

# “Son, Men Don’t Get Raped”

## *MST – Male Survivors Speak Out*

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*Sexual assault is alarmingly common in the U.S. military, and more than half of the victims are men. According to the Pentagon, thirty-eight military men are sexually assaulted every single day. These are the stories you never hear—because the culprits almost always go free, the survivors rarely speak, and no one in the military or Congress has done enough to stop it.*

Platon - A warship is like a city—sprawling, vital, crowded with purposeful men and women. But on a warship, as in a city, there are people who will see you not as their friend or their neighbor but rather as their prey.

After turning 25, Steve Stovey joined the Navy to see the world: Malaysia, Australia, Japan, Fiji, the Persian Gulf. His first year and a half as a signalman on the USS Gary was "the greatest time of my life," he says.

In late September 1999, Stovey was sailing to Hawaii, where he'd be joined by his father on a Tiger Cruise, a beloved Navy tradition in which family members accompany sailors on the final leg of a deployment. Parents and kids get to see how sailors live and work; they watch the crew test air and sea weapons. The Disney Channel even made a movie about a Tiger Cruise, with Bill Pullman and Hayden Panettiere. The West Coast itinerary is usually Pearl Harbor to San Diego.

On the morning of September 20, two weeks before the warship was due in port, three men ambushed Stovey in a remote storage area of the ship, where he'd been sent to get supplies. They threw a black hood over his head, strangled and sodomized him, then left him for dead on a stack of boxes. Stovey told no one. He was certain that his attackers, whose faces he hadn't glimpsed, would kill him if he did. He hid in a bathroom until he could contain his panic and tolerate the pain. Then he quietly returned to his post.

Stovey says he might have killed himself were it not for his father's imminent arrival. The timing of the visit was "almost a miracle," he says. "When I saw him, it was the most safe feeling I'd ever felt in my whole life."

Father and son spent the next five days on board ship, almost certainly being watched by the three attackers. "I just kept it inside," Stovey says in a low voice. "I couldn't tell him."

## **“You Will Not Make a Noise”**

*The moment a man enlists in the United States armed forces, his chances of being sexually assaulted increase by a factor of ten. Women, of course, are much more likely to be victims of military sexual trauma (MST), but far fewer of them enlist. In fact, more military men are assaulted than women—nearly 14,000 in 2012 alone. Prior to the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell" in 2011, male-on-male-rape victims could actually be discharged for having engaged in homosexual conduct. That's no longer the case—but the numbers show that men are still afraid to report being sexually assaulted.*

*Military culture is built upon a tenuous balance of aggression and obedience. The potential for sexual violence exists whenever there is too much of either. New recruits, stripped of their free will, cannot question authority. A certain kind of officer demands sex from underlings in the same way he demands they pick up his laundry. A certain kind of recruit rapes his peer in a sick mimicry of the power structure: I own you totally. "One of the myths is that the perpetrators identify as gay, which is by and large not the case," says James Asbrand, a psychologist with the Salt Lake City VA's PTSD clinical team. "It's not about the sex. It's about power and control."*

*To understand this problem and why it persists twenty-two years after the Tailhook scandal, GQ interviewed military officials, mental-health professionals, and policy-makers, as well as twenty-three men who are survivors not only of MST but also of a bureaucracy that has failed to protect them.*

Trent Smith “He was a senior aide—he had a direct line to the top. Being invited over to his house, I just took it as I should go. Looking back, I ask myself, Why didn’t you do anything? It wasn’t like he held me down or tied me up. I didn’t want to cross him. I really didn’t feel like I had any choice. I had just turned 19. It could be my career. I froze and went along with it.”

**Terry Neal Navy, 1975–77** The part that I remember before I passed out was somebody saying they were going to teach me a lesson.

**Richard Welch Air Force and Army, 1973–82** I was coming in and out of consciousness. He kept saying, "You're going to like this."

