

What I Wish I'd Known About Sexual Assault in the Military

For women, fending off unwanted male attention is the job that never ends.

Story by Sandra Sidi

| OCTOBER 2019 ISSUE | U.S.

“DUCK AND COVER!” a mechanized voice screamed. The ground shook and the window rattled. I rolled from my bed to the floor of my trailer and felt for the armor I'd forgotten in my office. I lay there and sweated and swore. The voice from the loudspeaker urged me to get away from the windows. I was inside a tin can.

I crawled to the door. My hand was on the knob when I realized I was naked. The next impact knocked the air conditioner to the floor. I grabbed a light-blue cotton robe and bolted.

I raced along a row of sandbags, one hand holding the robe closed. The duck-and-cover bunkers were 100 feet away. Another series of explosions, and I hit the rocks. I was lying there, panting, when I saw a bright-yellow bunker tucked behind a row of sandbags and palm trees. I was up, running, full out. My robe fell open and flew out behind me.

Another hit. I was 20 feet away. Ten. Five. I crashed into the duck-and-cover, yanking my robe closed.

More than a dozen men squatted there and looked at me. Soldiers in military fatigues, some without shirts; contractors in cargo shorts and polos; other

men in nothing but boxers. The curly hair on their chests rose and fell with their labored breathing. I should have slept in clothes, but my air conditioner was broken. The rounds hit like deep drums, but we were safe, packed together in 50 square feet of concrete.

I leaned against the wall and tried to stop my legs from shaking. Two more men in boxers joined us. A bearded, sunburned soldier stared at my feet. A half-dressed contractor took furtive looks at my neck. A marine offered me the one chair inside the bunker. “You always say thank you when we buzz you through,” he said, smiling kindly. These men went outside the wire every day, in all that danger, that heat. They were heroes. They were lonely.

The bearded soldier’s eyes met mine and held. He looked away. I pulled my robe tighter.

Finally, the attack ceased, and the sirens quieted. Back in my trailer, I dressed and slipped my embassy ID around my neck. I ran my fingers through my hair and braided it as I left the Riverside Trailer Compound, where I lived, and threaded through the rows of sandbags, then past the statue of Saddam Hussein, its half-head lying in the sand. Behind me, thick plumes of smoke rose into the sky.

I showed my badge at the palace entrance, coded into my office. I walked past flashing TV sets and translators in headphones typing at their keyboards. When I arrived at my desk, I put my head down. It was 6:30 a.m.

SOME HOURS LATER, my brown ballet flats tapped softly on the marble floor. It was 2007, and the U.S. military and State Department were working out of Saddam’s Republican Palace, in Baghdad. I walked next to a woman I’ll call Morgan, who was new and whom I’d met only the night before. At 23, she was two years older than I was. She wore her long brown hair down, though she wouldn’t for long. The men were excited about her. She carried a Bible, and I remember thinking this would help her.

Men watched as we passed beneath an ornate ceiling of red-and-green marble and rows of glittering chandeliers. The table of women was at the back of the palace dining facility—DFAC to all of us. We couldn't see one another socially much, with our crazy work schedules, but we walked together whenever possible, and gathered for meals, six or seven of us, our trays loaded with barbecue and biscuits and salads drenched in ranch dressing. We were all happy to see Morgan. Grateful for another young woman to talk to, and perversely relieved by the addition of another female to absorb the male attention.

One of us was State Department, another a civilian analyst, and others military police, or MPs. There was a cropped-haired, soft-voiced woman in the National Guard who dreamed of starting a goat farm. Beside her was a Naval Academy graduate with shin splints and swollen ankles from carrying 80 pounds on 10-mile marches. She could barely pull her boots on. None of us had the security clearance to know what she did. I was a civilian, ferried over by third-party contractors to provide analytical support for Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, the new head of public affairs for the Multi-National Force in Iraq. This was my first job out of college.

I counted how many women were in a room the second I entered: 63 men, two women; 44 men, one woman. Me.

