

Written Statement by  
Shawna Ward  
CWO4 (PERS), USCG, Retired

I want to thank this committee for allowing our voices to be heard and for your continuous efforts to uncover the true 'culture' of the Coast Guard.

This culture has saturated the entire Coast Guard fleet starting as early as bootcamp and continuing throughout a career. These incidents are not immune to ranks or rates as mine occurred when I was the most junior enlisted and continued to the most senior rank I could achieve as a Chief Warrant Officer 4.

Unfortunately, I am only one of many who experienced sexual assaults by a Coast Guard member. Like others, my experiences also involved harassment as well as a hostile workplace.

In 1994, I passed through the gates of Training Center Cape May for bootcamp. It would be during this initial 8-week period my experience with the Coast Guard culture began. Permanent party males told all 6 females in my company we will soon be 'barefoot and pregnant' to indicate we would not be in the Coast Guard long and were called "tree huggers". These comments were made in a classroom with a vast amount of permanent party personnel in attendance. At no time did anyone address these comments as inappropriate. This spoke loud and clear: these types of comments toward females were acceptable.

This same culture, that allowed these types of 'acceptable' comments, continued at my very first unit.

Immediately after reporting, I was interrogated for personal information to include my sex life. I was verbally counseled about inappropriate relationships from nearly everyone on duty that weekend before I even met the Officer In Charge. I was also told I was replacing a female SN, who slept with a married BM2 at the unit, and *she* was transferred north to the Group. This same married BM2 also slept with a wife of a MK at this unit and years later would return to this unit as the Officer In Charge upon achieving the rank of a BMC.

In my own duty section, I had a male BM3 who kindly provided me invaluable training, knowledge, and assistance. This great deed created an even greater culture unaccepting of a male and a female, who remained professional, to spend time together or have any conversations on or off duty.

To give a clearer picture of this culture, a BM3 from the opposite duty section threw a paper across the table at me while saying “F\$\$king women in the F\$\$king Coast Guard!” This paper showed a female would be reporting to the unit soon.

My first assault occurred at this unit. The culture I endured made it unacceptable to speak to anyone higher than my own paygrade. Even if I could speak, I didn’t know who to contact. With just a year in the Coast Guard, I was led to believe I would receive punishment if I spoke to someone. Therefore, I remained silent.

When I departed this unit, I was given one of the saddest yet the most beneficial advice I had in my career which was directly in response to the unit’s culture I endured. The male Executive Petty Officer told me this is not fair, and it should not be this way for females, but this is the way it is: “As a female in the Coast Guard, you will always be under a microscope”. He further explained I must work harder, swim faster, shoot better, arrive earlier, stay later, etc. This meant I must do everything quicker and better than my male co-workers.

At my next unit, as one of only two females, I experienced an even worse culture.

I listened to a BM3 near me discuss events that occurred the night prior in his barracks room and how he made the girl ‘sleep in the wet spot’. While hearing this, I looked around a room full of males of all ranks who were listening to this conversation and laughing. In my eyes, this conversation was accepted and encouraged by leadership as not one person told the BM3 his conversation was inappropriate. Their actions of laughing spoke loud and clear: this behavior is accepted in the Coast Guard.

Because conversations like this was accepted, similar conversations occurred daily. While sitting at a table, I heard two male MK’s talking while grabbing their food and drinks. When the first male was filling his cup with milk, the second male started to laugh saying, “Don’t you get enough milk at home sucking your wife’s tits?” This statement occurred because the first male’s wife recently had a baby and was nursing.

I also experienced firsthand what happens when someone does speak up. While underway on the 44’ boat I was directed by the coxswain to go below deck. When I inquired on the reason, I was accused of disobeying a direct order and instructed to do what I was told. When I discovered the reason was so the male crew could urinate off the side of the boat to avoid using the onboard porta-potty, I stated, “If the Commandant was onboard, would you urinate off the side of the boat?” This statement did not go over well with the crew as I was further chastised for not doing what I was told.

My second assault occurred at this unit. This assault, like the first, went unreported. Why? This culture condoned it and the lack of action from leaders allowed it.

