Record Numbers of Female Vets Strain System

by Asha Anchan, Kelsey Hightower and Caitlin Cruz

Female soldiers returning form war have a harder time finding jobs and are more likely to be single parents with children to support. They also may have different medical issues and psychological needs.

The fight to feel like a veteran weighs substantially on female soldiers returning from war, though their numbers have been historic, with more than 280,000 returning from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade.

A News21 demographic analysis shows that 17.4 percent of post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans are women. More than a quarter of those women are black, almost twice the proportion found in the entire U.S. population.

Yet, these same women are less likely to find a job than male veterans and more likely to be a single parent with children to support, interviews and records show.

They return to a nation that historically defines “veteran” as male, which in the post-9/11 era has meant a lack of female-specific resources at VA facilities across the country.

A 2013 Institute of Medicine report found that women in combat-support roles, like men, experience intense warfare and constant threats on their lives, but the implications of this trauma for women has been overlooked.

“Historically, research on the health of veterans has focused on the health consequences of combat service in men, and there has been little scientific research . . . of the health consequences of military service in women who served,” according to the report.

Currently, 360,000 women use VA medical services. But the number is expected to double as more women come home and seek care, many of them relatively new to its services, said Dr. Patricia Hayes, chief consultant of Women’s Health Services at the VA in Washington, D.C.

As of 2008, only 33 percent of the 152 VA medical centers had specified "women’s clinics," records show. Now, about 75 percent offer at least some type of female-specific care, Hayes said.

Army National Guard Spc. Crystal Sandor muscled a 5-ton truck through the ragtag roads of Iraq and likely would be dead from an exploding fireball had the 4-foot-10 soldier been just centimeters taller.

She was awarded a Purple Heart, but had to prove to the Army that she deserved it.

Even back home in Ohio, she doesn't feel much like a soldier.

"What did you do over there?" some gray-haired male veterans in Akron, Ohio, at the Department of Veterans Affairs asked as they sized up her petite frame. "Did you sell Girl Scout cookies?" one asked.

When Sandor's husband goes to the VA, he gets handshakes and "Thank you for your service" accolades in the waiting room.

Not Crystal.

Sandor has struggled to get the care she expected from the military since the night she nearly died – June 18, 2004.

She was a driver in a 20-truck convoy during a night mission in Iraq.

She laughs just a little, remembering a conversation with a fellow soldier. She was razzing him for spilling sunflower seeds, a staple during their missions together. Then, a fireball from a roadside bomb came head-on toward their truck.

Sandor woke up pounding on her chest to make sure she was alive. She couldn't see, couldn't hear. The voice of a soldier broke the chaos.

"Just keep driving! Just keep driving!"

"If I was that much taller," Sandor says, putting mere centimeters between her thumb and forefinger, "I wouldn't be alive."

After the accident and while still in Iraq, Sandor discovered her superiors lost the paperwork documenting the attack, meaning there was no official record that it ever happened.

"The only reason I have the disability (rating) I have is because I was smart enough to have a video camera on me and we recorded the damage to the truck and we took pictures of everything," she said. "That is the only reason I have a Purple Heart or disability."

Since Sandor's return home in March 2005, she's been at odds with the Ohio VA system over her treatment.

During her first appointment later that year, she said the VA doctor seemed skeptical of her injuries, treating her as if she never left the base. When she was asked about treatment options, Sandor requested therapy to talk about the attack that injured her. Instead, she left with three prescriptions for anxiety and sleeping. She said she stopped taking the medications because she felt like a "zombie."

"I don't think I've talked to one female veteran who goes to the VA who has had a good experience, that has been treated and received the care that they deserve," Sandor said. "I think because the VA has dealt with men for so long, through all the previous wars, they're not set up to handle females. But we've been at this war for 10 years, it's about time they figure it out."

She tried group therapy at the VA, but was placed in an all-male group. She left each session feeling guilty, not better, about herself because of the horror stories the men told.

For the last eight years, Sandor has bounced between her civilian doctor and

GALLERY

Photo by Caitlin Cruz/News21

Ohio Army National Guard veteran Crystal Sandor, 28, served in Iraq from February 2004 to March 2005, and was awarded a Purple Heart after an IED detonated near her truck. She has since suffered from back pain, arthritis in her knees, tinnitus, PTSD and hearing and vision loss.

the VA to prove the extent of her injuries – such as the post-traumatic stress disorder the VA denied, but her civilian doctor insists she has, along with ringing in her ears, severe arthritis in her knees, hearing and vision loss, herniated disks, a deviated septum and a brain lesion. She has a 40 percent disability rating.

She tries to dismiss her concerns with the VA, keeping her focus on her 17-month-old daughter and her husband's National Guard unit, where she volunteers to help other families. She also is pursuing a degree in public health from Kent State University, where she used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for online classes.

It's been nine years since a roadside bome nearly killed her, but her PTSD continues to creep into her civilian life both physically and emotionally.

