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WELLNESS

[Experts: Males Also Are Victims of Sexual Assault](#)

(20 Feb.) DoD News, By Jim Garamone

Experts urged Army leaders to reach out to male victims of sexual assault, noting people should not view sexual violence as a crime perpetrated exclusively against women.

[Take 3 years off! How you can get more time for family, education](#)

(23 Feb.) Air Force Times, By Stephen Losey

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[We Must Close The Military Sex-Offender Loophole](#)

(25 Feb.) Roll Call, By Reps. Jackie Speier and Mike Coffman

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[Hearing set for academy cadet on sex assault charge](#)

(26 Feb.) Air Force Times, By Kristin Davis

An Article 32 hearing for an Air Force Academy cadet accused of sexually assaulting a classmate is set to begin Monday.

[More Lenient Body-Size Regs In The Works](#)

(2 Mar.) Navy Times, By Meghann Myers and Mark D. Faram

"...the height and weight chart hasn't changed in roughly 30 years ...with fitness trends like weight lifting, and the increased numbers of women in the Navy, it's important to study how body shapes have changed over time," [Chief of Naval Personnel] said. That's lower than what the Department of Defense allows — 26 percent for men, 36 percent for women, suggesting it could be within the Navy's prerogative to ease the standards to match those of DoD.

[Fired XO Fires Back](#)

(2 Mar.) Navy Times, By Meghann Myers

Nearly two years ago, a Coast Guard executive officer reported an alleged sexual assault between two E-3s aboard his ship. The victim filed a complaint and the perpetrator confessed within days, but when the investigation was over, so was the officer's career.

ASSIGNMENTS

[Breaking the Kevlar ceiling](#)

(21 Feb.) Union Tribune San Diego, By Gretel C. Kovach

...[it] was the recommendation of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, a group of civilians that includes retired female brass such as Marine Lt. Gen Frances Wilson and Army Maj. Gen. Gale Pollock.

[New rules for enlisted promotions](#)

(23 Feb.) Army Times, By Jim Tice

The Army has released a sweeping list of changes to enlisted promotions via an updated regulation — one that applies to everyone from private to sergeant major.

LT passes pre-Ranger; 6 women now set for Ranger School

(24 Feb.) Army Times, By Michelle Tan

A female lieutenant successfully completed the February rotation of the Ranger Training Assessment Course, and she now joins five other women who have so far qualified to attend Ranger School this spring.

Ranger School adds packing list for women

(24 Feb.) Army Times, By Michelle Tan

Preparations are already underway for the integrated Ranger School class in April, and officials are looking at everything from accommodations to personal hygiene.

Millennials In The Military Gain A Financial Advantage

(25 Feb.) USA Today, By Emma S. Hinchliffe

Serving in the military may have financial benefits other than a salary.

EXTRA

Cancer Diagnosis Helps Airman Find Balance

(20 Feb.) DoD News, By Air Force Tech. Sgt. Vanessa Kilmer

Early in her career, as a telephone switch operator and then as combat crew communications, her ambition was the ever-present shove toward more responsibility. But [Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Daphnn] Soto's appetite for responsibility left her family hungry for her presence back home.

New SecDef signals support for transgender service

(23 Feb.) Military Times, By Andrew Tilghman

New Defense Secretary Ash Carter signaled support for allowing transgender individuals to serve in the military, the latest sign that the controversial policy may change before the end of the Obama administration.

Gay Rights Groups Urge Military To End Transgender Ban

(24 Feb.) Washington Post, By Sandhya Somashekhar

Gay rights groups on Monday called on the military to lift its ban on transgender service members, after new Defense Secretary Ashton Carter suggested over the weekend that being transgender should not alone preclude a person from serving.

Military Divorce Rate Hits Lowest Level in 10 Years

(25 Feb.) Military.com, By Amy Bushatz

The military's divorce rate dropped again last year reaching its lowest point since 2005, according to statistics released today by the Defense Department.

Top enlisted personnel: Protect family programs

(25 Feb.) Military Times, By Patricia Kime

Service families are well cared for in today's military but face increasing stress amid discussions on altering benefits like health care and family programs, the services' top enlisted members told Congress on Wednesday.

GI's life spiraled into darkness after Iraq

(26 Feb.) San Antonio Express News, By Sig Christenson

Iraq veteran Amanda Weyrick was buried Thursday at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, her once-promising life ruined by the effects of war, PTSD and a fatal infection likely driven by methamphetamine abuse, her family said.

Navy Ship Named For Gabby Giffords Hits Water In Alabama

(26 Feb.) New York Daily News, By Rachelle Blidner

Giffords is the only living female namesake of a U.S. Navy ship.

Army Shift On Transgender Troops Is Latest Sign Of Forcewide Review

(2 Mar.) Navy Times, By Andrew Tilghman

The Army plans to change the way it treats transgender soldiers, the latest in a series of signs that the Pentagon is conducting a highlevel review of the current policy that bars from military service people who undergo medical procedures to change their sex.

Experts: Males Also Are Victims of Sexual Assault

By Jim Garamone

DoD News, Defense Media Activity

TYSON'S CORNER, Va., Feb. 20, 2015 – Experts urged Army leaders to reach out to male victims of sexual assault, noting people should not view sexual violence as a crime perpetrated exclusively against women.

Jim Hopper, a psychologist and researcher, and Russell Strand, a retired Criminal Investigative Service special agent, spoke about an aspect of sexual violence not often discussed: sexual assaults on men.

Hopper and Strand spoke at the Army's Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Program Summit held here yesterday.

The number of males sexually assaulted in the military is sobering, the experts said.

“[About] 10,800 men are sexually assaulted every year in the military,” Strand said. “[Roughly] 8,000 women are assaulted.”

Few military males report being victims of sexual assault, he said. Only 1,134 men reported attacks -- roughly 13 percent of those attacked. With women, 39 percent reported attacks.

Reluctance in Reporting Assaults

So about 87 percent of men attacked are not reporting it and “these are real men in real pain,” Hopper said. The pain is compounded by shame. Being sexually assaulted brings additional feelings of shame to a man because it works against the ideal of what it means to be a man, he said.

And it brings fear. “There’s fear of those memories, there’s fear of being violated, there’s fear that someone might know what happened to them,” Hopper said.

Men who have been sexually assaulted believe they are not worthy of respect, Strand said.

The men who are assaulted are overwhelmingly heterosexual and so are their assailants, the officials said.

“Most people who sexually assault adult men are heterosexuals,” Hopper said. “And those same heterosexual men who are assaulting men are often the same men assaulting women.”

Fear of Being Ostracized

Many males won’t get help, he said, because they feel they won’t be believed, understood or supported.

“Part of that is they know most people don’t expect men to be assaulted, that this can’t really happen to ‘a real man,’” Hopper said.

They are also afraid of their friends or teammates finding out what happened to them, he said. They believe they will be looked at as less than a man, that they will be ostracized and shunned. And, many victims see the assault as the death-knell to their careers.

The military services need to begin reaching out to male victims of sexual assault, the experts said. A safe, anonymous helpline could be the beginning for getting many of these men the help they need, they added.

The services also need to market programs aimed at commanders, health care professionals, police investigators and prosecutors, informing them of the problem and assets available to help their service members, the experts said.

<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128213&source=GovDelivery>

Take 3 years off! How you can get more time for family, education

February 23, 2015

Air Force Times, By Stephen Losey, Staff writer

When Senior Airman Sarah Carter heard last spring about the Air Force's plans to allow airmen to take a sabbatical, "it was as if it was meant for me," she said.

Carter, 31, wants to take two or three years off to go back to school and get a bachelor's degree in homeland security. She would like to use that degree to get into Officer Training School and get her commission. With a two 2-year-old daughter and a husband, Staff Sgt. Casey Carter, who is also in the Air Force and in school, finding time to attend classes while keeping her house in order would be impossible without the sabbatical.

"Now with our schedule, I'm essentially a single mom," said Carter, an air crew flight equipment specialist at Fairchild Air Force Base in Washington. "It's upon me to make sure that the house is cleaned, things are cooked, the baby is at school, get workout time in, plus training at work. There's a lot on my plate. A little more time would help."

Airmen like Carter are exactly who the Career Intermission Pilot Program, or CIPP, is intended to help. CIPP is the Air Force's first attempt at a multiyear sabbatical program that will let airmen put their careers on hold for up to three years while they pursue personal goals.

Some airmen could use that time to go back to school, as Carter hopes to. Others could start a family, or take care of a family member. The Air Force isn't considering airmen's reasons for wanting to take time off when deciding who to admit to the program, so an airman could theoretically do nothing at all during his or her sabbatical.

If it works, CIPP could help transform how airmen balance their military careers and their personal lives. Up to 40 airmen — 20 officers and 20 enlisted — can take advantage of the pilot program. The first class will begin this year.

But the program so far has had trouble gaining traction. The Air Force couldn't find as many applicants as it hoped for last year. In an Oct. 2 interview — 13 days before the sign-up period closed — Col. Rob Romer, chief of the Air Force's military force policy division, said the program had by that point drawn only 30 applicants — five officers and 25 enlisted. The Air Force has not yet released the final numbers of applicants received.

Carter said she tried her hardest to find out how to apply last year. But nobody at her old base, Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, could find out any information on the program, though she said all tried their best.

"They were as baffled as I was," Carter said.

She tried to find information on Air Force websites but wasn't successful there either. She wishes the Air Force had done more to inform airmen.

Carter, who turns 32 in September, said she plans to apply for CIPP this year. But she fears she won't be able to finish her degree, return to the Air Force, and successfully apply for Officer Training School before reaching the cutoff age of 35. If she had been able to apply last year and been accepted, she thinks her chances of making it into OTS would have been much higher.

