

Sergeant Major, survivor of assault, speaks against stigma

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Sgt. Maj. Aaron Stone, sexual assault survivor, shares his sexual assault story to the 1st Theater Sustainment Command during sexual assault awareness and prevention month at Fort Knox, Kentucky, April 1, 2022. Eliminating sexual assault and harassment

Army.mil Editor's Note: This story contains descriptions of sexual assault and self-harm some audiences may find disturbing.

FORT KNOX, Ky. — In observance of Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month the 1st Theater Sustainment Command hosted an event at Waybur Theater at Fort Knox on April 1.

Sgt. Maj. Aaron Stone, a survivor of sexual assault, was invited by the command to share his story with the formation.

Before introducing Stone, Maj. Gen. Michel M. Russell Sr., commanding general of the 1st TSC, provided opening remarks impressing upon the room that sexual assault prevention should not be limited to a month, but something that our formations should be working on every day.

“[Sexual assault], sexual harassment, and anything related to that intrusion

of your personal space, your body, your mind, your integrity, your soul is not a 31-day period. It is not," Russell said. "It is a lifetime because the impact lasts a lifetime."

He stressed that the terminology used for those who have been assaulted matters and shapes the way people are perceived.

"Survivors, not victims, because they live to tell the horrible tale. They are a survivor in my eyes," Russell stated. "Because it takes immense personal courage to come forward and talk about something like that, immense personal courage. That's the first thing I want leaders to recognize when this comes to your door."

He charged the leaders in the room with fulfilling their obligation when Soldiers report and ensure they care for survivors with empathy and professionalism.

"When it falls on your desk to do something about, then I want you to move out and draw fire. You contact CID. You contact JAG," Russell said. "Do not have a survivor thinking that you do not care. You take the emotions out of it, and you handle it professionally and get after it. That's what we have to do as leaders."

When introducing Stone, Russell noted that Stone coming to talk to the organization took tremendous courage to be willing to share something that has had such a profound effect on himself and others.

"Sgt. Maj. Stone, on behalf of the First Team, I want to thank you personally for speaking to us, for the message you are going to leave with us," Russell said. "I admire your courage. I admire your ability to take something that has happened to you and turn it into something that will benefit us all."

Russell also addressed the audience once more, "Pay close attention, and take what you can out of this, and from this, and use it to make what you do better and more effective. At the end of the day, Sgt. Maj. Stone is going to make sure we know better, so we can do better so that we can be better, and at the end of the day, we have got to act better."

Then Stone took the stage.

"I don't follow a script. I don't memorize anything. I tell the story every time I speak from the heart. So, maybe a minor detail or two is missing, but the major points are always there," Stone said.

The Goldsboro, North Carolina, native detailed how he was a child of

divorced parents. His grandparents took him in and raised him for a while, and his grandfather became his male role model until he died. His passing left a void in Stone's life. In 1991, at the age of 14, Stone met a middle school science teacher at the restaurant where he worked. This teacher became Stone's male role model and friend. On Aug. 24, 1992, that man raped Stone.

"I know we like to use the word sexual assault in the Army, of course, sexual assault is a plethora of things from one end of the spectrum to the other," Stone said. "But I like to use the word rape because it's a nasty, dirty, filthy four-letter word."

In previous years, Stone would provide the details of the attack, but he no longer does because they aren't necessary for an audience to know. Instead, he focuses on the impact the event had on him and his life from that moment on.

Stone talked about the reactions of fight, flight and freeze. How his body froze, but his mind didn't; and while many sexual assault survivors cannot recall the details of their assault, he could remember every detail. A few days after the assault, he said he received an apology letter from that teacher. It didn't outline anything specific, but someone could tell something inappropriate happened between an adult and a minor, teacher and student. He threw it away and wanted nothing more to do with the man.

His mother found the letter and approached him about it later that evening.

"Me being 15 and raised to keep my emotions to myself because that's not what a real man does, I denied that he touched me," he said. "I said we just got into an argument and that's what he's apologizing for. She never mentioned it to me again. I thought she took it at face value and left it at that."

