

Being My Own Virgil: My Journey Through *Inferno* From Military Sexual Trauma

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This article provides a first-hand experience of military sexual abuse and trauma. The course of the abusive events unfolded over a span of 12 months. The abuse started almost immediately and continued over time, despite direct comments to stop, report to others, and other attempts by the victim at obtaining help to stop the abuse. The fact that the victim did not manifest the expected behaviors of a victim of abuse led many either to not see the effects or not view the effects as having significant impact on the victim. At different choice points, both colleagues and senior personnel either blamed the victim or refused to concern themselves with the events or get involved. Although the military system eventually understood and resolved the situation, it was a long, arduous, and painful process for the victim.

Keywords: military sexual trauma, sexual assault, military sexual assault, posttraumatic growth

I am a survivor of military sexual trauma. The first time I was sexually assaulted I was in my place of work wearing my uniform. It was my first day on a new job in a new organization. My abuser, who would become a constant figure in my life for the next few years, outranked me by several grades and had been in the military for many years. Due to the nature of our jobs, he was considered a “peer”—our profession in the military respects rank but also acknowledges that rank does not necessarily equal experience. Although I was new to the military, I had several years of previous professional experience in the private sector. In fact, because of my earlier professional experience, I was expected to help the higher ranking officers become more competent in their professional skills. In turn, they were supposed to help me develop a better sense of military bearing.

My View of My Clinical Duty

In the military I work primarily with individuals (active duty, retirees, government workers, and dependents) who are struggling with psychological and/or behavioral disorders, trauma survivors, or those with very serious and complicated medical and psychological presentations. Although I work with a different population now (i.e., military service members), this is the same job I had before entering the military. My job requires me to have extraor-

dinary amounts of empathy, or the ability to understand the felt experience of another’s mental and emotional state. In other words, I’m akin to Virgil from Dante’s *Inferno*; I am by a person’s side as we travel through the very depths of their psyche and explore the hellish experiences that have led them to be sitting in my office in pain.

I am there as a guide and to prevent the person from becoming lost or trapped in one of his or her own personal circles of hell, and, together, we take a journey that is life-changing for the patient. Although I feel the emotions and understand the cognitions, I am also detached enough not to be swallowed by their pain. As long as the patient is willing and actively engaged in treatment, I see my job as being the consistent, compassionate, understanding, and empathetic guide during the descent and journey through to the other side.

The Assaults

The first time I was sexually assaulted, I almost didn’t believe it had happened. It was quick, and it seemed innocent enough. My abuser had grabbed my chest because he was “confused” about something on my uniform. In the moment I immediately began to question myself—“Did that just happen? Is he supposed to grab me like that?” Since it was my first day, I casually yet firmly removed his hand and told him not to touch me. He laughed, apologized, and made a comment that my uniform surprised him. He told me I needed to “chill out,” and he seemed honestly surprised I had reacted that way toward him. Based on how he reacted toward my request and the way he looked at me, I had this innate feeling that he was dangerous. Despite my intuition screaming at me to do something to protect myself, I told him “Hey, everyone makes mistakes: Just don’t let it happen again.” I didn’t realize at that moment that what he had just done was considered abuse, and I couldn’t have predicted that this behavior would last for a year.

I was in my uniform, in the work place on government property every time my abuser sexually assaulted me. I emphasize this point because many people who hear about sexual assault seem to immediately wonder about the setting, what the victim was wear-

Editor’s Note. This is one of thirteen articles in a special issue on Military Sexual Trauma.

Editor’s Note. As a former American Psychological Association President, the editor of *Psychological Services* receives numerous invitations to visit various associations, universities, government agencies, and hospitals and clinics. During these visits, we often discuss their research and clinical experiences, and I frequently urge individuals and small groups to write professional manuscripts for possible publication. The author submitted the manuscript for this article to the editor during such a site visit. The author asked that it be published anonymously and gave her verbal consent to publish it in the *Psychological Services*.

ing, and whether alcohol was involved. I also emphasize these situational details because, arguing against these initial questions, it should be obvious that military uniforms (specifically camouflage) are not particularly flattering or “sexy,” and in no way do military uniforms “invite” or “tempt” an individual to violate the physical body rights of another. I was not in a club or walking down the street at 0200 hours. I was in the work place, which is the same place I see patients and conduct meetings with researchers and clinicians.

