

September 18, 2019

Honorable Members of The Armed Services Subcommittee, Staff, respected Experts, and Witnesses,

As a former citizen of New Delhi, India, and a now a U.S. Citizen and proud Military Air Force Spouse, I humbly and thankfully submit my testimony while being grateful to you for this opportunity to share my story on behalf of countless military families, my mother and my son Jay Hughes who is with me today.

I am a patriotic military spouse who served as a Key Spouse Program Manager for various Air Force units, and I have been a proud stay at home mother for the last 20 years while serving our military, my community, and my family. Major Matthew (Matt) Ernest Hughes is a prior Navy Reservist, a former active duty U.S Air Force JAG Corps officer (AFLOA), and currently has a private practice in Rockville, MD while still serving as an Active Reservist. Maj Hughes has had four tours of deployment.

On December 24, 2014, our world shook and was changed forever when my husband wiped out all our accounts, canceled the credit card and made 'stop payments' on all outstanding checks. He followed these actions with an email to me from overseas, stating erratic and controlling demands with a timeline attached for each demand. These demands clearly defined us as slaves to be objectified and owned; not to be loved, respected or honored. This was his way to retaliate our countless pleas for mercy against his abusive actions and behaviors. Upon reading his email, I realized we had already been subjected to so many demands of coercive control and various forms of abuse; this was later confirmed by several medical professionals. Examples of Maj Hughes' behavior was repeatedly laughing while degrading, tormenting, and enjoying his cruelty towards us. Maj Hughes would twist our young son's nipples while laughing; forcing his thumbs inside an open bleeding wound on while shaking our son's knee; laughing and stating that it did not hurt. He neglected our unsupervised son while being intoxicated for several hours, which traumatized Jay who believed his father was dead. On other abusive occasions, Jay would lock himself in a

bathroom in fear for his life. Another instance, Maj Hughes dumped a large box of food on top of our sickly daughter's feverish body. After years of abuse, we sought medical and mental health assistance. When he discovered this, he made us feel guilty and prohibited us from going to hospitals and Doctors even after our daughter's failed suicide attempt. Then, he demanded I pay rent for continued shelter in our home or accept his offer of \$200/month for sex in exchange for shelter. We were forced to perform all of the household duties while he leisurely worked on body-building. He would continuously yell in our faces claiming we were losers, dumb, and lazy; even when I miscarried or was giving birth to our children.

My children and I feared for our safety, and after years of abuse, and now the e-mail with 'slave-like' demands; I told Maj Hughes we could not continue to live this way. We were homeless for 7 weeks without any genuine inquiry or concern from Maj Hughes. Dr. Savithri Veluri, my PCM at Ft. Meyer Army Base, VA advised me to contact the legal office for further assistance. On December 31, 2014, I contacted Mr. Peter Katson at the Pentagon's legal assistance office and began a formal complaint by submitting a letter to Maj Hughes' commander, Col. Thomas Zimmerman [via Col. Heather Lobue and Mr. Peter Katson].

My husband was reported to Child Protective Services in December 2014 for child neglect and abuse by our counselor Mr. James Alexander, formerly at Meier Clinic, Fairfax, VA. He has been reported again since 2015, by Walter Reed National Military Medical Clinic, Joint Base Andrews Family Advocacy Program and Ft Belvoir Adolescent Inpatient Unit.

In January 2015, upon a recommendation from Mr. Peter Katson, I involved CDR Russell Carr, MD, Chief of Psychiatry at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for further assistance with my husband's abusive, erratic, abusive behaviors, and escalation of Matt's aggression. Dr. Carr assumed he may be suffering from PTSD or a mental disorder. I was discouraged by AFLOA leadership from reporting the abuse to FAP, as I was repeatedly reminded it would permanently ruin my husband's career. Due to the fear of further retaliation and abuse while still trying to salvage my marriage, I chose not to report the abuse. In March of 2015, at my first session with my Psychologist at Walter Reed National FAP failed to follow protocol while interviewing our children. Since FAP had a professional relationship with Maj Hughes, I was interrogated and harassed by the

very agency that was established to assist and protect my family. They interrogated me and blamed me.

In March 2015, Maj. Pamela Blueford, at the Joint Base Andrews' Family Advocacy (FAP) began reviewing the complaint submitted by Dr. Comilang and treated me with hostility during an interrogation in front of Ms. Mary Young, the victim advocate at FAP. She questioned my intentions and motives for seeking mental health assistance while repeatedly telling me these types of allegations could negatively affect my husband's career in the U.S. Air Force. Maj Hughes' deputy in AFLOA told me my marriage would likely be headed towards divorce while stating that this was a civil matter, disregarding the reported evidence of abuse. Additionally, she stated that as long as my husband was paying the rent, even though we chose not to return to our home in fear, he was providing adequate support.

