

Dear Senator Blumenthal,

My name is Meghan Klement and I am Coast Guard veteran and Military Sexual Assault survivor. I grew up in a small town in Washington with a family who loves America. My father and brother served our country admirably, along with my mother who cared for Veterans her entire career. I joined the Coast Guard full of hope and admiration at the age of 19. I was ready to make my family and my country proud. I served from September of 2012 until my medical discharge in May of 2015. It was a hard three years that made my innocence flee abruptly.

The eight weeks I spent in boot camp in Cape May, New Jersey were difficult but incredibly rewarding. I left there feeling so proud of myself and ready to serve my country dutifully. My first duty station was Small Boat Station Neah Bay. It is an isolated unit on the very northwest tip of Washington state on an Indian Reservation.

The culture of my unit was something I wasn't ready for. I was anxious and excited to start my job and to learn. It was there I met my Boatswains First Class Petty Officer that would eventually sexually harass me. I started experiencing joint issues after every time I went underway. My knees would swell and turn purple. I had mentioned I was in a lot of pain after going underway and in short was told to suck it up. I was fearful of speaking up, but my pain continued to get worse. Eventually they agreed to send me to physical therapy and I was so embarrassed being so new and not useful in the ways the crew needed me to be. I had to drive two hours in each direction to go to each appointment and the cost for gas was difficult on E-2 pay. My Commanding Officer (CO), Chief Warrant Officer, called me into her office one morning. She was very friendly and made me feel like she was a friend I could trust. She asked me if I actually wanted to be in the Coast Guard. I reassured her that I did in fact want to be in the Coast Guard, and I wanted to make a difference. Her questions made me feel as if being injured meant I wasn't actually wanting to be in the fleet. I later found out I was having auto immune issues that were causing my extreme pain. My CO then told me she was going to send me to Air Station Port Angeles on Temporary Duty Assignment (TDY) orders. She had told me this was for the purpose of me attending my physical therapy appointments easier and that I could marry my husband and live outside the barracks.

I reported to Air Station Port Angeles on March 5th, 2013. They put me in the Storekeeper warehouse. On March 6th I met my assaulter. He was a retired Senior Chief who was a contracted IT worker for the base. I was sent to his office to have my profile transferred and set up for my new unit. I felt hopeful for my fresh start

and the opportunities that the base offered. My assaulter was around the same age as my dad. He was very friendly and wanted to talk to me quite a bit. I assumed he was wanting to take me under his wing and help me learn the ropes of my new unit. The first time I went to his office on March 6th, 2013 he put his hand on my knee and rubbed it. I felt at the time it was a little odd but didn't want to make any assumptions.

Within a week of being at Port Angeles I was called into the Lieutenant Commander's office along with my Command Master Chief and my supervisor, Chief Warrant Officer. It was there that they slid a memorandum across the desk that read "intent to discharge for fraudulent enlistment; abnormal flat feet" (see attached 1). I was speechless. I had no idea how I could have fraudulently enlisted. The Lieutenant Commander said to me "we want you to go home tonight and read this over. We will have you in here to sign it tomorrow and have you discharged in about 30 days". My friend who worked in the clinic informed me that the Lieutenant Commander was going through my medical files. He had no right to do so. I found a Chief on base that I could trust and he taught me how to protect myself. I first called a JAG. He wrote up a statement proving I didn't in fact fraudulently enlist. (See attached 2). I was also told I had the right to call a Congressman. But I was told that if I did call a Congressman that I shouldn't tell anyone because the command would be very angry with me. It is widely known how much you will be disliked if you do so. I had to weigh out being disliked with being discharged for fraudulent enlistment.

Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler told me that the Coast Guard dropped my charges. I waited on base for weeks for someone to speak to me. No one ever came to tell me that the charges against me were dropped. I told my health services Doc what I had done. The news quickly spread and my supervisor, my CWO, was extremely upset with me. He came into the warehouse and screamed at me in front of my entire shop calling me "stupid" and "immature" for calling a Congresswoman. Unfortunately, my assaulter found out about my charges from the command and how much trouble I was in with them. After then he became more aggressive.

One afternoon I had to go into my assaulter's office to get a new Common Access Card (CAC) card reader. He shut his office door behind me. He had me sit at the desk in the corner of the room next to his. There were no windows, other than the window on the door. He kept those blinds drawn while I was in there. Therefore no one could see in. As he was explaining to me how to fix my computer, he ran his hands up my thigh and continued to rub them. He asked me very personal questions about my husband. I tried removing his hands from my legs and got up to leave. He quickly jumped up from his chair and put himself between me and the door. Then he said to me "you have to give me a hug since I helped you". I let him hug me in hopes that he would allow me to then leave his office. He held me as tight as he could

against his body and put his head down near my neck and rested it on my hair. He was repeatedly telling me "You're such pretty girl". He was running his hands all along my body and squeezing me. After a minute or more he finally let me leave his office. He then insisted on walking me back to my office. He took me out back behind the building and put his hand on my very lower back at the top of my buttocks and escorted me to my office telling me he was being a gentleman.

