

Hometown woman writes of military betrayal

'Ultimate Power' tells story of sexual assault, officer's punishment, lifelong scars

By CRISTINA SMITH

The military life ain't easy. On top of the physical demands placed on soldiers, a successful military career equals a life of conformity, fierce commitment, loyalty and discipline.

Soldiers follow the rules. They do what their superiors tell them.

Linda Fischer knows about the dynamics between superiors and subordinates.

Now a major in the Army, the Georgetown High School graduate has given almost 20 years of her life to the Army, during which time she has supervised hundreds of soldiers and answered to countless ranking officers.

"That is what the military is about," she said. "When you are talking about taking soldiers into battle, they can't question your authority."

But sometimes, people abuse their authority and cross lines that shouldn't be crossed.

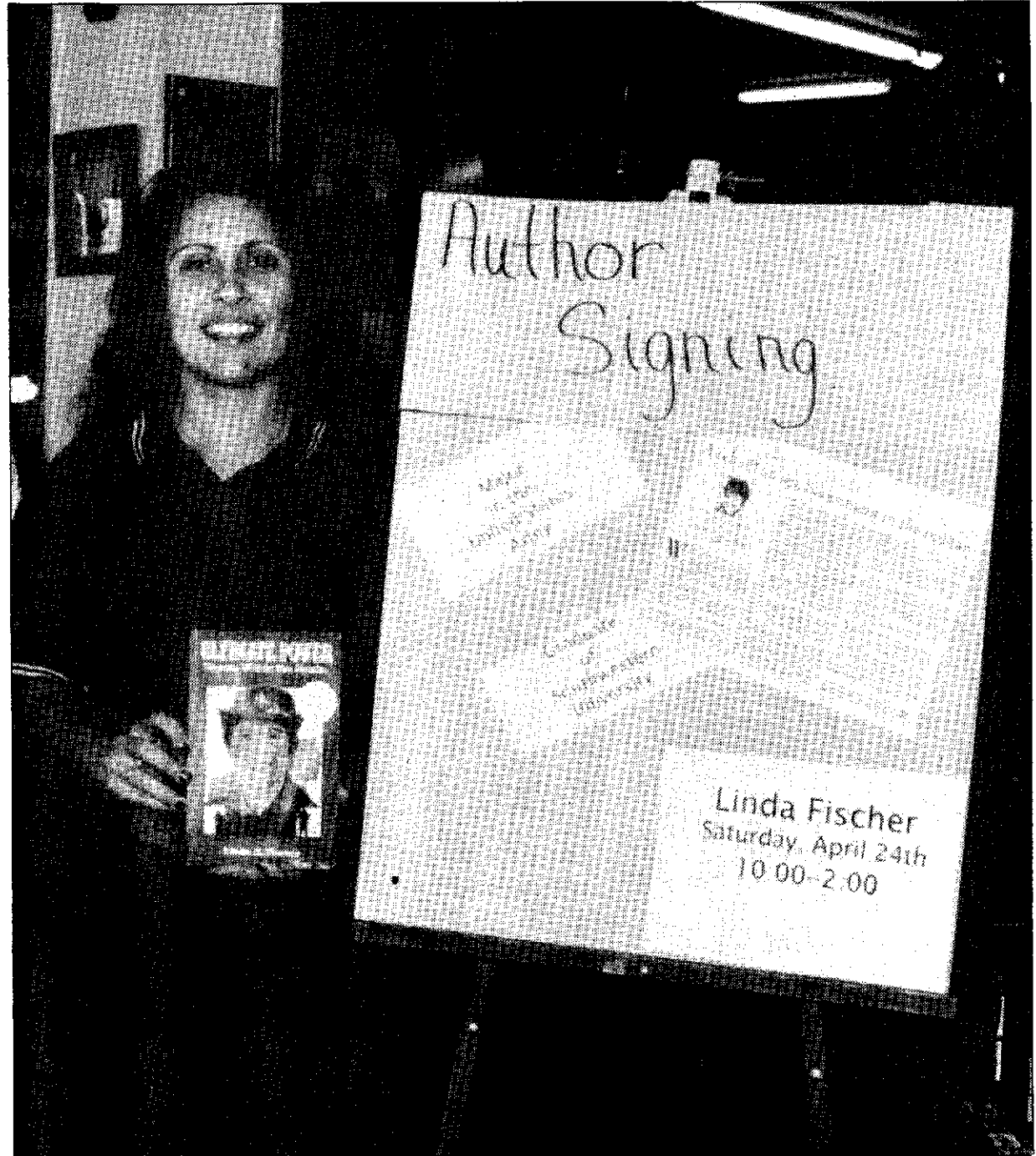
Major Fischer knows all about that, too.