In July 2015, Maj Hughes separated from active duty in the Air Force to go to the Reserves. Maj Hughes eventually moved out of our home while only paying the rent until July 2015, when as retaliation, he utilized his separation order to terminate our lease prematurely under the provisions of the Servicemember's Civil Relief Act (SCRA) forcing my family into homelessness for almost 2 years.

In October 2015, the new FAP officer at Joint Base Andrews admitted in an email that FAP had failed to abide by one part of the process, which was requesting to interview the children.

There were many other documented events of abuse, none of which supposedly met the Joint Base Andrews FAP's abuse criteria. However, it met DOD's abuse criteria by 100%. We needed desperate and urgent assistance and I begged his AFLOA Command at Joint Base Andrews to order him a mental health evaluation, however I was told they could not do this unless he was expressing concerning behavior at his workplace, had a DUI, or an arrest. After each abusive episode, Maj Hughes would drink, deny his abusive actions and behavior, words, and events, grin, and laugh. This forced us to begin documenting series of abusive events. We learned new terms, such as narcissism, sociopath, gaslighting, and coercive control from our therapists concerning Maj Hughes.

After several months of being ignored by my husband's command, interrogated, and treated unprofessionally by the Family Advocacy officer, Maj Pamela Blueford, I filed a formal complaint to the Inspector General at Joint Base Andrews. I was informed by Ms. Mary Young this unprofessional behavior and aggression was a normal occurrence in the FAP office toward victims.

Later, I received a telephone call saying the Central Board Registry did not find the submitted report and that the evidence of abuse did not meet the Military's emotional abuse criteria. I repeatedly requested this finding in writing so I could submit an appeal. My request was never complied with, and they have stalled my requests since 2015.

Finally, I received the Military's abuse criteria through an IG inquiry and submitted my appeal to Joint Base Andrews' Medical Group Commander only to be further ignored and silenced. I requested my case be transferred to another military installation for a reconsideration as it was apparent there was a conflict of interest. In my appeal, I was able to clearly identify the facts of abuse and directly correlate each event to the Military's abuse criteria. There is clear evidence of abuse in all the documents submitted to FAP: over 150 emails, and letters from two mental health professionals confirming the abuse with their diagnosis. I submitted my appeal numerous times to FAP, only to be informed by Maj Hughes' previous Commander LtCol Jeffrey Green at Hurlburt Field that the Statute of Limitations had expired. Then, he stated this was now a civil matter and the Air Force could not step in for any further assistance. Later, I discovered that our case had never been opened in 2015; there was no case number assigned to any of the documents. Clearly, Maj Hughes' professional interactions with Family Advocacy impaired my family's ability to receive a fair hearing.

If abusers are not interrogated and the victims are made to feel like criminals, what is the point in bringing any issues or complaints to the Command, FAP, or Inspector General's attention?

I submitted numerous emails and letters with extensive documented evidence of abuse since December 31, 2014 to Maj Hughes' Commanders, and IGs. I discovered in 2018 that Maj Pamela Blueford never opened the cases of abuse and the CRB never heard our cases of abuse. The only case opened in 2015 entailed the 'adequate support' issue. Maj Hughes' Commanders concluded that

even though he was residing in the house and paying the rent, he would not be mandated to provide any funds for food, lodging or children's needs.

Our cases of abuse were finally heard in January 2019 through an intervention from Ms. Pamela Collins at Lakeland AFB, who informed me that the original cases of abuse had never been opened. Once again, CRB concluded our case did not meet the emotional maltreatment criteria of the Air Force. My son, Jay Hughes was finally interviewed and FAP reported the abuse to OSI and CPS, as they also showed concern for his suicidal and homicidal tendencies as a result of the abuse and control from Maj Hughes. Jay Hughes also submitted a voicemail from 2014 as evidence only to be told that it did not meet abuse criteria either. As a young 16 yr old teenager, he has lost faith in our justice and military system as he watches his abusive father be enabled and empowered by our military and civil courts.

Since 2015, I have been forced into Pro Se litigation as I have been unable to afford legal representation and rejected by pro bono legal agencies. I have advocated for myself and my son in Fairfax County Juvenile and Circuit Courts.

While having to fight the Family Advocacy Program, I also had to deal with civil matters for the survival of my children and me. Since Maj Hughes was a JAG officer, he understood and exploited the SCRA by using it to stonewall discovery requests, and his appearances in Fairfax County courts. Additionally, he would deliberately file motions simultaneously in 2 courts on different floors, and he failed to comply with court orders to provide his military orders and physical address for service of process.