Nicole joined us at the table. Ex-Army, she was now a doctoral student and civilian analyst collecting research on democracy-building in Iraq. "Iraq's had a real ass-kicking this month," she announced. "Qahtaniya bombing toll over 500 now."

Theresa, an MP, mused that we hadn't figured out how to bring democracy to the Middle East, but we had managed to bring Southern fried chicken and grits. Theresa was tiny, with more positive energy than a sunflower. She did security checks on the perimeter and was Command Sergeant Major Holcomb's assistant driver.

Two soldiers stood up, craning to get a glance at us. One pointed.

“What do the men gain from it being like this?” That was Silvana (a pseudonym), an economic analyst with several master’s degrees. She’d just filed a sexual-harassment complaint against her supervisor. The food in front of her was untouched, as it often was.

“Before I came here,” said Ann (another pseudonym), the National Guardsman with goat-farm fantasies, “I used to like them—men, I mean.”

Morgan, the newbie, said she’d hoped that she might meet a guy in Iraq, but not so much anymore.

“The odds are good,” Nicole replied, repeating one of her mantras, “but the goods are odd.”

WE CAME FOR love of country, for patriotism, for money. We came to escape debt or marriages. We came because of television—*Alias* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We came for adventure, for service. We came because someone had suggested we wouldn’t dare.

I grew up in the Washington, D.C., area, and, like many of my high-school classmates, I was shaken by the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. Inspired to help my country, I chose political science as my major in college and studied three languages, including Arabic. Just before graduating, I was offered a job by the CIA’s Middle East desk, though I’d have to wait a year or more to get security clearance and would have little control over my assignment. I was thrilled to have been selected by the CIA, but I was also impatient and impulsive, and hadn’t given much thought to exactly what kind of work I wanted to do, or where. So when a government contractor pitched me by phone—*Three weeks and you’ll be in Baghdad*—I said yes.

Before I deployed, I stood in a line with other contractors and soldiers at Fort Benning, in Georgia, waiting for our physicals. The contractor in front of me wore a shirt with fake blood splattered up the side—a makeshift kidney wound—and the words I'M OKAY at the top. We started talking about his home in St. Petersburg, Florida, which is where my mother lives. We spoke of boats and streetlights and dolphins. He had gray hair and friendly lines around his eyes. He asked where I was headed.

“Baghdad,” I said. “The embassy.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-two,” I lied. My birthday was five months away.

He frowned. “Have they issued you a firearm?” I shook my head. He nodded and looked out at the line of men behind us. The creases in his forehead were like rails of a train track. He turned back to me and leaned close. “A tall blonde? Get a weapon,” he said. They called his name. He looked up at the nurse and then back to me. “Get a weapon,” he repeated, and walked away.

I'd thought he meant for insurgents.

FROM THE MOMENT I stepped outside my trailer, when I stood in line at the dining hall, when I ran to the duck-and-cover, when I sat at my desk, the male soldiers watched. For some, I was the first woman without a hijab they'd seen in months. Men with enormous hands, with shoulders the width of door frames, with pistols strapped to their thighs—they watched.

I read before I went to Iraq that women made up one in 10 American soldiers in the country, but I had no idea where all those women were. The ratio seemed closer to one in 20, even 30. I counted how many women were in a room the second I entered. Twenty-nine men, three women. Sixty-three men, two women. Forty-four men, one woman: me.

I wore my hair in a tight braid. I didn't wear shorts. I wore shoes that hid my toes. I put on sweaters in 117-degree heat. Even so, my body was everywhere.

My eyes met the other women's when we passed in the hall, when I threw my trash away at the DFAC, when I was buzzed through the guard stations. *How are you? Are you okay? Are we safe?*

THE MEN GOSSIPED about us; we'd meet them in a professional capacity and find that they already knew our hometowns, our alma maters, our marital status. They openly made bets about who was going to get pregnant, who was going to get an STD. We overheard conversations we wished we hadn't—like after my first briefing of the admiral, when one analyst in my office observed to another, "I think she'll do well," and the other answered, "Just another woman trying to use her body to get ahead." Or the four contractors who didn't see me reading in a chair behind them as they watched a female translator for the State Department:

"Fuck, look at that."