The Commanding Officer of the unit, a Lieutenant Commander, would conduct frequent all-hands meetings. During these meetings, the Lieutenant Commander would talk to and about “His Boys” such as ‘how are my boys’ and ‘how great my boys performed during the SAR case’. This group of boys was referred to by others as “The Boys Club”. Since the Lieutenant Commander always made it clear how proud he was of “His Boys” while referring to them by name, the crew knew who were in this club. The males within this club could do no wrong; a group of them physically attacked a male coworker while he slept, would assault their own spouses or other civilians, one sexually assaulted me, and the list goes on.

When I did mention the culture and what occurs, I was quickly summoned to the CO’s office and the Lieutenant Commander demanded I provide him the names. Knowing the incidents were from those inside this club, I was unwilling to provide names because I knew no one would be held accountable. However, I gathered enough courage to say the entire unit needed sexual assault and harassment training. In response, the Lieutenant Commander stated, “Didn’t you want to go to Group when the personnel records were moved there? How about you report to Group tomorrow. Problem solved.” This simple statement spoke loud and clear: if you speak up, you are the problem. I was immediately sent to another unit.

While my interactions with this Lieutenant Commander was relatively short in time, his actions had a long-lasting impact on me. Many in the Coast Guard saw this Lieutenant Commander differently and often spoke fondly of him, however, there were others I met throughout my career who had similar experiences with this Lieutenant Commander and his “Boy’s Club”. Years later, I would meet one such female who crossed paths with this Lieutenant Commander. She is also sitting before you today providing her testimony. While our interactions with this Lieutenant Commander were years apart, we personally experienced what happened if an issue was brought to this Lieutenant Commander that involved one of “His Boys”. This Lieutenant Commander achieved the rank of Admiral prior to his retirement.

I experienced sexual misconduct at various units while climbing in rank. The most significant occurred at a newly commissioned “elite” unit that contained the best and the brightest in the Coast Guard.

Shortly after reporting to this elite unit as a Chief Warrant Officer 2, I was told a Lieutenant Commander would become my new supervisor. Within days, my interactions with this Lieutenant Commander quickly became a

hostile workplace. He was often physically within inches of me, continually showed bullying behavior through his physical and verbal actions, and on many occasions, I thought he was going to physically hit me.

When I brought these issues to my leadership, I was told to “play the game”. Although I told others what I was experiencing, my concerns were dismissed and repeatedly told it couldn’t be *that* bad.

Not sure who else to turn to for help, I reached out to CG Headquarters overseeing sexual harassment and hostile workplace. Initially, Headquarters stated they could provide me assistance, but quickly reversed course when they heard what unit was involved. With no other options, I submitted a hostile workplace complaint to Headquarters against my Lieutenant Commander. Because of the complaint, I was required to go through specific courses of action such as attending a meeting with the Lieutenant Commander. When I walked into the conference room for this meeting, one side of the conference table contained about a half dozen personnel, including the Lieutenant Commander, while my side contained me and the one person I was allowed for this meeting. At this point I knew the meeting was going to be one sided, against me. During the meeting, unit leadership stated a hostile workplace does not exist because the Lieutenant Commander has not physically hit me. Although I stated a physical touch is not required for a hostile workplace, I was quickly dismissed saying it does by everyone in attendance. This meeting spoke loud and clear: Lieutenant Commander’s actions were acceptable.

As far as trainings, there was an in-person mandated training for sexual assault and harassment taught by Headquarters. In this training we watched the same video’s and received the same training materials that’s presented year after year. In this training, the Admirals aid, a male officer, said “a female is asking to be assaulted if she wears a short skirt, short shorts, or a revealing top.”

To my knowledge, this male officer was a product of the CG Academy which was a huge concern. If this officer thought this way, how many other officers thought the same out of the Academy? Is the Academy pushing this thought regarding females?

As an outcome of my complaint, I was able to depart the unit a year after I arrived. Upon my departure, I met with the Commanding Officer, an Admiral, who told me he was sorry I had a ‘personality conflict’ with the Lieutenant Commander. I stated I was sorry he was told there was a ‘personality conflict’ as that was far from the truth. Unfortunately, the Admiral did not ask me to expand on my statement and remained silent. The Admiral’s actions to remain silent spoke loud and clear: the Lieutenant Commander’s action and the actions under the Admirals leadership was acceptable.

Throughout my years of service, it always sounded like a broken record the Coast Guard continued to play over and over, year after year. They always said they are changing their culture, however, the lack of action from the Coast Guard spoke louder than their own words. Not holding personnel accountable for their actions and often promoting these personnel to high-ranking positions to continue to spread this culture seemed to be the theme. The Coast Guard, through their actions, condones this culture.