If she doesn't get into CIPP, Carter said she will likely leave the Air Force when her enlistment is up in October 2016.

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James is expected to reveal more about the first CIPP class in a March 4 keynote speech at the Center for a New American Security's conference on women and leadership in national security, Air Force spokeswoman Rose Richeson said.

"We'll all be watching to see how well it goes, and making sure that the first people through as our test case, that it's accomplishing what we want to accomplish," said Brig. Gen. Brian Kelly, the Air Force's director of military force management policy, in a Dec. 2 interview in the Pentagon. "Which is to allow our high performing airmen an avenue to remain in the Air Force if they have some

other thing in their life. If they're getting out to start a family, if they want to go and pursue advanced education, maybe they're taking care of aging parents. But that CIPP thing will be big."

From now on, Kelly said, the Air Force plans to begin discussing the next round of sabbaticals each spring and will start accepting applications each summer. The Air Force plans to run a selection board each fall to pick who will take part in the following year's program. Last year, the first application period closed in October and the first board met in November at the Air Force Personnel Center in San Antonio.

How it works

Highlights of the program:

Airmen continue to receive their usual medical and dental coverage.

They also receive a small stipend of 1/15th of their usual monthly basic pay, based on their grade and years of service at the time they enter CIPP. That means a technical sergeant with 10 years of experience, for example, who normally makes \$3,364.80 a month would get a monthly stipend of \$224.32.

Airmen can keep up to 60 days of accrued leave.

The Air Force will pay to move an airman from his or her duty station to any location in the U.S., and then move the airman to his or her follow-on base at the end of the program.

To ensure that airmen's careers don't suffer by taking time off, Air Force's personnel chief, Lt. Gen. Sam Cox, said participants' year groups would be reset when they return. For example, if an officer was in the 2000 year group before temporarily leaving the Air Force, he would be placed in the 2003 year group when he returns.

Airmen taking part in this program transfer to the Individual Ready Reserve during their sabbatical. When their break is over and they return, they will be required to spend twice as long in active duty status as they spent in the CIPP program. So an airman taking the full three years off agrees to serve another six years on active duty before leaving the Air Force for good.

Cox first announced the Air Force's sabbatical plans at a breakfast last May.

"Some women leave the Air Force because they want to start a family," Cox said. "So why don't we have a program that allows them, in some cases, to be able to separate from the Air Force for a short period of time, get their family started, and then come back in?"

Although Cox used the example of a female airman who wants to start a family to explain how such a program would help, the program is also open to male airmen, and allows airmen to leave the service to pursue other life goals besides raising a family.

Plan to expand

As early as next year, the program could grow even larger — and not just in the Air Force. Kelly said the Air Force and Defense Department hope to begin expanding the program over the next few years. "There is some push, not just from the Air Force, but from the Department of Defense, to expand that program out, and take it from its current trial phase and make it a larger, bigger program, that would be available to all the services," Kelly said. "What I think the Department is asking Congress for is permission to expand it beyond the 20 [officers and 20 enlisted] and go to bigger numbers, and allow for more use of the program."

The Air Force is the fourth service to test this program, which was originally introduced as part of the 2009 Defense Authorization Act. Congress created the program to try to improve retention of women in the Navy, which began offering CIPP that year and could make it a permanent program. The Marine Corps started offering it in 2013, and the Army selected its first 40 participants in September.

The Air Force can cancel airmen's sabbaticals and return them to active duty in case of national emergency, critical mission needs, or state emergency, according to the guidance memo. Airmen must maintain all Air Force standards while on their break, including health and fitness, and be ready to fully resume their duties at any time.

But airmen will not be eligible for promotion while on a break. Those who have been selected for promotion before entering CIPP will not be able to pin on their next rank until they finish the program. Time spent in CIPP does not count toward retirement.

According to the guidance memo, the Air Force will apply the "whole-person concept" when deciding who to admit to the program, to make sure participants they will be able to quickly readjust back to military life upon their return. That will include their job performance, professional qualities, leadership, depth and breadth of experience, job responsibility, academic and developmental education, and specific achievements.

The Air Force will also consider their manager recommendations, the memo said.

Airmen participating in CIPP will not be eligible for tuition assistance benefits, but they can use any veterans' benefit accrued like the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Time spent in CIPP does not count toward satisfying eligibility requirements for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Airmen can ask to return to active duty early, but that is not guaranteed.

Six months before each airmen's sabbatical ends — except in case of national emergency — the Air Force will notify airmen and send them instructions for returning to active duty.

If an airman does not return to active duty as required, he or she will be in breach of his agreement and may be responsible for reimbursing the government for all costs incurred by his participation in CIPP.

<http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2015/02/23/take-3-years-off-more-time-for-family-education/23753209/>

Sex assault court-martial set for Coast Guard E-8

February 23, 2015

Navy Times, By Meghann Myers, Staff writer

A Coast Guard senior chief is scheduled for court-martial Tuesday to face sexual assault charges, according to an Atlantic Area press release Monday.

Senior Chief Operations Specialist James Hamilton is accused of failing to obey an order, attempted abusive sexual contact, aggravated sexual contact and assault aboard the Portsmouth, Virginia-based cutter Northland, the release said.

The alleged incidents involved two junior enlisted female shipmates over more than a year, Atlantic Area spokesman Lt. Scott McBride told Navy Times.

Hamilton, 33, was first reported in February 2012, for which he received informal counseling. Following another complaint, the Coast Guard opened an investigation in December 2013 that uncovered six incidents against the two women between November 2011 and February 2013.

"The charges follow an investigation, which revealed that Hamilton was engaged in a broad spectrum of sexually related misconduct from inappropriate touching to aggravated sexual contact while assigned to Coast Guard Cutter Northland, homeported in Portsmouth," the release said.

Atlantic Area commander Vice. Adm. William Lee referred Hamilton to court-martial in July following an Article 32 hearing.

Hamilton could not be immediately reached for comment Monday. <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/02/23/coast-guard-court-martial-sexual-assault-portsmouth-northland-hamilton/23892241/>

We Must Close the Military Sex-Offender Loophole

Roll Call, By Reps. Jackie Speier and Mike Coffman

Feb. 25, 2015, 5:44 p.m.

Most Americans would find it chilling if a convicted sex offender were dropped into their neighborhood without warning, free to pick new victims at will. But apparently — according to a recent report — that’s exactly what the United States military has allowed to happen in our communities.

In Arizona, the Marines released a chief warrant officer who was convicted and served time for making his 12-year-old babysitters wear his wife’s high heels and walk on his partially nude body, then rub their feet against his genitals. He was never flagged as a sex offender because he pleaded to “conduct unbecoming an officer,” but even if he were, his crimes would never have been reported to his new neighbors.

In Mississippi, the Army released a specialist who had been convicted and served time for rape and forcible sodomy. He was supposed to register as a sex offender, but instead he wandered to Georgia and South Carolina and disappeared for 10 years, until local news reporters tracked him down.

In Texas, the Army released a private who’d been convicted and served time for assault and “indecent acts” against a young girl. Nobody was told he was a sex offender until he was charged with three more acts of sexual assault on a minor younger than 14.

These are among 242 identified cases where the military punished sex offenders, but released them without placing them in any local or FBI registry, as all civilian state prisons in the United States are required to do.

Worse, it was only possible to identify these instances from a 1,000-name database of those convicted offenders who appealed their cases — meaning this high rate of non-registry may also hold true for a much larger unidentified population.

Why weren’t these sex offenders tracked? Ordinarily, under the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, a sex offender is required to register before their release. But that law doesn’t apply to the U.S. military.

Although the military notifies local jurisdictions, the current system relies on convicted military sex offenders to register themselves within the communities where they wish to settle, something they obviously aren’t that motivated to do. They may also decide to move to a different location to remain undetected.

This shocking loophole allows sex offenders to go undetected and disappear within the communities they’ve been released into — something we don’t tolerate with civilian convicts and something there’s no reason to tolerate with military sex offenders.

The U.S. Marshals Service has said it is tracking down “some” of these individuals after these appalling revelations, but that’s simply not enough.

That’s why we are introducing the Military Track, Register and Alert Communities Act, which would establish a publicly available Defense Department sex-offender registry for military personnel convicted of rape, sexual assault or other sex-based offenses.

It would require sex offenders to register before being released from military prisons, and it would ensure the information on these offenders is available to states, civilian law enforcement agencies and concerned families.

This is a frightening loophole that must be closed.

http://www.rollcall.com/news/we_must_close_the_military_sex_offender_loophole_commentary-240341-1.html

Hearing set for academy cadet on sex assault charge

February 26, 2015

Air Force Times, By Kristin Davis, Staff writer

An Article 32 hearing for an Air Force Academy cadet accused of sexually assaulting a classmate is set to begin Monday.

It is the second Article 32, or preliminary, hearing for Cadet Second Class Brock W. Mangum.

At a hearing in November, Mangum, a junior, faced charges of sexual assault, abusive sexual contact and violating a no-contact order, the Colorado Springs Gazette reported.

The newspaper cited charging documents at the time accusing Mangum in March of pulling down the pants of a sleeping cadet and committing a sex act on the woman.

A military judge at the time recommended modifying the charges, resulting in a second Article 32.

According to the most recent charge sheet, Mangum is accused of touching the breasts of the woman without her consent in an alleged incident in January 2014 and the attempted sexual assault of the woman in March.

The military judge will recommend to the special court martial convening authority whether to send the case to court-martial or dismiss the charges.

An attempt to reach Mangum's defense attorney through the Air Force Academy was not immediately successful.

An academy spokesman, citing school policy, would not contact Mangum with an Air Force Times request for comment.

