

See It, Hear It, REPORT IT

Sexual assault victims speak out

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"Man up."
"Don't get your panties in a bunch."
"You throw like a girl!"

"These are terms thrown around every day and people think they are harmless," said Chief Christina Simpson, a victim of sexual assault. "Addressing a group of men by saying, listen up ladies, as if that is an insult. As if being a woman is an insult. As if throwing like a girl insinuates a weakness. Can you imagine if someone said, 'you throw like a Jew?' The outrage that would provoke – but replace Jew with girl, and no one raises an eyebrow. We can start there. We can start by being proud of those who serve with us, regardless of race, religion or gender. An environment tolerant of insults makes a path for an environment tolerant of assaults."

Simpson's story is a familiar one, unfortunately. She was an E-3 stationed in Groton, Conn., when it happened. She was out with members of her command. She was fed drinks until she blacked out. She woke up in a co-workers bed absolutely horrified, she said. He told her she wanted it and she didn't say no.

"I didn't say no," said Simpson. "As if a question had even been asked."

It is stories like this that continue to plague the Navy. And to what end?

That's a question the Navy is hoping to answer with the launching of the new 21st Century Sailor and Marine Office (N-17) focused on the total health of the force.

Although the office will cover a variety of topics, the immediate focus is sexual assault prevention and response.

"The role of women is expanding and we need to know what that means," said Rear Adm. Walter Carter, director, 21st Century Sailor and Marine office. "I've seen significant change in the last 32 years – but we've got a lot of work to do; and this office is the instrument of change."

Along with the standing up of N-17 comes a fleet-wide stand down currently being conducted to further target the problem of sexual assault in our ranks. The two-hour training is being given by the leadership triad at each command and focuses on consistently doing what's right to spark a cultural change in the Navy.

"I have heard people say that we can't train our way out of these problems," said Carter. "And I agree, but it's still important."

Carter anticipates the number of sexual assaults reported next year to break 1,000.

"I look at that as a good thing," said Carter. "Bridging the gap between the number reported and the number that goes unreported each year – it means we are gaining trust. We want to make sure we tell our commanding officers that they are not being graded or assessed on how many reports they have, but on what they are doing with those reports. Let those people know that if they are found guilty of this, it will end their careers, or worse. I think this will affect good change, and then eventually we will see all the numbers begin to go down."

Carter said we will begin to see real change within 18 months.

"This isn't lip service," said Carter. "If we don't build an office to help drive policy, we will only be good at the margins." Simpson is hopeful.

"I don't want Sailors to feel like they have to keep quiet about a dangerous situation, but even more I don't want that situation to exist in the first place," said Simpson.

"Some of the conversations I hear on board ships and in the smoke pit; almost always sexual in nature, sometimes down-right degrading and usually extremely personal. I try and pull aside young girls and tell them they do not have to engage in those conversations but most think they can handle it. Once these types of conversations become standard, it is only a matter of time before things escalate – especially with the introduction of alcohol."

When Petty Officer 1st Class Bonnie McCammond, a victim of sexual assault and an advocate, went to a friend's house-party she felt safe drinking, knowing that she was among shipmates, until she woke up with one of them on top of her.

"...I ended up drinking too much and crashing on the couch," said McCammond. "I woke up at midnight ... everybody was asleep. One of the other attendees from the party, another Navy person, was on top of me and was assaulting me. And I remember just completely freezing. I was not fully conscious for all of what happened. And then he was done and he crawled back over to the couch he was sleeping on and went back to sleep."

Years later McCammond would retell this story in front of a room full of people during a GMT on sexual assault. She expected there would be some reaction to it. What she didn't expect is that three males would come forward and confess that they too had been assaulted. A couple of them have even started sharing their stories.

They are not ashamed to tell it anymore," said McCammond. "And it doesn't make them weak to tell it."

Air Force Staff Sgt. Amber Wright also shared her story with McCammond. Wright said that joining the military was among the noblest callings a person could undergo. She knew there was little reward or monetary gain in it, but her father served in the Navy and she wanted to serve as well.

