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Battle on the Home Front

Identical names lead one Emily Beers to befriend another and learn a soldier's story of rape in the military.

By Emily Beers

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All Photos courtesy of Emily Beers

It's a crisp morning on the Fort Wainwright military base in Alaska.

Emily Beers makes her way to the gym for an early morning workout to get her mind off some of the recent stresses in her life.

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At 24, she has been a member of the military since she was 17. Being a soldier was what she wanted to do since watching the tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks while she was a sophomore in high school in Pennsylvania. Two weeks after she graduated, she ran off to boot camp to start her dream career.

In the last eight years, Beers, now a staff sergeant, has developed a great reputation. She has maintained top marks in her pharmacy program, and each year when performance review comes around, she gets a flawless report.

In 2009, she was deployed to Iraq, where she worked as a pharmacy specialist at a hospital in Baghdad. Life in a war zone wasn't easy. For Beers, it meant dealing with trauma patients who had been blown apart.

She readily accepted the challenges the military threw at her. Fighting for her country is what she eagerly signed up for as a teenager. She was prepared for military life; the training she received allowed her to handle the stress.

What her training didn't prepare her for, however, was getting raped by a colleague on her base.

Today, she still blames herself for how the incident unfolded.

While her abuser wasn't a good friend, he was co-worker, an acquaintance whom she occasionally talked to at work. She trusted him—not necessarily because he seemed so trustworthy, but because she didn't have a reason not to. He hadn't done anything to raise her awareness.

She blamed herself for not being able to physically prevent a 200-plus-lb. man from holding her down.

Beers arrives at the gym and heads to the treadmills. She's trying not to think about her abuser, trying not to blame herself for freezing up when she was attacked.

Beers is a member of the U.S. military. She's a tough soldier, she survived deployment to a war zone, and she considers herself both mentally and physically strong.

Yet she didn't do anything when she was attacked. She was so scared she couldn't move. Her mind left her body. She froze.

When it was over, she walked home in a daze and lay down. That's when she started to cry. She stayed there for three or four hours, holding her puppy—an English bulldog named Nellie—crying and blaming herself. The 5-foot-3 former gymnast blamed herself for freezing in the moment. She blamed herself for not being able to physically prevent a 200-plus-lb. man from holding her down. Why didn't she scream? Punch? Yell?

Beers tries to push these thoughts away and focus on the treadmill. Just forget about it and run.

She's on the second floor of the gym, where the treadmills face the facility's front entrance; she can see who is coming and going. All of a sudden, she sees him—her abuser—walk into the gym.

Her heart starts to race and her breathing instantly elevates. She feels her body get hot. She's having an anxiety attack. She stops running and stands there for a moment to wait and see where he goes. He walks into the locker room.

Beers makes her escape and quietly leaves the gym. It's time to carry on with her morning.

A Military "Crisis"

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) officially recognizes sexual assault as a huge black hole for the military. The DOD's lengthy 2012 two-volume annual report on sexual assault in the military not only acknowledges the problem but also suggests that its true extent is not known.

Full reports: [Volume 1](#) [Volume 2](#)

In Volume 1 of the report, the DOD states its ultimate goal as being "to establish a military culture free of sexual assault."

One of the major obstacles to overcome is that sexual assault often goes unreported.

The official numbers the DOD released are as follows: 6.1 percent of active-duty women and 1.2 percent of active-duty men said they experienced a form of unwanted sexual contact within the last year. In real numbers, there were 3,374 reports of sexual assault involving service members in 2012.

However, the report is also quick to point out that because of underreporting, these numbers are probably not equal

to the real number of assaults committed: "Due to the underreporting of this crime in both military and civilian society, reports to authorities do not necessarily equate to the actual prevalence (occurrence) of sexual assault. In fact, the Department estimates that about 11 percent of the sexual assaults that occur each year are reported to a DOD authority."

More recently, in a May 15, 2013, news release, an Army general referred to sexual assault within the military as a "crisis."

"We're losing the confidence of the women who serve that we can solve this problem. That's a crisis," Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey was quoted as saying in "[Dempsey: Sexual Assault Constitutes Crisis in the Military](#)."

DOD spokeswoman Cynthia O. Smith, in an email to the *CrossFit Journal*, said one of the major things that needs to change is military culture.

"We need cultural change where every service member is treated with dignity and respect, where all allegations of inappropriate behavior are treated with seriousness, where victims' privacy is protected, where bystanders are motivated to intervene, and where offenders know that they will be held accountable by strong and effective systems of justice," Smith wrote.

Pressing for Change

Jessica Kenyon is a vocal advocate for change. The 32-year-old was part of the military in 2005 and 2006 and left after being raped on two different occasions by colleagues.

"Sexual assault is a power move, used to intimidate, not about the sex or pleasure."

