

Chairwoman Jackie Speier
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
House Armed Services Committee

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Tuesday, Dec 10, 2019

Thank you Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of this committee for the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Pamela Campos-Palma. I served in the United States Air Force as an operations intelligence analyst from 2006 to 2016 on active duty and as a Reservist. While on active duty I served overseas in Germany, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan.

I was born and raised in a working-middle class town near Boston. My mother immigrated there from Honduras; she was the one who pushed me to enlist when I was 18 years old after a school administrator dissuaded me from applying for college based on her racial bias that “someone like me wouldn’t succeed there.” Not having any connections to college-educated people and having no familiarity with the US military, my mother took me to the recruiters office and had me enlist for money for college, a chance at upward mobility, and the opportunity to serve. I chose the intelligence career field knowing nothing about it except it required high ASVAB scores and was among the most difficult military jobs to get into. I assumed it would grant me the best chance to work in a secure environment and have better job prospects.

My military career was full of challenges. Some grew me in incredible ways and others were rooted in systemic failures that resulted in unjustified harms, avoidable inequities, and made it largely untenable for me to serve to the best of my ability.

I count myself lucky that my career started with a Senior Intelligence Officer (SIO) at my first unit who showed me what made a good military leader- he modeled respect & integrity, pushed personal/professional development & mentorship, encouraged ingenuity, and most importantly, cultivated a culture of accountability.

I worked hand in hand with high level commanders, law enforcement, and aircrews, was responsible for briefing complex attacks, highly sensitive analysis, and recommending courses of action. In addition to this extremely demanding, high-stakes job during a high operations tempo (at the time ranked #1 for suicides), my military service as a queer woman of color was marked by several additional issues.

Throughout my military career, sexual violence, harassment, and gendered hostility were and remain part and parcel to military service. In addition to seeing and supporting peers who'd been raped or intervening in various near rape encounters, I myself experienced assault multiple times. One assault was a homophobic retaliation by an Airman who resented I wouldn't return his advances. The feeling of being preyed upon and undermined from within made an already difficult role harder.

Despite the military's pluralism, the Armed Forces' personnel management and policies fail to recognize and modernize to the needs and long-term wellness of its diverse force. Personnel policies that touch on health, physical fitness, career development, naturalization, inclusive service, and family planning are broken or biased against women, parents, people of color, and LGBTQ service members and set us up for failure. Standards set by and for white men as the defaulting starting point fails to see the whole force picture and we know has resulted in terrible uniforms and gear design for women, dysfunctional promotion pipelines, body dysmorphia and eating disorders, depression, misdiagnosed women's health issues to name a few.

The foremost reason I left active duty was the issue of unchecked toxic leadership and the culture of impunity and lack of oversight that enables them. One bad leadership transition is all it took for my unit, once awarded for top excellence, to become rife with fraud, waste, abuse. I was a target of outright racial and sexist discrimination and retaliation. I saw junior officers' performance reports and careers held hostage to dissuade them from intervening or whistleblowing. Most importantly functional or trusted mechanisms to meaningfully defend or protect myself felt scarce. Over the course of my career I saw significant brain drain of the best leaders decisively leaving, in large part because of the high tolerance for corruptive behavior, especially at the highest echelons. In the end, it is irresponsible to rely on targeted recruitment of people of color, women, and working class people as prospective enlistees, into an enterprise that cannot offer the most basic workplace accountability, securities, and retention.

Timely and related, a more diverse military does not solve the retention problem that service members are burned out by endless deployments, costly training, and taxing personal and familial hardship for questionable, never-ending wars. This is an increasingly growing sentiment as training accidents continue, lives are lost, suicide rates have not substantively gone down, and moral injury grows.

In addition to urgent action towards military justice reform, research sanctioned by Congress that specifically surveys minority groups. Specific objectives around enlisted women with distributed race representation across branches, transgender/gender non-conforming troops currently in and those discharged within the last 5 years, troops of color, and religious minorities is vital to get direct insights and assess the scope and scale of structural and cultural gaps. More assertively partnering with our allies like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom on their research design and work around these problems is essential.

I joined the Reserves specifically wanting to make a change from inside even if in a small part. Although it was a more safe and healthy environment with much sadness I realized I outgrew

institutional and cultural limitations and had to continue service to my country in a different capacity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, I look forward to any questions you may have.