See It, Hear It, REPORT IT

Sexual assault victims speak out

By Terrina Weatherspoon, Defense Media Activity-Navy

"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, 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 few drinks in when she woke up in a co-worker's 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 out of the hope that it will result in 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 not that simple. 

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 ground. 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 want them 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."

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

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."