

Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
Hearing on “Coast Guard Whistleblowers: Sexual Assault and Harassment”

August 8, 2024

Chair Richard Blumenthal, Opening Statement

Thank you for being here. I am honored to welcome all of you to this hearing of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Let me just say, by way of introduction, how grateful I am to Connecticut College for giving us this great venue and to all of the folks in the audience who have come to hear us. Many of you may be Coast Guard retirees or even active-duty, and I want to thank you for your service, as well as the witnesses who are with us today, retired or currently serving.

We are in New London, which has a special affinity and tie to the Coast Guard. All of us in Connecticut have a tremendous respect, admiration, even reverence and affection for the Coast Guard, because we are home to the Coast Guard Academy, and we will soon be home to the new Coast Guard Museum. We are really looking forward to that museum being here in Connecticut to celebrate the tremendous contribution over centuries to our nation by the Coast Guard.

Every day, thousands of men and women put on Coast Guard uniforms—and serve and sacrifice for our nation. They protect our nation and provide a contribution to our national defense and our criminal justice system that is invaluable, that is beyond words an asset to this great nation. But at the same time, many of them are survivors of sexual assault and harassment. We are honored to have with us today five survivors of sexual assault and harassment. We issued a report yesterday with dramatic, moving accounts of the stories from more than 80 whistleblowers, about their experiences in the Coast Guard as survivors and the discouraging, shaming messages that were sent to them about coming forward. The retribution that they encounter and the lasting ramifications to their lives.

Nearly a year ago, this Subcommittee opened a bipartisan inquiry into the Coast Guard's mishandling of sexual assault and harassment cases at the Coast Guard Academy and its subsequent failure to disclose its investigation of those cases to the Congress. Operation Fouled Anchor was the name of that investigation, and it began as an investigation in 2014 to cover a period of the 1990s to 2006. But that investigation was itself covered up. It was completed in 2020. It was disclosed in 2023, only because of a news report that found it and revealed it to the public. Operation Fouled Anchor and its cover-up revealed a deep moral rot within the Coast Guard's ranks, and an utter abandonment of the honor, respect, and devotion to duty that comprise the Coast Guard's core values.

This Subcommittee's investigation has revealed an even deeper decay. The scourge of sexual assault and harassment is not a past problem. It is not limited to the Academy. It is persistent and pervasive, affecting not only the Coast Guard Academy but also the ranks of active-duty personnel around the globe. The culture of cover-up that hid Operation Fouled Anchor continues to this day, and that's the reason why we are here—so that the Coast Guard will, in fact, change course in the right direction and lead by example, not only for itself but for other military services where sexual assault and harassment continues as a problem as well.

This Subcommittee launched its investigation seeking evidence about Operation Fouled Anchor, but right after we began, we heard from a legion of whistleblowers, past and present, men and women, from across the Coast Guard, cadets, officers, and enlisted with service spanning more than five decades. Yesterday the report that we issued—and I'm going to make it a part of this record and formally open the hearing—because we wanted to elevate statements from those individuals who bravely came forward to share their experiences with this Subcommittee. In the words of just one of those individuals, "I never came forward to report my assaults. I knew I would not be taken seriously, and I saw how women who did come forward were treated. They would be blamed for causing their assault, punished for consuming alcohol or other infractions that paled in comparison to the crimes committed against them, or victims wouldn't be believed that they were assaulted in the first place." And as another individual who reported sexual assault put it, "During the investigation, they found that this was a pattern of behavior for him even in previous units. He had never been held accountable ever. It was sickening and humiliating. It was a slap in the face of all victims."

The experiences relayed in this report underscore what this investigation has already made abundantly clear. The problem of sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard is still far too pervasive. It is persistent and ongoing, and it affects officers and enlisted in present service. In fact, well over half the whistleblowers who shared their experiences with this Subcommittee describe instances of sexual assault or harassment that occurred while serving on recent active duty.

As I told Admiral Fagan, Commandant of the Coast Guard, when she appeared before the Subcommittee earlier this summer, these survivors have shown that the Coast Guard's failings did not just exist in the past. They are happening right now, and the Coast Guard must be addressing them.

Today, we will hear from five of these brave individuals, all of whom enlisted in the Coast Guard. On behalf of myself and all of my colleagues, I want to thank each of you for being here today. I want to thank you for your courage and tenacity in coming forward. And I also want to share the words of another member who cannot be with us today, Lieutenant Commander Samantha Block. She reported sexual harassment during her second tour years ago. She thought the individual she reported had retired then, but earlier this year, she learned that that was not the case. She told the Subcommittee, "I found out that he went on to another unit and continued his behavior. That has been the worst part of this whole ordeal for me to cope with because I did what I was supposed to do. I made the report, I raised the alarm. And it was not enough."

The Coast Guard, like the Academy, fostered an environment that seemingly from the top down not only enabled sexual assault and harassment to persist but also fueled the culture that has discouraged survivors from reporting and failed to treat those survivors with the seriousness and respect they deserve.

I was encouraged that the Coast Guard announced a safe-to-report policy earlier this year, responding to the problems that have been disclosed by this investigation and others. I also understand that Admiral Fagan has directed that the Coast Guard take 33 actions after the

completion of the Accountability and Transparency Review initiated earlier last year.

I don't need to tell anybody here that talk about reform is not enough. The service from the top down must ensure that everyone who serves follows these expressed commitments. I am also concerned that the Coast Guard has been late and lagging in making disclosures to this Subcommittee. We have received additional document production, but it has been long after we made requests, and then only because we made the possibility of compulsory process very real and direct for the Coast Guard.

Again, I want to be clear. I have enormous respect and admiration for the Coast Guard and all who serve in its ranks. I recognize all of the service that they have done for this country. I'm going to continue to be a strong supporter of the Coast Guard. As a member of the Armed Services Committee, as well as the Veteran Affairs Committee, I'm going to support the brave individuals who come forward and serve in the Coast Guard. But the strongest supporters of the Coast Guard also have to be the biggest advocates for change, to rid the scourge of sexual misconduct and the culture of concealment that imperil it now and in the future.