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Thursday, June 15th, 2006

Sexually Harassed Soldier is Arrested After Refusing to Redeploy to Iraq

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Police in Eugene, Oregon have arrested 21-year-old Army Specialist Suzanne Swift for refusing to return to fight in Iraq. Swift served in Iraq for a year but decided she could not return and went AWOL. Not only did she feel the war lacked purpose, Swift said her superiors repeatedly sexually harassed her while serving in Iraq. We speak with her mother, Sara Rich. [includes rush transcript]

Police in Eugene, Oregon have arrested a 21-year-old Army Specialist for refusing to return to fight in Iraq.

The soldier, Suzanne Swift, served in Iraq for a year but decided she could not return. And like thousands of other soldiers, she went AWOL. Not only did Swift feel the war lacked purpose, she said her superiors repeatedly sexually harassed her while serving in Iraq.

Swift remained AWOL until Sunday night when the Eugene police knocked on her mother's front door. She was arrested and taken to the county jail. Then she was transferred to Fort Lewis in Washington. She has been forced to return to her unit but is barred from leaving the base. No charges have been filed against her yet for deserting.

We speak with Suzanne Swift's mother, Sara Rich.

- **Sara Rich**, mother of Army Specialist Suzanne Swift. Email her at formydaughtersuzanne@yahoo.com

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We're joined now in Portland, Oregon by Sara Rich. She's the mother of the Army Specialist Suzanne Swift. We welcome you to Democracy Now!

SARA RICH: Hello, Amy.

AMY GOODMAN: It's good to have you with us. Can you tell us exactly what happened to Sarah? What happened when she went to Iraq, and what happened when she came home?

SARA RICH: I'll tell you what happened to Suzanne. When Suzanne was 19, she was recruited into the Army, and they promised her she would never go to Iraq. The first thing they told her when she went to basic training is that she was going to Iraq and that she was going to die. She got home from her basic training and was immediately sent to Iraq, where we thought that she would be facing danger from the war, but mostly she was facing danger from her sergeants that were in charge of her.

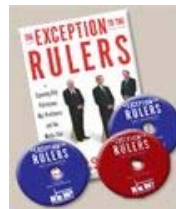
She spent a year there and I sat on my hands not saying anything

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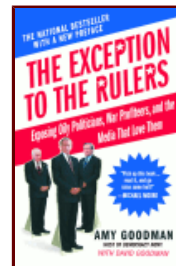


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because she said that if I said anything about the sexual harassment and assaults, that she would be in more danger than she was in already. When she came home, I said, "Can I say something now?" She said, "No, please don't, mom. I'll just get in so much trouble, and I'll be a traitor to my country and to my unit. So I didn't say anything, and then within a month of her being back, her sergeant -- she reported to her sergeant and said, "Where do I report to in the morning, sergeant?" And he said, "In my bed, naked."

At that point she broke and decided to go and tell, and he was moved to a different unit, and she was shamed and treated terribly by her unit for some time. Then they told her she was going to be redeployed. We thought she would have 18 months of stabilization time. And they forced her to sign a waiver waiving her rights to 18 months and were sending her back 11 months after her first return from Iraq. She then prepared to go back to Iraq, and three days before her deployment, she had her keys in her hand. She was in the kitchen, and we were looking at each other, and she said -- she turned to me, and she said, "Mom, I just can't go back." I said, "Are you serious?" She said, "I'm serious. I can't go back there."

And from then on, she decided to go AWOL from the Army, and that was six months ago. During that time she's been seeing a psychologist, dealing with her post-traumatic stress disorder, and planning on turning herself back in. However, on Sunday night, the Eugene Police Department came to our house at 10:30 p.m., when we were all in bed, and came to the house and arrested Suzanne and took her to jail and now she's been taken back to Fort Lewis and put back in active duty with her 54th M.P. unit.

AMY GOODMAN: Have you had a chance to speak to her there?