—Jessica Kenyon

Today, she owns and runs a nonprofit called Benefiting Veterans and is the founder of Militarysexualtrauma.org. She helps victims like Beers, offering them support and



After surviving a war zone, Beers was assaulted on her own base on U.S. soil.

advice, and she's publicly involved in putting pressure on the government for change: she speaks at conferences, talks to the press and writes papers for scientific review. She also consults to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which handles veterans' benefits.

Kenyon blames sexism and hyper masculinity as two major reasons sexual assault in the military is so prevalent.

"Rape and sexual assault is a power move, used to intimidate, not about the sex or pleasure," Kenyon said.

To combat sexist notions, Kenyon believes a drastic change in military thinking must occur.

"There are many, many things that need to be done, but an overall culture shift will go a long way to making justice occur and to deter further crimes," she said.

On top of a cultural change, many believe legal change is also necessary. New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D) is an advocate pushing for legal change in the way the military reports, investigates and prosecutes sexual-assault cases. Gillibrand believes one of the major problems is the way the system works.

Currently, when someone wants to report sexual assault or rape, the victim goes to his or her commander, whose job it is to decide whether the claim is legitimate. The commander then decides whether the case gets pursued or dropped. Often little to nothing comes of the report.

Of the 3,374 reports of sexual assault in 2012, the Department of Defense's annual report states that 302

subjects proceeded to trial. Of those, 238 subjects were convicted.

Of those convicted, the report says, "Most convicted service members received at least four kinds of punishment: confinement, reduction in rank, fines or forfeitures, and a discharge (enlisted) or dismissal (officers) from service."

Gillibrand isn't satisfied with these numbers or consequences, and she puts at least part of the blame on the legal system.

"Enough is enough. It's time to change this system that has been held over since George Washington. It is simply not working today for the men and women who are serving," Gillibrand told CNN.

Gillibrand sponsored a bill earlier this year—the Military Justice Improvement Act of 2013—that, if passed, would change the decision-making process entirely. Instead of giving military commanders the power, decision of reporting, investigating and prosecution would be put into the hands of independent military attorneys. This would also mean victims would report directly to a trained military prosecutor as opposed to their commander.

The hope is that this legal change will lead to more victims coming forward and reporting the crime as well as more cases getting prosecuted.

In Beers' case, she reported the crime but didn't receive justice.

In Beers' Words

After the incident, Beers stayed quiet.

"I didn't say anything because I was scared. And he was very threatening. I didn't feel safe, so I just kept my mouth shut and went about my life as best I could," she said.

But soon another female came forward, revealing to their commander that the same man had raped her, as well. This other woman had heard a rumor that the same thing had happened to Beers. When Beers' commander caught wind of this, he approached Beers to inquire.

Beers said when her commander met with her, she broke down and admitted she had been raped.

For a moment, Beers was thankful her commander approached her because she thought it might lead to both justice and professional help for her. But it didn't.

"That's basically all that happened," Beers said. "I worked so hard to be a good soldier for my unit, and I was, and then when I needed them most I didn't get any help. It's like I didn't matter as a person," she said.

She continued: "They don't want to deal with the fact that it happened under their command. I don't even think they know how to deal with the victims. They made me feel like I was the problem and should just keep my mouth shut. At one point, I was sat down and told by somebody that I just needed to get over it. . . . And this meant I was just going to have to get over having to see him all the time."

"I worked so hard to be a good soldier for my unit, and I was, and then when I needed them most I didn't get any help."

—Emily Beers

She added: "But even if it was only for five minutes out of a week that I saw him, it would devastate me."

Beers couldn't carry on living this way, so she spoke up to her commander.

"I was vocal and said I didn't feel safe being on the same base and wanted to switch to a new base," she said.

The demand didn't help her situation. She was then diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was encouraged to medically retire.

"They basically told me to retire or I wasn't going to be promoted. Every year you get rated on your performance, and up until that year I was rated perfectly," she said.

"I excelled in the military," she continued. "And being in the medical field you have to be good. You have to be good at physical training. You have to shoot well at the range. You have to be a well-rounded soldier."

This time around, Beers received a poorer rating than usual.

"I was missing too much work to go to the doctor, and I wasn't sleeping well. And they put the blame on me, not on the situation I was in," she explained.

Feeling like she had no other option, Beers took her commander's advice and medically retired with an honorable discharge. She returned to Pennsylvania, where she enrolled in college to become a nurse. Beers still receives educational benefits and a small amount of money as disability pay for her PTSD diagnosis.

"As a student, it's better than nothing for me right now," she said.

And what about her abuser?

As far as Beers knows, he's still with the military. It's as if nothing happened. If the DOD's figures on unreported assaults are correct, many other abusers go similarly unpunished.

"There are so many people who have raped or assaulted another service member, and if the commander of your unit doesn't want to pursue the case or go to court, it just gets dropped," Beers said. "And if you want to go to civilian court, it costs a lot of money. And I don't make money as a student."

She added: "It would take years for me to fight the system and change my situation."

In the Words of Beers' Father

When his 17-year-old-daughter told him that she was running off to become a soldier, John Beers wasn't surprised.

"Her brother at that time was a Marine, and Emmy just really needed to do something for herself. I backed her," he said.