**Matthew Owen\* Army, 1976–80** I heard one of them say, "Get that broom over there by the lockers."

**Gary Jones\* Army, 1984–86** At first I thought he was playing around. He managed to wrestle me onto my back, and I started freaking out. He pinned my arm above my head and my knee in the crook of his arm and covered my mouth with his right hand and looked at me and said, "*You will not make a noise.*"

**Sam Madrid\* Marines, 1962–68** When a gunnery sergeant tells you to take off your clothes, you better take off your clothes. You don't ask questions.

**Dana Chipman Judge Advocate General Army, 2009–13** The way we socialize people probably has some effect on the incidents. We cut your hair, and we give you the same clothes, and we tell you that you have no more privacy, you have no more individual rights—we're gonna take you down to your bare essence and then rebuild you in our image.

**Jones** I still don't believe I didn't bring this on. I keep telling myself, *If only I hadn't had a few beers that night. If only I hadn't invited him back to my room.* I tried to resist. He was just so fucking strong.

**Welch** There's nothing I could have done, except never have joined the military.

**Charles Bigo Army, 1966–69** I've told my psychologist, "Maybe it's my fault, because I'm gay." I was looking for friendship, companionship, some kind of emotional connection with somebody. They were predators. They knew what they saw in me that allowed them to be that way.

**Michael F. Matthews Air Force, 1973–85** Afterward they started kicking the shit out of me and said, "If you ever tell anybody, we'll come back and get you." But it was like the angels were singing, because I realized I wasn't going to die. Later I wished I had.

**Kole Welsh Army, 2002–07** I had actually let the assault go, because I didn't want it to interfere with my career. I wanted to be an officer, and I just said, "Bad experience, won't let that happen again." But there was some residual damage. A month and a half later, I was brought into a room with about nine officers and told, "You've tested positive [for HIV]." I was removed from the military and signed out within a day. It was a complete shock.

**James Asbrand Psychologist, Salt Lake City VA** There's the fear that "if other people know this about me, well, then, my life is over. No one's gonna want to be around me. They'll know that I'm less of a man."

**Neal** One of the doctors said to me afterward, "Son, men don't get raped."

**Jim McDonald\* Army, 1982–2004** (\* Name changed). I'm gonna have to cut this short. I'm not gonna be able to do this interview. This is really causing some flashbacks and triggers. I'm already having a panic attack. You're asking some serious questions, and I'd rather just cancel it here.

## “Hell no, I didn’t report this. Who was I going to report it to?”

*An overpowering shame prevents many enlisted men from reporting an assault—a sense that they must somehow be complicit in what has happened to them. Straight men often question their own sexual orientation, while gay men may struggle to find intimacy in relationships because they don't trust other men (or their own judgment). Telling the secret ruptures families and friendships. So does not telling.*

*The rape of a male soldier has a particular symbolism. "In a hypermasculine culture, what's the worst thing you can do to another man? Force him into what the culture perceives as a feminine role," says Asbrand of the Salt Lake City VA. "Completely dominate and rape him."*

*But shame isn't the only reason these men so often say nothing. Another is fear—of physical retaliation, professional ruin, social stigma. Research suggests that the military brass may have conspired to illegally discharge MST victims by falsely diagnosing them with personality disorders. "The military has a systemic personality disorder discharge problem," write the authors of a 2012 Yale Law School white paper. Between 2001 and 2010, some 31,000 servicepersons were involuntarily discharged for personality disorders. It is likely that in many cases these were sham diagnoses meant to rid the ranks of MST victims. "If they want you to be schizophrenic," says Trent Smith, an MST survivor currently fighting his discharge from the Air Force, "you're schizophrenic." These diagnoses also spare the government the costs of aftercare: The VA considers a personality disorder to be a pre-existing condition, so it won't cover the expense of treatment for PTSD caused by a sexual assault.*

*Above all, MST victims keep quiet because they do not believe their attackers will be punished. And they're almost certainly right. The conviction rate in MST cases that go to trial is just 7 percent. An estimated 81 percent of male MST victims never report being attacked. Perhaps it should astonish us that any of them do.*

Kole Welsh “A month and a half after the assault, I was brought into a room with about nine officers and told, “You’ve tested positive [for HIV].” I was removed from the military and signed out within a day. It was a complete shock.”

