

PROTECT OUR DEFENDERS 2013 MEDIA REPORT

In 2013, Protect Our Defenders Foundation (POD) has further cemented itself as the most vocal proponent of victim's right advocacy for those who have been raped or sexually assaulted in the military – leading the charge for fundamental reform to the military justice system. Our presence in national and local media, as well as our substantial social media presence has made this possible. POD is the connection point when elected officials and the media need help with a story. The non-profit has been featured in more than **500 articles**, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and all the major broadcast news outlets. We work with the media to break investigative reports that keep the issue of military sexual assault in the headlines and we influence public opinion by working closely with editorial boards.

This year we have been involved with numerous high profile media efforts involving survivors from the scandal at Aviano Air Base to the Naval Academy to exposing the ongoing retaliation survivors face for reporting. These stories have put a human face to the thousands of sexual assault victims in our armed forces -- as Congress finally debates the need for fundamental reform.



Protect Our Defenders with Kim Hanks' brother and family during a protest outside of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. April 25, 2013.

We continue to work with Kimberly Hanks, who was assaulted by Lt Col James Wilkerson at Aviano Air Base in Italy. The Aviano case woke the Senate and public up to the need for fundamental reform. Lt Gen Craig Franklin, the convening authority overturned the conviction and freed his fellow pilot despite a jury's verdict. POD brought Kim to Washington, D.C. to meet with elected officials, talk with the media, and bring attention to her case ahead of a Congressional hearing in March. **Earlier this month it**

was announced that her attacker would be forced to retire and demoted in rank for a history of misconduct.

Protect Our Defenders has been working with Senior Airman Ciera Bridges and her family this fall -- fighting a discharge recommendation against her for reporting harassment and assault. Her family came to POD for help and guidance. We developed a highly successful media strategy to bring attention to her case. The *Air Force Times* turned her story into an investigative series, [*They Accused superiors of assault & harassment: Now their careers are over.*](#) **Less than a week after the story broke, the discharge recommendation was dropped.**

Protect Our Defenders continues to be a go to resource for important regional papers, like the *San Antonio Express-News*, a prominent voice on the issue of sexual assault in the military. The *Express-News* broke the scandal at Lackland Air Force Base and has relied on POD for information, comments, and analysis. In 2013, POD helped the *Express-News* with their groundbreaking investigative series, [*Twice Betrayed*](#) that detailed how the military has consistently been more interested in punishing victims than attackers. The report featured POD survivors, and an [op-ed](#) by POD President, Nancy Parrish.

And this past July Protect Our Defenders worked with our Advisory Board Member and survivor, Terri Odom, on an [open letter](#) to Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The letter called on one of the biggest roadblocks to fundamental reform, McCaskill to support the creation of a professional, independent, and impartial military justice system and highlighted factual mistakes the Senator had made about the issue. Terri was featured in McCaskill's 2012 campaign against Todd Akin.

Survivors Stories

Protect Our Defenders continues to serve survivors of military sexual assault and harassment and their diverse needs. We provide legal assistance as they seek justice, peer support to aid in their recovery, and opportunities to advocate for reform to ensure that the men and women who serve our country in the future can do so in an environment free from pervasive sexual harassment and assault.

We are actively working with survivors to have their stories shared in news outlets.

Aviano Scandal

Lt Col James Wilkerson sexually assaulted Kim Hanks in March 2012, while Hanks was serving as a civilian contractor at Aviano Air base in Italy. Hanks reported the assault and Wilkerson went to trial. Wilkerson was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault by a jury of his peers, and sentenced to one-year of confinement, total forfeitures of pay, and a dismissal from the Air Force. However, Lt Gen Franklin granted total clemency, overturned Wilkerson's conviction and his jail sentence. **Kim came to POD for help to fight a coordinated campaign against her.**

Protect Our Defenders brought the Aviano victim to DC to meet with members of Congress, and spoke with [NBC News in exclusive interview](#) about her attack ahead of a Senate hearing on the issue.



“Hanks agreed to be named publicly for the first time and granted an hour-long interview that was arranged by Protect our Defenders, an advocacy group that has sought to call attention to the military sexual assault problem.”

In April 2013, Protect Our Defenders [organized a protest outside](#) of Davis-Monthan with the victim’s family, where Wilkerson had been transferred, calling for the removal of both Wilkerson and Franklin from the Air Force. The protest was covered by all the local media and selected as an *Associated Press* “Big Story.” We also [created a petition](#) calling for Wilkerson and Franklin to be removed from the military.

Subsequently, On October 2, 2013 the Air Force announced that Wilkerson was [being forced to retire](#) and demoted.

Protect Our Defenders also worked with the victim and Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) to force the Air Force to release a series of emails from Wilkerson’s chain of command that exposed bias all the way to Air Force Chief of Staff Welsh. The recently released emails sent a chilling reminder to victims of sexual assault in our military who are thinking about coming forward that military brass will go to extreme lengths to protect the status quo.