After graduating high school Stone decided to enlist in the Army instead of attending college, becoming a combat medic.

"I did my job very well ... and even though this internal pain was there, I was able to keep my personal and professional life very separate for a very long time," Stone said. "Seeing behavioral health at that time was seen as a stigma. It was a no-no, because you were seen as weak. You were seen as detrimental to the force. I wasn't going to see anyone about this. I was going to keep the pain to myself."

To cope, Stone turned to cutting, mostly on his upper arms and thighs so no one could tell when he was in his physical fitness uniform.

“Every day I thought of this, but come zero six with Reveille, PT in the morning, I’m private, sergeant whoever Stone, and no one was the wiser,” he said.

The war in Afghanistan began in 2001 and two years later in Iraq, which kept him busy professionally.

“I held the hands of Soldiers as they breathed their last. I saw the best that man can offer, and I saw the worst,” Stone said. “But no matter what I experienced, nothing could top the pain that I felt back in 1992, which is still on my mind.”

Even as seeking behavioral health started becoming normalized, Stone continued to keep his pain and struggle to himself. He got married. He shared that his wife told him on their second date that she had been raped by one of her brother’s friends, yet he still couldn’t mention his own.

It wasn’t until 2010, when he had a panic attack while driving, that he finally told his story.

“Something triggered in my mind in such a way to cause me to have a nervous breakdown while I’m driving,” he said. “I had to pull over to the side of the road. I’m shaking uncontrollably. I’m crying. I called my wife, I said, ‘I can’t do this,’ and I told her my story for the very first time and I needed help.”

That very next day, Stone enrolled in an inpatient/outpatient program for behavioral health, and that same day, he told his story for the first time to a group of strangers.

“It’s cliché, but it’s true,” he said. “As soon as it was out there, it seemed like the weight of the world was lifted off my shoulders. I was like I can do this. I can take that step forward.”

A few months later, Stone looked up the statute of limitations for statutory rape in North Carolina.

“It turned out there were none, but all I had was my word from an event that happened 17 years prior against this pillar of the community, but I’ll give it a try,” he said.

Stone called the local police department, and they asked him to come up to

give his statement. He traveled from Fort Rucker, Alabama, back to Goldsboro. He provided a written statement and even showed them where he lived. Stone didn't think anything would happen since he had no proof.

"A week later I received a phone call," he said. "They had arrested Mr. Pate the night before. He was currently sitting in county jail under half a million-dollar bond on the charges of statutory rape and sexual [offenses] with a minor."

During the investigation the police spoke to the former school superintendent who said they had a file on the teacher. In that file was this letter that Stone had received. His mother had taken the letter to the school board and Pate had been allowed to retire quietly.

"I had no idea this woman did this for me. She never mentioned it at all." Stone said. "And because my story corroborated with the dates on this letter, they had enough proof to arrest him."

Getting ready to testify at the trial, Stone shared that he made the mistake of reading comments on social media. People questioned why it took 17 years for this person to say something. People stated they would have done something immediately.

"To read comments like that saying, well I would have done this or I would have done that, you don't know what you're going to do until you walked a mile in that person's shoes," Stone said. "I probably would have said the same thing if I didn't have this life-transforming event happen to me."

Pate eventually pled out and took a lesser sentence, so Stone didn't have to testify.

"But I know I did my part to ensure that one person was off the street who couldn't touch my wife, who couldn't molest my daughter, who wouldn't sexually assault any of your family members, and that's all we can do is one person at a time," he said.

No one else ever came forward during the trial. Stone stated that either he was the only one unlucky enough to have to suffer or that others were continuing to suffer in silence.

"This is why I do this so that those of you who are suffering in silence will have the courage to speak up," he said. "No matter how many years it is, no matter how much time has passed to have the courage to speak up and do something."

Stone continued to outline additional reasons for sharing his story. He shares to encourage leaders to create an environment where Soldiers can speak up. He shares so that men are represented as survivors.

