

Why Have 46,500 Women in the Military Been Sexually Assaulted?

No, not by hostile enemies—by their own fellow service members. Panayiota Bertzikis can't accept that. She's making sure everyone finally does right by our troops. **By Roxanne Patel Shepelavy**

**Tablet
Bonus!**



▶ A hard shove and a punch to the head sent Panayiota Bertzikis sprawling to the ground. Dazed, she struggled to get back up, to gather her strength, to make sense of what was happening.

As a U.S. Coast Guard seaman for six months, Bertzikis, then 24, was trained to be tough. She knew—or thought she knew—how to spot an enemy, how to protect boaters and oceans and herself from environmental and human threats. She believed in the Coast Guard, had planned a career in it, having grown up near water first in Greece, then in New York City. And since starting her post in Burlington, Vermont, in February 2006, she'd loved the work. She thought she belonged there, among her military "brothers."

But on a recreational hike on May 30, 2006, according to a class-action lawsuit Bertzikis later joined, one of those brothers pushed her down, then crouched on top of her. He punched her in the face and raped her, she says. Then they rode together back to base.

That night she remembered what her instructors had said during boot camp: There was a zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault in the Coast Guard. So Bertzikis did as she'd been told and reported the attack. But her superiors did not launch an investigation, her lawsuit says; instead, she was ordered to stop talking about what had happened—if she continued, she could be charged with a military crime equivalent to slander. (Bertzikis' superiors did not respond to *Glamour* regarding specifics about her case.) Then, she says, she was sent back to her barracks right down the hall from her alleged rapist and tasked with cleaning out an attic alone with him to "work out their differences."

Three months after the hike, a Coast Guard psychiatrist diagnosed Bertzikis with "adjustment disorder" and recommended her for discharge. "I did have adjustment disorder," Bertzikis says. "I could not adjust to be being raped and get-

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—lawyer Susan Burke

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—Jennifer Smith, Air Force technical sergeant

ting no justice.”

Dismayed that the career she had always dreamed of was about to be over, Bertzikis walked back to her barracks, went online, and started a blog she would name Coast Guard Rape Survivor. “I just wanted someone to listen because,” she says, “it suddenly hit me: The Coast Guard is really not going to do anything.” Days after her first blog post, Bertzikis’ email inbox started to overflow with stories from women—and men—in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard, across every rank and generation. Most of them shared intimate details of being sexually assaulted and then watching their attackers receive little, if any, punishment. Those who reported their assaults said they were often harassed by colleagues and superiors, reprimanded for their behavior, labeled as troublemakers, and in many cases, kicked out of the service. “I realized that the only ‘zero-tolerance policy’ the military has,” Bertzikis says, “is for people coming forward to report a rape.”

What Bertzikis did next put her at the forefront of a movement that would expose many of the lurid stories the military had been trying to ignore—and helped thousands of survivors find a way to stand proud again.

The explosive truth

Today even the Pentagon admits that sexual assault in the military is rampant: Nearly one in four female service members says she’s been subjected to unwanted sexual contact by someone in the ranks, according to the latest data—that’s roughly 46,500 women currently on active duty. And military brass continue to grapple with several embarrassing sex scandals. One of the most recent? The head of the Air Force’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program himself was arrested on charges of sexual battery. His mug shot, showing scratches on his face, provoked such outrage, even

members of Congress tweeted about it.

Back in 2006 Bertzikis was already hearing story after story like this and pushing the military to make changes. Within a year of starting her ad hoc online support group, she turned it into the privately funded Military Rape Crisis Center. Now with a staff of five case managers and more than 100 volunteers, she's helped thousands of service members navigate the military justice system and get the psychological aid she felt she never received. She also has encouraged soldiers to report their claims, and file suit if necessary, against military leaders. Some of those complaints have sparked national headlines and congressional hearings.

It's hardly been smooth sailing, however. In December 2011 military leadership fought, and won, a dismissal of Bertzikis' suit, which included 28 service members, by argu-



Bertzikis in uniform, after entering boot camp for the Coast Guard in November 2005



In November 2011 Bertzikis joined California congresswoman Jackie Speier, far left, in Washington, D.C., to introduce a bill to stop rape in the military.



Bertzikis and Patrick O'Keefe on their wedding day in New York City on June 11, 2011

Bertzikis getting her message out at a Slutwalk in Phoenix in 2012



ing that “the plaintiffs’ claims are incident to their military service” as one of the points. “In other words,” her lawyer Susan Burke says, “the government has successfully argued in federal courts that rape is essentially an occupational hazard of military service.” The following month, January 2012, then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta publicly vowed

“It’s almost like incest. Victims are violated by someone who was like a brother. Then they are violated again when they’re tossed aside by their military family.”

—Nancy Parrish, advocate

to improve how the military handles assault cases. But Bertzikis, who spends her days helping survivors, says, “From what they tell me, not much has changed. Prosecutions are still rare, and survivors are still getting blamed.” Indeed, more than a year after Panetta made his promise, a federal court heard another case Burke filed against him and several other military leaders, which represented 12 more service members—and the defense argued again that sexual assault came with the job. “I don’t think that expecting to be raped should be part of your career plans,” says Bertzikis. “The fact is, this is a problem that has been going on for decades. Now’s the time to fix it.”