<http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/crime/2015/02/26/hearing-set-air-force-academy-cadet-sexual-assault/24055381/>

More Lenient Body-Size Regs In The Works

(NAVY TIMES 2 MAR 15) ... Meghann Myers and Mark D. Faram

The Navy's body size rules are outdated and unattainable for many, officials say, and the service is on its way to coming up with new ones.

Late last year, the Office of the Chief of Naval Personnel revealed that officials are looking into updating the height-and-weight chart, as well as service wide ways to reward outstanding performance on the semi-annual physical fitness assessment.

Roughly one-third of Navy personnel are heavier than the approved height-and-weight standards and must be taped, a senior Navy official told Navy Times on Jan. 27.

"If a third of the force doesn't meet the published height and weight standards, then the accuracy of these charts today needs to be and should be looked at," said the senior official, who asked not to be identified because he wasn't authorized to discuss the subject publicly. "We know that over time, the size and shape of the population has changed, so it makes sense to at least reevaluate our baseline to ensure it is still valid."

Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Bill Moran confirmed to Navy Times that he's poised to brief his recommendations to Juan Garcia, the assistant secretary of the Navy for manpower and reserve affairs, followed by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus.

"The BCA, as we understand it, is based on decades-old data," Moran said at a public appearance in February, and the height and weight chart hasn't changed in roughly 30 years, he said.

With fitness trends like weight lifting, and the increased numbers of women in the Navy, it's important to study how body shapes have changed over time, he said.

Currently, male sailors age 40 or younger are allowed 22 percent body fat; older men are allowed 23 percent. For women, limits are 33 percent under age 40, and 34 percent for the rest.

That's lower than what the Department of Defense allows — 26 percent for men, 36 percent for women, suggesting it could be within the Navy's prerogative to ease the standards to match those of DoD. Another option would allow higher body fat percentages as sailors get older.

Navy statistics show that during the spring 2013 physical fitness testing cycle, 109,902 sailors, or 30.2 percent of the force, didn't meet the Navy's height and weight chart standards and had to be taped.

Of those, 7,792 failed the tape test, for a failure rate of 7.1 percent for everyone who had to be taped.

Moran is no fan of the height and- weight standards.

"I will tell you, every weigh-in, I am down to the ounce, just because of the way I am built," Moran said in a spring 2014 interview with Navy Times.

There might also be changes to the tape test, which measures sailors' neck girth in proportion to their waists. Many say the body composition assessment is unfair or too subjective; sailors must pass this and the PRT or they'll fail the cycle. Three failures in four years will get sailors booted out. Dozens of readers have suggested to Navy Times that calipers or a body mass index scale are preferable.

"Bioelectric impedance, which is available in nearly all scales, could be used as a replacement at no, or reduced, cost," wrote Lt. (Dr.) Mark Hauswirth, a Navy flight surgeon, in a January letter to the editor. "Its accuracy is at least comparable, and it has no bias as it does not introduce human error."

Some senior officials agree it's long past time for a change.

"It's amazing to me that with all the leaps in technology that have happened over the past few decades in ships and weapons and aircraft, that we are still testing for body fat the same way we did when I came in the service in the 1980s," the senior official said.

In addition to new body composition standards, CNP is also looking at standardized incentives for PT studs.

The Navy's Physical Readiness Program Director Bill Moore told Navy Times in 2014 that skippers have a host of incentives — from special mention in the plan of the day to prime parking spots to special liberty — they can give to sailors who score an excellent on the PFA.

CNP spokeswoman Lt. Stephanie Homick confirmed that her office was looking into more ways to reward consistently high performers, but declined to go into more details before the proposals are briefed to leadership.

Fired XO Fires Back

Cmdr. Claims Retaliation For Reporting Assault

(NAVY TIMES 2 MAR 15) ... Meghann Myers

Nearly two years ago, a Coast Guard executive officer reported an alleged sexual assault between two E-3s aboard his ship. The victim filed a complaint and the perpetrator confessed within days, but when the investigation was over, so was the officer's career.

Cmdr. Ben Strickland, a nearly 20-year officer with three years in the Navy before transferring to the CoastGuard, says he's the victim of overreach by Coast Guard investigators who dredged up years-old private messages that were inappropriate but unrelated to the criminal investigation.

He was canned as the XO of the high endurance cutter Munro in Jan. 2014 and soon after filed complaints with various government agencies and inspectors general, alleging that his firing was retaliation for opening the sexual assault investigation.

A Coast Guard spokesman denied this charge, saying Strickland was fired by his commanding officer over instant messages sent during the investigation.

The inquiry by the Coast Guard Investigative Service triggered a command climate investigation with Pacific Area's command, which found no issues with the Kodiak Island, Alaska-based ship. The CGIS investigation led to the perpetrator's special court-martial conviction a year later.

Still, the investigators mounted a full-court-press, pulling email and instant message logs for the Munro's entire 170-person crew.

Strickland said instant messages he sent — some of which expressed his frustration with and distrust of CGIS, and others that were sexist or homophobic in nature — led to a bad officer evaluation and his firing.

Strickland provided the redacted chat logs to Navy Times, which he had obtained from the Coast Guard via a Freedom of Information Act request.

"I wouldn't have been fired if you hadn't read my [instant messages], and you wouldn't have read my IMs if I didn't report the sexual assault," Strickland told Navy Times in a Jan. 13 phone interview.

He appealed to Alaska lawmakers, including Sen. Lisa Murkowski, on the grounds that his removal violated the Military Whistleblower Protection Act, which protects service members from reprisal for making protected communications about a violation of a law or a regulation.

Murkowski appealed to the Coast Guard's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs, Homeland Security Department's Office of Legislative Affairs and the DHS inspector general, but all found that Strickland's case didn't meet the standard of reprisal against a whistleblower, according to letters provided to Navy Times.

Hard-ball tactics

Though he said he knows his career is effectively over, Strickland said he wanted to come forward to publicize what has happened to him.

"I think there's a larger issue here, and I think it's the mismanagement by the CGIS and the Coast Guard itself," he said.

The Coast Guard, however, denies any retaliation on its part, stating that Strickland's relief came at the hands of his CO, due to "inappropriate communications" discovered during the CGIS investigation.

"The commanding officer of Cutter Munro felt these communications significantly undermined Cmdr. Strickland's leadership authority and ability to execute his duties as executive officer," PACAREA spokesman Lt. Donnie Brzuska told Navy Times. "The command acted in the best interest of the crew of Munro, the victim and witnesses involved."

In late May 2013, a female seaman assigned to Munro came to Strickland's office to tell him that a male E-3 had been groping her on multiple occasions on board in the past year.

Munro's commanding officer, Capt. Mark Cawthorn, had been on leave, so Strickland was in charge on May 23.

After a call to Cawthorn, Strickland called PACAREA to request a CGIS investigation, as well as Kodiak's local sexual assault and response coordinator for the victim.

ACGIS agent came to Munro the following day, and one day after that, the suspect confessed to assaulting his shipmate.

"I was just devastated that this happened to one of my young shipmates," Strickland said. "I thought I had set a high standard of good order and discipline, but obviously, this young man that did it to her had some sort of character flaw. He thought this sort of behavior was acceptable."

A week after the initial report, an O-6 from PACAREA arrived on board Munro to conduct a command climate investigation.

Munro's commanding officer, Capt. Mark Cawthorn, had a reputation as a macho cowboy-type, Strickland said, and it seemed as though CGIS was trying to paint Munro's command as an environment where sexual assault was at best not taken seriously, and at worst, permitted.

In early June, Cawthorn called the crew together to explain why a command climate investigator was asking questions. He told them to cooperate and provide information whenever possible, Strickland recalled, but reminded them that they didn't have to incriminate themselves.

Then the sexual assault investigation heated up. "I had distraught crew members coming to see me, basically saying that they were being strong-armed, that they were treated unfairly," he said. "And these are witnesses — they aren't suspects."

The victim's roommate came to his office, Strickland recalled, to tell him CGIS had threatened her, saying, "We have your emails and if you don't cooperate we're going to ruin your career."

They were referring to some emails the roommate had sent to her mother, complaining about other women on the ship. It turned out that CGIS had pulled emails and instant message logs for the entire crew.

He said he felt like CGIS had decided to investigate his entire crew, rather than the sexual assault he had reported.

That's an unusual move, according to a former Army judge advocate general officer.

"I'd say it's not very common to be pulling messages from a witness," Greg Rinckey, a civilian defense attorney in New York told Navy Times on Feb. 3.

"I mean, it's one thing to pull it on the accused, it's another to pull it on witnesses, unless they're suspected of maybe lying or giving a false official statement," he said.

A former senior officer with knowledge of the Munro case, who asked for anonymity to protect his employment, was equally stunned by the search.

"When have you ever done that for a sexual assault? What do the emails of the entire ship have to do with a sexual assault case?" he said.

The senior officer added that he'd heard the CGIS investigator, Chief Warrant Officer Aaron Woods, was on a "personal jihad" against the CO.

"It seemed like they were out to hang Cawthorn," he said.

By June 14, PACAREA had wrapped up its command investigation, and the O-6 in charge told Cawthorn and Strickland that he found nothing negative about their command climate.

A day later, Strickland met with CGIS agents, who said they'd expanded their sexual assault investigation to include Cawthorn's remarks to the crew. The agents said Cawthorn's warning against self-incrimination constituted obstruction of justice, Strickland said.

Strickland says he understood Cawthorn's comments as relating to the command inquiry, but said that CGIS pressured him to say they also pertained to the CGIS criminal probe.

But there wasn't any time left to investigate the CO: Cawthorn handed over Munro's command on June 18, 2013, and retired after 27 years on active duty.