"Is she seeing anyone?"

"Not since they sent that old bird home."

"Well, that ass has got to be fucked."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Riverside 242."

WE WORKED 14-, 16-, 18-hour days. We put in as many hours as the men—we made sure of this. Women who'd been there longer offered advice: *Be sure to engage with them*, we were told. *Don't get too close*, we were warned. Say *Yes, sir*. Do not ever say *Yes, sir*.

Some of us were married, had kids back home. One of us was quietly going through a divorce. Theresa had deployed to Iraq with her mother, also a soldier, while Ann had come with her husband, who, like her, was a staff sergeant. When we sat together in the DFAC, talking, he'd sit a few tables behind, drinking coffee, her lookout. They lived together in a married trailer and held hands while lying on the floor during shellings. Some of us were looking to date. Others couldn't be bothered with men. A number of us were virgins.

During my breaks, I'd lie on a gold couch in the main palace entryway, which was usually empty because the side entrances were safer. I'd run my fingers over the gilt of Saddam's chairs and along the smooth marble railings. I'd stare at the gorgeous geometric patterns of the ceiling until images emerged. My mother's favorite blue dress. The sun striking the Potomac River, where we used to swim. My own eyes and breasts and legs and feet, misshapen and rearranged like in a cubist painting.

I WAS LUCKY. Rear Admiral Smith made it known from his first day in theater that he'd personally punish any sex offenders. This made a difference, I think. A colonel from Psychological Operations once propositioned me on behalf of his son—*Honey, with him you'll be breathing twice as hard*. In the office, though, I was fairly safe. The only sexual slurs came from a fellow analyst who had a habit of calling me "Twat." But I'd lived such a sheltered life that I didn't know what the word meant, so I wasn't bothered by it.

My job was to inform the admiral of the most "strategic" events that occurred in Baghdad on a given day—incidents that would affect our operations, the stability of the Iraqi government, or our highest-priority alliances. Each evening, I chose six events to highlight.

Not long after my arrival, a translator, Nazir (a pseudonym), reached out to provide guidance. I'd passed the exams that tested regional knowledge and the ability to respond to hypothetical foreign-policy and security challenges, but I was the only analyst without a master's degree. Nazir helped me keep track of the latest faction to boycott the prime minister and which new militia was splintering off from the last new militia. He'd find important events for me before they were reported anywhere in English, allowing me to give the admiral the most up-to-the-minute information. He was funny and took me to social gatherings with Iraqi nationals that, as a non-Middle Easterner, I wouldn't have had access to. Those first weeks, I don't know what I would have done without him.

We had fun, too. We slid down the marble railings of the palace. We flew over blue pools surrounded by sand and could hardly breathe at their beauty. On a mortar-free day roughly a month into my deployment, I sat outside the palace. The air was like the inside of a hair dryer. A squad of soldiers jogged around the T-walls, the 12-foot slabs of reinforced concrete lining the embassy compound. After they went by, I saw Nazir and waved.

"Do you want to smoke?" he asked.

I didn't smoke but appreciated the invitation. "Sure, Nazir. Thanks." We walked to a picnic table, passing a roped-off section of dirt with a sign in bold letters: DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS. We laughed.

He lit a cigarette for me, which I held awkwardly. "You look tired," he said. I shrugged. Three soldiers passed our table; the shortest one blew me a kiss. "You seem to have caught their attention," Nazir said.

"They wouldn't be so hot for me if they knew how clueless I am." I looked at the sand and thought of another soldier far away.

Nazir's eyebrows rose. "You've never had a boyfriend?"

“Not really,” I admitted. I didn’t think what I had qualified as a boyfriend. I’d spent the past two years in love—a love consummated, at this point, exclusively via email—with an Israeli soldier 700 miles away whom I’d met on an academic fellowship in Israel.

“Do you mean to tell me,” Nazir said, “that you’re a virgin?”