This behavior continued over the course of three months. I avoided him as much as possible but my SK1 (Storekeeper First Class Petty Officer) had me frequently running to his office on errands. At the same time this was happening, I was receiving text messages from my prior BM1 (Boatswains Mate First Class Petty Officer) that were sexual in nature and were a form of harassment. My command was talking about sending me back to Neah Bay, and if I returned I would work under the BM1 who was now showing sexual interest in me. I informed my SK1 that I did not feel safe going back to Neah Bay. So, she brought me to my Command Master Chief's office and I informed him as well that I did not feel safe returning there. He then said to me "I am here to give you a reality check. If Neah Bay needs our support, then that's where you will go". I left that office feeling completely defeated and alone. Knowing that if I returned to Neah Bay this BM1 would be in charge of my evaluations and whether I could take any leave. I had informed my SK3 of the messages I had been receiving and how uncomfortable they made me. He had not received training on how to deal with this situation. He informed me that it wasn't a big deal. In turn, he went to BM1 and his wife and informed them that I showed him the messages. I then received very long messages from my BM1 about the type of person he thought I was. Telling me I was disgusting, and ugly. Saying he would never be interested in someone like me. He informed me that he was disappointed in me, and that he thought I was "cooler". It was devastating knowing I was going to be sent back to work for this person and no one in my command would listen to me.

My assaulter continued to pursue me any opportunity he could. I had asked many other people about him and they all just told me "that's just who he is. He's an old perv". Everyone was aware of the type of person he was. MK2 Cool (Machinery Technician Second Class Petty Officer) started to see what was happening. He picked up on the interest this man had in me. He told me if I didn't tell anyone he would. I'm very thankful for my MK2 Cool for realizing what was happening to me. He saw the signs when no one else did. I came to work the morning after my conversation with my MK2 Cool and my CWO asked me to come speak to him outside. He then brought me out back and around the corner where no one could see or hear us. He asked me "Did (my assaulter) shut you in his office and position himself between you and the door?" I responded and said "Yes sir, it's been going on for months. This is also going on." I showed him the messages I was receiving from BM1. My CWO responded to me by saying "Okay, I want you to think about these men and their careers. They

could lose their jobs over this, and you could ruin their lives. And then CGIS (Coast Guard Investigative Services) is going to show up and make you out to be a liar. No one will believe you. Do you want that? I want you to think about all of this before you decide to tell anyone else”.

Again, I was completely devastated and felt utterly alone and unprotected. I returned to my shop very distraught. I had a close friend who noticed, and I told her everything. She brought me over to an adjacent building where a female Chief worked. I told her everything.

A few days later CGIS showed up. I was very nervous to speak to them because the only thing I knew was that they wouldn't believe me. I was encouraged to speak and told that wasn't true. So, I decided to give an interview. I was in a long board room sitting next to two male CGIS agents. The Chief who helped me come forward sat across the table and against the wall. The agents asked mostly routine questions, but it took a turn part of the way through where they then started questioning my character. Then they made me raise my left hand and use it to show them exactly where he had touched me. I remember sobbing uncontrollably as they asked me to do this. I didn't know that I had the option to say no to these men. As I touched myself, they discredited me. Told me that “if your hand just went up your thigh a little farther, then you would have been assaulted”. They made me tell them how many seconds he touched me in each place. The agents then informed me “this is only harassment and it's not that big of a deal”. I became frantic that they weren't understanding, and I told them that this same man did in fact try and touch the female Chief sitting across the table from me, as well as my friends who worked in the clinic. I returned to work, and I waited. I knew that with assault cases you were to be moved units. I waited weeks and no one spoke to me about it. I had to continue to work with my assaulter and see him almost daily. It wasn't until one afternoon I was walking by him and he shook his head with disgust while looking at me. It was then that I realized no one was here to protect me but myself. So, I asked a female Chief if she would help me get out of the Coast Guard or send me somewhere close to home. I told her I couldn't work there anymore, and that I was scared. She somehow was able to get me orders back to Portland, Oregon.

