

U.S.

5 Women Say Sex Charges In Army Case Were Coerced

By PETER T. KILBORN MARCH 12, 1997

Five women who were Army recruits said today that investigators had coerced them into falsely accusing officers of sexual misconduct at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland.

So far at least 50 women have made official complaints of sexual abuse at Aberdeen, including 27 rape complaints. One officer and about 20 noncommissioned officers, mostly drill sergeants, have been implicated since the accusations first became known last November, and there have since been complaints of abuse at several other Army bases.

Five sergeants face courts-martial -- one was charged today. Last month one of the women who spoke today, Pvt. Toni Moreland, was charged with disobeying a noncommissioned officer, being away without leave and making a false statement under oath.

The women, four privates and one who has been discharged, appeared at a news conference held near the post by officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The women said they had been compelled to make statements after promises of immunity from prosecution and under threat of retaliation if they did not.

Which sergeants the women's charges involved and the exact nature of the charges were not clear. But a lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P., Stuart Jay Robinson, said that some of the women might have engaged in consensual sex and that the Army had goaded them into calling it rape.

One of the women, Pvt. Brandi Krewson, said, "I agreed to tell them what they wanted to hear in order for them to leave me alone." Another private, Darla Hornberger, said that in eliciting accusations of sexual abuse from her, "everything they said was a lie."

Kathryn Leming, who has left the Army, said, "I never admitted that I was raped." But she said she had been told that under military law consensual sex was considered rape.

"They pushed me and pushed me until basically they tried to make me say 'rape,' " she said. "But I would not do it. It was not the truth."

Pvt. Kelly Wagner said, "They are not allowing me to speak what I feel because they're afraid that it could maybe help the defense."

Paul Boyce, spokesman for the investigation command, said responding to the women's accusations would violate a "longstanding procedure" against discussing active cases.

In a statement, the command noted that investigators routinely obtained sworn statements from suspects, subjects, victims and witnesses in pretrial interviews. Those interviewed swear that "the statement is made freely without hope of benefit or reward, without threat of punishment and without coercion, unlawful influence or unlawful inducement," the command added.

The N.A.A.C.P. has become involved because of suspicions of discrimination against black sergeants. Most of the men implicated in the Army's sexual abuse cases are black, and most of the accusers are white. "There are possible civil rights violations on behalf of the accusers and the accused that ought to be looked at," Kweisi Mfume, the N.A.A.C.P. president, said at the news conference.

In an interview later, he added: "I think it may be more than just race. It may also be class and rank."

Mr. Mfume said that he was urging Army Secretary Togo D. West Jr. to permit an independent investigation of the misconduct charges and that he had spoken to him twice today and would meet with him on Wednesday.

"What we do see is a very inadequate investigation," Mr. Mfume said. The women were not allowed legal representation when they were questioned, he said, and they were threatened and intimidated into making false accusations. "They were basically put in a situation where they felt coerced."

At a brief news conference after the women's appearance, Lieut. Col. Gabriel Riesco, chief of staff to Maj. Gen. Robert D. Shadley, training ground commander, said he also could not comment on the cases. He said the post shared the N.A.A.C.P.'s concern that those involved be treated fairly and equally. "Race has never been an issue in this investigation at all," Colonel Riesco said. "It is an investigation of sin, not skin."

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