I mumbled something, then decided to ignore the question. Nazir chuckled. He took a long pull on his cigarette.

What would possess me to provide such an intimate detail? Now I can recognize my extreme loneliness in a place where men looked at me and tried to attract my notice, but rarely spoke to me as a friend. I also see my naïveté. I never imagined that a man old enough to be my father, a highly respected professional whose knowledge and experience far eclipsed mine, could be interested in me.

Nazir put his arm gently around my shoulder. “How about we change that, dear?”

THANK GOD FOR MORGAN. Practically overnight, we became as close as sisters. I was also good friends with Theresa and Nicole, but they weren’t around as much. I could almost always find Morgan to walk with. A public-affairs officer for the State Department, she’d deal with journalists while I briefed the admiral, and then we’d find a corner somewhere to talk.

One day, Morgan was a bit quiet at lunch. I asked her why, and she blushed. A half-empty bottle of sexual lubricant had been left on her desk, and her colleagues had watched, laughing, as she found it.

We women drank. We picked up smoking. We flirted and slept with several men or, like me, hunched our shoulders and stayed out of their way as much as possible. Some of us loved Baghdad, no one more than Nicole, the

doctoral student. She swore as well as the men and had jaw-length red hair so thick, it looked like a crash helmet. She barely seemed to notice the lack of women.

We desperately missed our families. I'd think of my 10-year-old brother, who was still into Pokémon cards. (Secretly, I was too.) We dreamed of home. For me, it was the leafy college campus filled with women I'd left only weeks before. For Morgan, her twin brother, who was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan. Theresa dreamed of her two little boys; she feared they wouldn't know her when she returned home.

THERE WERE WOMEN who, like Silvana, reported their male bosses for sexual harassment. But I worked for a man as decent as he was powerful. A man who listened to me in the briefings, who sought out my opinion in a room full of majors and colonels. And when the security situation deteriorated, and the mortars and rockets began hitting the palace with frightening accuracy, he refused to allow me to accompany him to the broadcast room, because the hallway had floor-to-ceiling windows.

Three months into my deployment, Silvana vanished. She just stopped coming to work, no word to any of us. I emailed her, called her cell. We asked around, but no one knew.

“Bet she broke her contract,” Morgan said. “She’s probably home.”

“Good for her,” Theresa said. “Who could work for that creep?”

“I hope he gets AIDS,” the Naval Academy graduate said, massaging her shins.

We discussed how to respond to Iranian encroachment in Basra. “That’s easy,” Nicole cracked. She moved a chunk of red hair from one side of her

face to the other. “Tell them to watch it, or we’ll fuck up Iran the same way we fucked up Iraq.”

Genius! We laughed.

I wish I could say that we were more curious about what was going on in Silvana’s office, but we didn’t have any way to speak about our vulnerability in an environment that placed a premium on female toughness and resourcefulness. I didn’t tell the others, not even Morgan, how the same day Silvana disappeared, Nazir had put his hand on my neck and whispered, “Have you thought about my question?” It’s not that we didn’t care about Silvana—we did—but we also wanted to be in Baghdad. We wanted it badly. We feared the noise coming from her corner would show as lie the truth we most valued: *I belong here. Women belong here.*

WE HAD FUN, TOO. We slid down the marble railings of the palace when no one was looking. Hanging out in Saddam’s golden chairs, we ate tangy, Army-issued granola bars, which actually weren’t bad. We used Morgan’s State Department status—she had the longest leash of any of us—to get our names on a helicopter transport and flew over blue pools surrounded by sand and could hardly breathe at their beauty. We got drunk at Italian-embassy functions and marveled at the authority we’d been given to broker deals, transport top-secret government papers, and shape policy decisions for America’s generals.

Morgan started an all-female Bible study. I can’t say my faith was thriving in Baghdad, but I never missed a meeting. Oh, the joy and freedom of being a woman among women, of letting my guard down. It was additional relief to be around Morgan, because she was fearless. She would run the perimeter, where most of us were too afraid to go by ourselves. She would swim—actually be seen in a swimsuit by dozens of drooling men—in Saddam’s pool.