The next question that is normally asked of me about the experience is, “well, why didn’t you speak up?” I did. I spoke directly to my abuser, and I spoke with colleagues. A few days after the first incident took place, I described it to one of my female coworkers. She has a similar background to me (i.e., prior professional experience, but no military experience). She immediately told me she felt his behavior was inappropriate, but we were not able to figure out a solution. For example, even though I directly confronted my abuser, should I still report it? Was this sexual harassment or sexual assault? Should I take precautions to prevent being alone in the work place with my abuser? We decided to table the decision at the time, but, hindsight being 20/20, I wish we would have found answers to these questions.

Over time the sexual assaults became more aggressive. After the first incident, he had laughed when I confronted him, but during subsequent assaults, he would scream at me and threaten me. He told me that once he left his (our) current command, he would be in a position of authority over me and he would destroy my career (e.g., he would rate me poorly on evaluations, counseling statements to indicate that I was trouble). He threatened that if I did not let him have access to my social media accounts, then he would create rumors that I was having sex with enlisted soldiers or with my married male friends. Although these accusations would be completely unfounded, he told me that being accused would be “enough” to ruin my future.

Each time an assault would occur, I would immediately talk to a coworker, whether male or female, who had more military experience and time in service than I had. I had been told that these “peers” would help guide me in all military issues, so I naturally assumed they would be the ones who could help me change and handle this emerging problem situation.

My Journey Through Inferno

My experience with military sexual trauma did not allow me to have my own Virgil for reasons that will be explained throughout this narrative. I had to be both Dante and Virgil, which may be a result of my training and experience in my own job. However, I invite all the readers of this article to act as my Virgil as I describe what I endured.

First Circle: Limbo

My limbo was the period of time during which I tried to address the situation within my department without reporting the abuse to a military service official outside my department. About 9 months into the abuse, I learned through departmental gossip of another survivor from the same abuser. I learned from her that he had a documented past of such abuse of other junior colleagues or subordinates. I also learned the shocking information that almost

all of my direct superiors, who were all civilians, had some knowledge of this (as he had confessed this during an interview), but did not understand the gravity of what he had done previously. It was a further shock and shame on the military to learn that many experienced and senior military officers (i.e., my aforementioned “peers”) were aware of the earlier situations, yet none of them wanted to educate the civilian leadership, nor did they want to help their coworker, friend, or sister-in-arms.

When I reached out to this survivor, who was a female service member as well, I learned that there were resources that I had the right to use. I learned that I could choose how to report this behavior, which was initially reassuring to me. I decided that since the Department of Defense had allocated a significant budget for helping survivors in these situations, then surely I would be able to locate and utilize these helping services and resources easily. After all, I was on a military base, and I am in a profession that helps people. Unfortunately, the resources were not easy to locate—no weblinks on our website, no working numbers to the reporting personnel (e.g., sexual assault response coordinator [SARC] or sexual assault prevention and response office [SAPR]), and if working numbers were found, the military service member that had worked in that capacity had moved to another base (i.e., permanent change of station, PCS) and the position was empty. I was stuck in limbo.

Second Circle: Lust

As I continued my descent into the inferno, I was continually confronted by the lust of my abuser. Each time an assault would occur, I would seek out someone (i.e., from my peer group) who might be able to help and ask, “Hey—X touched me/grabbed me/tried to put his hand under my shirt. What do I do?” The following responses greeted me at every turn.