"A lot of people are still like, 'Why does it bother you? It's been eight years, get over it,' " Sandor said. "It doesn't go away, it's with you the rest of your life. I mean, the severity of it might – how much you remember of it might – but that feeling, it's always there."

When Hannah Siska left the Marines in 2011, she expected to find a job with the skills she acquired during her five years of service. She was a Marine in good standing. She had strong leadership skills. She had high security clearance.

But she couldn't get a job, even with her training as a special communications signals collection operator and analyst.

Siska applied for more than 150 jobs posted on Department of Defense websites geared toward applicants with security clearances. The result always was the same.

"They want to hire vets that are males, not females, and that was very apparent," said Siska, who was deployed to Iraq in 2008 and 2009. "I had everything and my resume looked just like all the other guys that got jobs and I didn't."

In September 2012, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 female veterans hit a high of 19.9 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The average unemployment rate for female veterans for all of 2012 was 12.5 percent, but that was still 3 percentage points higher than the average for male veterans that year.

"Unfortunately when female veterans come home they aren't perceived as women warriors," said John Pickens III, a Vietnam veteran and the executive director of VeteransPlus, a nonprofit offering financial counseling to service members.

A woman's military experience isn't seen as suitable for civilian life, despite the fact that they learned the same skills as their male counterparts, he said.

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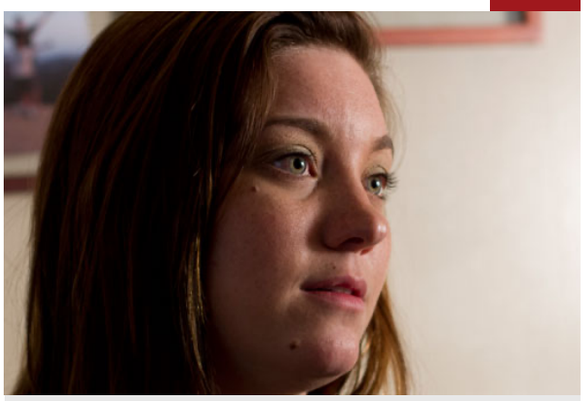

“They can’t enjoy the life they’ve fought to defend and there’s a lot of pride there,” he said.

Siska calls it “the boys’ club” mentality, a perception she worked against during her time as a Marine. When she joined in 2006, Siska said her superiors and fellow Marines gave her extra responsibilities because they trusted her judgment and work ethic. She sought a higher rank, but was not promoted. So she left the Marines.

“I loved it, and I loved the people, I loved what I did, I just didn’t like the political aspect behind being able to move up,” she said.

She described the Marines as “old fashioned,” and based on a ranking system emphasizing running and shooting scores. This mindset hinders the Marines, she said, because it discourages women from joining.

In 2009, women made up 19.5 percent of officers and enlisted members in the Air Force, but only 6.4 percent of all Marines, according to the Pew Research Center.

Now, Siska’s working on a biochemistry degree at Kent State University while caring for two young children. Her goal is to go to medical school and serve in the Navy.

“I want to be a career person and I want to accomplish things and feel like I’m contributing to society or a community or just my family,” she said.

Photo by Caitlin Cruz/News21

Hannah Siska, 29, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, was deployed to Iraq twice - from February to September 2008 and from February to September 2009.

Other than when she is in a Kent State classroom, Aribella Shapiro is always by herself. She walks everywhere because she doesn’t have a car – to school, to Walmart, to the Kent Church of Christ.

On one Sunday, she leaves at least 45 minutes before the 10:45 a.m. service. The dewy grass sticks to her brown suede and rubber boots with fur around the top. She says the boots remind her of being in the Army.

She cuts across the lawn of another church, passes campus, stops to get a Frappuccino at Starbucks and zigzags past Main Street and over to the church.

They’re finishing a Bible study and moving on to the main worship service when she comes in and sits at the back of the 14-pew church. There are fewer than 20 people in the church; Shapiro is one of about three under the age of 35. She said she likes to try out different churches, but wants to connect somewhere so God knows she’s thankful.

“I’m proud because I’m alive and I’m all in one piece,” said the 32-year-old. “I have a lot of friends who have died due to the war and I wasn’t one of them. I’m proud that I fought for America.”

But she’s not proud of everything about the military, namely her rape by a superior officer.

“I didn’t tell anyone because I felt embarrassed,” she said, explaining that her rapist threatened to kill her if she said anything. “I cried for months.”

The crying stopped, she explains, because she talked with other women who experienced similar scenarios, and she realized her story was not unique. The Department of Defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office estimates that 26,000 cases of sexual assault or unwanted sexual contact occurred in fiscal 2012. Of that estimate, 3,374 cases were reported, according to that office.

Shapiro joined the Army, knowing her decision to serve would pay her way through college. The Post-9/11 GI Bill brought her to Kent and it’s where she feels the most confident – sitting in class, studying for an exam or helping other students with their homework.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers an education to those who served after Sept. 10, 2001, and has paid for nearly 1 million veterans to go to school.