She formed a soccer team with Italian-army guys. “They don’t care that I’m the only girl,” Morgan said, “and they never go easy on me, either.”

It wasn’t long, however, before posters were plastered around the embassy with a photo of Morgan’s five teammates and a description—in English and Italian—of all the things a certain unidentified female soccer player would do to them, one-on-one or all together. “There was no one else they could have been describing but me,” Morgan said grimly.

To be close to any man, no matter how platonic the association, was to have your reputation questioned. The five guys ran around the base and tore down every poster.

THERE WAS A young marine who worked at one of the palace’s side entry points, and whenever he manned the booth it took me three times as long to be screened. I didn’t know if he didn’t understand how to work the buzzer or just liked to be in my company, but I didn’t mind. He looked like my little brother: stiff blond hair, smooth face, crooked nose. Every Tuesday and Thursday, we’d peer at each other through two-inch-thick, bulletproof yellow glass.

I remember one of these interactions in particular. I held up my badge. He fumbled with the buzzer and then it sounded, but the door didn’t open; he must have released the button too soon. Through the glass, I heard him clear his throat. There was a pause, some shuffling, and a sound like something falling off a desk. A muffled curse. I fought a smile.

After I’d finally made it through, I turned toward him and smiled, because he was awkward, because he looked like my brother, because there was thick glass between us, or because I was so tired of *not* smiling. For a moment he simply looked at me, then nodded, like I was his superior. In his eyes there was gratitude and respect.

“IKNOW ALL the spots,” Nazir whispered, leaning over my desk, his hand on my shoulder. A male co-worker—the same one who’d said I was trying to use my body to get ahead—fed a folder into the shredder, looking at me with disgust. He was convinced I’d pursued Nazir.

I’d wake to the siren; I’d wake to the call to prayer. I’d wake to throwing myself on the floor as mortar rounds crashed down around me. “You know I’m a very determined man,” Nazir said. I read reports about sectarian protests and Sunni marginalization. “I think I’ve been very patient,” Nazir said. I read reports about kidnappings and IEDs. “You’re so selfish,” Nazir said.

“Please stop,” I told Nazir, but never anything more. I had almost no knowledge then of what constituted sexual harassment, never mind that it was illegal.

A female soldier told me she’d slept with most of the men in her squad. “I guess I don’t really know how not to,” she said. “They keep me alive.” I was also keenly aware of the importance of Nazir’s work. He’d often catch videos on Arab channels of U.S. military convoys being blown up by IEDs, videos that everyone knew fueled the influx of foreign fighters. Thanks to Nazir’s detection, they could swiftly be taken off the air, saving American lives.

I’d call the faraway soldier I loved and tell him nothing about the harassment. I wanted so badly to tell him, but he was in combat, and I worried that any additional stress would compromise his safety. My silence was a way of protecting him from the knowledge that he could do nothing to protect me.

MOST TIMES I SAW NAZIR, he asked for sex. But in the briefings with the admiral, a translator wasn’t necessary, and there I grew strong. I was creative, adaptive; I was correct. The admiral requested my work regularly. I was

assigned to write a high-profile section of the Battlefield Update Assessment, which was sent to General Petraeus, the Pentagon, and the White House every morning. A paper I wrote was recommended by the Defense Intelligence Agency as required reading for all incoming personnel. One day, I asked the co-worker who called me “Twat” what the word meant. His face flushing, he haltingly explained, and never called me that again. Four months into my deployment, Morgan got a cook to make a cake for my 22nd birthday. General Petraeus called to tell me I had written *diffuse* instead of *defuse* in the Battlefield Update Assessment. He joked about it; he was kind. It snowed in Baghdad for the first time in living memory, and we ran outside to see thin white flakes falling on sand, and I thought it was possible that this was where I was supposed to be.

