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OP-ED by Shannon Sampert

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No expiry date on sexual misconduct

THE question came on Tuesday morning from a dear friend, one of those guys I consider to be progressive. “Now that we’re reaching back to the student days on the misconduct issue in the military, has it maybe gone too far? Is a party from 2019 going to haunt a commander in 2049?”

My friend was responding to the announcement that Maj.-Gen. Dany Fortin is now out as the head of Canada’s vaccination rollout, after allegations of sexual misconduct. The complaint suggests he exposed himself while a student in 1989 at the Royal Military College in Saint-Jean, Que. Fortin has denied the allegation. He has been relieved of his duties and Brig.-Gen. Krista Brodie will take over as the head of the vaccination campaign, effective immediately.

Of course, the military had no choice but to suspend Fortin — something I explained to my friend. Canada’s Forces are already embroiled in a major sexual misconduct crisis, investigating at least seven complaints against senior officers. Fortin’s is just the latest. A report in the *Globe and Mail* suggests the complaint is being taken seriously; acting Chief of Defence Staff Lt.-Gen. Wayne Eyre and deputy minister Jody Thomas told a *Globe* source all complaints would be dealt with through a proper military investigation.

But more to the issue at hand — the concern that men will have to be responsible for their behaviour at parties in their youth. Is a party in 2019 going to haunt a commander in 2049? That’s an unequivocal yes — and well it should. We need to stop thinking that bad sexual behaviour is something men seemingly grow out of.

What we do know from research is that sexually aggressive men tend to hold on to rape myths, including the belief that women ask for trouble because of their behaviour or how they are dressed. This can be ameliorated by peer intervention — in other words, being provided an alternative worldview by other men might help young men who are sexually aggressive at 18 or 19 grow to understand from peer intervention and education that this is unacceptable.

This change in perspective might not happen in the military, however. Research conducted on military sexual violence within the Canadian Armed Forces suggests the high prevalence of sexual misconduct stems from a number of issues, including cultural acceptance.

The military places a high importance on being a “man” — being dominant, competitive, selfsufficient, aggressive — all traits society deems important for a fighter and a warrior. This leads to hyper-masculinity — often including negative attitudes toward women and sexual misconduct within the ranks. This has meant a culture that allows for sexualized jokes, language that belittles women and LGBTQ+ persons and other more serious incidents.

There is little in the way of protection for those who have been subjected to this type of misconduct, and those within the Armed Forces are expected to look after their own. Don’t ask, don’t tell, and protect your ranks.

Despite a high-profile campaign to stamp out sexual misconduct in its ranks, Department of National Defence figures released to Parliament in April include 581 reports of sexual assault in the past five years, and another 221 incidents of sexual harassment. And because there are many who will never come forward to tell their story, this is likely just the tip of a very big iceberg.

In the meantime, Operation Honour — the attempt to address sexual misconduct in the military — has been deemed a failure and has formally ended. In April, the Status of Women committee probing sexual misconduct in the Forces heard testimony from women in the military. One of them, Emily Tulloch, an aviation technician, testified that the initiative to root out misconduct has “aged like rotten milk and just leaves a sour taste in your mouth.”

The allegations continue. Earlier this week, Vice-Admiral Hayden Edmundson was removed from his post as head of human resources following allegations of rape. Of course, the biggest recent news came in February, when Canada’s new top military commander, Admiral Art McDonald, voluntarily stepped aside as he is investigated by the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service on allegations of sexual misconduct.

McDonald had just replaced Gen. Jonathan Vance, who was under investigation for having a long-standing inappropriate relationship with a female subordinate and separately for having sent a racy email to another woman, also of lower rank.

This is going to be a difficult situation for the Forces to address. It goes to the very core of how the military envisions leaders and builds its ranks. It will require education and a zero-tolerance policy. It will take an influx of women in leadership roles. It will also mean that some men now serving in positions of authority will have to answer for things they did at parties 30 years ago. As well they should.

Shannon Sampert is a Winnipeg-based political scientist and the former politics and perspectives editor of the Winnipeg Free Press.