Post-9/11 female veterans who have a high school equivalent degree outperform non-veterans when it comes to post-secondary degree attainment, according to a News21 analysis.

But many women veterans returning home to student life juggle other challenges. Only 15 percent of student veterans are “traditionally” college-aged students. Another 47 percent have children and nearly that same percentage are married.

“We think that women veterans don’t necessarily want to be identified solely as veterans, as a special group, they want to be identified as women students and adult learners,” said Rachel Anderson, director of the Center for Adult and Veteran Services at Kent State University.

The Independent Budget - an annual VA budget and policy analysis prepared by independent veterans service organizations - reported that researchers found women veterans have a difficult time finding support systems upon returning home. Some women reported feeling isolated, and for others this feeling is made worse by the college atmosphere.

But Aribella Shapiro’s life is lonelier than she would like. She dreams of getting her bachelor’s and master’s degrees to teach English overseas, maybe even in Kuwait where she was stationed in 2004. Only this time she wants to go as “friend, not foe.”

Alone in her apartment, Shapiro misses the men and women she served with in the Army. She’s trying to make connections with students in her classes, through the roommate she hopes to get by putting up signs around campus and even with the barista at Starbucks.

But going from being in the Army to being by herself is difficult especially, as a single person, she said. And when asked if she felt welcomed home, Shapiro answered immediately: “No.”

She described the TV shows that show soldiers coming home to their families and the emotional reunions that cue tears and hugs.

“What about us soldiers that were single and we don’t have a family to come home to? Why can’t you appreciate us for what we do too?” she said.

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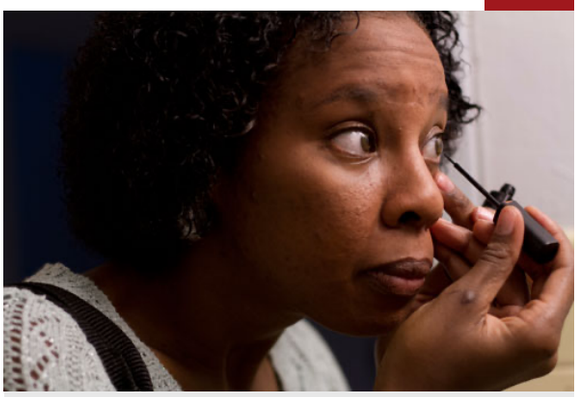

Photo by Caitlin Cruz/News21

U.S. Army veteran Aribella Shapiro, 32, gets ready for Sunday morning worship at her home in Kent, Ohio. Shapiro says she was serving at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait in 2004 when she was sexually assaulted. Religion has helped her cope.

Briana Hawkes' Army dress blues hang pressed and ready in her parents' basement in Bristolville, Ohio.

The basement is where Hawkes is living for the next two-and-a-half years. She converted it into her own studio apartment while she's home and is willing to hang her clothes on a metal rod suspended from the ceiling because she knows it's only temporary.

The 25-year-old single mother served as an E-5 supply sergeant in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012 and is home to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill to get her degree and join the ROTC program at Kent State University. After she graduates and becomes a commissioned officer, Hawkes plans to re-enter the Army and continue her military career.

According to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), many women carry the burden of caring for children while they are deployed. More than 40 percent of women on active duty have children and more than 30,000 single mothers have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2009.

"Especially as more women are involved and we see continued deployments we need to be cognizant how deployments are impacting families," said Kate O'Gorman, political director at IAVA. "We have to make sure that service members that deploy can't be worried about their kids constantly. There needs to be a strong system at home so they can execute their job overseas."

But parents still will worry – both during and after deployment.

Hawkes is young to hold the rank of E-5 supply sergeant. She's typically in charge of soldiers with at least six years on her, she said, and it hasn't been easy to achieve this level of leadership. "It's really cut-throat out there," Hawkes said, describing the way some sergeants stop soldiers from moving up in rank because they don't want to be passed up. "I've seen it and I've been through it and I've conquered it."

Coming home to get a degree and care for her daughter is a major contrast to the rigor of her military lifestyle. She is used to straight lines, strict rules and order. But on campus, students walk around wearing whatever they want, smoking and talking on their cell phones.

You're not allowed to do that in the Army.

Thinking about going back to the Army in two-and-a-half years is hard, especially after spending concentrated time with her 3-year-old daughter, but Hawkes knows it's a decision she's going to stand by.

"I plan on going until there's no more go in me," she said. "If that is one star, two star, I'm not stopping . . . I have a daughter to take care of and I know she's going to have needs and college so I'm going to provide."

Asha Anchan was a Peter Kiewit Foundation Fellow, Kelsey Hightower an Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation Fellow and Caitlin Cruz a Women & Philanthropy Fellow for News21 this summer.

GALLERY

Photo by Caitlin Cruz/News21

U.S. Army veteran Briana Hawkes, 25, picks up her daughter Aubrey, 3, from Champion Day School in Warren, Ohio. Hawkes was deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan in April 2012, just months before Aubrey's second birthday.