- “Wow, I’m sorry. How about we get you a bigger uniform so he can’t see your figure?”
- “Ohh . . . maybe if you didn’t wear make-up then he wouldn’t find you attractive.”
- “That sucks, but hey—everyone knows he is creepy and does stuff like this all the time. I guess he just picked you this year. Sorry man.”
- “A few of us figured he’d try to mess with you since you’re the only single one. You should try to get some dependents or something, maybe he’ll leave you alone then?” (Note: dependents means children or a spouse).
- “You know, if you weren’t so nice then he wouldn’t find you approachable. You need to stop being a team player.”
- “Let me give you an OPD [officer professional development]—women in the military are either bitches or whores. You aren’t a bitch so I guess you chose your path by default.”

The last one is probably my “favorite” as it was said in front of a group of coworkers from all service branches. Regardless, these coworkers chose to blame how I looked or my status as single in the military. My perceived sexuality, sexual experience, and appearance became the focus for several individuals, not the behavior of my abuser.

Third Circle: Gluttony

My descent into “gluttony” was due to two main things: my direct supervisor’s “addiction” to my productivity and my “over-indulgence” in how I appeared physically. My direct supervisor had made a special request to have me work for him because of my abilities before joining the military. By all accounts during this 12-month period, I was always “squared away”—and my professional abilities and skills improved ahead of my peers during this time. I was never tearful or struggling professionally. I was not acting and behaving in the way they expected of a victim of military sexual trauma. My ability to survive, and possibly grow, from these abuse experiences probably resulted in coping mechanisms I had learned earlier, as well as my professional training and experience.

Although I got a significant amount of work done, it did not meet the same quality of work that I had always held myself to prior to the abuse. I was constantly fatigued. When I would get home from work on a day with no sexual assault, I would sit on my couch and watch reality TV until I was tired. I would avoid doing work I had brought home with me, which led to decreased productivity. On the days I was sexually assaulted I would go home and just lie in my bed and wait until the feelings of shame, anger, sadness, and frustration would pass, or until I fell asleep for a few hours. I always woke up exhausted. I was surviving, but I was paying a price.

Speaking of my general attention to my personal appearance, I continued to appear to others as I have always appeared—professional, funny, positive, upbeat, and a team player. In fact, when I finally disclosed the abuse to one of my civilian supervisors who is an expert on trauma, she responded by saying, “Wow, but you’re so nice, pretty and funny! I wouldn’t have guessed because you’re so put together, and you’re always making jokes and cheering others up.” Not only did she, an expert in trauma who worked by my side several days a week, miss some of the telltale signs of sexual abuse, but she also fell back on the stereotype image of a victim of sexual abuse.

I would wake up in the morning, taking great care in doing my hair and make-up and putting on my uniform. But, I would dread going to work every day. The second I would reach the outside of my work buildings, I would take a deep breath and put on my “armor”—the always put-together, smiling, bubbly, and hardworking professional with a quick wit, style, and image. It was exhausting to do this every day, and it felt that my armor was getting heavier as time and the abuse wore on. I had signed an extensive contract with the military, thus I was not in a position to just “leave” my job (and the situation). In addition, I truly love my job in the military, and I knew (realistically) that I would not always be in this situation. Despite that, the only thing that could comfort me during this time was the fact that the people rating me had no idea what was happening because of my continuing good job performance and outward positive appearance and behavior.

Fourth Circle: Greed

My experience in this circle centered on several things. First, my disclosure to other coworkers resulted in the following.

- “That sucks . . . so did you finish doing X assignment? You know I need that by tomorrow.”

- “Look, everyone knows he does this stuff. Do you want to ruin your career and OUR career because you have an issue with it?”

These individuals seemed to acknowledge but dismiss my problems and distress. Faced with a choice between helping me personally and emotionally and getting the job done (and advancing our department’s performance goals and their career), they chose the latter. In this way, greed became a factor that would nearly destroy a professional relationship I had with a male colleague due to him being greedy about our collective work and his career.

Fifth Circle: Anger

Anger was always gurgling under the surface, even if I refused to acknowledge its existence. Denial is a very powerful defense mechanism, and I was able to deny my feelings of anger toward my civilian leadership, my military colleagues, my abuser, and myself for a very long time. Approximately 11 months into the 12-month ordeal, I first expressed some anger following my initial reporting of the abuse to an investigating officer. At first my report was handled as an administrative investigation, despite the fact that I repeated many times that he had sexually assaulted me on numerous occasions.

