At War is a newsletter about the experiences and costs of war. Sign up here to get it delivered to your inbox every Friday.

Each year since the late 1990s, public surveys have found that Americans have a high confidence in the country’s armed forces, often higher than for any other American institution. This public confidence largely endured even as American plans in Afghanistan and Iraq repeatedly failed, and as thousands of men and women in uniform died and tens of thousands more were wounded in wars that did not achieve what the military and its leaders set out to do.

For many people who served in these recent wars, living within the services’ stifling bureaucracies or laboring in operations or circumstances that eroded their confidence in the Pentagon and the brass, these results can feel both familiar and odd. How do the services seemingly get a pass? Is public support reflexive, a species of approval as automatic as some of the thank-you-for-your-service gestures that are a feature of life as a service member or veteran?

The disconnect between public support and military performance extends beyond the failures in the wars. It’s a feature as well in how the military handles issues away from the battlefields, including, as presented this week in At War, in cases of sexual harassment and public health.

On April 3, Patricia Kime wrote about the dangers of lead exposure in military service and the multiyear odyssey of Stephen Hopkins, a Special Forces veteran who suffered “crippling nausea, constant dizziness, a skyrocketing heart rate” and later “migraine symptoms, abnormal thirst and muddled thinking.” His symptoms began in 2005. Hopkins received a proper diagnosis — chronic lead exposure — in 2012, and only after
he collapsed and his parents drove him to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The military, Kime’s reporting found, has resisted wider monitoring of its members for exposure, and has not followed earlier warnings.

That soldiers are exposed to lead while on the job isn’t news for the Army. A 1996 study by the Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine noted that soldiers on bases were at risk for exposure to ‘unhealthy levels of lead’ from firing ranges, battery repair, lead paint and building demolition. The center recommended fully implementing ‘existing Army policies, programs and procedures for lead-exposure reduction’ and including lead ‘as a priority pollutant in ... pollution prevention programs.’ Yet Hopkins and others say they never received explicit warnings of potential lead exposure or guidance on proper range hygiene.

The Army Thought He Was Faking His Health Issues. Turns Out He Had Chronic Lead Poisoning.

After years of misdiagnoses, Stephen Hopkins learned that lead in his bones was making him sick. Now he’s calling for the military to increase testing for metal poisoning in troops.

April 3, 2019
I Followed My Father Into the Marines. But It Was Different for a Woman.

I faced constant sexual harassment in the corps. It was a side of the military neither of us wanted to see.

April 4, 2019

On April 4, At War published an essay by Cristine Pedersen, a former Marine Corps cryptologist who followed her father into the service. Pedersen was raised in a Marine ethos, a climate of almost religious devotion to the corps. She completed her demanding training and volunteered for deployment, only to have her good-faith service betrayed. Pedersen was subjected to misogyny and repeated sexual harassment, and to small-unit leaders who often did not act upon her complaints. For much of her service, she withheld the sordid details from her father, worried that he too might play down her suffering or be inclined not to believe her. “My father and many Marines I served with,” Pedersen wrote, “failed to grasp both the extent of the abuses and their costs. In the summer of 2015 I let my enlistment expire, and I started college three weeks later. I felt exhausted by my career and angry that my father still felt so loyal to an institution that had repeatedly dehumanized me.”
How to square this kind of deep loyalty to the armed forces and high public support with a long record of failures? Pedersen proposed an answer that aligns with the mission of At War. “You can simultaneously love an institution and recognize how it is failing. The truest form of commitment is perhaps to bring these failures to light.”

The Latest From At War

Afghan War Casualty Report: March 29-April 4  April 4, 2019

Bad Food, Broken-Down Trucks: What It’s Like to Be a U.S. Soldier on the Mexico Border  April 5, 2019

Editor’s Picks

Russia’s Military Mission Creep Advances to a New Front: Africa: In an influence campaign that is worrying the Pentagon, Russia’s weapons sales, military training programs and security agreements are growing across Africa.

Freed From ISIS, Syrians Struggle to Rebuild Raqqa: The Syrian city was liberated from the Islamic State more than a year and a half ago, but rebuilding is slow and hope is fading.

The Secret Death Toll of America’s Drones: President Trump is making it harder to know how many civilians the government kills by remote control.

U.S. Troops Leaving Syria, but Some May Stay Longer Than Expected: Hundreds of the 2,000 American troops in Syria are leaving, but new plans will pause the withdrawal before reaching the 400-troop level President Trump approved.

In Rare Speech to Congress, NATO Leader Says Allies Must Deter Moscow: While NATO celebrates turning 70, a squabble between Washington and Ankara over fighter jets and missile systems threatens to spoil the party.