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STAFF PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

A paradegoer tends to a barbecue pit on Napoleon Avenue as the Krewe of Carrollton rolls on Feb. 12.

## UNNEUTRAL GROUNDS

### With little enforcement of Carnival rules, 'early birds' proliferate along parade routes

BY CHAD CALDER  
Staff writer

Sprawling tarps. Paid sitters. Mannequins standing guard.

Whether it was pent-up public enthusiasm or a lack of high-profile code enforcement sweeps, 2023 seemed to be the year of the parade-route early bird.

Amanda Anjier, back in town for Mardi Gras for the first time in six years, noticed it right away.

Anjier, 27, grew up a few blocks from St. Charles and Napoleon avenues and remembers being able to grab a decent spot on the route shortly before a parade was set to roll.

"Now people are reserving space so far in advance and being rude about it," said Anjier, a writer who now lives in Austin, Texas. "They think that if they put an empty chair down, the entire area is theirs. ... That's not how Mardi Gras works."

To many, the issue of paradegoers bogarting sections of the sidewalk and neutral ground seemed to be worse than ever this year. On social media, photos of tarps, enclosed tents, adjoining canopies, mega-ladders and orange plastic fencing drew condemnation from

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STAFF PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER

Paradegoers watch as the Krewe of Iris parade rolls on the Uptown parade route on Feb. 18.

**"(The Department of Parks and Parkways) removed several oversized, unpermitted structures along the route during Carnival. But when it came to revelers improperly claiming public space, the city appears to have only documented these practices and taken them under advisement."**

MICHAEL KARAM, director of Parks and Parkways Department

## Parish's ties to military in spotlight amid rape case

### Local sheriff says Fort Polk leaders cooperative after 5 soldiers accused

BY FAIMON A. ROBERTS III  
Staff writer

One evening in late November, staff at Beau-regard Memorial Hospital contacted the Vernon Parish Sheriff's Office regarding a sexual assault.

Two women who had arrived at the hospital earlier that day said they had met a group of men at an apartment in the tiny town of Rosepine, where they believed they may have been drugged and raped.

Within days, officers had made arrests: five men, all soldiers at nearby Fort Polk.

The case, with the number of victims and perpetrators, is a "very unusual" one for Rosepine and rural Vernon Parish, a sprawling timber-flanked expanse nestled up against the Texas state line in the west central part of Louisiana.

But it and other recent reports surrounding misconduct at the base highlight the at-times fraught relationship those communities have

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## Roof repairs lead to legal battle

### La. homeowners say law firm, roofers took advantage of them

BY ALENA MASCHKE  
Staff writer

When a young man from a roofing company knocked on the door of Holly and Michael Caffarel's Mandeville home in March, telling them that their roof needed repairs, they thought he was nice, charming even.

"Very personable, not pushy at all," is how Michael Caffarel remembers the representative from Alabama-based Apex Roofing & Restoration. They signed a contract that day and, with the help of the Apex representative, filed a claim with their homeowners insurance to repair the damage caused by a hailstorm in late 2021.

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## SPOTLIGHT

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with their military neighbor, which supplies economic oxygen to the region but whose leaders answer to the Pentagon rather than local authorities.

By all accounts, Fort Polk leadership, headed by Brig. Gen. David Gardner, have taken steps to make sure that the Vernon Parish sheriff's detectives would have any support they needed from the Army in their investigation into the rapes.

Army investigators "worked pretty closely with us on this," Sheriff Sam Craft said. "We have always and still do maintain a good working relationship with them."

That's consistent with the way they have operated during Craft's tenure, he said.

"I can't think of one instance where I myself or really any of my people had any issues dealing with the military," he said.

The Nov. 30 rape arrests serve as a reminder that when soldiers commit crimes, their effects can be felt off base.

Then, in January, military officials took disciplinary action against two other Fort Polk personnel.

On Jan. 5, a Fort Polk soldier was sentenced to 42 years in an Army court on 13 counts of sexually abusing children and possessing child pornography.

And on Jan. 31, Fort Polk



leaders announced that a commander of an engineer battalion had been removed from command "amid allegations of misconduct." The Army Times, which reported the removal, cited an anonymous source in linking the action to an incident at a Dec. 14 holiday party in a Lake Charles casino.

### Rape case advances

The case against the five soldiers, ranging in age from 19 to 29, has been handed over to the district attorney, Craft said. Each remains in the Vernon Parish jail on bail ranging from \$200,000 to \$400,000.

According to Craft, the investigation proceeded quickly after that call from the hospital. The five suspects were largely "cooperative," Craft said.

The case apparently worried brass at Fort Polk enough that Gardner reached out to local community leaders to make sure they knew the Army would not stand for the type of behavior the soldiers were accused of.

"They were the first to

reach out to us and to let us know they were tracking it," said Logan Morris, CEO of the Greater Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce. "They were really concerned about the local communities' image of the installation and the soldiers."

Gardner declined to be interviewed for this article.

Morris said Gardner was keen to make sure the case did not devolve into a situation in which local authorities felt like they were fighting Fort Polk.

The Fort Polk spokesperson, Shelby Waryas, referred all questions about the investigation or the status of the soldiers to Craft. She did not answer follow-up emails.

### Commander dismissed

In the second case, fewer details have emerged after a Jan. 31 news release from Fort Polk announced that Lt. Col. Jon-Paul Depreo, of the 46th Engineer Battalion, had been relieved of his command "for loss of trust and confidence in his judgment and ability to command, amid allegations of misconduct."

The matter remains under investigation, the news release said.

The Army Times report linked Depreo's removal to an incident that occurred at a holiday ball in a Lake Charles casino on Dec. 14. Neither the Lake Charles Police Department nor the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office had any record relating to an incident on that date.

