

Behind Closed Doors: The Ugly Truth About the Military

Nonfiction by Alexandria Lopez

“I hear a new girl is dropping into the section. Do you think she's single?”

“If she's with someone, I give it a few months before she cheats on them.”

“Bet she'll sleep with someone in the chain of command and pick up rank within a few months.”

“Oh yeah? I give it a year before she gets pregnant just so she doesn't have to work anymore.”

I sit back in my seat armed with 40 pounds of gear while I listen to the men converse and laugh with each other. I roll my eyes in disgust and know nothing I say will matter due to the reputation some women hold and the toxic work environment I am in.

I'm reminded of when I first joined the military and dropped into section. I was surrounded by an overwhelming amount of kindness. However, I didn't know that behind closed doors were bets, polls, and ratings of every new woman who joins section. Just like them, I was blindsided. Here I was, thinking I was in a welcoming environment. The worst part is that most of the men are always so courteous, but their intentions are elsewhere.

The problem is not men themselves. Unfortunately, a woman is just the entertainment amongst long hours at work.

To make matters worse, some women choose to follow these stereotypes to reap the benefits, allowing them to advance quicker in their careers and implant a reputation amongst other enlisted females, targeting innocent women to get harassed. The military tolerates this work environment and causes young men to be accustomed to toxic masculinity created by their peers. With women and men acclimating to this toxic environment and the military tolerating it, the cycle will always repeat and cease to change.

When I first joined the military five years ago, I was introduced to a completely new world. Just like everyone else, I started with no friends, no family, and was thrown into a lonely atmosphere that made me want to grasp onto anything that would make me feel accepted and welcomed. Unfortunately, a mindset like this causes many women, including myself, to be blindsided by others who had certain intentions. When I was introduced into bootcamp, I was taught to follow the higher chain of command: what they say goes. We were taught to learn respect, address colleagues by their proper rate and rank, obey seniority, and follow through the chain of command. However, when introduced into the “real military,” it was a façade. It was a shocking eye-opener and a rude awakening for a naïve 18-year-old girl with no real-life experiences. I learned rather quickly that these commands promote systems that create conditions for tolerating and enabling uncivil behaviors. In a male-dominated environment, the military strives for equality within its military. However, the masculinized nature of the armed forces also provides an enabling environment for sexual assault, gender discrimination, hazing, and harassment, despite the zero-tolerance policies.

When I was thrown into my first command in Georgia, I didn't know what to expect. I was fresh out of bootcamp and on my toes expecting the environment to closely resemble bootcamp with professionalism. However, that wasn't the case. Everybody wasn't as stern, strict, or professional as I was told that they would be. They were just normal people in uniform with their own problems. The “real military” was the opposite of what I was told, in fact, worse and outright depressing. Depression takes ahold of everyone at the command, and the majority turn to booze as a coping mechanism and a comforting hand. Another way people found escape through comfort with the closest body. This led the majority to cheat in order to fill an empty void of loneliness. Everywhere I turned, there was always some sort of scandal, and it became customary to cheat on your significant other or sleep with someone within your chain of command. Looking back now, it was a known routine among women that every new girl who dropped into sec-





Autumn's Scent, Photograph by Alexandria Lopez

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On my first day of work, I was overwhelmed by the amount of kindness I received from men. Women, on the other hand, kept to themselves and didn't bother looking in my direction or return the same number of pleasantries. Looking back now, it was a known routine amongst women that every new girl that dropped into section got special treatment while the women who've been there for some time got treated like garbage. Unfortunately, I didn't know what to expect and what to be careful of.

One night, during my first week of work, I experienced my first eye-opener of what was assumed of women in the military. In my first week of work I was considered a "down-body," someone who doesn't have the right paperwork and qualifications yet to stand the post. To keep myself occupied for the next twelve hours, I walked my way around the building and saw a three-seater couch in front of the TV and sat there to kill some time. Two members who had just got off watch were on their break, so they made their way towards me and asked if it was okay to sit down and watch TV as well.

No more than five minutes later, a female chief came out and yelled at us for not being productive, which was under-

standable, but then pulled me in separately into another room to lecture me. I was sweating, nervous, and worried about what she could possibly need to talk to me about alone. She closed the door, crossed her arms, and I looked back up at the raised chin, tight lips, and furrowed brow staring down at me. She then proceeded to scold me and say that it looked like I was snuggled up against two men. When I told her that it wasn't the case, and that I had a boyfriend, she interrupted and said, "As a woman, you need to be more conscious of what you do before you continue to put on a bad name for yourself." My actions were harmless. The reality was that no one on that couch was doing anything other than watching TV, yet it was assumed that the "new" girl was going to flirt and cause problems.

Before a woman joins the military, her attractiveness level may appear average by society's standards. However, once in the military, her level of attractiveness dramatically increases in the eyes of military men. Because there is a significantly low number of enlisted women, and since the population of women on active duty is low, any small impact affects the majority. The terms "barracks bunny" and "homewrecker" are thrown around frequently for women who sleep around with multiple men at the same command or go out of the way to have an affair with married men. On the contrary, there are no terms for men who engage in similar activities. At my

command, some women had built reputations for carrying out these actions to reap the benefits; some women were innocent, but were constantly being objectified, exposed, or having vulgar graffiti written on posts about them. However, when the chain of command saw this, they didn't bother to address these issues and would casually sweep them under the rug.

