

**“What does it tell you about E Company’s command climate that six different victims did not come forward? What went wrong here?”**



J.B. FORBES/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/TNS

A poster in one of the barracks at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri addresses the issue of sexual assault.

# ‘Silence Is Deafening’

## How A Sexual Predator Operated Under The Radar At An Army Base

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FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. — A government investigation into how an Army drill sergeant was able to prey on several female trainees finds numerous lapses in reporting and protocol up and down the chain of command.

In September, military police Staff Sgt. Angel Sanchez, 30, was found guilty on a long list of egregious claims against him, such as forcing sexual favors from young trainees.

Even before his court-martial, Sanchez admitted to having sex with three subordinates. He was then found guilty of incidents involving five more women, in what one prosecutor called an effort to fulfill “his own pornographic fantasy.”

Sanchez operated under the radar on post here in south-central Missouri during an era when sex harassment prevention has been hammered home with the repetition of a training drill. There are frequent briefings. A banner on a chow hall wall says: “Speak up! Silence is deafening.”

But a trove of public records recently obtained by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* suggests that more work needs to be done to change the culture of the military.

According to the documents, high-level leaders on post “mishandled” informal sexual harassment complaints in Sanchez’s unit, E Company, 701st Military Police Battalion.

The 548 pages of documents, which include redactions, describe Sanchez as being “extremely adept at choosing his victims, place of attack, masking his misconduct from his chain of command and superiors, and maneuvering around the safeguards put in place to protect trainees.”

For example, one victim — whom Sanchez forced to perform oral sex on him in a latrine — had been sleeping outside of secure quarters designed to separate male and female personnel.

The investigation found no indication that Sanchez’s current or previous superiors “were aware of criminal or inappropriate behavior prior to the allegations of misconduct being reported.”

The investigation found trainees knew what constituted sexual misconduct. A problem, according to military records, was failure to report.

It was true of his peers and subordinates, who saw “many indications of a predator in the ranks.” And it was true of six victims, who reported allegations only after a victim finally came forward.

“What does it tell you about E Company’s command climate that six different victims did not come

forward?” an investigator asked a military official on post after allegations came to light January 2014. “What went wrong here?”

“I just don’t know — they have a pretty good team,” the official said of E Company, adding that perhaps there was shortsightedness because Sanchez was a new drill sergeant. “I firmly believe now, after seeing all the reports, that (drill sergeant) Sanchez is a predator who knows how to skirt around the checks and balances put in place to stop predatory behavior. I also believe had any cadre member truly (known) his true nature, they would have reported him.”

But superiors had a much different view of Sanchez than some junior enlisted soldiers who had served with him in Afghanistan and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, according to investigation documents.

A first sergeant who wrote a recommendation letter in favor of Sanchez being selected as a drill sergeant candidate said Sanchez was the best non-commissioned officer “he had ever served alongside,” an investigator noted.

But once Sanchez was selected, junior-ranking soldiers wondered how long it would take before he would be accused of sexually harassing female trainees, according to investigation documents.

“Sanchez’s peers and subordinates describe him as a person who often made inappropriate comments, sexual jokes and remarks, and flirted with soldiers,” one investigator noted. “His peers and subordinates failed to report this behavior to their chain of command, enabling SSG Sanchez to continue to behave in this manner for a long period of time.”

Sanchez was caught during his first cycle of being a drill sergeant at Fort Leonard Wood, where 24,000 people enter basic training each year.

A female soldier who had served with Sanchez in Alaska and Afghanistan told an investigator that “there was not one female in the unit that (Sanchez) did not make an inappropriate comment to or about.” She said she didn’t report it to command because she didn’t think anything would be done.

“Also, if I report every inappropriate comment or sexual harassment complaint by a male soldier toward me that I experienced during my time in the Army, it would be a full-time job,” she said. “It would be all I would do. This problem is pervasive in the Army and a serious issue.”