Waryas declined to elaborate beyond what is in the



STAFF PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER

Vernon Parish Sheriff Sam Craft talks about having a good relationship with Fort Polk, in his office in Leesville on Feb. 14.

news release.

In the third case, Pvt. Tyler Davis, an infantryman, was sentenced to 42 years in federal prison on Jan. 5 after pleading guilty to sexually assaulting and raping three children as well as possessing child pornography.

The abuses happened between February and April 2022 on the base, per an Army statement.

All three cases come within months of the Department of Defense releasing an annual audit that showed reports of sexual assault within the mili-

tary are on the rise. The Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military showed that more than 8% of women and 1.5% of men have reported unwanted sexual contact in the 12 months before Sept. 30, 2021.

The numbers represent a marked increase since 2018, when just 6.2% of women reported unwanted sexual contact, though the report notes that some of the metrics and reporting methods have changed and could impact the results.

The report was released Sept. 1.

### An important engine

Louisiana Economic Development estimates that Fort Polk employs almost 15,000 and contributes \$770 million in payroll to the economy, per a report published in October 2021. That does not include millions more spent on contracts and other support industries.

A Fort Polk officer sits permanently as a nonvoting member of the Vernon Parish School Board.

Renovations of Leesville High School a handful of years ago were largely due to pressure from Fort Polk officials.

Gardner has been engaged in the community, attending ribbon-cuttings for local businesses, Morris said.

"He goes throughout the community," Morris said. "They've been extremely inclusive on supporting community partnerships."

It's not surprising then, that post leadership carries a lot of weight in the area. Among local officials, "keeping the general happy" is a common maxim. Morris doesn't even want to imagine what the community would look like without the base.

"All of our eggs are in that basket," he said. "There's no other industry here."

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## GROUNDS

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residents wondering why the city wasn't cracking down on clear violations of the law. A city ordinance forbids paradegoers from putting personal property on the public right of way more than four hours before the parade.

Michael Karam, director of Parks and Parkways, issued a statement Wednesday saying the agency removed "several" oversized, unpermitted structures along the route during Carnival. But when it came to revelers improperly claiming public space, the city appears to have only documented these practices and taken them under advisement.

"Parkways also encountered roping off of public space, enclosed tents, oversized structures and portable toilets, which are not permitted," Karam wrote. "These observations and past methods for ordinance compliance will be a part of after-action meetings to determine how future Carnival neutral grounds can be safe and accessible for all paradegoers."

This was no surprise to Anjier, who attended parades along the Uptown route Thursday through Monday.

"I didn't see anyone taking anything down before the parades," she said. "No one was enforcing anything."

In 2018, Mitch Landrieu's administration publicized sweeps ahead of the first official parades of the Carnival season, inviting the media to watch city crews with bolt cutters rounding up ladders along St. Charles Avenue and carting them away.

However, the get-tough approach was not met with universal approval. Some residents complained Landrieu's sweep was heavy-handed, and in a few cases, neighbors banded together to save one another's ladders from the junkyard.

Asked if anyone was fined

this season for violating the city's parade ordinance, a spokesperson for Mayor LaToya Cantrell noted the only section in the law that includes a fine is related to the placement of portable toilets. The administration did not say if violators of that section were fined.

Among other restrictions in the ordinance:

- Ladders, chairs and other personal effects must be placed at least 6 feet back from the street curb. Any items placed on a neutral ground four or more hours before the start of a parade may be removed by the city.

- Fastening two or more ladders together is illegal.

- Enclosed tents, scaffolding or the use of ropes, spray paint or other means to create a barricade or obstruct passage along public property is prohibited.

### A perennial problem

The problem of space hogs is not a new one, nor is the practice of calling them out. It's been at least a decade since the emergence of The Krewe of Chad, a withering characterization of rule-violating early birds as spoiled, entitled and un-New Orleansian.

City Council member JP Morrell took to Twitter over Mardi Gras weekend to comment on the Cantrell administration's apparent lack of enforcement, saying it was too late for council action this year. But he promised to work on it for 2024.

"If we had known they were going to fall flat on their face beforehand we could have addressed it," he wrote. "Now that we know, we will address it."

Morrell also noted "one person" could have had the city's contractors haul things away, in an apparent reference to Cantrell.

"The person seems distracted and unwilling to piss off the people putting them up," he wrote. "In the absence of their action, the council will step up and re-

solve the issue."

### Getting ladders wrong

Another issue is ladders, specifically their size and placement. Traditionally a way of getting young children up high enough to be seen by float riders, ladders have increasingly been used by adults, and are often chained together. One photo emerged online last weekend showing a big, wooden mega-ladder that someone constructed to hold about six people across.

Mark Bologna, a 52-year-old from Fontainebleau, said he grew up as a "ladder kid" and is now a regular float rider. He sees more and more illegally placed ladders each year.

"In some cases, there was a row of parade ladders right in your face," he said. "You almost had to arch and throw over them to get the people who were following the rules."

Bologna, who has ridden with several krewes, said he tries to avoid throwing to people misusing ladders or in space-hogging tents.

"That was just my one, personal 'What could I possibly do?'" he said.

Anjiers said she thinks the rise of short-term rentals is a major contributor to the erosion of Carnival etiquette, mostly because tourists now occupy parts of the route that were traditionally just locals. The problem snowballs, she said, when it's obvious that others are getting away with it.

Anjiers also thinks that moving most parades to a single route means that revelers have fewer places to watch. While she understands the practicalities of a consolidated Uptown route, "I do think that Mardi Gras should be returned to the people of New Orleans and the neighborhoods."

Advocate reporter Leah Clark contributed to this report.

Email Chad Calder at [caldler@theadvocate.com](mailto:caldler@theadvocate.com).

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