

TSgt Jennifer Norris, USAF (Ret)

I joined the Maine Air National Guard in 1996 after getting my Bachelor's in Social Work/Justice from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I enlisted as an E-3 and was offered a job in one of the Air Force's critical career fields, Satellite Communications. Unfortunately, although I totally excelled and loved serving my country, I encountered four different predators in the first two years of my career. I had never been exposed to this kind of behavior, therefore I didn't recognize what was happening. I just know that I wanted it to stop and I wanted to escape from it.

Because of the prolonged exposure to the predators and others who retaliated after I reported the crimes, I developed PTSD. As a result, I was considered non-deployable for the majority of my career. Had I been supported from the get go, the PTSD would not have got as bad as it did but I felt betrayed by those in my squadron who retaliated against me for "making [the predators] lose their job." As a result of this retaliation, I had to transfer to a new squadron in Cape Cod, Mass which was about 4 hours away. In order to continue with my career progression without any interruption, I needed to stay in my career field.

I encountered what I felt was gender discrimination in the Massachusetts Air National Guard. I worked really hard and was eventually considered a subject matter expert by my Commander but the enlisted chain of command was setting me up to fail at every turn. I fought for my SSgt stripe, I fought for my TSgt stripe, I fought for the Team Chief position because I was the most qualified. Instead, my boss tried to make one of the troops that I trained our new team chief. I could not believe the double standards and eventually filed an EEO complaint against my boss. The saddest part about this whole thing is that I was definitely a super troop and totally dedicated to the mission. I worked very hard and was met with resistance from the get go. Women can fix things. And, women can troubleshoot.

While serving my country, I got my Master's Degree in Public Policy and Management. Every bias that a woman soldier can endure I endured. I experienced sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, gender discrimination, abuse, retaliation, etc. It beat my soul down and made me eventually want to die. After getting help through the VA in Maine, I realized that staying in the military was detrimental to my health if I wanted interpersonal relationships. But, I am stubborn so I did not want to give up my retirement after 14 years of service.

Eventually I was forced to disclose on the SF86 that I was getting help for PTSD due to MST. I was not willing to give the security clearance folks my medical records, therefore I essentially gave up my career. But I fought back and received an early medical retirement with the help of Senator Olympia Snowe. Because I know how devastating all this is to someone's psyche, self-esteem, and job performance, I made it my mission in life to help and support those who also become a victim of this crime while honorably serving their country. No one should feel abandoned for reporting criminal activity. No one should be exposed to retaliation and administrative or punitive action because they reported a crime. My mission is to take the investigation and prosecution of violent crimes out of the Chain of Command so the military can focus on the mission at hand. We already have a vital mission and our Commanders don't have the time necessary to effectively do their job and go after predators in the ranks.