The first time I expressed real anger, the kind that burned within my body, was when I reported the abuse during a staff meeting, which included every staff member that was in some way connected to our department (approximately 70 people). This staff meeting occurred 3 months after the abuse had ended, but the investigation into the abuse had started to accelerate. During this meeting, the head supervisor stood up and was vague about the investigation, and he kept repeating that it was “sexual harassment,” which is not as serious an issue, and that individuals should be able to “stand up and tell someone that you don’t want to date them or sleep with them.” I felt pure anger, and I felt I needed to say something.

I disclosed to the group that I had been sexually assaulted many times by the individual. My head supervisor was minimizing the events, as well as saying it was my fault because I did not “stand up” and speak my mind to my abuser. The reaction of others? One supervisor hugged me, one was outraged, and one started the victim blaming. Out of over 70 people who knew me well, fewer than five were willing to stick by my side publicly following the disclosure. I was angry because I felt abandoned and ignored, and it was hard to swallow these powerful emotions. By the time I left the room that day, I had pulled myself together and refused to acknowledge my anger further—that day and for the duration of the year-long investigation and legal experience.

Sixth Circle: Heresy

At this stage I fell into a struggle with certain individuals who felt the need to try to force me to accept their beliefs about the situations. Some of these individuals were also survivors of abuse from the abuser. I felt like a heretic when I challenged their automatic thoughts regarding the situation. I questioned myself. I wondered if something was wrong with me for not just standing in solidarity with them. And, at times, I felt something was wrong with me for not being as *angry* or struggling as *much* as they were. Even through this period of abuse, lack of support, and the lengthy

investigation, I was still able to enjoy many aspects of life, even though I was frequently fatigued and upset.

Command intervened and ordered my abuser not to come to the department offices (standard for this sort of investigation); thus I was able to begin to enjoy doing my work. I was able to work well with my coworkers, including the ones that were not supportive, and I didn't find my interpersonal relationships to be affected. Some days I felt that maybe I *shouldn't* be this well-adjusted and the other survivors, with whom I occasionally talked for support, would agree with my observation and wonderings.

I also felt that the other victims in the case were being heretics. They blamed everyone and everything for the abuse and the slow crawl of the investigations. We often had to meet with lawyers or investigators, so we spent a significant amount of time together. It was exhausting to be in a room with them as they blamed the military, our command, our civilian leadership and supervisors, the coworkers, and the individuals who were involved in victim services and the investigation. It felt annoying and trite that they could not see past the blame and work on being happy themselves, regardless of the investigative and punitive outcomes. It felt like heresy because the conceptualization of the military is that we stand together and we have each other's "6" (i.e., we have each other's back). I finally had to resolve within myself that I didn't have to share the same emotions or beliefs as the other survivors.

Seventh Circle: Violence

My intuitive reaction from the initial incident with my abuser was the foreshadow to his potential and real danger. As he became more aggressive in his assaults, it gave me more data to support my initial reaction that he was dangerous. Despite this, I did not know I had fallen into the seventh circle until the legal portion of the experience was coming to an end. At some point, approximately 1–2 months after the investigation began, my abuser made threats that he, if left unescorted and not banned from entering department buildings, would attempt to hurt or kill me (or another victim) and then kill himself at our place of work.

He made these statements to multiple people, including our military chain of command, during the initial 1–2 months of the investigation. I found out 11 months later that my abuser had made threats when my command gave me a military protective order (MPO; i.e., restraining order). There was little explanation for why I was receiving one except that it was "for my protection" and is a necessity to military victims when their abuser is found guilty and being discharged from the military. As I was leaving the commander's office, I made a comment regarding how bewildered I felt about receiving this MPO at the (then) present time. A civilian administrator in the office politely told me that I should have received the MPO when he originally made the threats. Although notified unofficially, I still have not been officially notified about these threats.