Six years ago she was sexually assaulted in Panama by her commanding officer, then left in the wake of a personal and professional crisis.

In her self-published book, *Ultimate Power: Enemy Within the Ranks*, Linda Fischer recounts the horror of the assault and the series of obstacles she faced when she came forward with her story a year after the attack.

'I think it's important that people understand the process a victim goes through. The person that you were before the assault, you'll never be that person again.'

LINDA FISCHER, ABUSED BY OFFICER



"Nobody should be subjected to what I was subjected to," she said in an interview Wednesday. "Nobody deserves that."

Major Fischer is stationed in Hawaii, but returns to Georgetown to visit her parents Bob and Josie Fischer, often. She said she wrote her book, released in January, because she felt it was important to let others know not only about her experience as a sexual assault victim, but also about how the system failed her.

After reporting the offense to the military authorities — victims are banned from filing the complaint in civilian courts — Major Fischer watched and waited for several months as her case was passed from division to division. During that time, she was asked to undergo psychological tests and even a polygraph.

Upon word that a decision had been made, Major Fischer requested a copy of the case outcome, and was told the only way she could get that was by filing a request through the Freedom of Information office.

She did, and the report, which is printed in her book, stated Major Fischer's commanding officer "had received a general letter of reprimand for the offenses of sodomy, indecent assault, conduct unbecoming a member of the military, and cruelty

LINDA FISCHER, a Georgetown native, stands with a display of her book at the Hill Country Book Store on the Square.

and maltreatment of a subordinate."

Later, he was promoted to full colonel.

Twice a Victim

Major Fischer recounts in her book the outrage she felt at being victimized first by her commanding officer and then by the system that punished offenders with nothing more than a piece of paper.

"What message are they sending out?" she said, referring to her own case as well as others like the Aberdeen scandals where several officers at the Maryland facility were accused of raping and assaulting subordinates.

One officer was acquitted on several different accounts and another officer was fined \$22,000 — less than three months retirement pay, she said.

"It's like adding insult to injury," she said.

In her book, Major Fischer talks about the turmoil she felt immediately after the attack. Her biggest fear at the time was that no one would believe her and her 12-year-career would come to an end.

"It's your word against his," she said.

Because of the way the military hierarchy is constructed, commanding officers have total control

over their subordinates, and are almost solely responsible for reviewing them for promotion, Major Fischer explained. As an officer, if you do not get promoted, you are asked to leave, which effectively ends your military career.

For almost a year, Major Fischer kept her secret, afraid that if she told, her career would go down in flames. Looking back, it wasn't worth it, she said.

"You have a responsibility to follow orders," she said. "But at the same time you have a responsibility to yourself."

A Sense of Betrayal

"I think it's important that people understand the process a victim goes through," she said. "The person that you were before the assault, you'll never be that person again."

Major Fischer describes having feelings of shock and disbelief following the assault. Especially because she knew her offender. Major Fischer said in addition to the physical violation, she felt intense feelings of betrayal.

"In a military structure, there is that underlying

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Book serves as a means of closure

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commitment and loyalty and position, that you entrust yourself to your supervisor," she said. "When you're talking about rape, you're talking about the ultimate violation a person could experience."

Years later, Major Fischer said she still suffers physical and psychological reactions to the assault, but she doesn't blame the Army for it.

"Any time you have a power structure, you have the potential for misuse," she said. "The military still

has great opportunities to offer our young men and women. This was one facet. This was one person."

Writing her book has been a means of closure, Major Fischer said. The idea came when she was visiting her parents in Georgetown from Hawaii, where she serves in the Corps of Engineers.

"It was a catharsis," she said, adding it took her two and a half years to complete the book, which starts with the events leading up to and the details of the attack.

"The first three chapters were the most difficult chapters," she said. "It took so much out of me doing those three chapters that I stopped for almost a year."

Now that her book is completed, Major Fischer said she wants to continue studying the impacts of sexual assault on victims and to be an advo-

cate for change regarding how they are handled in the military.

She has done speaking engagements at high schools in Hawaii, and spoke this week at a psychology class at Southwestern University, from where she graduated in 1981.

Major Fischer dedicated her book to the victims of sexual assault.

"May you find peace and enjoy the happiness life has to offer," she wrote. "I share these words with you as you search for closure."

Major Fischer signed copies of her book at Tim's Book Shop early Friday afternoon and was scheduled to sign books at the Hill Country Bookstore Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The Williamson County Crisis Center provides services to victims of sexual assault. Call 1-800-460-SAFE or 255-1212 for help or information.