I’d begun ad hoc humanitarian visits to Iraqi families around Baghdad, and the admiral volunteered to join me. While many flag officers considered this an unnecessary security risk, he rarely missed a trip. “I can’t wait for the runs out to the families on Thursday,” the admiral said after the briefing one day. “My wife made a quilt for Sabine and the kids.”

Thinking of this moment now, I feel sad, because I almost told him about Nazir then, and I could have. He surely would have helped, but I was too shy, too embarrassed to say words like *proposition* and *sex* and *help me*.

SEVEN MONTHS INTO my deployment, I hadn’t seen Theresa for four days. I asked the marines at the door if they knew where she was, and they told me to check the front gardens, which sounded strange, because no one would be so reckless as to go there in the middle of the day. Yet when I arrived, I saw her brown bun peeking out from inside the dry fountain.

I trotted over to her, about to make a fuss about being out there in daylight and rush us both inside, but I quickly realized that if we sat inside the

fountain, we were protected from shrapnel on four sides. Only a direct hit would kill us, which seemed like good enough odds.

The fountain was strangely magnificent. Giant stone fish leaped from nonexistent water. I climbed in beside the fish, but Theresa didn't look at me. I sat next to her and nudged her with my shoulder. She sort of smiled.

"Where you been?" I asked.

"I was at karaoke night," she said quietly.

I laughed. "For four days?"

"But there was no one to walk home with." Her voice was hoarse as she told me she'd seen and spoken with him, the guard, many times before, though never alone. She said "Good evening," as she always did when she entered her trailer compound. "He held out his hand and smiled, like for me to shake it," Theresa said, and that's when the guard yanked her toward him and forcibly kissed her. "I twisted away from him. I just kept trying to twist away, looking to see if anyone was around. Anybody."

I took her hand. It was so small.

The guard grabbed Theresa by the hair, and she kept saying, "I have to go. I need to go." Theresa told me her thoughts ran on a loop as he dragged her. *I'm going to be raped. Is this cheating on my husband? Why is this happening to me?* When he released his grip to undo her jacket, she ran. "The whole time, running, I thought he was going to shoot me in the back," Theresa said.

We watched a brown bird land on the opposite side of the fountain. "Even my mother's been assaulted, you know." She sat quietly for a moment before adding, "Several times."

"Theresa, can I do something? Help you report—"

“I did. I just—” She shook her head. “I didn’t react how I thought I would. I thought I’d be ...”

Theresa was furious with herself that she hadn’t fought back. Despite her training, she’d frozen in fear. And she was upset that she’d lied in her report. She’d provided the location and unit of the soldier who tried to assault her but claimed not to have seen his face because she’d forgotten her glasses. Theresa knew exactly who he was. She lied because he was armed and lived only a few trailers away from hers—how might he retaliate if she named him? She hoped the other soldiers in his unit would identify him, because there had been only one guard on post at the time. They didn’t.

THERE WERE OTHER STORIES. Stories of supervisors using their trailer keys to enter female subordinates’ rooms, stories of gang rape. There was the American translator, a civilian who worked down the hall from me, who whispered, “I came here a confident person.” And the enlisted soldier, the only female in her squad, who sat across from me one afternoon in the DFAC, having just come in from outside the wire. Her sunburned face was peeling as she said, lightly, that she’d slept with most of the men in her squad. When I smiled awkwardly and asked if she had wanted to, she said, “I guess I don’t really know how not to. They keep me alive.”

She looked toward the other end of the cafeteria, where her squad sat eating. One of the soldiers caught her eye and waved amiably. She turned back to me. “You know, sometimes I feel like a piece of dirt, blowing in whichever direction anyone chooses.”

And there was Theresa’s rage and guilt when the guard who assaulted her assaulted another female soldier only weeks later.

NOT LONG AFTER Theresa and I talked in the fountain, she and Ann completed their deployments. Morgan, Nicole, and I watched them preparing to depart in armored buses called Rhinos. Standing together, saluting stiffly,

they looked beautiful, and we were proud of them. I started to cry, thinking I'd never see them again. Nicole turned to comfort me. "Go back to the palace. Walk those halls as a lion," she said.

