

**From the Quaker House, Fayetteville/Ft. Bragg NC Newsletter,
September 2002**

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Domestic Murders at Ft. Bragg

There was something surreal about Fayetteville's community meeting on domestic violence on August 21 2002. The mix of victims, civilian and Army professionals were to talk about how to prevent more domestic homicides. We were all there, of course, because seven corpses had been hauled from local homes in the space of five weeks, the deadly result of murders and suicides by military family members.

This bloody outburst brought national media attention, as well it should have. It also aborted the city of Fayetteville's latest PR campaign to change its unhappy "Fayettenam" image.

But all this was muted nearly into invisibility. A Colonel Davis, Fort Bragg's garrison commander, spoke, but his rhetoric was almost as hard to make out as the nametag sewn on his camouflage green uniform.

This was a "great day," he declared, in which to "come together" and "move forward" to increase "awareness" and "outreach" to "people who are hurting." Pausing to praise Fayetteville as an "All-American City," he insisted on "accountability" for people involved in "these situations " as the Army worked for "more productivity" on the "issues at hand."

He could have been talking about diabetes or drunk driving. Only when announcing a newly-scheduled seminar on post did he actually speak the "DV" words, hurrying past them to wrap up with a promise that this was not "a short-term thing." He finished to warm applause.

Most of the rest of the session was carefully focused on domestic violence away from Ft. Bragg, as a statewide problem in North Carolina, and on pleas to get more information for families at risk, about counseling and other services. The oblique character of the event was probably unavoidable; certainly spousal murders are a scourge in this state, occurring almost weekly. But that wasn't why we were there, nor did it explain the gaggle of reporters and TV cameras outside the door collaring anyone willing to call herself a victim or an expert.

Only in the back of the room, little-noticed on a literature table, was there a discordant, more revealing note: a stack of reprints from a newsletter, Domestic Violence Report, which presented data on the real issue, the 900-pound guerilla

everyone was stepping so carefully around: the epidemic of domestic violence in the US military, and the blatant, chronic inadequacy of its responses.

One speaker could have cut through the fog of phony optimism: Deborah Tucker, who is Co-Chair of a task force on DV that was forced on the Defense Department by Congress in 1990 after earlier searing exposes of "The War At Home" on TV's 60 Minutes and elsewhere. Tucker's task force has issued two reports which, within reams of carefully modulated bureaucratese, deliver a damning indictment of systematic denial and coverup of rampant family abuse in the military. But Tucker too pulled most of her punches, offering only the mildest of criticisms, carefully wrapped in praise for the good intentions of the Pentagon brass.

As an exercise in Army damage control, the meeting was a success: I watched a uniformed officer shrug and tell a TV reporter that there was nothing special about the recent killings "They were just an anomaly." (Another favored term was "a fluke.") And the Fayetteville Observer's report dutifully headlined the event with an upbeat slant, portraying it somehow marking the turning of the tide. The issue has since been receding from Fayetteville's public consciousness at least until the next bodies turn up.

Given the institutional and cultural realities here, the meeting probably went as well as could be expected. But what was not said, and has not been acknowledged, is that the real news about this rash of killings and what it represents is that it really isn't news at all.

In this regard, the experience of the Fayetteville Observer is revealing: The Observer has the makings of a good paper, but its coverage has a predictably ingrained pro-military bias. Thus its early stories on the killings reflected spoon-fed Army PR, with spokesmen expressing shock, bewilderment and the "just an anomaly" line.

But then something truly anomalous happened: the Observer's phones began to ring, and wouldn't stop. On the other end were military wives, dozens of them, spilling out gruesome tales, not only about beatings and abuse, but of a military culture that, despite PR protestations, remains deeply and systematically indifferent to their plight. The recent killings, these witnesses made plain, were just the bloody, impossible-to-ignore tip of a very large and otherwise submerged iceberg.

This outpouring must have been painful to listen to, and the reporters, to their credit, paid attention. While the Observer still ignores or downplays the plentiful evidence that DV rates are much higher in the military than the civilian population, it chose not to ignore the anguished testimonials of dozens of its local neighbors.

The Army clearly hated that. It works nonstop here and elsewhere to project a wholesome, family-friendly image, for various reasons, not least as an aid to recruiting. And to be sure, many Army families are perfectly normal. But too many are in serious difficulty. Nor is this epidemic confined to "families": the Army Times reported on August 19 that there had also been five GI suicides on Ft. Bragg thus far this year. A strong case could be made for adding them to the tally, but this report has not made it into the local press.

And there have been two other spousal killings this year which are not included in

the current tally: A female officer at nearby Pope Air Force Base was killed by her estranged husband in front of their children but that happened in South Carolina; and in January, a woman was stalked and stabbed to death in broad daylight at a restaurant -- but her ex-husband had been discharged from the Army a few days before, so that case doesn't "count" in their already inadequate statistics.

What accounts for this cultural tolerance of domestic violence? This is the last question the Army brass wants to have to face. And I don't blame them; it's disturbing enough to contemplate even from the outside: After all, the army is the instrument of the American body politic, that is to say, us. We pay for it, the polls say we admire it, and take pride in its skill at its assigned job of killing people and breaking things in an admittedly dangerous world.

Can we really be surprised when this violence comes home, when what is sown elsewhere is also reaped in the families who live with its professional purveyors?

Deborah Tucker's task force has come up with some constructive ideas; but even if they're adopted by the Pentagon (a big IF in the current macho administration), I'm not convinced they'll get to the bottom of this ongoing plague. The more I look into it, the deeper the roots seem to go, far beyond the guarded enclosures of our military bases.

I won't pretend to have a list of solutions to this unfolding horror. But there's one thing I am sure of:

It is not an anomaly.