**Madrid:** I guess I feel okay telling you because you don't know who in the hell I am, and I don't know who you are, and you can't see me.

**Mike Thomson Marines, 1997–99:** I wasn't "afraid" to report it—I was ashamed and disgusted. Guys aren't supposed to be raped. I didn't want to tell anybody about it. I didn't want to say anything.

**Bigo:** I didn't talk about this for nearly fifty years.

**Trent Smith Air Force, enlisted 2011:** He was a senior aide—he had a direct line to the top. Being invited over to his house, I just took it as I should go. Looking back, I ask myself, *Why didn't you do anything?* It wasn't like he held me down or tied me up. I didn't want to cross him. I really didn't feel like I had any choice. I had just turned 19. It could be my career. I froze and went along with it.

**Welch** Hell no, I didn't report this. Who was I going to report it to? He had serious rank over me. After they ordered me to return to work with him, I stabbed myself in the neck so I could go home.

**Brian Lewis Navy, 1997–2001** No commanding officer wants to have to pick up the phone to his or her boss and say, "I've had a sexual assault aboard my command."

**Thomson** That's basically admitting that you can't control your men.

**Chipman** [Let's say] I'm a company commander and I've got this sergeant first class who's done a great job of getting my company ready for combat. Then this private I don't know from Adam comes in and says, "Sergeant X assaulted me last night." I don't believe that private. I don't *want* to believe that private. I can't imagine that Sergeant X would do such a thing. Is there a natural bias that would say, "Can I make this go away?" That's probably a very typical reaction.

**Neal** I was starting to hallucinate that people were coming to get me. I barricaded myself in my room in the barracks because I heard a key in the lock and thought they were coming in. It was my roommate, but I was screaming, "Don't hurt me!" They took me to the hospital, and that's where I finally told the psychiatrist what had happened. It was a huge mistake. I was put into a mental ward out of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The doctor would say, "You enjoyed it, didn't you? Come on, tell me the truth."

**Jeremy Robinson\* Army, 1970–72** I have very little memory of my time in the psychiatric ward, because I was so heavily drugged. I stopped eating. I became suicidal, and I made three attempts. They gave me shock treatments against my will. The diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia. I bore that label for forty years before the VA finally admitted they had misdiagnosed me.

**Neil Alexander Navy, 2002–04** There were about seven assaults. I got to the point where I just didn't want to live anymore. Not that I had a plan; I just got reckless, and my command took it as a signal I was suicidal. They said I had "Personality Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified." They said I was being discharged for that.

**Chipmann** The discharge for personality disorder — that's a problem. If you've talked to twenty different victims and twelve of them say, "I was discharged for a personality disorder and I was railroaded," I would not deny that in many cases a personality discharge would have been issued. It's not right.

## The Case of Heath Phillips Navy, 1988-89

"The two main guys—their nickname was the Twin Towers. They held themselves like they were God and untouchable. They were both six feet five or above, 250 pounds. I weighed maybe 120 pounds soaking wet. As soon as the Twin Towers came near you, you instantly wanted to pee yourself.

The main attacks were at night. When you're being dragged out of your bunk literally by your ear, you can't fight, because they're doing these funky things with your fingers, twisting them, and they're ripping your mouth open, and then they got another guy that has his fingers in your nose or in your eyes to make you open your mouth. That's what always used to bother me: I'm screaming, yelling, fighting, and nobody is even moving their curtains to look.

I went AWOL; I couldn't take it no more. I tried hanging myself. I was living in the streets, and I got arrested shoplifting, and they sent me to the brig. Then I got sent back to the same berthing area, where they started terrorizing me again. The final straw was, I was taking a shower and these guys beat me up and raped me with a toilet brush. Medical told me I probably had a hemorrhoid. I went AWOL again, then turned myself in a couple of days later. Finally my executive officer came back [proposing] I take an *other-than-honorable* discharge.

To this day I don't know why they did it, because they had beautiful girlfriends. I just happened to be one of their victims."

**Steve Stovey:** "As a man, I can't perform the way I used to. I just feel damaged. All I remember, along with the pain, is the slapping sound of being raped. I try to make love to my wife, but I can't—I'm triggered. I'm traumatized by that sound."