In Morgan's trailer a few weeks later, we struggled to open a bottle of wine without a corkscrew so that we could break the rule against drinking. "I don't have cups," Morgan said, when the cork finally yielded to a combination of a knife and a screwdriver. "We'll just have to take it straight from the bottle," Nicole said.

We lay in Morgan's bed, and she started talking about her brother, a helicopter pilot, but she wasn't saying her words right. "You're drunk," we teased, and then she started saying she couldn't feel her limbs and her tongue was swollen and she couldn't breathe, and we were calling an ambulance.

Morgan was medevaced to London, where it was discovered that she'd suffered a flare-up of a rare autoimmune syndrome. A week later, when we spoke on the phone, she said, "I'm so worried about you all. I'll be back soon." My voice was stern, mean even, when I replied, "Morgan, don't ever come back here," and hung up.

I'D BEEN IN IRAQ eight months when the Sadr City cease-fire began to fall apart, in March 2008. Rockets rained into the embassy compound. The mortars and sniper fire were so accurate that we took to wearing our flak vests inside buildings.

At night in my trailer, the aluminum ceiling above my bed shone like a bullet. I imagined the roof peeling back like wrapping paper, my body sprayed on the walls. I slept a few hours a night, less. Everyone looked terrible, unshaven, white-faced. I walked slowly down the hallway, dragging my hand along the red mosaic of the wall. My shirt was untucked. My hair hung around my shoulders, long and oily.

When rockets took out several trailers and a prominent financial analyst in the embassy was killed, we were required to remain inside the palace at all times. I briefed on the same bombings in the same markets day in, day out, and then tried to find a place in the palace to put my cot, though the siren rarely shut up long enough for us to sleep for more than 20 minutes at a time. In the open areas, men were everywhere, dozens of hungry eyes. I'd set up my cot in the DFAC or a hallway and lie there watching every boot that passed, looking and not looking at every face. I lived in fear that Nazir would discover me while I slept.

The number of sexual assaults in the military has risen, with 20,500 in 2018. I'd heard that the theater in the basement was safe and that the siren was muted. So one evening I waited until the basement hallway was clear, pulled my hoodie over my head, and walked quickly inside. In the pitch-black room, I could see nothing, but instantly I heard a chorus of snoring. Did I breathe like a woman?

I made my way forward, my shins bumping into soft bodies and metal frames. I almost forgot myself and said "Excuse me." I set up my cot in the dark and lay down. I was so tired. I heard the man beside me snoring, slow and gentle. I rolled over and my hand fell off the cot onto his. The frame of his cot was warm from his body. I drew back quickly and stuffed my hands into my hoodie, but sometime during the night I reached out and touched the warm metal again.

This went on for weeks. Every night I looked for somewhere, anywhere, I could sleep alone or at least with another woman. Eventually I wandered into one of Saddam's conference rooms. It had two massive floor-to-ceiling windows. One mortar and anyone in the room would be vapor. *The men would be mad to choose this place*, I thought. I dragged my cot in there and slept for the first long stretch in days.

A FEW DAYS into the ban on going outside, I decided to violate orders and go to the post-office trailer to send my family a letter. We'd been discouraged from mentioning via email or phone how dire the situation in the embassy compound really was, but I was desperate to communicate with my parents. Or maybe I just got lazy. It's tiring, trying to stay alive all the time. I put on full gear and helmet and waited for lunchtime, when mortars were fewer. Running, I could make the trip in less than five minutes.

I stood by the door for a moment, and when I heard nothing, I pushed outside, jogging toward the post office. And then the sirens blared. "Incoming!"

The next thing I knew, I was facedown in the gravel at the foot of the post-office stairs. *I'm so stupid. How could I have done this to my family? Don't let me die. Don't let me die.*

The earth isn't hard like we think it is. It snaps like a rubber band. The first mortar landed. The second one lifted me off the ground. I crawled to the nearest T-wall, a few feet away. I didn't hear the third impact at all; I only felt air heavy as water roll over me.

"Are you hit?"