“We’ve been talking about SHARP on the forefront for well over a decade now, and every time I saw a pamphlet, every time I saw literature it was always a female’s face. Where was the male representation? They’re out there because I’ve talked to them,” he said. “But they’re afraid to speak up because they don’t want to be ostracized. They don’t want to be looked down upon.”

The first time he shared his story with Soldiers was as the first sergeant of a company. He didn’t know how it would be received, but it was received well. So, he continues to share so that others may feel they can too.

“We, as leaders, have to create an environment in which Soldiers can have moral courage because once one Soldier is denied it’s going to spread like wildfire, like a cancer that spreads quickly,” he said.

Stone continued to stress upon the audience the importance of understanding our mental models and our biases surrounding rape and sexual assault. He highlighted that the paradigm needs to shift to properly address the issue of sexual assault prevention not only in our formations but in our society.

“Change takes time though. Like the Titanic, it’s going to take time to turn. We have to continue working at it,” he said. “You’re not going to see results right away, but if we keep chipping at it, we will.”

He emphasized the value of listening to other people, getting different perspectives, and trying to understand our biases and where they come from in order to change them.

“That’s what we’re trying to change, those biases, those mental models, the paradigm shift to ensure that our force is safe because we have enough people out there wanting to hurt us already,” he said. “We don’t need to be worried about someone behind, to our left and right doing us harm.”

Stone then gave his final reason for sharing his story, and that is to try to prevent loss of life. He talked about a Soldier he had when he was a battalion command sergeant major, Sgt. 1st Class Ramon Reyes. Reyes ultimately committed suicide because he could no longer bear the pain of the sexual assault he suffered at his first unit, something he carried with

him for over 20 years.

“Please, if you are hurting inside, if you want to seek help, please do so,” he urged. “Confide to a friend, confide to a battle buddy, seek professional help. Take away that stigma of seeing behavioral health, they are there for you. I’m living proof. I’ve been seeing behavioral health for well over a decade and I’m still in uniform. It did not affect my career whatsoever.”

“I want to thank you first of all for what you do. Just putting on this uniform is hard enough. As I said, I’m taking this off after two decades and a half... 25 years, and I’m done. I’m leaving the force to you now. I expect you to make sure this force is better in a decade than it was when I came in.”

Stone then opened the floor to questions. Several Soldiers and leaders in the audience took the opportunity to ask questions ranging from what rank he was when he finally told his story to what leaders need to be aware of that may prevent Soldiers from reporting. The final question came from 1st Lt. Katrina Townsend, accounting officer, 18th Financial Support Center, asking for tips to encourage Soldiers to speak up and speak out.

“The biggest tip I can give is it’s easier said than done of course,” he said.

He closed with, “But seek that help. I promise you it does not get better with time. I contemplated suicide many times. I came close a few, but I never pulled that trigger. Don’t be like Sgt. 1st Class Reyes. Don’t be Ramon. We don’t need to lose another one. One is more than enough, and sadly, we are seeing more every day.”

Russell came back to the stage and presented Stone with a token of appreciation and a commander’s coin for sharing his story.

“Sgt. Maj. Stone, as we anticipated, or at least I anticipated, you were going to give us some profound statements and the life experience that we can carry with us,” Russell said. “On behalf of all of us at the First Team, and all of us that this is being streamed to downrange, and all of the folks we are going to share your story with, I want to give you a little token of our esteem.”

To finish out the event, the general was joined on stage by additional Soldiers to sign the SAAPM proclamation.

“I wanted this to be meaningful, really meaningful, not just something that we do every month, Russell said. “This has to be something we do routinely because what we make routine no longer becomes foreign and

we are no longer afraid of it and build trust within the process, and I want to build trust within this process.

In the absence of a command sergeant major, Russell invited Stone to sign the proclamation with him as an honorary command sergeant major.

“Sgt. Maj. Stone has been duly tested, tried and has gone through the crucible of survival and has shown himself to be a true leader, and for the next 30 seconds he’s the 1st TSC command sergeant major, so congratulations,” Russell said.

With that, both Russell and Stone signed the proclamation.

“Alright, we just signed a piece of paper,” Russell emphasized. “Let’s give it teeth and let’s get after it.”