A former JAG officer heard our civil case in Fairfax County Circuit Court which further re victimized us through his bias. Though our son has been diagnosed as suicidal due to the abuse he experienced from Matt, the Judge ordered him to have forced visitations with his abusive father. The Judge reduced our monthly support which has forced us to apply for state welfare, borrow funds, receive church's financial assistance, and has ordered me to pay close to \$30K in one year to Maj Hughes for legal fees. The former JAG officer Judge decided since FAP and CPS did not conclude Maj Hughes abused his family, all the evidence and mention of abuse was thrown out. The Judge further informed me I will face consequences for contacting Congressman Gerry Connolly

and Virginia Attorney General's office for an investigation into the abuse and collusion at Joint Base Andrews. He did not hold Maj Hughes accountable for lying under oath as Matt stated he financially supported us during the 7 months of abandonment, even though I had evidence that this was untrue. We were even denied a protective order due to Maj Hughes status as a JAG officer. Fortunately, we were approved to keep our physical address confidential under the Domestic Abuse Address Confidentiality program which Maj Hughes is currently attempting to revoke through Fairfax County Circuit Court as he continues to stalk us, threaten us with his appearances, and has a history of appearing at our door step at odd hours just to intimidate us by proving that he still controls us.

I am bringing all this to your attention because other military spouses and children are facing identical or similar challenges and trials. My children and I are willing to share our story to assist other military families who are struggling to survive as we have no advocate. I discovered the federally regulated Domestic Violence hotlines are referring the Military Spouses who are victims of Domestic Violence back to their spouses' Military installation and FAP; they too are being further silenced, shunned, and crippled through collusion.

The SCRA is commonly exploited by irresponsible servicemembers who use the very law designed to protect military members to abuse and destroy their families. This must stop and this Federal law must be amended; the local Judicial system needs to be educated on Domestic Violence and Military laws and provide protection for their military families.

The military family is expected to make sacrifices, support, and serve our country by supporting the military member, they must not be abandoned in their hour of greatest need. The military system clearly does not ensure adequate support for our families and it fails to protect them. This is a black eye on our U.S Military. It is the invisible scars that will forever haunt me and my children, through the failed suicide attempt from my daughter and my son's suicidal ideations and his fears of repeating the abuse to others because of what his father did to him, while Maj Hughes prohibits him from seeking medical and mental health assistance. We can no longer trust anyone but the few that have assisted us, we fear Maj Hughes harming us, I fear losing my son to suicide, as Maj Hughes has eliminated all of his Therapists to keep him from speaking about the abuse. This is not about

the financial abuse, although it has been scary not to be able to put a roof over my children's head. What I care about most is that I could not get the assistance that my children desperately needed in order to protect their innocent and precious bodies, hearts and mind from being abused by their father in the most vile of ways because our military/FAP/and civilian courts cared more about protecting his good name and status than the innocence of my children.

Unfortunately, my story is not an isolated set of event. Many military spouses experience similar abuse, desertion, and abandonment but are afraid to come forward and fight. The few military spouses that do come forward are discouraged, insulted and further ignored by the chain of command for bringing the abuse to military's attention. As military spouses, this is *NOT* what we signed up for as our spouse signs up to serve our nation. The spouses and children serve next to the military service member during frequent moves, deployments, temporary duty and remote assignments. Inadequate financial support for the family, bias decisions by the service member's commander in regards to abuse, fraudulent use of housing and food allowance, misuse of the SCRA, and ignoring mental health concerns as consequences of deployments are few of the many issues that our military families endure.

I strongly believe this case should never have been heard at Joint Base Andrews due to a conflict of interest and personal biases from the CRB's Committee Members who had a close working relationship with Major Hughes. This preexisting relationship gives the appearance of collusion to protect a Chief of Military Justice. This bias directly contributed to the reasons why an official investigation was never initiated, and all the abuse cases reported by Walter Reed National Military Medical Clinic were left unopened, not investigated, and failed to be submitted to the Central Registry Board (CRB). A civilian Judge used the findings, or lack of findings, of the military to determine the outcome of our civil case. Obviously, actions of the military are far reaching. The results are that I, with only a High School education and no work experience, have been ordered to pay thousands of dollars to Matt Hughes who has a Legal Degree and is a lawyer with great potential for a nice annual income while my son and I have nothing. My family received no justice because the military did not do their due diligence.

This is a *silent* epidemic and it needs to be fixed immediately. The Military Spouses and Children humbly request each one the Committee members to take a hard and close look at the impediments and gaps identified through my

testimony and consider working with my new Advocacy team in resolving these issues to strengthen the Military families in hopes of saving their life and future. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,
//signed//
Rohini Hughes