That afternoon, Strickland and his new CO, Capt. Jeff Thomas, met with CGIS agents, who told them they intended to interview all 170plus crew members about Cawthorn's comments. The interviews were wrapped up by the end of June, when Munro left Alaska for

a Western Pacific deployment. When they returned in mid-September, CGIS requested to re-interview four crew members regarding the sexual assault investigation.

In January 2014, Strickland was confirmed as the next Coast Guard liaison officer for the Navy's 6th Fleet in Naples, Italy.

But two weeks later, Thomas called him in for a meeting. He informed Strickland that he was being relieved for cause based on the instant messages CGIS had pulled during the previous year's sexual assault investigation.

Soon after, he found out his orders to Naples had been canceled, Strickland said.

Lewd messages

Strickland, 42, now assigned to Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C., admitted that he used some choice words while chatting with other officers online. He also admitted to questioning CGIS' handling of the investigation.

"They are going to try and 'prove' that there is a command climate from the CO/XO that facilitates excessive alcohol consumption which likely is the causitive [sic] factor in the sexual harassment case," Strickland wrote to another Coast Guard member, whose name was redacted, in 2014.

Strickland told Navy Times he believed he was fired for expressing his opinion about CGIS, and for offhandedly using a homophobic slur in a private instant message conversation that took place in 2012, before he reported to Munro.

The chat logs, however, contain evidence of other inappropriate language.

Though Strickland said he was devastated that the woman had been assaulted, the records he provided to Navy Times suggest he knew that the perpetrator had a habit of grabbing his female shipmates.

On May 25, 2013, he told a friend about the start of the investigation.

"My 'A gang' guys like playing grab ass/cop and feel with each other in the shop," Strickland wrote. "Problem is now it has escalated to where they tried good gaming one of my female SN...Needless to say, she didn't react like the others did and now is an emotional wreck."

"Yeah, you could say this is a sensitive issue right now in the CG," he added. "Got the lawyers involved and everything. The female SN is psycho enough to begin with."

Strickland said that he sent the message after the CGIS agent in charge had briefed him after the initial investigation interviews, but that he wasn't aware of the behavior beforehand. "Why would I cover something up that I reported?" he said. "That makes no sense."

Strickland also made sexually charged statements and judgments about a female officer and several enlisted women he served with during 2012 and 2013.

"Instant messages from Cmdr. Strickland were inappropriate," Brzuska, the PACAREA spokesman, said. "He also apparently minimized the nature of the sexual assault under investigation and admitted to encouraging his crew to not cooperate with law enforcement. These messages ultimately led to the command's decision to relieve Cmdr. Strickland."

Though Strickland's Jan. 2013 officer evaluation report shows mostly stellar ratings from an operational and leadership standpoint, Thomas came down on his personal and professional qualities, citing the investigation.

"I think that he took everything out of context because he was looking for a reason to fire me," Strickland said. "And I think they were mad that I criticized the investigation."

Thomas wrote that he lost confidence in Strickland's ability due to a "demonstrated lack of support for CG policies" and a failure to "adhere to CG core values."

“A capable officer who possess [sic] the administrative and managerial skills to contribute positively to CG; must align personal beliefs with CG direction and core values,” Thomas wrote. “Not recommended for promotion or future afloat assignments.”

Strickland argues that he had a reasonable expectation of privacy while communicating at work, but Rinckey, the defense attorney and former Army JAG, flatly denies that.

“Can it be used to show that you’re screwing around? Yeah. Can it be used against you if you’re forwarding an off-color joke? Probably not,” he said. “Although you’re still misusing government systems.”

Legal questions

Fireman Daniel H. Rose pleaded guilty May 28, 2014 — a year after the investigation began — to both grabbing the victim and repeatedly making sexual comments about her body.

He was sentenced to four months confinement, reduction in rank to E-1 and a bad conduct discharge, Brzuska said.

Strickland and others have questioned why it took so long to charge and convict Rose.

“Why would you waste the time and resources going after some poor commander up in Kodiak? For what?” the anonymous officer said. “You’re telling me that sexual assault and all of this is rampant throughout the Coast Guard, but you want to use your scarce resources to worry about what Ben Strickland is doing six months after Cawthorn’s retirement? When the guy who did it admitted to it on day two?”

CGIS was entitled to dig into Strickland’s background, Rinckey said, but it could set a dangerous precedent for sexual assault investigations.

“In the past, victims were afraid to come forward because they were afraid the tables were going to be turned on them,” he said. “Now we’re going to start doing that with witnesses?”

Service members should know that their communication isn’t protected on a government computer at work and they could be punished for things they said years ago, Rinckey said, adding this should be balanced with the consequences of prosecuting valuable witnesses.

“You have to weigh that with witnesses being willing to cooperate,” he said. “If I were a witness, would I want the government to be reviewing three years of my emails? Did I say something stupid in an email three years ago? I’m sure I did.”

Strickland confirmed Sept. 18 that he had recently submitted a request with the Coast Guard’s Board for Correction of Military Records to have his relief stricken from his service record. He added that he came forward, not to change the outcome of his case, but to highlight what he feels is a witch hunt so that it doesn’t happen to others.

“I’m a small part of this,” he said.

Breaking the Kevlar ceiling

(21 Feb.) Union Tribune San Diego, By Gretel C. Kovach

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. — The light armored vehicle lurched down the firing range with its mixed-gender crew, blasting a new chapter in Marine Corps history with each shot from the chain gun.

In a clearing of tall pine trees near Camp Lejeune, two female research volunteers from an experimental task force hunted targets recently with an experienced infantryman serving as vehicle commander.

On that frigid afternoon on the range, the gunner gripping the trigger stick was Lance Cpl. Ashleigh Howell, 19, of Grand Rapids, Mich., a Marine who normally works in ammunition supply. Lance Cpl. Brittany Dunklee, 19, of Gwinn, Mich., peered down-range through spectacles from the blue glow of the driver seat.

Current Marine policy dictates that only men can serve as crew and infantry scouts on light armored vehicles, although that could soon change now that Pentagon restrictions on women in combat have been eliminated. Under pressure from Congress and orders from the defense secretary, the services have until the end of the year to open all jobs to women or seek a waiver.

Howell pressed her eyes to optic sites inside the spinning turret. “I see it. On the way,” she announced as the target popped into view 1,500 meters in the distance. Howell fired a volley of rounds from the main gun, a 25mm M242 Bushmaster, then a faster burst from the M240 coaxial.

Metal ammunition casings clattered inside the war machine. The *thunk, thunk, thunk* of explosions rumbled under their flak jackets, kicking up dust inside the armored vehicle. Then the crew heaved over hilly ground toward the next target, the whining drone of the engine mingling with the sour smell of gunpowder and diesel fumes.

“Kill-kill-kill, kill-kill-kill,” the master gunner said from the watchtower, noting their performance.

After emerging from the eight-wheeled, 15-ton vehicle, Sgt. Corey Carter said his third crew of the day had done well. “Best gunner I had so far today. Killed every target except the last one — went down for time,” said the vehicle commander, 25, of Sarasota, Fla.

Emphasizing readiness

These Marines serve in the Corps’ new Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force, a group of about 600 including staff and 350 research volunteers assigned to mixed-gender platoons. The unit is an unprecedented experiment for the U.S. military as it prepares to bring women into all-male ground combat units, as well as a means for the Marine Corps to define entry and performance standards for anyone serving in its infantry, artillery and mechanized vehicles.

After training for four months at Camp Lejeune, the bulk of the task force followed the advance party last week to Twentynine Palms. During a three-month combat assessment in the Mojave Desert, and additional evaluations for some at Camp Pendleton and the mountain warfare center at Bridgeport, the Corps will rate the Marines individually as they perform collective tasks in combat units containing varying concentrations of women.

Civilian researchers from the University of Pittsburgh will track injuries, heart rates and other physiological indicators to correlate physical fitness and combat performance. Then a “red team” with the independent Center for Strategic and International Studies will evaluate the Corps’ conclusions drawn from the task force and other lines of research.

“Ultimately this is about readiness, the readiness of the Marine Corps to fight its nation’s battles. This is not male-female. This is to get the standards right and then ensure we have the most qualified, capable Marines to perform all those tasks associated with that job,” said Col. Matthew St. Clair, the infantry officer in command of the task force.

“Cohesion and integration? Yes, we are looking at that. But male and female Marines have been serving side by side together for a long time,” he said. In all areas outside the ground combat arms, “This is not new. ... This is normal.”

During St. Clair’s previous assignment as commanding officer of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, men and women served together in three of his four combat elements — as they do throughout the Corps — with aviation, logistics, and command staff.

“When I was tasking my Aviation Combat Element commander to prepare to insert an embassy reinforcement force into our embassy in Cairo, Egypt, I wasn’t saying, ‘You don’t have one of your female pilots in there, or one of your female crew chiefs?’ It was, ‘Hey, this is the mission, be prepared.’

“Marines are Marines. ... There are weak males and there are weak females. I mean, that’s the reality of it. All I want is the best. Whoever is the most qualified and capable, boom ... go,” St. Clair said.

Infantry core

The armed forces and Special Operations Command have until Oct. 1 to appeal to the defense secretary for an exemption to the new all-in policy, presenting research showing why it may be warranted to reserve any ground combat units for men.

In some respects, the Corps has the most at stake. It is the most male of the services, with about 7.6 percent of its force comprised of women. It is also the most heavily dominated by its currently all-male infantry. About a quarter of the job slots in the Corps remain off-limits to women, most of them in the infantry.

The Marine Corps started researching the implications of adding women into infantry training in 2012, months before the defense secretary rescinded the 1994 policy that had restricted women from direct ground combat.

That fall it began admitting newly minted female officers on an experimental basis to its Infantry Officer Course at Quantico, Va., hoping to get 92 research volunteers. Only 5 percent of female officers offered a shot at it were interested.