J.B. FORBES/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/TNS

Major General Leslie C. Smith, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center of Excellence at Fort Leonard Wood, talks during an interview, at his headquarters in Missouri’s Fort Leonard Wood about the issue of sexual assault.

In addition to targeting trainees, Sanchez was found guilty of abusive sexual contact involving a fellow drill sergeant. That drill sergeant wept from the stand during the September court-martial, saying she was going to quit the Army out of guilt for not reporting the crime earlier.

Testimony at the court-martial also questioned leadership and its adherence to the Army program Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention, or SHARP.

Two former E Company trainees said from the stand that the two highest-ranking members of the 701st Military Police Battalion told trainees that if they made any more SHARP complaints the whole company would have to start basic training all over.

The testimony spawned an additional Army review of the command climate in Sanchez’s unit, a Pentagon spokesman said.

According to investigation documents, the battalion commander and command sergeant major addressed Company E on Dec. 7, 2013, after finding out about five trainee-on-trainee sexual harassment allegations. One of the leaders later told an investigator that he’d merely wanted the trainees to stop engaging in inappropriate conduct and that it was never his “intent to stop trainees from making complaints.”

A focus group of E Company trainees was formed and questioned about the short lecture in question. According to investigation documents, the group said the two commanders “appeared very angry with them” and that “the message they were left with was that if there was another complaint or allegation of sexual harassment or assault, that

they would all be recycled back to the beginning of training.”

An investigator noted that the “command climate contributed to the lack of reporting from trainees on SSG Sanchez.”

Among the investigation’s findings on that point:

- A drill sergeant who also served as unit victim advocate, the go-to person for trainees to report abuse, incorrectly categorized an allegation of sexual assault against Sanchez and didn’t follow another procedure that delayed awareness of a complaint to command. For a time, E Company was left without a unit victim advocate.

- The company commander once told a trainee who had complained of sexual harassment by a fellow trainee that “sometimes you have to just deal with these situations,” a deputy brigade commander told an investigator.

- A drill sergeant who had been a former unit victim advocate told an investigator that the company commander and first sergeant didn’t take SHARP serious enough, stressing traditional basic training needs come first.

Sanchez mainly avoided detection during the night shift, when he was the only drill sergeant on duty at the barracks. He evaded the battle buddy policy strictly enforced in basic training. Trainees aren’t supposed to go anywhere alone. Drill sergeants also have battle buddies; however, one drill sergeant usually works alone for the overnight shift.

There are alarms on barracks doors that separate male and female trainees, but the alarms didn’t prevent Sanchez from going into the female sleeping quarters alone. One of Sanchez’s victims was separated from her peers after being accused

of sexual harassment of another trainee. Sanchez portrayed himself as a mentor to her and later forced her to perform oral sex on him in a latrine.

An investigator said video surveillance could have helped prevent Sanchez from isolating trainees. The investigator also recommended more frequent checks by commanders during the night shift.

In a statement, a post spokesman said the Sanchez case has triggered a widespread review of SHARP personnel and systems at Fort Leonard Wood. And at a national level, the Army has taken steps to ensure leaders are aware of the lessons learned from the incident, a Pentagon spokesman said.

Maj. Gen. Leslie Smith, commander of Fort Leonard Wood, said in a recent interview at the post that there are good people who do the right thing in the Army, and people who don’t — “just like outside the gate.” He said he was a firm believer in the military’s judicial system and the practice of holding people accountable.

“From the time that it was discovered to the time the guy was court-martialed was nine months,” Smith said. “Guaranteed, it won’t be that way in the civilian court.”

He added that Sanchez “was a leader that took advantage of people, and he was dealt with, the chain of command was dealt with, all of those things were dealt with at the appropriate level.”

A military judge recommended that Sanchez receive a 20-year sentence. Smith will have the ultimate authority on sentencing once a few more legal technicalities are finished in the case soon.