To bring this problem to light, I had a similar instance a year into the command where graffiti was written about me, but nothing happened. One of the men who I dated in section, a misogynist who grew accustomed to the hypermasculine environment, became infuriated when I broke up with him. A couple of days later, my name was graffitied on a post, next to a sentence reading, "I smashed ho-peez in here," combining the word "hoe" with my last name "Lopez." Everybody saw it but chose not to say anything. When I reported it to the chain of command, my ex was merely given a slap on the wrist as an outcome. I ended up taking the matter into my own hands and having to get a friend to help me carve out my name.

The chain of command—mostly men—aware of the slander women receive based on their reputation or defamation of character, nearly always ignore and overlook these issues. This makes unlabeled women who enter the military susceptible to objectification and receive the same level of harassment. However, men aren't just to blame for repeated habits. I can't help but look at the fact that other factors cause these behaviors in men and why it tends to be accepted amongst individuals.



Typically, the people already stationed at the command have been defiled with foul habits and have acculturated to the trait of toxic masculinity. When a male is introduced into section, hazing begins to set in motion on the new personnel, and dominance is immediately established. One of the most common justifications for hazing is that it increases commitment to the group. This becomes a common trend for men as they wish to inflict the same ritual upon others to attempt to regain a sense of power in their lives and instant gratification. This then becomes repeated, causing them to jump at the chance to establish dominance. Men tend to believe that they have to establish dominance in order to be left alone and not get hazed. To make matters worse, the fastest way to establish dominance is to prey on the weak. It becomes a cycle. The marginality of the dominant script starts to get drilled into the male culture in the military. Some men tend to get used to being hurtful and disrespectful towards other people, and it tends to bleed over and lose the natural respect and morals of all women.

Through personal experience, I have nearly always seen a new male drop into section with a strong heart and great morals, but in a matter of a few months, their persona starts to change quickly and soon becomes "one of the boys." This starts to throw the idea around that being kind to people can be seen as a weakness, and this leads others to quit treating people with common decency and become blatantly offensive, especially to women. To add, within the military culture, a morbid sense of humor starts to become normalized. These jokes typically include mundane talk about rape, suicide, and taboo topics that aren't mentioned out loud on the civilian side. It starts to get drilled in the head that certain topics like making offensive jokes about the stereotypes of women are acceptable. Crude remarks and sexualized jokes about women have become the norm. For that reason, many women report sexual talk surrounding the exploits of their peers or being asked unwarranted questions about their own sex lives. Hypermasculinity in the military makes a hostile work environment for new women entering the military.

To illustrate, around my first year I had an experience with a coworker above my pay grade who constantly harassed me. One night he touched me inappropriately in front of everybody at a party while he was drunk, and I was told by the rest of my peers to not report it because he wasn't thinking clearly. Being new to the military, I figured they were right and never said anything about it. During the span of three years, the harassment continued. He would always text me when he was drunk and ask me to come over to his place or come to mine to have sex. As usual, I ignored him. He would then tell everyone at work the next day about how drunk he was and what he would text me. Everyone thought it was funny. Because it got conditioned that it was okay to do so, the harassment got worse. In public settings, he would come up to me and ask me the vilest and inappropriate questions regarding my sex life. It even went as far as him telling his peers at the bars, when I was a designated driver, that he wanted to rape me in the car if I drove him home. The men would warn me to bring someone with me but laughed it off because it was just "him being him." However, when it came to work, this same

Reflections



Lake Hubbard, Michigan, Photograph by Alexandria Lopez

guy would talk down to me and barely treat me like a human being or with common decency. Name calling, and addressing me as if I was dumb, was normal conversation for him. When I finally got the courage to report him, I was pulled out of the section immediately. Word spread like wildfire, and multiple men who were friends with him began to treat me differently and I became ostracized by my peers. I was then sent to another command.

The investigation went on for six months, and every day I waited for a phone call. I waited to hear whether standing up for myself was the right decision or if I possibly exaggerated the issue, and it wasn't as big of a deal as I thought it was. Three months later, at my second command, I received an email from the Convening Authority stating that they chose not to prosecute the perpetrator and that no further action would be taken regarding the reported offense. All hope was lost. My heart sank, and my mind was filled with embarrassment. I finally became that typical girl who caused and stirred up drama at the command. After receiving the heart wrenching news, I knew that the military cared little to none for their people.

When a woman joins the military, the known stereotype is that the woman is either very masculine in nature or a "slut." These stereotypes suggest why so many women are likely to experience gender discrimination, repeated attempts to establish an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship, persistent and offensive jokes, and sexual comments about their appearance. Men will experience hazing and ostracizing from their peers until they are hardened, ultimately causing the rise of suicide in men. There is always talk about the military's "zero tolerance policies," yet nothing is ever done about it, and no one ever prepares the enlisted for what to expect.

Imagine how that conversation I witnessed could've been different. What if men weren't so worried about what people portrayed them as and instead stuck by their morals to do the right thing such as standing up for others despite being labeled as weak? Imagine if women didn't feed into their stereotypes but instead, were given an insight on what to expect when joining a male dominant environment and to warn them of the red flags. The world needs to be educated on these matters instead of blindly recruiting young adults or else the cycle will continue until somebody makes a change.