Eighth Circle: Fraud

My abuser was a fraud in the military. He knew how to work the system, and he worked his magic in very impressive ways. It is easy to accept that he was a fraud; all of the evidence supports that statement. However, it was not easy for me to be labeled a "fraud" by his lawyer during the board hearing—a court-like system in

which a military review panel hears testimony, reviews evidence, and can ask questions to any individual involved, and makes a decision regarding whether the accused will be discharged from the military and the designation of discharge (e.g., honorable discharge, less than honorable discharge).

My abuser's lawyer argued that the whole situation was functionally my fault for existing and being in the military. He argued that if I hadn't been in the military, we would not be having the investigation and hearing. In addition, he argued that if I were truly being abused then I wouldn't have continued to work with my abuser. Although I explained that I had no choice regarding that matter, as we had the same supervisor and I kept being placed on projects with him because of my skill set, my abuser's lawyer was relentless. How dare I, someone with such little military experience and rank, report my abuser, who had many years in service and was supposed to be promoted in rank?

My abuser's lawyer kept trying to paint me as a fraud, a liar, and a seducer. He argued that my pain and suffering were fraudulent because of my appearance and my "armor" of being well-put-together. He argued that surely someone living in fear would not be that pretty and professional all the time. It took every ounce of self-control I had not to lunge at either my abuser or his lawyer, both of whom sat 6 feet away from me during the military hearing.

Ninth Circle: Treachery

I had experienced many acts of treachery, both against me and against the other victims during my experience, all of which came with powerful emotions. For most of these acts, I was able to use my "normal" coping mechanisms, such as humor and sublimation, to recover and grow from the experience. Some of the acts of treachery were so public that it took me several weeks to process my emotions. For instance, the initial designation of the investigation was administrative rather than criminal, which meant that the outcome would not result in a court martial and jail time for my abuser. This was further supported by our discussions with the military prosecutors (i.e., the Judge Advocate General) when we were told that if they had been given all of the information in the beginning of their investigation, it would have taken a different course.

I also found out that some of my coworkers had refused to speak with investigators to aid in the criminal investigation because they were more concerned about their careers. That felt, to me, like the ultimate betrayal, as my fellow service members abandoned me because they did not want to be "associated" with a sexual assault case. In the darkest moments of the overall experience, it felt as if I had been discarded by and was worthless to my command. The ninth circle was the hardest because it meant I had to confront all of these emotions and cognitions, accept that the events had happened, accept others' reactions and behavior regarding the case, and then move on.

The End of My Inferno

My inferno "ended" the day the military decided to separate my abuser from service, which was nearly 2 years after I was first sexually assaulted. I received this information from the prosecutors and my wonderful Special Victims Counsel (SVC), i.e., lawyers appointed to military sexual trauma survivors to help them through

the legal proceedings. The text message was one sentence long, but it meant finality. That night was the first time I slept soundly and awoke rested since I had first been assaulted 2 years earlier. Although this journey is technically not complete, as my abuser is still fighting the outcome (and trying to “wait it out” to 20 years of time in service), the hard part of the journey is over. I made it to the other side.

My journey through the inferno was heartbreaking, difficult, and at times seemingly unending, but in the end it did not change my core beliefs about myself, others, and the world. I had to be both Dante and Virgil to make it through this journey physically and psychologically healthy, and, because of that, I am incredibly grateful for every person who has trained me in my profession. I would have been worse off having not had the intellectual and research knowledge about trauma, coping, and recovering within me as I faced my own trauma and had to grow from the experience.

You, dear reader, may wonder why I decided to write about my journey. First, it is important for professionals to understand that

this behavior continues to happen, even in environments where many believe (or hope) that professionals would not engage in this sort of behavior. Second, it is therapeutic to write about this experience. This is the first time I have ever sat down and written a narrative other than the sworn statements I made. And finally, I hope this challenges any conceptualizations about victims and how they should act or behave during these situations. People would never have known what I endured had I not chosen to disclose my experience because I was the antithesis of the common conceptualization of what it means to be a victim. Maybe this will finally help challenge our professional and personal beliefs regarding survivors of military sexual trauma and perhaps we can continue to change the way survivors are treated.

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