexual assault, harassment and rape have escalated in recent years and now there are over 26,000/year - 71 a day. Our brave servicewomen are assaulted every 20 minutes. Rape by soldiers, commanders, doctors, and gang rape of our women in uniform must be stopped.

I have read everything there is to read about this issue and personally interviewed over 58 women veterans from WWII up to and including Iraq and Afghanistan over the past seven years while writing my book *Women Under Fire: Abuse in the Military*.

Over and over in their stories, the women made it clear that if they report sexual assault— or someone else reports it on their behalf, they are punished harshly and the perpetrator is protected, promoted, and permitted to continue inappropriate abusive language and behavior. Victims are isolated from all support, ostracized, publically humiliated and usually lose their health and military career. 62% of the women who report sexual assault are retaliated against severely.

Sara Rich a Medical Social Worker, told Amy Goodman of NPR, that she was shocked by the blatant and rampant sexual abuse by male soldiers and that when a woman reported rape they were treated as a traitor to their unit and her country and asked, "Why in the world are our federal elected officials not stopping this?"

Ninety-five percent of the rapes and assaults to military personnel are from repeat offenders and serial rapists. The military response has been terribly inadequate and has only engendered more crime. Sexual predators will calmly claim the rape was consensual sex when it was not— and the command accepts it. Officers are indoctrinated into the culture of abuse toward women all the way up the chain of command.

Because women are so demeaned and diminished by the military and are considered government property, there is no justice for them. The U. S. Armed Forces seems to be giving a strong repetitive message that justice in the military is only for those they value, which all too often are

the perpetrators. The Military Justice System at every level and all the way up to the Supreme Court, gives immunity to rapists in the military.

When a rapist confesses, the military ignores that confession and instead charges the woman with making false statements and puts her through yet another violation of her rights and makes her life a living hell.

There was a 35 % spike in sexual assaults during 2012 and reported sexual assaults at the nation's three military academies jumped by 23 percent overall then in 2013 that spike went to 60% and there were 5400 cases reported.

Sharon Mixon, a twenty-one year old decorated combat medic in Desert Storm was devastated by her experience of being gang-raped while waiting to process out of Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1991. Her assailants were U.S. soldiers who drugged and raped her then said that if she told anybody they would kill her.

Colleen Mussolino, an Army cook in the 1960's was gang-raped by four soldiers who took her into the woods. She fought and screamed as they held her down and raped her. The soldiers' put their knees on her arms to keep her from fighting and beat her unconscious while they each took turns raping her. When she regained consciousness she was bruised on her neck, head, jaw and arms, and was bleeding down her thighs. Colleen ran to the road for help and the military police stopped and took her to the hospital. The CID then interrogated her from 7AM-4PM five days a week for six weeks and she was threatened with a dishonorable discharge if she did not sign a paper saying she would not prosecute.

MSA (Military Sexual Assault) is a deep wounding and betrayal that occurs when a soldier is sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier or superior. Women are told they can rely on these men to protect them in combat. They are told they can trust these men to 'have their back'. Women are drilled on this in basic training to rely on their buddy soldiers and commanders.

Male attitudes toward women are dismissive, arrogant, disrespectful, and demoralizing. Men made it clear that women were not wanted in **their** military. Men tend to see women as government property for them to do with as they please. That attitude was very widespread from the lowest to highest ranks. Threats and intimidation tactics are used to coerce women into sex with those of higher rank. If the leadership in any or all branches of our military truly taught respect for women and meant zero tolerance for sexual harassment or assault, then women would not be perceived and treated in such disgusting ways. I am happy to tell you that not all men in the military hold these attitudes or behave in these ways, yet it is so pervasive that it must be acknowledged and stopped. That is the purpose of my book.

In 1997, Major Elsbeth Ritchie, Assistant Chief of Outpatient Psychiatry at Walter Reed Health Care System testified against a drill sergeant from Aberdeen Proving Ground and described a hierarchical structure so powerful that a victim reporting a rape would find her superiors closing ranks and protecting one another, instead of her. That was 1997, and seventeen years later the situation is worse than ever.

The Army is the best place for a rapist because it is a target rich environment for them, they know they will be protected from prosecution and there is an unspoken rule that rape is tolerated, in spite of the so-called zero tolerance policy.

Bob Herbert writing in *The New York Times* said, “The military is one of the most highly controlled environments imaginable. When there are rules that the Pentagon absolutely wants followed, they are rigidly enforced by the chain of command. Violations are not tolerated. The military could bring about a radical reduction in the number of rapes and other forms of sexual assault if it wanted to, and it could radically improve the overall treatment of women in the Armed Forces. There is no real desire in the military to modify this aspect of its culture. It is an ultra-macho environment in which the overwhelming tendency has been to see all women, civilian and military, young and old, American and foreign—solely as sexual objects. Real change will have to be imposed from outside the military. It will not come from within. Rape and other forms of sexual assault against women is the great shame of the U. S. Armed Forces, and there is no evidence that this ghastly problem, kept out of sight as much as possible, is diminishing.”