There are ‘unspoken’ rules among groups of Officers and Enlisted that look out after their own, at all costs. The Admirals look out after themselves and do not step out of line within the group. Like the Admirals, the Captains adhere to this unspoken rule, and they too look out after their own. On the enlisted side, the Chief’s Mess - E-7 to E-10 - looks out after their own. As someone who was part of the Chiefs Mess, I too know about the unspoken that occurs. For example, in response to a Chief who was arrested for a DUI, nearly everyone in this large Chief’s Mess signed a character letter for their fellow Chief. Although this Chief and the Chiefs Mess knew the consequences for drinking and driving, they still signed this letter saying what a “great guy” this person was, and how this person needed a “second chance” due to a “minor lapse in judgement”. On the contrary, junior enlisted are separated for the same action without a second thought. While there are some good personnel within these groups, there are only a *few* willing to go against their own group to better the Coast Guard. This is a significant reason there is a lack of accountability and transparency for the sexual misconduct that occurs.

In January 1974, the first group of enlisted females called “regulars” reported to bootcamp. During this time, the Coast Guard could have worked on their culture, but they made the decision to not make their culture a priority. When I joined in 1994 – 20 years later – this culture was still running rampant. Again, the Coast Guard could have made this culture a priority, yet again, they made the decision not to. Although it’s been over 50 years since the “regulars” arrived to bootcamp, females have been apart of this organization since 1830. When will the Coast Guard make changing their culture a *true* priority?

Even in this culture, there are a few willing to find a way to make those silenced feel safe and heard. I was fortunate to become part of a group that was created for females where you felt safe and could share your own experiences. This group was beneficial as many learned they were not alone in their experiences with this culture.

I still love the Coast Guard, but I am heartbroken they had 24 years during my career to fix their culture. I always adhered to the Coast Guard’s Core Values of Honor, Respect, Devotion to Duty and frequently put the Coast Guard ahead of my own family. I lost a lot of valuable time with my family and missed precious

moments with my children because I cherish the Coast Guard and really believed the culture would change. Today, I look back and wonder if it was all for nothing because the Coast Guard never made changing their culture a true priority. The Coast Guard's lack of actions and accountability speak loud and clear: this 'culture' *is* acceptable.

In the end, I am left to wonder how many more generations of females and males must go through similar experiences before the Coast Guard makes its culture a priority and truly takes significant action across all ranks, high and low, to fix it. I am also left to wonder when the Coast Guard will stop covering and making excuses for those creating and continuing the culture while pushing out the brave souls seeking to fix it. Unfortunately, it seems this just may be too big of a feat for the Coast Guard and something I will not see corrected during my lifetime.

I had to find peace with my decisions for not speaking up when I should have during my time in the Coast Guard. I have endured years of counseling and mental health programs to work through my traumatic experiences and still continue to deal with the aftermath from incidents that occurred decades ago. With all the odds against me, I am very fortunate to have had a successful career. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to say the same. I can only hope sharing my experiences help make the Coast Guard a better place than when I left and prevent others from enduring similar experiences.

For the last 194 years, the Coast Guard has allowed this culture to continue across the fleet. To truly enact a change in culture, the Coast Guard must be held accountable for condoning this culture by utilizing all tools and laws available to Congress. Words and commitments from Coast Guard leaders have shown this is not enough to fix the culture. Only through *real* actions, starting with the Commandant, will true change begin to spread throughout the fleet. Holding current, retired, and separated personnel equally accountable from the highest of ranks – such as current and past Commandants - to the lowest of ranks, through transparency, will the fleet start to see a change. This also includes holding the groups of Officers and Enlisted, who look out after their own at all costs, equally accountable for their actions or lack of it. To ensure there is transparency with the actions of the Coast Guard, I strongly urge Congress to publicly release the names of all Coast Guard personnel who committed, covered up, condoned, and supported the years of sexual misconduct. Unfortunately, it will only be through this type of transparency that the culture truly begins to change.

While the Coast Guard should be a place to thrive, for a lot of females and males, the Coast Guard is a place to survive. Through your actions, Congress **MUST** speak loud and clear to the Coast Guard: **this culture will NO LONGER be condoned.**