In 2005, a young Wright found herself in a long distance relationship. After an argument over the phone, Wright sought solace among a Navy friend of hers and his girlfriend. An upset Wright refused a drink and was given orange juice.

"They spiked my drink," said Wright. "I didn't even realize it until I tried to get up to use the bathroom. I remember thinking I was in trouble, but only because I was 19 and under the drinking age."

Wright had no idea why her friends spiked her drink and she said her memory is spotty when it comes to the incident. But every now and then, when she is brave enough to dig mentally, she recalls what happened next. It wasn't the Navy male who assaulted her, it was his girlfriend.

"I remember her holding my wrists together above my head and me not being able to break her grip," said Wright. "I remember her body pressing down on me, I remember she wasn't wearing deodorant, and I was squirming and trying to roll out. I remember looking away to find an out, and seeing her boyfriend and their roommate sitting there. They were watching. I felt horrible and looked back at her to try and forget them."

Wright doesn't really remember what happened next, only that she woke up the next morning with her jeans undone and her bra on the floor. She grabbed it and left.

"I still have those jeans," said Wright. "I will never throw them out. We've been through too much together"

At the time Wright didn't report. She said she had a supervisor that had the opinion that women in the military should get a full scale hysterectomy/sterilization if they wanted to serve. She said he told her that her career would be made by her pretty face and not her skill or talent. For those reasons she could see no

good coming out of reporting. It would only make her look weak she thought. And she said she was hell bent on proving him wrong.

"I was far more than a pretty face and a fertile vagina," said Wright. "I wanted to be the best. I wanted to serve the best I could. And I have, but at what cost? I don't know."

She said she realized that not reporting was hypocritical and as an advocate, encourages others to report.

"Do not suffer as I have," said Wright. "Please report and get the help you desperately need. You are not alone and you are not to blame. The program has gone through a lot of trial and error and is still not perfect, but the DoD has learned and they are listening."

Wright, McCammond and Simpson have more than just their assault in common. They all agree that the way people talk and what people say has to change.

"It's hard because it is a constant education process," said McCammond. "We are military, we are notorious for having really foul mouths and telling a lot of dirty stories and jokes, but we have to get more comfortable with confronting these things."

McCammond said the answer lies in truly reaching out to those at ground zero.

"I've been in a lot of planes and from 1,800 feet you can't see very much on the ground," said McCammond. "For those of us at ground level, we aren't being asked where our command struggles and what we need ... we keep getting a lot of information passed down to us ... and it becomes a circular argument. We keep giving the same training, just different versions of it. At the end of the day we took all the human elements out of this, the Sailors, the people who are affected, they became statistics, they became SITREPs, and they became somebody else's problem."

The solution, said McCammond, is returning the human element.

"It will be uncomfortable ... but it's a little bit different to have a real person who maybe you know from work," said McCammond. "It's different, it's not staged, it's not a scenario, and it's not painfully boring anymore because it's a living, breathing story."

"It alienates and disassociates the severity and traumatic extreme of sexual assault," said Wright. "If possible, we need to develop a climate that empowers survivors to share their story."

Wright said she is scared and nervous about sharing her story, but as a mother now, she wants to have a part in making this world safer for those who go after us.

"I love my daughter with everything in me," said Wright. "I want her to know that no matter what, I will be her strongest supporter, cheerleader, friend and foundation. I want her to know that if someone – man or woman – desecrates her beautiful, sacred body, that I will die inside for her, but I will know that it was never her fault."

The Navy has two cultural barriers to break down," said Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus in an American Forces Press Service article on navy.mil.

The first culture that has to change is the "one that says this is OK, or that it is not really serious," he said. "The other is the mindset of a victim who says, 'I'm not going to report this, because nothing will happen. I won't be taken seriously, it won't be investigated, and it will hurt my career.'"

Simpson thinks that once people see how strong these men and women are to stand up and share their stories; more people will stand up to prevent situations that will create future stories.

"The fight to do what's right starts here," said Simpson. "And I fight like a girl, so be afraid."