SARA RICH: I sure have. I sure have. She -- I talked to her on Tuesday, and I spoke to her on Wednesday, yesterday.

AMY GOODMAN: What did she say?

SARA RICH: She said, "how can I help, mom? What can I do?" I said, "sweetheart, just stay safe." They took her back and they put her under the care of one of the sergeants that we are actually pressing criminal charges against for the harassment in Iraq. So I called her attorney immediately, who was already on the base, for her, and he got her changed, and we got a no-contact order with that sergeant.

AMY GOODMAN: We invited the military to join us on the program, but they declined. However, Tammy Reed, a spokesperson from Fort Lewis where your lawyer is being held, in Washington, provided the following statement:

TAMMY REED: Specialist Swift has returned to Fort Lewis and is on duty in her unit. She will in-process back into the installation on -- today, Wednesday, June 14. She has also been restricted to her unit area and her pass privileges have been revoked, meaning she cannot leave Fort Lewis. Her chain of command is thoroughly investigating the circumstances surrounding her absence from the unit and no charges have yet been filed.

Because the matter is under investigation, and for privacy reasons, we cannot discuss details of Specialist Swift's case. The Army is committed to ensuring that every soldier is treated with dignity and respect, and the commanders take very seriously any claims of mistreatment, and investigate each claim thoroughly to determine the facts of the case and take appropriate action.

AMY GOODMAN: Tammy Reed is a spokesperson at Fort

16, 2006

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Lewis, Washington where Suzanne Swift is now being held. She's released from prison, she's with her unit. We're talking to her mother Sara Rich in a studio in Portland, Oregon. Sarah, can you talk more about her experience in Iraq, and were there other women in her unit?

SARA RICH: From what I remember, there were two other women in her unit, and most of the time the three women were separated and had their own rooms. Her experience with the war -- she was a Humvee driver so she was the driver of a Humvee for a combat patrol when she was in Karbala in Iraq, and she -- I think we were both just so shocked at the treatment that almost every one of the soldiers, the male soldiers gave her that we didn't quite know what to do for the first couple of months. Well, and we couldn't do anything because she would have been a traitor to her country and to her unit if she had spoken up.

There was one soldier who was her confidant and her friend and helped her, and when she was in real trouble or really scared of some of the sergeants and what they were doing to her, he was the one that would give her solace and comfort. She said he was the only man that was faithful to his wife in that unit, and how much she cared about him, and he's still her friend today.

So she encountered so much harassment that -- it was daily, sometimes it was hourly. She was punished. She was in her own room so she had -- you know, the some of the sergeants, especially this one main sergeant had access to her all the time. He would show up in the middle of the night, intoxicated, wanting to have sex with her and if she said no, she would be punished. She used to say, "He's just insane, mom. He's an insane person, and I'm scared to death."

AMY GOODMAN: And explain, then, how she told others about what happened, her superiors, when they had him moved to another unit, not punished, but moved, is that right?

SARA RICH: This is somebody else. She has not reported this one. The only one that she reported was after she got back from Iraq and had been serving as a military police officer in Fort Lewis. Her direct supervisor, or the person she reported to, was the one who did that and he was a different sergeant. And he is one of the three we are going to be pursuing with criminal charges soon.

AMY GOODMAN: Suzanne Swift, right now, talking about the person that she had to deal with, even at Fort Lewis, explain there.

SARA RICH: Explain there? When she was in Fort Lewis?

AMY GOODMAN: Yes.

SARA RICH: And she was serving as a military police officer in Fort Lewis and she -- this is the one that when she went up to them the night before she was supposed to report to duty, she said, "Sergeant, where do you want me to report to?" and he looked at her, and it was in a group of people, and he said, "In my bed, naked." And that was the straw that broke Suzanne's back, and she said, "I can't do this anymore."

