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Female combat vets report more assaults

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Women who deploy to violent combat environments are more likely to report sexual harassment and sexual assaults, according to a new Defense Department study.

The study found that 2.1 percent of the military women surveyed reported in an anonymous survey that they experienced some form of sexual assault during the prior three-year period.

Yet that rate was almost twice as high, 4 percent, among women who said they had deployed and experienced combat, the study found.

For purposes of the study, "experiencing combat" was defined witnessing one of five key things:

death, physical abuse, dead bodies, maimed service members or prisoners of war.

The study's authors suggest several possible reasons for the correlation, including:

■ Violent combat settings make men more likely to become aggressive toward the military women they live and work with.

■ Combat settings are a more traditionally male-dominated environment compared with other settings where military women work.

■ Women in a high-stress, life-threatening combat setting may find it more difficult to identify, diffuse or avoid high-risk settings for sexual assault and harass-

ment.

■ Men in a combat environment may be less concerned about the consequences of sexually harassing or assaulting women and may be less likely to be held accountable for their actions.

The study was based on DoD surveys of more than 13,000 women and was conducted by a group of researchers from the department and other government agencies. It was published recently in the *Women's Health Issues* journal. The data is from an initiative known as the *Millennium Cohort Study*, a long-term series of anonymous surveys tracking health issues related to military service.

The study found that women

who deployed to combat settings were also nearly twice as likely to report sexual harassment. Specifically, 19.9 percent of women with combat-related deployments reported some form of sexual harassment, compared with 9 percent of women who deployed to non-combat settings and 8.2 percent of women who did not deploy during the prior three-year period.

Overall, the numbers suggested a lower incidence of sexual assault when compared with other Defense Department studies. A widely reported study in 2012 showed that about 6.1 percent of military women reported experiencing "unwanted sexual contact" during the previous year.

The new study comes at a time of heightened concern about sexual assault in the military and the Pentagon ratcheting up official prevention efforts.

The study also comes as the military is planning to lift all gender restrictions and allow women to serve with combat units and in combat-arms career fields for the first time. □