Military Sexual Trauma takes away everything you are in a minute. The woman who is sexually assaulted will never be the same again. Her body, mind, emotions and her sense of self were violated. She may never feel safe or confident again. Depending on how others respond to her after her assault, she may be able to heal and move on. If she is NOT believed, supported, given the care she needs immediately, treated with dignity, respect, and compassion, she is likely to be left with serious symptoms that may be permanent. The way our military handles sexual assaults is disrespectful, indignant, cold and harsh. Women are shamed, humiliated, denied compassion, medical care, protection, even the kind of investigation that affirms military values of integrity and accountability. Put simply, women who are sexually assaulted in the military are denied justice.

Miles Mofeit and Amy Herdy, in their special report for the *Denver Post* in 2004 wrote about the 1999 urgent issue of, ‘command interference’ in sexual assault cases. The Panel of the National Academy of Public Administration called for the Department of Defense to put an end to command interference. **That never happened!** There is also the 2001 Cox Commission Report, which stated, “The greatest barrier to operating a fair system of criminal justice [is the] far reaching role of the Commanding Officer. Even serial offenders are allowed to resign with administrative punishments and they can slip back into the civilian world with no criminal record.” Over the past 22 years there have been over 18 different panel or commission reports, all of which went unheeded by Congress and our military.

The chain of command has far too much power over individuals and a serious conflict of interest. The commander is responsible for each soldier, and the unit, so when faced with a sexual assault by a soldier on another soldier in their unit, that conflict of interest becomes paramount. Because of commanders tendency to cover up crimes that would reflect on them as officers, the decision making power and authority over the handling of all sexual assault cases needs to be removed from the chain of command. From the fifty-eight interviews I have done, it is clear that commanders almost always choose to side with the perpetrators and not the victims.

Unlike in the civilian world, survivors have no legal right to sue their perpetrators, their supervisors, or their branch of service for damages. The military has immunity from external judicial review in cases of injury incurred “incident to service.” The issue is the well-known Feres Doctrine that our military hides behind. Because of this doctrine, there is no deterrence for military negligence or even criminal activity. The Feres Doctrine must be challenged in court.

The Pentagon’s Domestic Violence Task Force, appointed in April 2000 and comprising 24 military and civilian experts, met regularly for three years to examine a system where, they found, soldiers rarely faced punishment or prosecution for battering their wives and where they often found shelter from civilian orders of protection. That task force report was scheduled on March 20, 2003, the day we invaded Iraq, which rendered the report irrelevant. A request to reconvene in two years to reevaluate was rejected by Congress. The Pentagon Task Force had one overarching recommendation: that the military work hard to affect a “culture shift” to zero tolerance for domestic violence by holding offenders accountable and by punishing criminal behavior. Members believed there was a core credo that needed to be attacked frontally: “This notion that the good soldier either can’t be a wife beater or, if they are, that it’s a temporary aberration that shouldn’t interfere with them doing military service,” as Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell put it. A higher authority has to break through the military’s denial system if their culture of abuse is to be changed.

The overall attitude of the military is that they are untouchable and can remain in denial and unaccountable because no one can dispute them. For their sake and our country’s sake they must be challenged. They must be forced to change by ‘*we the people*’ and a higher authority. If each person who reads my book calls their representatives and senators regularly to ask that they investigate the culture of abuse toward women in our military and insist on accountability, then we might ultimately have positive change and progress toward justice for all.

It is time to finally acknowledge that the Military Judicial System is broken when it comes to cases of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, and that an alternative system must be created to guarantee accountability and justice for these crimes.

We must take a serious look at these dishonorable, violent and demeaning practices. It is time to examine the training and leadership culture in our military that promotes this heinous behavior and examine the UCMJ in relation to MSA. Now is the time for action to make the necessary changes, so that women who serve in our military are safe with their fellow soldiers, doctors, and commanders, whether in training or on deployment.

Some of the nation’s finest servicemembers leave the military after their abuse and betrayal, while their perpetrators and the officers who willingly protected them, remain in uniform today. Reporting sexual assault in the military is brutally intimidating. Perpetrators often guarantee a victim’s silence by threat of retaliation. Often, commanders are the perpetrators or are complicit in covering up these cases.

Our military justice system is broken and change is imperative. We can no longer allow the military to investigate themselves. They are far too self-protective. It is time for independent unbiased investigations into sexual assault crimes and how our military mishandles them. Do a

thorough evaluation at every level of how reports of abuse toward women are handled, how protective orders are managed, and how the system applies accountability and justice, if at all. It is time to fully investigate this abuse culture, clean house and begin anew with appropriate policies and actions that restore honor, integrity and accountability to our military and bring justice to women serving.

YOU CAN HELP BY BUYING A BOOK AND READING IT, BUYING ONE FOR A WOMAN IN UNIFORM, BY CONTACTING YOUR SENATOR AND CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE ABOUT THE CULTURE OF ABUSE TOWARD WOMEN AND INSIST THEY TAKE REPORTING, INVESTIGATING AND PROSECUTING THESE CASES OUT OF THE CHAIN OF COMMAND. Go to my website www.womenunderfire.net and see what is there, buy a personalized copy of the book and tell others about it please.

Here is the link to my Veteran's Day Story: <http://youtu.be/Bf82D-Xmbeo>

