



Remarks by Paula Coughlin, retired US Navy
Lackland Abuse Scandal and Congressional Hearing
Press Conference, Rayburn House Office Building– January 23, 2013

My name is Paula Coughlin, former LT, US Navy, and a member of Protect Our Defender's Advocacy Board. We represent more than 500K veterans who are sexual assault victims and those currently serving, all who have no voice in rectifying the systemic abuses they have suffered in the military.

Twenty-one years ago, I was sexually assaulted while attending a TH naval aviation convention. When I realized the Navy was covering up the abuse that occurred at the Navy sanctioned event, I filed a formal complaint -- no one was prosecuted. I was given assurances from the President of the United States down through the ranks to my own immediate commander that no woman or man would again suffer the abuses I endured.

Since that event, military leadership, my chain of command and our government has failed me and countless others. To date the Department of Defense and Congress have failed to effectively examine and eradicate the epidemic of violent assaults.

Since Tailhook we have seen repeated scandals, military leadership investigating itself, congressional hearings, reforms announced, training days ordered, laws passed, and yet today more violent crimes are perpetrated with lower prosecution rates than in the civilian sector.

Fortunately, with me here today are committed service members that have worked past the pain and disappointment to offer real solutions to ending this criminal dynamic between rapist and the chain of command. We stand united to solve this problem. Unfortunately, because of restrictions imposed by the HASC leadership, you may not hear those answers today. In fact, the whole scope of the problem may be sidestepped again.

But, this is the time and place to confront the central issues related to ending this crisis.

Twenty-one years ago, I spoke to Congress, and again, five months ago, with fellow veterans and survivors Jessica Hives, Jennifer Norris, Jenny McClendon and Brian Lewis -- we came to our nation's capitol to demand the House Armed Services Committee open an investigation into what has become the largest military sexual abuse scandal in history, at Lackland Air Force Base. We delivered a petition signed by over 13,000 supporters.

In response, Chairman McKeon promised an "open and complete" hearing. The hearing you will see today is neither. This hearing is woefully lacking in relevant victim testimony and expert military justice recommendations that Protect Our Defenders has provided to the Chair over the past several months.

Real and immediate changes must be made by this committee by refining the UCMJ to improve the prosecution of violent criminals, and start providing real support to all victims, not crush them with reprisals and career-ending mental health diagnosis. Retired Brigadier General, Loree Sutton recently said: "The only credible solution is an independent special victims unit completely outside the (unit) chain of command, under professional civilian oversight." We agree. The answers are here in front of you.

The old military adage applies here: if you're not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. This committee hearing will reveal which side of the equation Congress is on.

We continue to speak the truth of sexual assault in the military and press the solution forward -- so that no other man or woman suffers the abuses we endure even today.

The question is today: who is listening?