More than two years later, just 27 women have attempted the grueling 12-week course. None has passed.

“The lack of volunteers is also a data point,” said Capt. Maureen Krebs, public affairs officer for the Corps’ force integration plan.

Critics contend that female officers have little incentive to join the course, since they will not be allowed to serve in the infantry if they pass. 2nd Lt. Sage Santangelo, a Marine dropped on the first day for physical exhaustion, argued in a March 2014 Washington Post editorial that women are at a disadvantage since they train as Marines to lower fitness standards.

She also found it unfair that female officers were not allowed to cycle through the infantry course a second time like men. The policy has changed since then and three women have reattempted the course, with none passing.

According to a disclosure form that volunteers sign, repeating the course would delay the start of training for their actual occupation and cause “potential harm to the volunteer’s career path.”

The last group of women permitted to volunteer for the research will begin the course in April.

About a year later in 2013, the Corps expanded its research to allow enlisted women into infantry training. About a third of the women eligible for the Infantry Training Battalion course elected to try it. Among 358 research volunteers, 122 graduated — a 34 percent passing rate.

Among other ground combat schools, 29 out of 32 female Marines graduated from the artillery cannon crewman course, 11 out of 15 made it through tank school and 16 out of 22 passed amphibious assault vehicle school.

Most of those women now serve in the experimental ground combat task force. The Marine Corps established that unit last year after deciding that the initial round of strength tests it administered to men and women were not an adequate gauge of combat performance.

During “proxy test” research in 2012 and 2013, the Corps found that 34 percent of female Marines were “good performers” on a battery of six largely upper-body strength tests, compared to 66 percent of men. The proxy tests were administered to 409 men and 379 women.

The Corps created the task force because “we needed Marines performing the actual occupational tasks in a closely simulated combat environment to derive occupationally specific gender-neutral standards. A deadlift in a controlled environment doesn’t mimic requirements of the job,” Krebs said.

Since 2013, the Corps has opened 12 occupations in ground combat specialties formerly closed to women and nearly 6,000 positions. Those positions include staff and combat support jobs with units such as tanks and artillery.

So far the Marine Corps has kept women out of its infantry, reconnaissance and special operations units, even in combat support occupations currently open to them. Twenty Marine occupations and nearly 60,000 positions remain closed to women.

The Army, which has an active-duty force nearly three-times the size of the Marine Corps, is forging ahead integrating its infantry units, assigning women in support roles. Fourteen occupations and almost 180,000 positions remain closed to female soldiers.

Task force skeptics

Some question the Corps’ research objectives. Why not simply set a gender-neutral entry standard and let anyone who qualifies take the job?

That was the recommendation of the **Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services**, a group of civilians that includes retired female brass such as Marine Lt. Gen Frances Wilson and Army Maj. Gen. Gale Pollock.

After a September update by each of the armed forces, the defense advisory committee called the Marine Corps' experimental task force a "continuing concern." The panel recommended that the Corps stop its infantry training experiments "and allow qualified servicewomen that volunteer and that complete the courses to be awarded the (military occupation specialty) and assigned to infantry units."

The committee was similarly opposed to a plan to admit female soldiers to Army Ranger school this April for research purposes, saying women should have the same opportunities as men to train for and work in that special-operations unit.

Retired Army Col. Ellen Haring, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Women in International Security, accused the Corps of conducting its research in bad faith.

She credited the Marines for pioneering an innovative use of women in ground combat, with the Lionesses in Iraq and later with Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan. But she added that rather than spend three years figuring out "how to best recruit and integrate some badass women, the Marines have used their time to develop data to justify a request for an exception."

The Marines said no one is stacking the deck.

"The Marine Corps at least has enough sense to do this and say well, let's slow down and take a little bit more deliberate, methodical approach before we just half-ass something," said 1st Sgt. John Dober, 46, of Dawsonville, Ga., a four-time combat veteran who serves as infantry company first sergeant for the gender-integrated task force.

"Let's get some research done and see if this is going to actually be the best way to ensure combat effectiveness and efficiency, so we're not putting kids in body bags for just an idea that we didn't really think through," Dober said.

For instance, the fact that few women may be interested in becoming an infantry officer or qualify for the course may be relevant according to critical mass theory, which predicts minorities will be treated as second-class until they constitute perhaps 30 percent of a group.

Women make up about 15 percent of the U.S. military. When Gen. Martin Dempsey, the joint chiefs chairman, called for a "critical mass" of women in ground combat units, he stoked fears among some people of lowered standards and gender quotas.

After the Corps analyzes results of the experimental task force's combat assessment, individual Marine standards may become more difficult or change in other ways, but "the commandant has been very clear, we ain't lowering standards for anybody," said St. Clair, the task force commander.

Gen. Joseph Dunford, who took over as commandant of the Marine Corps in October, declined through a spokesman to comment on the gender integration research.

"The evaluation process is ongoing... He's not the type to prejudge or make a recommendation to (the defense secretary) without thought, deliberation, and analysis. All of which will happen after the study is complete," said Lt. Col. Eric Dent.

Esprit de corps

Whatever the expectations may have been going into the research, the Corps' experimental task force is proving that women can be quickly and effectively integrated into ground combat units, according to preliminary observations by task force members.

During more than a dozen interviews over a recent three-day visit at Camp Lejeune, Marines of all ranks cited evidence to U-T San Diego that unit cohesion and combat proficiency have been high.

Capt. Alex Puraty, company commander of the mechanized unit, said he was able to train fast and accurate gunners in four months instead of the customary four years, thanks to extensive range time and the task force budget — half of which is devoted to ammunition.

"We just had a tanker shoot task-force high. It actually outshot all the other tanks on Camp Lejeune, and that was an integrated crew. So my tankers can go toe-to-toe," said Puraty, 33, of Austinburg, Ohio.

Minor hazing problems by Marines who spent their entire careers in all-male units before joining the task force have been quickly corrected, said officers and enlisted leaders.

For instance, a female Marine on duty in the barracks who responded to a noise complaint was taunted by a male Marine who said they were celebrating their performance on the physical fitness test. “The MALE” test, the loud Marine said, emphasizing that women aren’t held to as high a standard. He was reprimanded and quickly changed his attitude, Dober said.

At Camp Lejeune, task force Marines have employed a timeless grunt-life technique for building cohesion — shared hardship.

Sgt. Kelly Brown, 30, of Winchester, Va., is a rifle team leader in the provisional infantry platoon. During a two-day field operation, she and her fellow Marines slept in the treeline on the ground as temperatures dropped below zero.

“Everything was frozen. The ground was frozen. The five-gallon jugs of water were frozen. The Jetboil didn’t work. It was a bad day,” she said. When the sun rose, they hopped around trying to keep warm, convinced it couldn’t get much worse.

“It’s miserable for everybody so you’re all dealing with it together, which definitely brings a lot of camaraderie,” Brown said. Once you think to yourself, “Man, I didn’t die ... at least I’m still alive, then you’re in the infantry mindset,” explained Staff Sgt. Jamil Alkattan, 33, of Chicago, provisional rifle platoon sergeant.

Some women have struggled with physical demands of their new task force occupations, like toting heavy rounds. When that happens, the men often rally them on as they do for male peers who need motivation, the U-T observed with different platoons.

Sgt. Mindy Vuong, a 28-year-old cannoneer in the artillery battery, grunted and wobbled as she tried to hoist a heavy howitzer round from her arms to her shoulder.

“OK, explode!” Sgt. Edward Ballard called out. “Balance it.”

Afterward, Vuong smiled between sips from a canteen. “He keeps me going,” she said.

Some feared that social problems would be the biggest challenge integrating women into all-male combat crews. At the task force, where everyone volunteered expecting to serve in a mixed-gender unit, “we just haven’t seen it,” said Puraty, the mechanized company commander.

“It is a brother-sister relationship and they seem to be doing very well with it. They gather up underneath the tower at the end of the day for their debriefs, smoking and joking, ribbing each other.

“It’s a normal crowd. There’s no cliques” separating men and women, he said.

Quick conversion

Marines from the provisional infantry platoon were intentionally not sent to infantry school before checking into the task force. They started virtually from scratch to test the Corps’ “every Marine a rifleman” ethos.

At first, some of the men and women couldn’t reload their rifles without dropping a magazine. When Alkattan asked if they had ever seen an M203 grenade launcher, he got blank stares.

A couple months later, Alkattan watched his provisional platoon move down range in synchronized fire team attacks. Even after shuffling personnel among the teams to create friction, no one was shooting each other. The right side wasn’t going too fast. The left side wasn’t going too slow.

The orchestra was playing in tune, as he put it. “It’s like music when it comes together the right way,” Alkattan said. When the 2nd Marine Division commanding general dropped by the range, he asked which group he was watching and had a hard time believing it was the provisional platoon in action.

“Yes, it is sir. That’s supply-admin. That’s a truck driver. That’s a female truck driver ...” Capt. Ray Kaster, the infantry company commander, recalled telling him. “It’s been extremely successful.”

Alkattan doesn’t expect mixed-gender infantry platoons to be tested in real combat anytime soon.

“But we’ve proven that you can develop a Marine to fight combat. ... Can we take a female, put her in the infantry and actually develop her as a rifleman? Yes.” <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2015/feb/21/marine-task-force-women-in-combat/?#article-copy>

New rules for enlisted promotions

(23 Feb.) Army Times, By Jim Tice

The Army has released a sweeping list of changes to enlisted promotions via an updated regulation — one that applies to everyone from private to sergeant major.

Some of the new rules, such as promotion points for combat zone deployments and transferable promotable statuses, will be welcomed as good news for soldiers.

