

My name is Chief Warrant Officer Julian Bell, and I am standing before you today as a survivor of Military Sexual Assault. I enlisted in the Coast Guard in July of 2003, and I have proudly served for over 21 years.

My journey began with excitement and purpose as I reported to my first assignment aboard the CG Cutter CHASE, homeported in San Diego, California. At just 19 years old, I was eager and ready to serve my country. However, the reality of life onboard was starkly different from what I had expected. From day one, I witnessed a toxic environment where shipmates who struggled with mental health or performance were subjected to harassment and hazing. The prevailing command climate discouraged any cries for help, leading to open ridicule and persecution instead. Violence, inappropriate relationships, and assault became the unsettling norms among my shipmates.

In 2004, during a harrowing incident in Navy barracks, I was drugged and raped by a fellow Coast Guard shipmate and two Navy sailors. After that traumatic experience, I felt isolated and alone. I worked directly with the person who assaulted me but felt that speaking up would only lead to further ostracization. Thus, I chose silence, believing it was my only option.

Despite the trauma, I pressed on in my career. By 2016, I had reached the rank of Chief Warrant Officer and was assigned to Sector Houston-Galveston. It was here that I encountered a pivotal moment in my life. As part of our leadership training at the Coast Guard Academy, I attended an eight-hour seminar on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response. It was during this training that I met Shannon Norenberg, the Academy's Sexual Assault Response Coordinator. With her guidance, I finally found the courage to come forward and report my assault, even though twelve years had passed since that dreadful day.

Confronting my past was not easy—the memories resurfaced, and the pain returned. I submitted to an investigation by CGIS, hoping for justice. However, the outcome was disheartening. My assailant was believed, and little hope was offered for accountability. After several agonizing months, the investigation was closed.

To make matters worse, the trauma from my assault manifested in serious physical health issues, including cancer in my pelvis. Thankfully, I was able to find medical care and recover, but by then, my physical and mental well-being were in disarray. In early 2022, I reached a significant milestone in my healing journey by publicly sharing my story through my podcast, *Sailor's Disgrace*, providing a space for others to voice their experiences. Each shared story has been cathartic for me and has empowered fellow survivors to navigate their own healing paths.

However, during the summer of 2023, when CNN released their report, *Operation Fouled Anchor*, detailing a shameful history of sexual assault and harassment at the Coast Guard Academy, I was both saddened and motivated. Rather than feeling defeated, I felt emboldened to take action to fight against the culture of coverup that was taught at the Academy, I became a Sexual Assault Victim Advocate, eager to effect change. I shared my story with senior officials in the Coast Guard at the Executive Summit in February 2024, and attendees expressed that my account would trigger necessary change.

Yet, soon after, I faced another setback. During the training videos we recorded for Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, concerns arose about their release. The fear of tarnishing the Coast Guard's image halted the release of my story and those of my fellow survivors. We had hoped our voices would be heard, but instead, we felt our experiences were being silenced.

Additionally, I was in the midst of a second investigation into my case, which had been reopened due to efforts from CGIS leadership. However, I soon discovered troubling issues, including missing evidence from my initial interview, leading to doubt about the thoroughness of the investigation. I was left feeling as if my quest for justice was being undermined yet again, and ultimately, no administrative action was taken against my assailant who was allowed to retire shortly after closing the investigation. To further exacerbate the hopelessness of my case, CGIS contacted me weeks afterwards investigating an unrelated hazing incident during my time on the CHASE. It was obvious their intent was to implicate me in something that would bring discredit to my name and story.

With each step, it became clearer that our systems are broken. While I have served honorably for over two decades and love the Coast Guard, I have witnessed firsthand the failures within our systems to protect and support those in vulnerable situations. Now, we must ensure that when our members call for help, they receive compassionate and honest responses that prioritize their healing.

The stories of survivors like myself are far too common, and we have a responsibility to change the narrative. We must create an environment rooted in care and transparency, where survivors are encouraged to speak out, and their stories lead to meaningful action. We need to transform our culture into one that respects, supports, and empowers those who have faced unimaginable traumas.

It's time for us to stop silencing survivors. We must learn from their experiences and honor their strength. We have let down our brothers and sisters for too long, but now is the time for action. Together, we can pave the way for a brighter, safer future within our ranks. Thank you.

U.S. Department of
Homeland Security

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5041
August 5, 2024

Addendum to Letter Submitted May 10, 2024

United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Blumenthal:

I respectfully submit this addendum to my letter submitted to the Committee on May 10, 2024. Since I submitted that letter, the Coast Guard continued investigating me in matters unrelated to my assault to discredit my character and my sexual assault case. In mid-May of this year, a few weeks after my assault investigation was formally closed and my assailant was allowed to retire with no consequence, Coast Guard Investigative Services (CGIS) agents from the Los Angeles office contacted me to investigate a hazing incident that I mentioned in an episode of my podcast. The agents were adamant that I appear in their office to give a formal statement in this matter. I asked why they were investigating a hazing incident mentioned in my podcast and why they were listening to it after my assault investigation closed and not before. I did not receive a response.

Eventually a telephone interview was scheduled, and I willfully submitted. I was not involved in this incident but witnessed other members of the crew onboard the CHASE hazing someone in a berthing area. The agents kept asking what I did as I walked by the berthing area implying that I was somehow involved. I stopped the interview several times and said that hazing was rampant during my time on the CHASE (2003-2005) and if I were to recall every incident, they would be extremely busy investigating countless cases.

As of this writing, I have yet to hear back on how their investigation of this hazing incident progressed or if it was closed. It is my strong belief that CGIS was using this investigation as a retaliatory tool after my case went public and after my involvement with your office was known.

I would also like to highlight that I recently found out CGIS attempted to contact a former shipmate and friend from the CHASE. This person is a struggling drug addict and was discharged from service for drug use about 15 years ago. I let the agents on my assault case know that this person had no knowledge of my assault and that he was not a reliable source of information due to his addiction issues. My friend reached out to me in May and told me that CGIS tried contacting him directly and even went as far as reaching out to his sister, whom he has been estranged for the past 12 years. CGIS was trying to implicate me and smear my name with a person battling drug addiction even though I was open about our friendship and perfectly clear that he did not want to be contacted.

Again, I thank you for your time and for your continued efforts in the ongoing improvements to our service and its culture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Julian E. Bell".

J. E. BELL, Chief Warrant Officer 4
U.S. Coast Guard