I opened my eyes. The marine with the crooked nose from the other side of the yellow glass—he must have seen me leave the palace. His mouth moved again. The roar was so loud.

"Are you hit?"

"No," I whispered. He picked me up by my vest with one hand. I swayed to the left, and he caught me in his arms. Another crash near the pool. He spun me so that I faced the palace and shoved me hard. *Go!* Then he ran toward the mortar rounds in search of more casualties. *Toward* them. I thought how

brave that man was. How were we supposed to report one of these guys? Maybe the soldier who harassed or even molested you didn't save your life, but what about someone else's? Do you report a man who is mission-critical?

Back at the palace, I sat in my office, still in full gear and helmet. I didn't remember walking there. Commander Scott Rye was speaking to me. *What's wrong? Why are you wearing your helmet?* I'd been knocked briefly unconscious by the blast, and I'd be diagnosed with a concussion. He helped me up and half-carried me to the palace infirmary.

"I'm sorry I'm like this," I mumbled. The infirmary was full, so we waited in the hall. I was leaning on him and then lying in his lap, which embarrassed me, and I apologized again. Commander Rye was a reserved, professional man. We had rarely spoken, but that afternoon he wiped the layer of dust and sand from my face, patted my head, tried to soothe me.

"I can't sleep here," I mumbled. Men, men everywhere.

"Sure you can."

I must have trusted him. I did sleep.

IT WASN'T an easy decision, but I gave my two weeks' notice several days after the mortar attack that picked me up and dropped me near the post-office stairs. It is miraculous that nothing worse happened to me other than being very scared. Ann, with her bodyguard husband, made it to the end relatively unscathed and started her goat farm. Morgan recovered in London and returned to Baghdad after I left. Once she returned home, Theresa became pregnant with her third child and retired from the military, which she'd always miss. The Naval Academy graduate recovered from her shin splints and became a lieutenant commander. And Nicole, with her wild red hair, who liked to announce her arrival in the dining hall with a coffee cup slammed on the table and the words *Iraq's had a real ass-kicking this month,*

Nicole who loved Baghdad—she was blown up in a municipal building in Sadr City. The bomb had been placed for the Iraqi politicians she was meeting. In one of the last emails she sent, she wrote, “I love this job!”

IN 2008, the Pentagon ramped up efforts to prevent sexual assault and make offenders more accountable. Since then there has been a substantial drop in incidents: from approximately 34,200 in 2006 to 14,900 in 2016, based on a confidential survey. Yet recent data suggest that the number has risen, with 20,500 victims of sexual assault in 2018. It’s hard to know exactly what to make of this, but one finding is particularly surprising: Despite the #MeToo movement, service members were somewhat less likely to report an assault in 2018 than they were in 2016, based on comparing figures in the confidential survey with reported incidents.

Sometimes I wonder if it’s the nature of warfare itself that is to blame for the persistence of sexual abuse in the military. We ask men to do violence in service to the state, to be paragons of hypermasculinity. Can we simultaneously ask them to change the way they perform masculinity toward women? Can we ask them to make safe spaces for women in war?

But Rear Admiral Smith treated women with respect, treated us simply as colleagues united in a common mission. Commander Rye did too. The men of the Italian Personal Security Detail did too. As do thousands of soldiers performing their duty honorably under great stress.

In a photograph of me taken during this time, my face is nearly transparent from lack of sunlight, deep blues and purples framing my eyes. When I look at that photograph, I remember a 21-year-old woman learning how to make strategic battlefield assessments about where to sleep, what to wear, how to engage with male co-workers without risking sexual assault. I lasted about a year in Iraq. I don’t know whether I could have lasted longer. Maybe I could have withstood the pressures of IEDs and mortars and stray fire over the

Tigris and a workload more appropriate for three analysts if not for the less explicable, less tangible pressure of the ratio: too many men paying too much attention.

This article appears in the October 2019 print edition with the headline “Get a Weapon.”

SANDRA SIDI *teaches at Texas State University and is working on a novel about Israeli soldiers.*