But others, such as classifying out-of-shape soldiers as non promotable and mandatory education requirements, have and will continue to catch some soldiers off guard.

Here is a closer look at some of the major changes included in the update to Army Regulation 600-8-19, Enlisted Promotions and Reductions — the reg's biggest revision in two years:

1. Promotion point fixes

The new reg supports the Army's goal of establishing a career with predictable promotion points, but still allows for accelerated promotions for high-speed soldiers who excel in their jobs and professional development.

"The revised regulation re-emphasizes that soldier skills are important, and it places (a focus) on developing those skills," said Gerald Purcell, a policy integrator in the enlisted division of the Directorate of Military Personnel Management, Office of the Army G1.

"We have really tried in this version of the regulation to put more objectivity in the semi-centralized promotion selection process, while taking into consideration perceptions of unfairness, which some soldiers thought were in place with the previous system," said the former sergeant major.

Among the changes prompted by the wars in the Middle East is a policy that authorizes promotion points for time spent in a combat zone – up to 30 points for sergeant, and 60 points for staff sergeant.

The Army listened when deployed soldiers complained they were disadvantaged in the competition for promotion because they could not attend school or spend time on distance education courses that are worth promotion points.

Also, under procedures now in effect, when a promotion point-earning event occurs, it is put into the database through a transaction at the unit level or at a level where the event occurred, such as a service school or training venue.

"This means a soldier's promotion points automatically are recalculated on a real-time basis, and they can change from day-to-day based on data entries," Purcell said.

This eliminated the need for a soldier to go to the unit's S1 (administration) section with supporting documents to have his or her promotion points updated – a process that in the past took personnel officials hours and hours to accomplish each month.

"We have created a system that when exercised properly works. It produces the right information to select the right soldiers based on being the best-qualified," Purcell said.

"It requires extensive involvement at the unit commander level, the unit S1 (administration) level and the soldier. These three players have an inherent responsibility to perform their role correctly," he said.

"If they do that, it will work."

2. Transfer of 'promotable' status

Soldiers who've been selected for promotion can now carry that status with them if they transfer between active and Reserve components.

The new version of the regulation allows for:

- Soldiers in the active Army, Army Reserve Active Guard and Reserve, Troop Program Unit, Army Reserve Element and Multi-Component Unit to transfer between these components while retaining their promotable status when competing for promotion to sergeant or staff sergeant.
- Army Reserve soldiers who transfer from TPU, AGR, Individual Mobilization Augmentee, Individual Ready Reserve or Standby Reserve (active status list) to retain their promotable status and be integrated onto the appropriate gaining list. This applies to centralized promotions only, so for soldiers being promoted to sergeant first class, master sergeant or sergeant major.

Before this change, anyone who left the active component and transfer to the Reserve would lose their promotional status, said Sgt. Maj. Tim Stanton, the Army Reserve's G-1 (personnel) sergeant major.

"The new regulation allows soldiers on a recommended promotion list, a standing list, to carry that standing with them into the Army Reserve," Stanton said.

The change to the policy stems from discussions that first took place years ago, Stanton said.

"The [old] regulation didn't allow soldiers to transfer from one component to another," he said. "It didn't make sense."

Under the old policy, soldiers who transferred components were re-boarded within the Reserve's promotion process, Stanton said.

"They've already been boarded," he said. "They're ready. That shouldn't change just because they change component."

The change is critical for the Reserve, which is undermanned when it comes to mid-level noncommissioned officers. The Reserve is short about 2,300 sergeants and about 4,700 staff sergeants, Stanton said.

The new policy "allows us to gain the experience of that individual into our component," Stanton said. "Also, we have a shortage of junior NCOs in the Army Reserve. It's a way to entice them to come to the Army Reserve."

Promotable soldiers leaving the active Army for the Army Reserve will bring with them not just their promotion status but their promotion points as well, Stanton said.

"Many of them probably have attended more schools and probably have done a few more things than their reserve component counterparts because they have more opportunities, so their points may be higher than reserve component soldiers," he said. "They'll be able to carry over their promotion standing, and they will be put on our list based on their promotion points."

This could mean a lower sequence number — and a quicker promotion — for some.

However, Stanton said he expects this new policy will have a "minimal" impact on how many soldiers will switch to the Reserve.

"The majority of soldiers who qualify probably will stay in the active component if they're promotable, but [this new policy] is an incentive," he said. "The goodness of it is this will also have the reverse affect. If we have a soldier in a standing list in the Reserve and they go to the active Army, they would maintain their status."

3. What makes you non-promotable

Soldiers can be placed in non-promotable status for a myriad of reasons, many of them temporary. Here are some of the events and situations that make soldiers ineligible for promotion, and in many cases ineligible for re-enlistment, to the ranks of specialist through master sergeant:

- Lack of a qualifying Army Physical Fitness Test score. (The restriction does not apply to soldiers who are declared missing, terminally ill or enrolled in the Disability Evaluation System.)
- Not in compliance with Army weight standards.
- Subject to denial of continued service under the Qualitative Management Program or the Qualitative Service Program.
- Absent without leave.
- Approved or pending administrative separation.
- Approved retirement.
- Field bar to re-enlistment.
- Pending a security clearance determination that is required for the soldier's primary MOS. Soldier regains eligibility the day the clearance is approved.
- Soldier was punished, or received suspended punishment, under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Soldier regains promotion eligibility the day of completion of correctional custody, suspension, restriction, extra duty, and/or suspended forfeiture of pay, whichever occurs later. Summarized proceedings, as described in AR 27-10, do not result in non-promotable status.
- Command referral and enrollment in the Army Substance Abuse Program. Self-referred soldiers are eligible for promotion while enrolled in the ASAP.
- Qualifying conviction for domestic violence under the provisions of federal law.
- Soldier has failed, due to his or her own fault, to complete reclassification training to a new MOS.
- Court-martial conviction within the past 12 months. Previously, soldiers who had a court-martial conviction were placed in non-promotable status for the duration of their enlistment.

Under the revised regulation, soldiers remain in non-promotable status for 12 months following a court-martial conviction. The change was made because most soldiers are placed in voluntary indefinite status when they are promoted to staff sergeant and reach 10 years of service and do not periodically re-enlist like soldiers in the lower ranks.

4. Disability evaluations

New rules will help keep soldiers with disabilities eligible for promotion.

When a soldier is pending a decision in the Disability Evaluation System, he or she remains eligible for promotion consideration, selection and promotion.

A soldier with a permanent profile of 3 or 4 is not a determining factor for promotion eligibility.

"Commanders are supposed to look at the situation holistically, and not automatically make a soldier ineligible based on the profile. We want them to look at qualification or disqualification from an MOS perspective," Purcell said.

The regulation also provides for the promotion of soldiers in the DES who are placed on the Temporary Disability Retirement List. If they are in promotable status, they will be promoted as they leave the Army, which is a change and is in compliance with federal law.

The regulation provides detailed guidance regarding grade determinations for soldiers who are returned to duty from the Temporary Disability Retired List.

The regulation also provides that soldiers who are found physically unfit, but who are retained on active or reserve status, remain eligible for potential selection and promotion.

"This is to make sure that any soldiers who are serving have an opportunity for promotion," Purcell said.

The new rules expand eligibility for the Special MOS Alignment Promotion Program, which guarantees a promotion to a soldier who switch to a shortage MOS.

The regulation expands the SMAPP to all components. Previously this program was limited to the Regular Army and the Army Reserve component of the Active Guard and Reserve.

"These are soldiers who are fully qualified without waiver, and who are one year past their primary zone look, and since they are fully qualified, they should be recommended for promotion," Purcell said.

"We push these names before commanders on a monthly basis in an effort to encourage them to take a close look at these soldiers, and provide the proper guidance, counseling and mentorship to prepare them for service at the next higher grade."

These soldiers have been in the Army long enough that they should be in promotable status. Because the Army is an up or out system, with retention control points, these soldiers will be separated if they don't get promoted.

"This is an avenue for a soldier to find a place that the Army has a requirement for," Purcell said. "If a soldier qualifies for a SMAPP military occupational specialty, it means we have an immediate need for that skill set."

"If they successfully complete the training, they will be promoted," Purcell said.

5. Required education

Nearly 100,000 soldiers were affected by the phased linkage over the past two years of Structured Self-Development courses to the promotion system.

About 80 percent of those soldiers are now in compliance with the new requirements. However, some 18,000 promotable sergeants recently were removed from the staff sergeant selection list early this year because they did not have credit for SSD-2.

"They made a conscious decision not to complete the course, which resulted in their removal from the list, or they were denied advancement to the next higher grade," Purcell said. "The Army G-1 has not made one exception to this requirement over the past year."

All soldiers who were promoted to staff sergeant Feb. 1 were in compliance with the new SSD-2 requirement.

The revised version of AR 600-8-19 lays out the promotions and schooling linkage as follows:

Promotions to Sergeant

- All Regular Army and Army Reserve corporals and specialists must complete SSD-1 to compete for promotion to sergeant.

- All Army National Guard and Army National Guard of the United States corporals and specialists must complete SSD-1 to be eligible for promotion against a position vacancy.
- Soldiers who receive a battlefield promotion to sergeant, but who are not a graduate of SSD-1, must complete the course within 270 days after redeployment (for Regular Army soldiers) or release from active duty (for National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers) to retain their E5 stripes.

Promotions to Staff Sergeant

- All sergeants of the active and reserve components must complete SSD-2 to compete for promotion to staff sergeant.

Promotions to Sergeant First Class

- All staff sergeants of the active and reserve components must complete SSD-3 to qualify for consideration by a sergeant first class promotion selection board.

Promotions to Master Sergeant

- All sergeants first class of the active and reserve components must complete SSD-4 to qualify for consideration by a master sergeant promotion selection board.