Before I left Air Station Port Angeles I had to check out with my command. My Command Master Chief Moan and Executive Officer (XO). They both told me “When you leave here, we don't really think it's a good idea that you talk about what happened. We don't want this to follow you around and ruin your reputation”. So, when I reported to my unit in Portland I was under the impression that I wasn't allowed to tell anyone about what I had just been through. There was a new Chief on base who became the non-rate liaison. Her job was to form relationships with the

lower enlisted members and help bridge the gap between them and the command. She was to offer support and guidance. She coincidentally had worked in the recruiting office that I joined through. Once she realized I was on base she found me. She asked me why the heck I was back home and I had informed her "I'm not really allowed to speak about it. My command told me I couldn't when I checked out". She then informed me that that wasn't okay. I told her everything along with my new Commanding Officer, Captain Ropp. Those two continued to fight for me for the following two years, but to no avail. (see attached 3)

After being at Portland for a few months I still wasn't "getting better" in their eyes because I couldn't work in the Communications Room. It was a similar room to the one I had been assaulted in. So, they decided to send me up to the Naval hospital in Bremerton, Washington for a psychiatric evaluation. I wasn't in the psychiatrist's office for more than five minutes before she told me our meeting was a waste of her time. I had informed her that I was in routine therapy where I was diagnosed with PTSD, depression, and anxiety from my work environment. She told me all my responses were completely normal for someone who was freshly assaulted. Station Portland then didn't know what to do with me so they sent me to Marine Safety Unit (MSU) Portland so I could work in the Storekeeper shop where I could continue to learn the rating.

In late 2013, after being stationed at MSU Portland, I showed up to work and there were a lot of Chiefs on base from various units. I was later told that the Pacific Area Admiral had heard my story and sent his Master Chief to hear it directly from me. Later, I was put into a room with my Station Chief, my Command Chief, and District 13 Master Chief. Master Chief led the conversation. He informed me that he had looked through the investigation reports. He then asked me "did you know that you weren't actually assaulted? You were only harassed". I was shocked that someone who had literally never spoken to me before seemingly thought he was a professional on my assault case. I asked him "So someone touching you unwantedly over the course of three months is only harassment to you?" He had told me that he was just going by what the reports said. It was then I realized that my investigation was a sham. Master Chief then proceeded to tell me he would make sure BM1 couldn't make Chief, but that there was nothing he could do about my assaulter because he was now a civilian. I continued to tell him that that wasn't good enough for me. I left that conversation feeling helpless again. Realizing that even my highest senior enlisted member in my District wasn't going to help me. Instead, he belittled my assaults and dismissed me. Master Chief ended up becoming the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard, with no skill set on helping assault victims.

In the latter part of 2013, I became pregnant with my son. I had been in an immense amount of pain in my pelvis. At a routine checkup, when I was seven months pregnant, the doctor realized I was in more pain than normal. She gave me a pelvic exam and asked if I had been a victim of sexual assault. I informed her that I had. That is when I found out that I had internal damage. My body went into attack mode like I was being assaulted and never relaxed. I was informed my body did this from my assaults and my brain telling my body that my environment wasn't safe. I had to continue to get internal physical therapy for two years as well as desensitization therapy.

In early 2015 I found out my medical board was coming soon, so my days in the Coast Guard were numbered. We had an all hands meeting one morning with the D13 Admiral. He stood up in front of everyone and told them all how he had a zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault and harassment and that their reporting system was better than ever. When it was time for questions and concerns with the Admiral, I raised my hand. I informed the Admiral that his reporting process was in fact broken. I told him that not a single person had called to check in on me or give me any updates. I told him that my investigation had been ongoing for two years, and that both men still worked for him. He was stunned and didn't have much to say. After the all hands meeting, his Master Chief found me and told me he wanted to talk to me in my Command Chief's office. In that meeting, the Master Chief informed me that he would make it his priority to message me with updates and keep me informed. I never once heard from the man.

I was discharged May 15th, 2015. I had to receive countless hours of therapy, psychological and physical, to help maintain my health. I deal with PTSD and anxiety in my daily life. It is a daily battle for me still to this day. I have nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, and trouble enjoying sex. The traumas that happened to me have affected me physically and emotionally throughout my daily life. The assaults and harassment were one trauma, but the way the Coast Guard handled them is an entirely other trauma in itself.

Since releasing my survivor story, I have received over 50 messages from current and past coasties who have dealt with sexual assault and harassment. Very few of those people actually saw any justice. We all join as patriots, and so many of us leave the service hating our government and deeply mistrusting it. That is because we are silenced, discredited, ran through the mud, and beaten down. The ones who promise to protect us seemingly are more concerned with protecting their careers and doing whatever is necessary to move through the ranks. It was revictimizing for me to film this storyteller session and then find out that the Coast Guard did not want to release it. I again felt silenced.

I have submitted a FOIA request in hopes of finally seeing my full assault case in its entirety. I submitted it officially May 29th, 2024. As of today, August 2, 2024 I still have not received my FOIA request. After submitting my request, I was contacted by the D13 SARC and offered a “healing opportunity”. She was wanting me to fill out what she referred to as an “ intake” form. Later I found out she was wanting me to fill out a 2012 version the 6095 form. She admitted that she would annotate it for me. Therefore my case was never dealt with correctly from the beginning.

We must do our best to help change the sexual assault culture within the Coast Guard. My story is far too common amongst service members. No more silencing survivors. Things need to change, and they need to change now.

Thank you for your time and for giving me and so many others a voice.

Very Respectfully,

Meghan L. Klement