Emily's superiors told her to "soldier up" and forget about the assault.

"And I said to her, 'Hey, if that's what you want to do, that's what you want to do,'" he added.

"Ever since Em was a little girl, she always planned things herself. She always set her own path, and I was behind her. No doubt about it."

John trusted his daughter was in good hands in the military. Even when she was sent to Iraq in 2009, he wasn't all that worried.

"I really wasn't scared because I knew the job she was doing was that of a pharmacy tech, and I knew she'd be well protected," he said.

He assumed she'd also be protected and supported by the military on her home base in Alaska. He didn't expect the news he received one day in 2011.

Emily never directly told her father she had been raped.

"Em's got a good relationship with my wife, Audrey, and she'll tell Audrey things that she doesn't want to tell me," John said. "I don't remember a whole lot about Audrey telling me. I know I was at home. And Audrey is really direct. She doesn't mix up her words. She told me that Em had been raped, and then the anger started overtaking the whole thing, so I don't remember the details."

He continued: "I was angry. I was very angry. I was angry that she wasn't protected and I didn't really know what was going on. She was in Fairbanks, Alaska, which from here in Pennsylvania is a half a world away, and so it wasn't an easy thing to deal with."

What John did do to deal with the situation was fly to Alaska to visit his daughter. He made a point of meeting with Emily's major.

"I had a very frank discussion with her major about how I felt about the military not protecting her at all, and not doing the right thing. I told him, 'I might be 14 hours away from Fairbanks, Alaska, but I'm only three hours away from Washington, D.C., and don't think I won't,'" John said of his attempt to threaten with legal action.

All John received from the military was lip service.

"He said to me, 'I'll do what I can to look out for her. She's a good soldier.' I found out later that Emily's major told her, 'You need to soldier up,'" he said.

John added: "They basically wanted Emily to buckle up and be a soldier and move ahead. Their way of dealing with it is just to move on and forget about it."

John wasn't ready to move on and forget about it. He approached Congress, as promised.

Eventually, he was able to meet with Republican Congressman Charles W. Dent in Pennsylvania. Dent essentially told John that a member of Congress is powerless to do anything about it. And that was that.

"I was really disheartened about that," he said.

It's been especially hard for John because he's been a long-time supporter of the military.

"I'm very patriotic. I would have been in Vietnam but I wasn't drafted. My father and son were both in the military," he said. "But in retrospect, knowing what I know now, I would never have advised Emily to pursue a career in the military. Never."

Two years later, John still struggles with what his daughter went through and continues to go through.

One of the hardest things for him was seeing how devastated Emily was when she made the decision to leave the military.

"She wanted so much to get into the officer's program and make a career of it. She was absolutely crushed," he said.

"The innocence is lost. They robbed her. And that's horrible."

—John Beers

"I don't know that you can ever go back to being your old self once you've been physically abused and raped the way she was. I really don't think you can. But she is tough, and she's building a new path for herself and trying to build her image around that and generate a new life. But her old self? No. The innocence is lost. They robbed her. And that's horrible," he said.

"And as a parent, you don't get over it. You don't. They didn't just lose a soldier in Emily. They lost someone who was dedicated and excellent at what she did. Emily wanted



"It would take years for me to fight the system and change my situation." —Emily Beers

to excel. They didn't just lose a 9-to-5 employee. She was at the top of her class in pharmacy tech. She got the highest GPA when she was there," he said.

He added: "But she grew to understand that the United States Army had no interest in her future, no interest in dealing with something that was awful and wrong. They were going to just let her to continue to exist. They didn't deserve to have her."

Living With Scars

Emily agrees with her dad that it's tough to go back to being her old self.

She still has nightmares and anxiety at inopportune times.

"Just the other day, I was sitting in chemistry class and someone slammed the door and it scared me," she said. "I wouldn't expect someone slamming a door to scare me still."



Emily doesn't regret her time in the Army but can't understand why it abandoned her when she needed help.

And the thought of being in a relationship seems daunting. "Even now, it's hard for me to date people. I haven't really dated anyone," she said. "If I had never been raped, who knows? I could be married now and have a family, and now I question whether I am ever going to be OK with dating someone."

But what affected her more than going to war in Iraq, more than being raped even, was the fact that nobody backed her up, the fact that nobody in the military supported her. Despite feelings of abandonment, Emily doesn't regret her eight years of military service.

"I'm thankful that I served my country ... I learned so much from it all. It was hard to go through, but I think I grew as a person," she said. "The military taught me a lot of good things. A lot of bad things happened to me, too, but that can happen in life in general, and I don't want to live my life based on those bad things."

But one thing she does wish is that she had been more informed when she was 17.

"You expect the military to be there for you at the worst point, and I still don't understand why they don't see me as the victim and that the man needed to be punished. It's just hard. They turned their back on me when I needed someone the most," she said. "I felt all alone."

This is one of the reasons she wants to tell her story: so others can learn what she learned too late.



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.*