

**House Armed Services Committee hearing on the review of sexual misconduct by basic training instructors at Lackland Air Force Base**

**January 23, 2009**

**Statement of Cindy McNally**

**Chief Master Sergeant, United States Air Force (Retired)**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views on the sexual misconduct disgrace at Lackland Air Force Base (AFB), and the issue of sexual assault in the Air Force.

I sit before you today having experienced sexual assault in the Air Force from multiple perspectives: First, as a survivor of sexual assault when I was a young airman; Second, as an enlisted troop who spent her entire career on the flight line as an aircraft maintainer; and Third, as a retired Chief Master Sergeant who has supervised 1500 enlisted troops as a Maintenance Group Superintendent. I have had direct dealings with all the personnel issues that come with supervising people in today's Air Force and will be sharing that perspective with you today.

I enlisted in the Air Force in 1975 and was assigned to the 3347<sup>th</sup> Women in the Air Force (WAF) squadron at Lackland Air Force Base. At that time, women trainees were segregated from men both physically, and in our course curriculum. Following basic training, I attended technical training at Chanute Air Force base, where we as women began our integration into the Air Force. It was there that I was first sexually assaulted by two of my instructors. I reported the incident, believing that my leaders would handle it. That didn't happen. I knew then that I would never report another assault. Later at my first assignment, I was again assaulted and never reported the incident. In fact, I never discussed either of those incidents until after I retired 23 years later and was being treated for PTSD.

While many things have changed in the Air Force since I first enlisted, the trauma of sexual assault has not changed. It feels like someone has reached into you and sucked the soul out of you. It is traumatic, and it is ugly. For those of us who have survived it, we go on because of our strength and our will to overcome what could otherwise be a crippling episode in our lives. That being said, I remained in the Air Force, proud of my service and without regrets. The reason I continued to serve far outweighed any single incident in my life. I served alongside the nation's finest, in an Air Force where honor, integrity and service before self are a way of life.

There are many problems that occur in the Air Force, just like in any institution: sexual assault, sexual harassment, drugs, alcohol abuse and racist behaviors. Our job as enlisted leaders is to define the standard, and make everyone understand that we have absolutely no problem removing violators in the blink of an eye. It is our duty to ensure that standards are met. If that is simplistic, I am ok with that. In the trenches, where lives are at stake and the well being of our

troops is at stake, we need to be that simplistic. We do the right thing or we suffer the consequences. It is called leadership.

To me, the sexual assault cases at Lackland demonstrate what happens when leadership fails. Basic training is where our sons and daughters are at their most vulnerable. The power that Military Training Instructors, or MTIs have over these airmen is perceived as absolute. Consent does not exist in a basic training environment. Turning young men and women from all over the country into airmen is a transformational process where the MTI represents the success of that transformation.

I am somewhat ambivalent about a female leader being the answer to correcting a culture that enables sexual assault and harassment. Having led in a predominantly male career field, my men needed to be able to come to me with any issues. The true yardstick for an effective leader is not gender. That is not to take away from the ability of the current Lackland commander in any way. However, a truly integrated, well-trained and qualified force is what matters. I have worked with many men who have set a stringent environment where all airmen are free from harassment and a threatening workplace. NCOs in the chain of command have an overarching duty to take care of their troops. Doing what is right does not depend on gender.

I have closely followed recommended actions in the midst of the Lackland disgrace. I have discussed this with SWAN, and I support their recommendations. I have had the privilege of talking to General Woodward and I applaud her for taking a deep look into all the issues.

I believe the following steps that are being taken will have a positive effect on the training environment at Lackland:

I agree we should increase the number of female MTIs to at least their percentage in the Air Force. All basic training students should be exposed to both male and female NCOs. This is, after all the beginning of their exposure to leadership in our Air Force.

Increasing instructor to student ratio is a must. I was shocked that the MTI to student ratio was roughly still the same as when I went through basic training. A reasonable student to instructor ratio is critical so that students are properly supervised, and instructors avoid burn-out.

I also agree with the requirement to raise the rank requirement of MTIs. This is not to take away from our junior NCO corps, but the fact is that Technical Sergeants and Master Sergeants are seasoned leaders and have a great deal of experience in deterring, identifying and taking action on sexual assault. However, a non-voluntary MTI assignment didn't work before and it won't work now. I had troops who viewed MTI duty as an assignment that was the death knell for their career. That needs to change to attract the type of people suited to train our next generation of leaders. Incentives to attract the best of the best are the answer.

A wingman requirement for all students is sensible, and I remember always walking in twos or fours as a student. However, that requirement should not exist just for women. Also, this is not a substitute for engaged leadership.

Additionally, I do not believe women should be segregated from men in Basic Training. We train as we fight. One team. Segregation in training did more harm than good in attempts to integrate women into the Air Force. We want to be viewed as airmen first and you cannot do that coming from a segregated unit. Our own history with racial integration should tell us that.

For larger solutions we need to look at integrating women completely into the armed forces. Creating a second-class of military citizenship only serves to perpetuate a climate that victimizes women. This includes removing the obsolete Combat Exclusion Policy. This will be the signal that we are a fully integrated force. Being able to do the job should be the standard—not whether you are male or female.

I believe that as military leadership collectively took our eye off the ball, we enabled a climate where our troops became vulnerable. We can train and train, but in the end it is about leadership. We draw the line on what is acceptable behavior; we define the standard and enforce the standard. It is a bright shining line and consequences of crossing that line must be crystal clear. I don't believe we can legislate leadership, but holding our leaders responsible and legally liable for the welfare of their troops is an absolute must. In the maintenance career field all our leaders are passionate about doing what's right to protect our pilots while flying; all our leaders need to feel as passionate about protecting our troops from sexual assault. The Air Force should invite sexual assault survivors to be a part of Air Force leadership training and have them describe the damage so that leaders at every level understand it doesn't just happen in another squadron, another wing, another base. Then hold leaders responsible for protecting their troops, and if they have failed, then punish them under the law.

Finally, if I could make a comparison: When working on an F-15, on grave shift, in the cold when nobody is watching, we are sometimes faced with the temptation to take a shortcut or make decisions that might cause damage to the aircraft or endanger the pilots. But we don't do that. We do the right thing. This silent epidemic requires the same clear decision. You cannot minimize risk to zero—but leaders can and better make sure they are there to make the right decision and do the right thing. Our troops demand nothing less.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.