She turned around and went immediately and reported him. They were both investigated. She said she was treated horribly, that it was basically her -- both of their faults, that they were both culpable for the harassment and the involvement, and he was moved to a different unit, and she told me that he was promoted. I'm not sure if that's accurate. And then she was treated like a traitor. She called me, crying, for days afterwards because people would call her names, and not look at her, and not talk to her and it was very stressful and very sad for her, the way people would respond to her finally speaking up for herself.

AMY GOODMAN: SARA, why did Suzanne join the military?

SARA RICH: Well, she got a real good deal, Amy. They -- the recruiters really wooed her. She was in a -- She had graduated from high school. She was in a dead end -- well, she working at Safeway, and she was miserable. She hated going to work every day. She didn't know what to do. You know, we looked at college, and she just said she wasn't ready for college, and the recruiters were calling our home. They have our home number, and they were offering her travel and college money and training and if she signed up for the special deal of being a military police officer for five years instead of four, she would not be deployed to Iraq, because at that time they weren't deploying military police to Iraq, she was told.

AMY GOODMAN: And yet, she was deployed.

SARA RICH: Immediately.

AMY GOODMAN: What are your thoughts right now, Sarah, as Suzanne's mother, what do you want to happen right now? And will you be suing the military?

SARA RICH: Well Suzanne is -- you know, this has gotten bigger than Suzanne. Right now I want Suzanne to have an honorable discharge because she has post-traumatic stress from being treated so horribly in a war zone by the people that were supposed to be caring for her and in charge of her very life were molesting and harassing her so I want Suzanne's rights to be honored, and I want her to be discharged from the Army with full benefits because her emotional and psychological well-being is so compromised.

But what's really surprising me, Amy, is the amount of women veterans that have been calling and emailing, saying, "That's exactly what happened to me, and nobody listened." It breaks my heart, and Suzanne is just shocked at how many people are supporting her and saying, "You're not alone and you're not crazy. That's what happened to me, and it wasn't your fault." And that's the big thing for Suzanne because she has really thought that this was all her fault.

AMY GOODMAN: Are you sorry she joined the military, Sara Rich?

SARA RICH: Oh, so sorry, so sorry that she joined the military, and that's one of the things I do, I'm a counter-military recruiter now, and Suzanne has said, "Mom, I want to join you as soon as I'm clear. I want to join you and tell kids what the recruiters are really doing. It's really like selling your soul to the devil to go be human fodder for an illegal war."

AMY GOODMAN: What do you do as a counter-military recruiter?

SARA RICH: We go to rural high schools, especially rural high schools because that's where the recruiters go, where there's kids that don't really have the money for education, where they don't have anything to do other than, you know, work in a gas station, possibly, that's, you know, what they have to look forward to. So when the recruiters come and they say, "let me take you out to lunch, let me give you this, let me promise you a college education. Let me promise you a future. Let me promise you world travel. And, you know, you probably won't go to Iraq, it will be over by the time you get in."

So we go and we talk to these kids and we get them real fired up, but it's the kids that are already with us that are already against the war that are -- you know, because this isn't about anti-military, this is about the way that our military is being deployed and treated as human fodder that is so wrong. And we get these kids fired up, and they're the ones that work with their peers. They're the ones that are most effective in telling their peers, "Don't sign up. Are you kidding me? Don't risk your life."

AMY GOODMAN: SARA, if people want to reach you, do you have a website or an email address that you want to share? Remember, this is public; it goes out on hundreds of stations so you could get a lot of mail.

SARA RICH: Sure, somebody did set up an email account, and it's at Yahoo, and it's ForMyDaughterSuzanne@yahoo.com. And yeah, I'm already getting a lot of email. I was up for hours yesterday answering the emails.

AMY GOODMAN: SARA Rich, we look forward to speaking to you again. We'll certainly follow your daughter Suzanne Swift's case. I just want to thank you for joining us from Portland, Oregon.

SARA RICH: Thank you, Amy, so much.

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