Ciera Bridges

Senior Airman Ciera Bridges' family came to Protect Our Defenders to help save her career. Airman Bridges had been sexually harassed and assaulted for four years by her superior officers while serving at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.



Senior Airman Ciera Bridges, top, and Airman 1st Class Trent Smith were both recommended for discharge after coming forward with sexual assault allegations against higher-ranking airmen. (John Harman/Staff)

“Bridges sought the help of advocacy organization Protect Our Defenders... Instead of handling the problems, she has alleged, her superiors retaliated against her, citing Bridges for minor misconduct that culminated in January in a discharge recommendation under other-than-honorable conditions.”

We connected Airman Bridges' family with an *Air Force Times* reporter who turned her story into an investigative series on the culture within the United States military that keeps victims of rape and sexual assault from speaking up. One of the [articles in the series](#) broke Airman Bridges' story of retaliation for reporting. Less than a week after the article came out, the [recommendation was dropped](#). Ciera's story quickly became national news, covered by the *Huffington Post*, *Salon* and *Politico*.

U.S. Naval Academy Scandal

The treatment the victim has received in the ongoing U.S. Naval Academy sexual abuse scandal has shocked Americans and shows yet again the urgent need for fundamental reforms to the military justice system. Protect Our Defenders has worked with Attorney Susan Burke to drive attention on the case.



“The case also has refocused attention on a military justice system that has faced criticism for allowing a commander, or “convening authority,” absolute power to overturn a court martial decision. Such a system is archaic and rife with conflict of interest, some legal scholars assert.”

The events of this case highlight why more victims do not come forward. During the Article 32 hearing the victim has been put through more than twenty hours of cross examination by 12 defense attorneys and subjected to degrading questions about her sexual history, while her attorney has been prevented from participating to protect her rights. POD worked with survivor Ariana Klay and *ESPN* to highlight this case in their recent E:60 segment, [“The Enemy Within.”](#)

Stacey Thompson

Sen. Boxer wanted to build support for the Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA) by hosting local events. The MJIA co-sponsor came to POD, looking for a survivor in Los Angeles that could speak forcefully for fundamental reform.

Protect Our Defenders had been working with [Stacey Thompson](#), a Marine Corps veteran and sexual assault survivor who had never told her story before. Stacey was drugged and assaulted by her commanding officer. Six months later, for reporting her assault, she was kicked out of the Marines with an other-than-honorable discharge and lost all her benefits.



"To see that what happened to me 14 years ago is still continuing to happen now, for me that was a big reason why I felt the need to come forward," she said. "I can finally say I have the strength."


In May, Sen. Boxer held a press conference with Stacey and Protect Our Defenders to discuss MJIA and the epidemic of sexual assault in military. Stacey joined Senator Boxer and [shared her story](#) for the first time in a powerful account. The press conference received substantial media coverage including an article on the front page of *Yahoo!* from the [Associated Press](#) and other coverage in *Bloomberg News* and local outlets.

Revisiting the Military's Tailhook Scandal

To highlight how long the military sexual assault epidemic has been going on and the ongoing failure of the Pentagon to implement necessary common sense reforms, we make it a priority to highlight scandals throughout the decades. This past May, the *New York Times* published a *Retro Report* documentary, [Revisiting the Military's Tailhook Scandal](#).



By Retro Report

 **The Legacy of Tailhook:** Retro Report: Military sexual assault is not a new phenomenon. A second look at the Tailhook scandal in 1991 reveals what happened then. And what it all means now.

“There is a tendency to think we’ve made social progress on so many fronts in recent decades, but watching the Tailhook video, you wonder.”

Protect Our Defenders worked with *Retro Report* for the better part of a year on the documentary. The film covered protests we put together in our nation’s capital around the Lackland scandal, the hearing that we got a reluctant Congress to hold and interviews with many POD members, including Jenny McClendon, Brian Lewis, and Paula Coughlin. Paula is on our Advisory Board and best known as the whistleblower of the 1991 Tailhook Scandal.

Social Media

In addition to making sure the viewpoints of survivors are accurately reflected in the media, Protect Our Defenders organizes advocacy through online campaigns that are helping to put pressure on our elected officials to investigate the epidemic of sexual assaults in our military and legislate fundamental reforms.

POD's Facebook page has over **9,400 'likes'**. Our online community is steadily growing. POD also has over **1,000** followers on Twitter -- where we are constantly engaging with reporters, elected officials, and other prominent voices in the advocacy community.

Protect Our Defenders also has over **18,000 supporters** on Causes.com, the world's largest online campaigning platform. Our Causes petition to remove two Air Force officers involved in the Aviano Air Base has garnered over **6,000 signatures**, and has helped keep the pressure on the military to do the right thing and remove Wilkerson and Franklin.

Our advocacy will continue in 2014, as we work with survivors and the media, and press the President and members of Congress to accomplish fundamental reform. A number of investigative stories are in the works from the *New Yorker*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Vogue* and others as we continue the drumbeat for changes to a corrupt system.

We stand with Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D-CA) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) on their landmark legislation to protect our defenders by fundamentally changing the way sexual assault is handled by our military.