Promotions to Sergeant Major

- Graduation from the Sergeants Major Course is a requirement for promotion to sergeant major, except that:
- Soldiers who are selected for advancement to sergeant major, but who are not graduates of the SMC, can be conditionally promoted to E9 provided they are making satisfactory progress in the nonresident version of the SMC.
- Conditionally promoted sergeants major who are reduced or removed from the E9 list because of failure to meet the schooling requirement are ineligible for future E9 consideration.

6. Senior NCO Promotions

Two years ago the Army began adjusting the zones of eligibility for promotion to the senior NCO ranks to support a 32-year career model for most soldiers.

The objective timeline will result in soldiers, on average, advancing to sergeant at about 4 ½ years of service, staff sergeant at eight years, sergeant first class at about 14 years, master sergeant at 20 years and sergeant major at 25 to 26 years.

The changes will have the practical effect of stretching out the wait between promotions to give soldiers additional time for schooling and activities that will better prepare them for duty at the next grade.

"Our goal was to have this accomplished by fiscal 2015, but we really have not gotten where we want to be," Purcell said.

"We manage the enlisted force by years of service, and we use promotion timing and retention control points to do that."

"We still are promoting sergeants first class and master sergeants earlier than desired. In fact, the sergeant first class zones of eligibility for the 2015 board (that meets in June), and that has not been announced yet, will expand eligibility for promotion by one year, so that we can age the force a little by grade, which is our intent," he said.

"We have created a 32-year enlisted career timeline, and it's important that we hit the right gates, so that we are not promoting soldiers too quickly to sergeant major, which in turn would create problems for the Army in terms of properly utilizing its population of E9s," Purcell said.

"While we need an accelerated promotion capability, we don't need half the Army to be among the best of the best."

"We have to figure out a way to align promotion timing to fit the 32-year career timeline, and the only way we really have to do that is by shaping eligibility for consideration," he said.

Two years ago the Army did expand time-in-grade requirements, but it did not produce the desired outcome, which was to expand timing for promotions to sergeant first class and master sergeant.

"So now we are going to add a year of eligibility to time-in-service and see how that comes out," Purcell said.

"It's really important to have the average noncommissioned officer promoted at the right gates to justify the 32-year career timeline," he said.

7. Big changes still to come

While the regulation outlines many changes, there are still more to come.

"We are exploring future policy changes that would require soldiers to be fully trained at the appropriate level of NCOES before promotion (pin-on) to the next grade," Purcell said.

"This means a sergeant would be required to be a graduate of the Warrior Leader Course before promotion to staff sergeant, and right now we are exploring how we would execute such a policy."

While senior leaders have yet to sign off on specific changes to implement Selection, Training, Education and Promotion, or STEP, one possible way would be to retain the promotion system exactly as it is now, in that soldiers will have to complete an appropriate level of Structured Self Development to compete for promotion.

For example, the specialist moving to sergeant would have to complete SSD-1 before being recommended for promotion, and then that soldier would have to graduate from the Warrior Leader Course before being fully qualified for promotion pin-on.

"That means that when the promotion month comes, only soldiers who are WLC graduates will be eligible for promotion to sergeant based on their cutoff score," Purcell said. "This also means that some soldiers may have more points than soldiers with WLC credit, but they will not be promoted until they complete the course," he said.

The STEP concept would apply to the ranks of sergeant through sergeant major.

Purcell said the Army is exploring now how to achieve that goal with automated administrative support.

"I don't believe it will take very long to find that solution, and I think we might be announcing some policy changes this summer mandating completion of school before promotion," he said.

Officials expect that the Army's current alignment of NCOES courses (Warrior Leader Course, Advanced Leader Course, Senior Leader Course and Sergeant Major course), along with the proposed Master Leader Course, will be used to certify soldiers for promotion. <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/enlisted/2015/02/23/army-promotion-regulation-updated/23492405/>

LT passes pre-Ranger; 6 women now set for Ranger School

(24 Feb.) Army Times, By Michelle Tan

A female lieutenant who flies Apache helicopters successfully completed the February rotation of the Ranger Training Assessment Course, and she now joins five other women who have so far qualified to attend Ranger School this spring.

A total of 100 soldiers — 17 of them women — started the course, which took place Feb. 6-21 at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Thirty-six soldiers successfully completed the two-week course, said Maj. Gen. Scott Miller, commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning.

The success rate for this month's rotation was "considerably lower" than normal, said Maj. William "Shep" Woodard, commander of A Company, Army National Guard Warrior Training Center, which runs RTAC.

The typical completion rate for RTAC is about 57 percent, he said.

"For whatever reason, this was an underperforming class for men as well as women," he said.

The most common reasons soldiers dropped out or failed to meet the requirements were:

- Pushups
- Road march
- Injuries

All of the drops happened in the first week of RTAC, Woodard said.

It's too early and the population too small so far to pinpoint any specific trends, Miller said.

"What we're starting to see, if soldiers fail RTAC for some reason, you have pushups, you have some lack of motivation [where] someone says 'this is not for me' and pulls out," he said.

There also have been some soldiers dropped for medical reasons, and "we're looking closely at the medical drops," Miller said.

Many women candidates — six in this February class — who did not meet the requirements for RTAC are opting to stay and complete the two-week course anyway, Woodard said.

"They continued to take advantage of that opportunity," he said. "Even though only one was successful, they seem to see the intrinsic value of the training and opt to stay."

The female lieutenant who successfully completed the February RTAC is an aviator from Fort Carson, Colorado, he said. She is an Apache pilot, according to an Army release on Tuesday.

The Army announced in January that it plans to conduct a one-time, integrated assessment at its storied Ranger School in April.

The assessment is part of a wider effort to determine whether and how to open combat arms jobs to women. This assessment will be a first for the two-month Ranger School, which until now has been open only to men.

Women who successfully complete Ranger School will receive a certificate and be awarded the coveted Ranger tab. They will not, however, be assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment, which is separate from Ranger School.

To prepare for the assessment in April, the Army is requiring female candidates to attend the two-week Army National Guard Ranger Training and Assessment Course. There will be up to 40 seats for female candidates in each iteration of the course between January and April. The course has historically been a strong indicator of whether a candidate will be successful at Ranger School, officials said. Data has shown that more than half of the soldiers who complete RTAC will successfully complete Ranger School.

The next iteration of RTAC begins March 6.

During the first integrated cycle of RTAC, 122 soldiers started the course; 26 of them were women.

A total of 58 soldiers — 53 men and five women — successfully completed the course Jan. 30.

RTAC is two weeks long and consists of two phases, according to information from Fort Benning.

The first phase of RTAC mirrors the assessment phase at Ranger School and is designed to assess a soldier's physical and mental abilities. During this phase, a student conducts a PT test, a swim test, land navigation, and a 6-mile foot march. The second phase of RTAC, the field training exercise, is designed to assess and train soldiers on troop leading procedures and patrolling, skills that are used extensively during the Ranger School.

On average, about 45 percent of Ranger School students will graduate. As many as 60 percent of all Ranger School failures will occur in the first four days. Many get disqualified during the physical fitness test on the first day. The test gives candidates two minutes to do 49 pushups and two minutes to do 59 situps, and they also must run five miles in 40 minutes and do six chinups.

In fiscal 2014, PT test failures made up the largest number of Ranger School failures.

The pushup portion of the PT test has been difficult for male and female candidates at RTAC, officials said.

Some don't have the right form, while others couldn't do the 49 required of them within the allotted time.

"We have the same problem with male students, it's not just with the women," said Col. David Fivecoat, commander of the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, which runs Ranger School. "Yesterday we started a Ranger School class and lost at least three score students for pushups alone."

Officials expect 40 women to start the March rotation of RTAC. Another 40 are expected for the April class.

Both RTAC and Ranger School are "physically and mentally demanding" courses, Miller said.

"Not every soldier is going to make it through this course," he said. "The standards are demanding, and the standards are not changing. They're not changing in the pre-Ranger course, and they're not going to change for the Ranger Course."

The Army is learning "some great lessons" so far, Miller said.

"Any time any soldier will raise their hand for a voluntary course, particularly one that's very, very tough, I admire those soldiers," Miller said. <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/2015/02/24/ranger-school-women-army/23930153/>

Ranger School adds packing list for women

(24 Feb.) Army Times, By Michelle Tan

Preparations are already underway for the integrated Ranger School class in April, and officials are looking at everything from accommodations to personal hygiene.

The Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade has updated its packing list for students, said Col. David Fivecoat, commander of the brigade, which runs Ranger School.

"We had to add bras to the packing list," he said. "Those are the gender-specific things we're working through."

This is a first for the storied Ranger School, which until now has been open only to men.

The packing list updated Monday contains several items female students must bring with them, on top of the standard items such as uniforms, ear plugs and eye protection.

They include feminine wipes, sports bras, cotton underwear, pads or tampons, and a female urinary diversion device, or FUDD. With use of a FUDD, a female soldier in the field can urinate more discreetly while standing, and also with minimal undressing.

The packing list also advises female students who use birth control to start the regimen at least 90 days before training begins.

In addition, many of the barracks used by Ranger School students are old and have only one latrine, so changes have to be made to accommodate both male and female soldiers.

"We have to separate the sexes by time for when they use the showers or latrines," Fivecoat said.

The brigade also is relying on soldiers such as Sgt. 1st Class Tiffany Easter, who was selected to serve as an observer/adviser during the assessment.

After a tough week of training last fall, the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade chose 31 women — 20 noncommissioned officers and 11 officers — to serve as observer/advisers. Due to natural attrition, there are now 25 observer/advisers — 17 NCOs and eight officers.