## "I'm terrified of men. I'm gay and I'm terrified of men."

*Men develop PTSD from sexual assault at nearly twice the rate they do from combat. Yet as multiple research papers have noted, the condition in men is egregiously understudied. This is because so few men tell anyone. Those who do often wait years; many male participants in therapy groups are veterans of Korea and Vietnam. At Bay Pines' C. W. Bill Young VA Medical Center in Florida, the country's first residential facility for men suffering from MST, the average patient is over 50 years old at admission.*

*Military sexual trauma causes a particularly toxic form of PTSD. The betrayal by a comrade-in-arms, a brother in whom you place unconditional trust, can be unbearable. Warrior culture values stoicism, which encourages a victim to keep his troubles to himself and stigmatizes him if he doesn't. An implacable chain of command sometimes compels a victim to work or sleep alongside an attacker, which can make him feel captive to his suffering and deserving of it.*

**Jones** I'm terrified of men. I'm gay and I'm terrified of men. I can't even get an erection, especially since I got sober. I isolate. I don't go to movies, I can't handle concerts. I have horrid nightmares. Last Christmas, I went to dinner with some friends, and at one point I started panicking so bad I had to get out of the restaurant. I was shaking. I never even told anybody about this until last July. Do you know what it's like to live with this for thirty years?

**Neal** My first sexual experience ever was being raped by these guys. It screwed me up: That's what sex is supposed to be—anonymouse, painful. The nightmares never went away. I started getting really bad with alcohol and an addiction to anonymous sex. Having a relationship with somebody has been extremely difficult.

**Owen** The hardest thing for me was the fear to be looked at as being gay. I went through a lot of women. I went through several marriages. I wasn't a loyal husband. In college a couple guys brought up to me that they had an opportunity to make some serious money. I became an escort, and I did it for a good eleven years. It erased my thoughts.

**Alexander** I'm afraid to go outside. I hate dealing with people. I hate being in crowds. I go grocery shopping at three in the morning, because there's nobody out. I drive a hundred miles to Walmart to pick up my meds, because one of my friends works there and I can get in and out comfortably.

**Welch** No supervisor was ever going to have me alone in his office again. If a supervisor was to call me into his office, I was done. I can't tell you how many jobs I went through over the years because of that.

**Phillips** I just couldn't handle working around men. I've done masonry work, but I'd last only a couple weeks. I would have outbursts. Sometimes sexual jokes would trigger me. I'd be like, "Listen, you perverted scumbag..." When things upset me, I yell [my attackers'] names out to people. The guys would just look at you like, *This guy is crazy.*

**Lewis** Your certificate of discharge, form DD-214, says very clearly your reason for discharge. But if you [tell a prospective employer] the psychiatrist misdiagnosed you, the perception is, "Oh, he's lying. He's a troublemaker, and we don't want to hire him." So you either have to own up to it or you basically don't get a job. You essentially have to tell a prospective employer you were sexually assaulted.

**Robinson** It wasn't until I got my records that I learned about the codes on the DD-214. Employers who offer benefits are not going to hire anyone with a pre-existing condition such as schizophrenia. I've spent many years just spinning my wheels trying to get jobs that I'm not gonna be allowed to get.

**Owen** To this day, I still cut—arms, legs, stomach—with a hunting knife or a razor blade. It gives me a sense of control, endorphins, relief. The nightmares just play over and over. They're so real I can feel the broomstick going up inside me.

**Welch** I drank myself crazy and did street drugs—methamphetamine, codeine, morphine. At night I still have four or five drinks of vodka. It helps me relax.

**Owen** I can turn off my love for a person like a light switch. If my current wife made me distrust her in any way, I could walk out the door and not miss her. My kids told me my head was always in my work, which was true. I don't feel any loss of not being part of their life.

**Bob Hunter Navy, 1980–84** I'm emotionally numb all the time. I'm not feeling love. I don't *feel*.

**Stovey** As a man, I can't perform the way I used to. I just feel damaged. All I remember, along with the pain, is the slapping sound of being raped. I try to make love to my wife, but I can't—I'm triggered. I'm traumatized by that sound.