Why rapists in uniform walk free

How, in 2013, is sexual assault in the ranks still such an intractable problem? Some women point to the hostile environment in the military. Jennifer Smith, 35, an active-duty technical sergeant in the U.S. Air Force who has been serving for almost 18 years, filed a sexual-discrimination administrative complaint last October in which she included a popular song as an example of the culture women face. It goes like this: “Who can take a chain saw / cut the bitch in two / this half is for me / and the other half’s for you.” When Smith brought the songbook and other offensive material to the attention of her superior, “he characterized the sexism and hostility as ‘part of the mentality’ in the Air Force and admitted that he would be ‘surprised’ if anything were done about it,” she says. That attitude, Smith claims, led to her being sex-

ually assaulted while on duty in Iraq in the summer of 2010 by a man who threatened, “I could kill you right now, bitch, and no one is going to miss you.” Although she didn’t report it at the time—“I knew they’d just look at me as weak and I wouldn’t get promoted”—she told her captain upon returning to the States and provided details of the attack in her complaint. (At press time the Air Force had not responded to *Glamour’s* requests for comment.) “We’ll go to Djibouti to keep the peace,” says Smith, “but we won’t do anything about the war on women and men in our own ranks.”

Advocates point to another stunningly obvious way to reduce rape in the armed forces: reporting cases to an independent authority, not through the military. The current system allows commanding officers, rather than trained nonmilitary police and prosecutors, to decide the fate of a service member’s rape case. “Superior officers with no legal background can close down an investigation, reduce

a charge, or decide if a case will even be prosecuted,” says Nancy Parrish, president of Protect Our Defenders, an antirape advocacy group for the military. It has an undeniable chilling effect, the Pentagon’s own numbers show: Of the 26,000 estimated sexual assaults in the military from October 2011 to September 2012, only 3,374 were reported. That’s less than 13 percent. In the civilian world 35 percent are reported.

The data also suggests that the chain of command does little to get justice for victims of rape.

A mere 9 percent of military sexual-assault charges that are reported—about 300 cases a year—go to trial. Bertzikis’ story is a case in point. According to her lawsuit, no investigation was ordered when she first spoke up about her rape. Then, after she was finally granted a transfer, she reported the incident again while stationed in South Portland, Maine. This time an official investigation was launched, but even though she says she provided photographs of her bruised

“Because the military investigates its own cases, it’s like a perpetrator’s drinking party.”

—Panayiota Bertzikis, former Coast Guard seaman

face and a letter of apology from her attacker, an internal memo shows the case was dropped “due to lack of evidence.”

“It’s almost like incest,” says Parrish. “Victims are violated by someone who was like a brother. Then they are violated again when they’re tossed aside by their military family. That really destroys them.” Adds Bertzikis: “We keep relying on the military to do the right thing, and again and again, they don’t. It’s simple: If rapists were prosecuted, this wouldn’t keep happening. Because the military investigates its own cases, it’s like a perpetrator’s drinking party.”

“Panayiota changed my life.... She taught me that it wasn’t my fault, that I wasn’t alone.”

—Stephanie Schroeder, former Marine

Stephanie Schroeder, a former U.S. Marine, felt that sense of helplessness until she found Military Rape Crisis Center and Bertzikis encouraged her to join the lawsuits against the military leadership.

Schroeder’s suit includes shocking details: She’d been on active duty in 2002 when a fellow Marine followed her into the public restroom, shoved her to the ground, and punched her until she was forced onto her back. Then he ripped her pants down and raped her. She reported the attack, but no one was ever punished; instead, the suit contends: “Command laughed at her and said, ‘Don’t come bitchin’ to me because you had sex and changed your mind.’” (The Marine Corps did not respond to *Glamour’s* request for comment.) “The military told me I did something wrong, and I believed them for seven years,” says Schroeder. “Panayiota changed my life. She understood my pain; she counseled me through it and taught me that it wasn’t my fault, that I wasn’t alone.”

Ending the epidemic

The avalanche of women’s voices like Bertzikis’ and Schroeder’s is getting noticed. This year President Barack Obama declared, “I have no tolerance for this,” and directed Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to “exponentially step up our game” to halt such assaults. Hagel, in turn, pledged before Congress to change the military’s rape culture. The Department of

Fewer than 13 percent of military sexual assaults are reported.

Defense has already begun to revamp its mandatory sexual-assault-prevention training and open Special Victims Units. And as *Glamour* went to press, both Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) were pushing legislation to take the handling of sexual-assault cases outside the chain of military command. “We are making progress,” promises Major General Gary Patton, director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office for the Defense Department. “This is something we are going to fix.”

Bertzikis, now 31, remains dubious. “Words are not enough,” she says. Recently married and settled in Phoenix, she’s hopeful that congressional action—brought largely by the coalition of women who now serve on the Senate’s Committee on Armed Services—will finally mean rape in the military is taken seriously and women won’t have to fear they are jeopardizing their careers for speaking out.

Bertzikis plans to keep fighting; after all, it’s what the military trained her to do. Like many of the women who contact her center, she would still put her life on the line to serve her country. “My dream, even now, is to be in the Coast Guard,” she says. “I probably would be if I hadn’t reported the rape, and sometimes I regret saying anything. But I know I did the right thing. Because one day rape in the military is not going to be an epidemic. That’s what I work toward every minute.” ■

Roxanne Patel Shepelavy’s last story for Glamour was “How Far Would You Go to Save a Baby?” in June 2012.