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Arizona senator reveals she was raped by a superior officer while in the Air Force

By: **Leo Shane III** (</author/leo-shane-iii>) 📅 March 6

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WASHINGTON — Arizona Sen. Martha McSally (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/12/18/even-after-her-midterm-loss-air-force-vet-mcsally-will-serve-in-the-senate/>), a former Air Force colonel and one of the first female combat veterans elected to Congress, revealed she was raped by a superior officer during her military career but kept the attack secret out of fear of reprisal (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/09/21/sexual-assault-here-are-the-bases-where-troops-are-most-at-risk/>).

“Like so many women and men, I didn’t trust the system at the time,” she said during a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee. “I blamed myself. I was ashamed and confused. I thought I was strong but felt powerless. The perpetrators abused their position of power in profound ways.”

The revelation came as the committee heard from other military sexual assault victims (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/01/31/dod-estimate-academy-sex-assaults-up-47-since-2016/>), and questioned Pentagon officials on whether have done enough to address the problem.



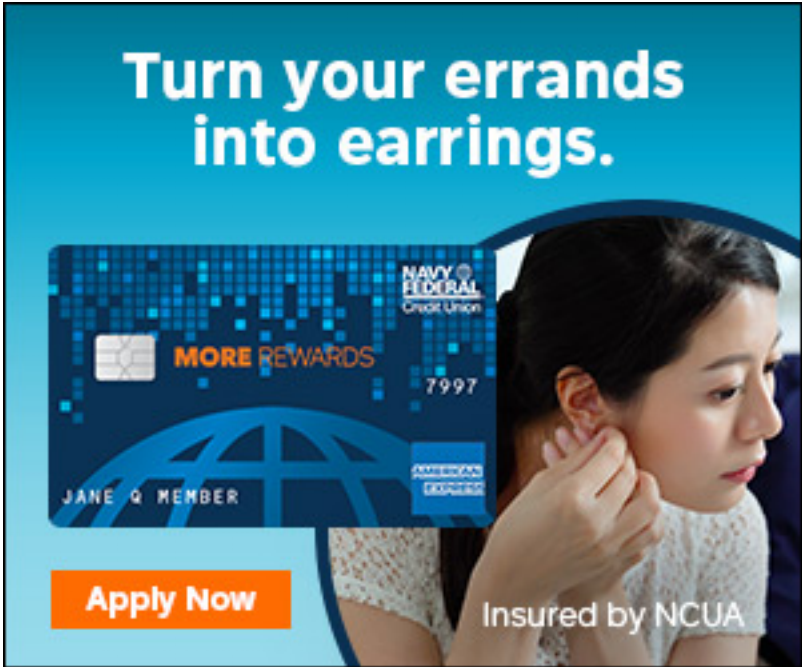
(<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/02/13/as-sexual-assault-cases-rise-service-academy-superintendents-struggle-for-solutions/>)
As sexual assault cases rise, service academy superintendents struggle for solutions (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/02/13/as-sexual-assault-cases-rise-service-academy-superintendents-struggle-for-solutions/>)

Cadets at the three academies reported a sharp increase in unwanted sexual encounters in recent years.

By: **Leo Shane III**

Earlier this year, the Defense Department’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office found the number of service academy cadets reporting unwanted sexual encounters increased almost 50 percent over the last three years, to 747 incidents in 2018.

That news has spurred a series of hearings and legislative proposals in recent weeks aimed at changing cultural norms within the military, and forcing more aggressive action by Defense Department leadership.



McSally, a Republican lawmaker who has been an outspoken voice on issues of equality of women in the ranks, served in the Air Force from 1988 to 2010. She was the first military woman to fly in combat after the military lifted rules barring them from those pilot posts, and provided close-air support during operations in Iraq and Kuwait as part of Operation Southern Watch.

She did not say when the assault occurred or who her attacker was, but did say she did not discuss it with anyone until years later.

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“Later in my career, as the military grappled with (sexual assault) scandals and their wholly inadequate responses, I felt the need to let some people know I too was a survivor,” she said. “I was horrified at how my attempt to share generally my experiences was handled.

“I almost separated from the Air Force at 18 years of service over my despair. Like many victims, I felt like the system was raping me all over again.”

Despite that experience, McSally said she does not support legislation to remove sexual assault and harassment crimes from the rest of the military justice system. A number of advocates have pushed for that move, saying that military leaders have repeatedly shown they are not equipped to properly respond to the crimes or handle their prosecution.

“I share the disgust of the failures of the military system,” she said. “But it is for this very reason that we must allow, we must demand, that commanders stay at the center of the solution and live up to the moral and legal responsibilities that come with being a commander.

“We must fix those distortions in the culture of our military that permit sexual harm.”



(<https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2018/08/21/report-va-may-have-mishandled-thousands-of-sexual-assault-cases/>)
Report: VA may have mishandled thousands of sexual assault cases (<https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2018/08/21/report-va-may-have-mishandled-thousands-of-sexual-assault-cases/>)

The inspector general estimates that half of cases handled by VA recently may have ignored proper processing rules.

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McSally was appointed to the open Arizona Senate seat after losing the November election against Democrat Kyrsten Sinema. During that campaign, McSally told the Wall Street Journal that she was sexually abused as a teen by a high school track coach.

McSally is one of three Iraq War combat veterans in the Senate today, including Iowa Republican Joni Ernst and Illinois Democrat Tammy Duckworth. Duckworth was on hand at the subcommittee hearing for McSally’s announcement and was among senators who praised her courage and insight on the issue.

McSally called the problem of sexual assault in the ranks a threat to national security.

“Commanders have a moral responsibility to ensure readiness of their units,” she said. “That includes warfighting skills, but demands the commander cultivates and protects and enriches a culture of teamwork, respect, and honor.

“Any conduct that degrades this readiness doesn’t just harm individuals in the ranks, it harms the mission and places at risk the security of our country.”

In a statement following the hearing, Air Force officials issued a statement saying "the criminal actions reported today by Senator McSally violate every part of what it means to be an airman. We are appalled and deeply sorry for what Senator McSally experienced and we stand behind her and all victims of sexual assault.

"We are steadfast in our commitment to eliminate this reprehensible behavior and breach of trust in our ranks.”

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