## The Case of Mike Thomson

"In infantry training, I tore ligaments in my ankle. It wasn't a visible injury, so I was accused of faking it. After I was assigned to base, three individuals started singling me out. They would intentionally bump into me. When I was asleep, somebody punched me in the face. A month later, I was pulled out of the shower. They kicked me and beat me with a plunger, and I don't know if I lost consciousness or not, but the next thing I remember is my wrists were taped to the bedframe and they were holding a knife to my throat. Then they took turns sexually assaulting me.

As the company clerk, part of my job was to sort the mail, and I started stealing magazines, Christmas cards: *I'm the one that's in charge, you only get your mail when I decide.* After the military, I worked undercover security for department stores. I would go in the back room and steal cash before it went in the vault—not just fifty bucks here and there but \$2,000 in one night. They couldn't prove it was me, because I'm the one controlling where the cameras go. Later on, working at a small business, I would print up high amounts of postage [on the in-house postage meter] and sell it—over seven years, probably \$30,000 worth. I got more daring, and I finally stole a couple checks. I got caught for that and was sentenced to a year in jail. I was able to serve on house arrest, and I sought help from the VA. The psychiatrist diagnosed me with obsessive-compulsive disorder. The high for me was getting away with it, being in control."

## "You see us in a group, it's like we're each individually wrapped in a burlap sack."

*Men who have been sexually assaulted avoid treatment for the same reason they avoid so much else in their lives: because it makes them feel threatened. "We're asking them to talk about the one thing they'll do anything to keep other people from knowing about them," says Asbrand. The irony is that PTSD is highly treatable, even if the damage it does over time to families and professional lives may not be.*

*Unfortunately for male victims, the VA's facilities for MST focus largely on women. In fact, the statute that establishes these programs makes mention only of female victims. Interviewees for this story indicate that the quality and availability of outpatient treatment for men is spotty at best. Some men report being denied care altogether.*

**Matthews** Come to my VA, they don't have counselors for men. There's no standard across the VA.

**Phillips** The questionnaires are designed for women. They were asking, "How many times were you violated in your vagina?"

**Jones** You see us in group, it's like we're each individually wrapped in a burlap sack. We don't want to touch anybody. We're all just very leery of each other.

**Lewis** I don't want to discuss in a room full of women how there's nerve damage to my prostate from the attack, and I'm sure they don't really want to discuss their reproductive organs in a room full of men.

*Whistle-blowers have alleged that the VA's regional offices routinely destroy veterans' medical records in an effort to escape a massive systemic backlog. Nearly 60,000 new patients have been made to wait ninety days or more since 2004, with some 65,000 others never getting to see a doctor at all. At least twenty-three veterans have died while waiting for care. In May, Eric Shinseki, the head of Veterans Affairs, resigned under pressure.*

**Ted Skovranek Army, 2003-05** When I first got out, I tried to seek treatment with the VA. It became an issue where every time I came back, it was a different person; they had interns filling in. Every time, I had to relive telling the story again. It just became too much. It's a joke.



**Lewis** There was a period of years where I wanted to die on a daily basis, every minute of every day. The VA's pill cocktails simply did not work.

**Jones** I take a handful of Skittles every fucking morning—for the anxiety and the nightmares and the insomnia. Taste the rainbow, dude.

**Ronald Abrams** **Joint executive director, National Veterans Legal Services Program** The VA has a real quality problem. They say they have a 90 percent accuracy rate [in processing claims], but we do their quality checks, and the error rate in the last year was over 50 percent. In over 70 percent of all appeals, the board reverses or remands the VA's decisions. No one understands what the VA is doing.

**Phillips** I went to the VA from 1994 to 2010 for severe chronic PTSD due to military sexual trauma. But one day I was denied service, and I'm like, "What the heck?" My VA rep said I had slipped through the cracks—they were never supposed to have seen me in the first place, because I have an other-than-honorable discharge [for repeatedly going AWOL to avoid being attacked]. I go to this lady's office: "You guys are not denying that I was sexually assaulted, but now you're telling me I can't see an MST counselor?" She says, "That's correct."

**Stovey** I've got a PTSD diagnosis from my doctor. I've written my testimony down, filled out the paperwork, and sent it in, and it got denied. It just feels like another betrayal.

**Welch** I've been turned down several times. There's this wall that says, "That couldn't have happened to you—you're a man."

*In March, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York sought to pass the Military Justice Improvement Act, a bill that would strip commanders of the power to determine whether to prosecute sex assaults. The MJIA would instead delegate that power to independent military prosecutors. The bill won a narrow majority in the Senate but fell short of the votes required to beat a promised filibuster.*

*At the same time, Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri offered a competing bill that MST-victim advocates attacked because it seemed to reaffirm the status quo. Worse, it didn't address victims' fears of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy that, to put it mildly, deters reporting. "You know McCaskill's bill ain't gonna work," says MST victim Michael Matthews, "because the Pentagon likes her bill."*

*For commanders, it's a nuanced matter to decide whether or not to refer a rape case for trial. The decision requires judgment calls about consent. It demands empathy for a victim who has been made to feel profoundly unsoldierlike. It calls for unsparing scrutiny of one's own complicity, because the failure of "good order and discipline"—a canonical 239-year-old military concept—is the commander's own failure. MST-victim advocates argue that people with specialized training should be making these decisions, not commanders.*

*McCaskill's bill was passed unanimously and currently awaits action in a House sub-committee. Gillibrand has vowed to revive the MJIA later in 2014. Meanwhile, the number of reported sexual assaults rose for a third consecutive year. The Pentagon interprets this to mean that a greater proportion of victims are reporting. Veterans believe it just means there are more victims.*

Heath Phillips "When you're being dragged out of your bunk literally by your ear, you can't fight, because they're doing these funky things with your fingers, twisting them, and they're ripping your mouth open, and then they got another guy that has his fingers in your nose or in your eyes to make you open your mouth. That's what always used to bother me: I'm screaming, yelling, fighting, and nobody is even moving their curtains to look."

## **"I can't blame the whole military for what one person did"**

**Ken Falke, Founder, Boulder Crest Retreat for Military and Veteran Wellness, Bluemont, Virginia** It's funny. Even people who have the most horrific experience, at some stage in their life—it may take

them till they're 75 years old—the best memories of their lives will come back to [their service time]. I can't tell you exactly why. The brotherhood, the camaraderie, goes deeper than the worst trauma.

**Alexander** I can't blame the whole military for what one person did. I liked the structure—having a sense of I knew what I was doing, what my job was going to be. I would go back in a heartbeat, even after everything that happened. I would love to.

**Jones** I liked the routine. I liked the work. I liked the benefits. I liked the freedom of being young and not under my parents' rules anymore. I wanted to travel and to go up in rank and to store away money for an education when I got out. It only takes twenty years. I wanted to stay in the military.

**Smith** I just wanted to stay in the Air Force. Being in the Air Force makes me happy. I didn't want him to take that last thing away from me. I feel like this is where I really belong. But obviously it's not an option.

## The Case of Matthew Owen Army, 1976-80

"I was from the Midwest, and they said they hated "Yankees." At night they'd pull the covers over me and beat me with a bar of soap in a sock. They would push me out of my bunk onto the floor. They would mess up my locker during inspection.

One night I was getting ready to go into my room in the barracks when a blanket was put over my head. I heard five different male voices, which I recognized, because I had heard these voices when they harassed me every day. They beat me down onto the floor and forced my legs open. Then they took the end of a broomstick and forced it into me again and again. Each time it felt like my insides were coming out. The blood was a blessing, because it seemed to lubricate the broomstick.

In order to heal, I'm supposed to forgive; I've been told that many times. But how do you forgive somebody that's done that to you? You tell me that. Could *you*? I know the identity of the ringleader, and two of the others came back to me a year ago. I searched online, and there was no trace. There's millions of people that have those last names.

My thought of what I would do to them is, I would first tie 'em down to a table. Then I would take a blowtorch, and I would slowly roast them from their toes to the top of their fucking head. You know how long that's been on my mind?"