These soldiers will work alongside the Ranger instructors and serve as extra eyes and ears and as a sounding board for the all-male cadre. The women will not evaluate or grade Ranger School students.

Easter, a military police soldier from Fort Stewart, Georgia, previously served on a cultural support team supporting special operations troops in Afghanistan.

"I've worked with Rangers before, and I just felt that, at this point, I would serve better as an O/A and use my experiences," Easter said.

The observer/advisers are tasked with giving the all-male Ranger School cadre feedback, Easter said.

"Some of the issues could be just a lot of the Ranger instructors have never worked with females before, so they're not sure how to handle certain issues, like personal hygiene issues," she said. "Or just the treatment of them, to ensure they treat them the same as a male student." <http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/2015/02/24/women-ranger-school-preparations/23945361/>

Millennials In The Military Gain A Financial Advantage

(25 Feb.) USA Today, By Emma S. Hinchliffe

WASHINGTON — Serving in the military may have financial benefits other than a salary.

Active-duty Millennials are more financially secure and prepared than their civilian counterparts, according to a survey released Wednesday by the Navy Federal Credit Union.

The survey measured financial literacy, readiness for a financial emergency, goals related to loans and debt, and self-confidence in personal finances among 300 active-duty Millennials and their spouses and 1,011 civilians ages 18 to 34.

Millennials who serve in the military are more likely to think they are on the right path toward meeting their financial goals and to be satisfied with their current financial situation. For example, 84% of military Millennials feel they are on track to pay off their debt over the next five years, compared to 68% of civilians.

Military Millennials are also more aware of their finances: 68% have checked their credit score in the past year, compared to 37% of others surveyed. Those in the military are two times less likely to use a payday loan and two times more likely to pay attention to a household budget.

The two groups also have different financial priorities; 66% of civilian Millennials think it is very important to purchase a car, compared to 50% of those in the military. Military Millennials are more likely to prioritize paying off debt, building up savings and saving for retirement.

So what gives active-duty Millennials this financial advantage?

"Their life circumstances put them in a place where they need to strive for financial independence faster than other Millennials do," says Maritza DiScullio, vice president for member research, intelligence and development at the Navy Federal Credit Union, which serves all Department of Defense and Coast Guard personnel.

"You're more in a preparedness mindset vs. your more everyday Millennials, still figuring things out," adds Mary Beth Storjohann, a military spouse and financial planner specializing in clients in their 20s and 30s.

Because of this reality, the military often helps its servicemembers to become financially literate and make responsible financial choices by offering education about available benefits and resources, among other guidance. For civilians to reach the same level of financial confidence and security, employers may need to adopt the military's approach.

"If employees took a bigger hand in educating their employees, that would be a first step," Storjohann says. "Military Millennials are a lot more aware of their benefits."

Although serving in the military does seem to be a surefire way to gain financial responsibility, the survey results show potential for other Millennials to find that same security.

"I look at them and think that this is the potential that non-military Millennials can reach," DiScullio says. "There are a lot of reasons why military Millennials are where they are, but that doesn't mean that non-military Millennials can't be there as well."

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2015/02/25/navy-federal-military-millennials/24010679/>

Cancer Diagnosis Helps Airman Find Balance

(20 Feb.) DoD News, By Air Force Tech. Sgt. Vanessa Kilmer

FAIRCHILD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash., Feb. 20, 2015 – Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Daphne Soto never meets a stranger, because each encounter opens a door to a potential new friend or to someone who just needs to talk. And she'll keep the door open for both. This 24-year Air Force veteran will weave a serpentine path through cubicles and offices just to say hello to every airman, regardless of rank. Her conversations are sprinkled with laughter and seasoned with southern flavor when she reveals her roots with the occasional use of the word "child."

For Soto, the 92nd Air Refueling Wing's equal opportunity director here, it's not just part of her job. A self-proclaimed "sweet girl from South Carolina," she has always held tight to one goal from the moment she enlisted: to always give her personal best. Soto said she knew her lofty goals would require more attention, and possibly sacrifices, but that she didn't recognize the magnitude of the impending imbalance. Her aspirations formed blinders that cloaked lost time with her family and shrouded symptoms as her body began to rebel against her.

Ambition Leads to More Responsibility

Early in her career, as a telephone switch operator and then as combat crew communications, her ambition was the ever-present shove toward more responsibility. "I wanted to be the chief master sergeant of the Air Force," she said. "I think everyone's had that little moment."

But Soto's appetite for responsibility left her family hungry for her presence back home.

As a mother of three and wife of an active-duty crew chief, Soto said, she worked 12-hour days that didn't end when she returned home. She would bring work home with her and would take calls on her home phone, even late in the evening. This was when cellphones were new, she noted.

"I've always tried to be a good mom and a good wife and a great airman," she said. "But I soared at a cost, ... because I sacrificed all of that precious family time. I was on every [temporary duty assignment]; I never turned down an opportunity. There was a time that my husband and I weren't even seeing each other. I would kiss my kids goodnight, read a quick bedtime story and then get right back on the phone."

Hectic Cycle Took a Toll

Soto was on that cycle for almost 18 years, which she admitted took a toll on her as well.

"When you're used to being that go-to person and having to live up to that expectation, and not being able to say no, it takes a lot," she said. "And then you find yourself saying, 'You've got to say no.'"

Soto said she justified this brutal schedule because she saw it as her purpose -- a part of her legacy.

"I thought I was being a role model to my children and making my husband proud being that breadwinner," she said. "So you lie to yourself. You lie to yourself to say it's all worth it in the end. You convince yourself that it's going to justify it all once you hit that goal."

For almost 20 years, Soto charged through, made rank, earned more awards and accolades, with the support of her husband, Air Force Master Sgt. Damon Soto, pushing her forward.

Every extra hour his wife put in meant an extra hour away from him, but he accepted the sacrifice "because I love her, and that's what she wanted," he said. "And she's way smarter than I am."

Partnership Fueled Difficult Balance

He acknowledged that it was difficult to balance school, work and children, but he said their partnership kept them going.

"When her schedule was hard, I picked up as much slack as I could, and vice versa," he said. "My thought was if we didn't, everything would fail."

It was 2010 when life for Soto changed. In two months, she had inexplicably lost weight -- down from a size 6 to a size 00. For about two years, Soto said, she had noticed changes in her body -- nothing to raise alarm, but the weight loss began to bring everything into focus. She advocated for a referral to see a doctor who would be able to diagnose her symptoms.

After Soto's doctor heard about her weight loss, he waived his three-month wait list and agreed to see her within the week. It was just 30 minutes between the beginning of the examination and the diagnosis she had begun to expect: cancer.

Overwhelming Weight of Diagnosis

Soto described driving home from the appointment and pulling over because she was overwhelmed with the weight of the diagnosis and blinded by uncontrollable tears. She said she distinctly remembers the primal urge to talk to her mother.

"My mother said, 'It's going to be OK. We're going to get through it,'" Soto said. "And you know, I didn't really have a choice, because I had three kids and a husband to worry about."

For Soto, whose life and career had been going at full-tilt for more than two decades, everything suddenly stopped, and her life aligned itself along a completely unexpected trajectory.

After her diagnosis, Soto said, she had a crash course in cancer. Because of the aggressiveness of the disease, she had to make very quick decisions to determine the course of her treatment and elected to undergo two invasive surgeries.

Before her diagnosis, Soto was chosen as the primary organizer for her career field's upcoming utilization and training workshop, in which attendees develop all of the equal opportunity career field's training requirements.

A Realization During Convalescence

After her second surgery, Soto was confined to her home for six weeks, facing a six-month convalescent period and completely dependent on Damon. During that time, she said, she came to a powerful realization: The workshop was held on schedule, and her career field's training curriculum was developed -- without her. The mission went on.

"I think that's when it all started coming together," she said. "I said, 'I have to shift my priorities, and it's OK to take care of me.'" Upon returning to work, Soto said, she had a new perspective. She said she found a new rhythm and started feeling more effective at a slower pace.

The slower pace gave her time to think things through and be clearer with expectations. It also gave her the confidence to say no, instead of trying to complete the task no matter the cost, she said.

"It's OK to say no," she added. "It's OK to say, 'I can't do it all.' 'I can't' is not a bad part of your vocabulary, unless you are completely giving up, and I wasn't doing that."

Value in Helping Others

Her work improved because of her honest communication, Soto said, and she found that by taking care of herself, she saw more value in taking care of others.

"I was so worried about my career, [but] what was I doing for others?" she said. "And now I realize I don't have to supervise a soul. It's the Air Force's airmen. They are all my airmen."

These connections, Soto said, helped her embrace and understand the importance of "Mission First, People Always." "I'm not here just to transition an individual to the next rank," she said. "I'm here to transition them to things that are going to be ... throughout life."

With only a few months left until retirement, Soto said, although she has Florida and her dream tea shop in her sights, she is still focused on her airmen. "I don't believe in 'ROAD,'" she said, using a derisive acronym that stands for "retired on active duty."

"I will work until that last duty day, even if that is just walking around and saying hello to every airman," she added. "I will do my personal best. That is my goal with leaving the Air Force and living life."

<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128210&source=GovDelivery>

New SecDef signals support for transgender service

(23 Feb.) Military Times, By Andrew Tilghman

New Defense Secretary Ash Carter signaled support for allowing transgender individuals to serve in the military, the latest sign that the controversial policy may change before the end of the Obama administration.

"I don't think anything but their suitability for service should preclude them," Carter said while speaking to troops on a visit to Kandahar, Afghanistan, on Sunday.

A Navy officer raised the issue during a town hall-style meeting that Carter held with service members during his visit. The officer asked: "What are your thoughts on transgender service members serving in an austere environment like this here in Kandahar?"

"It's not something I've studied a lot since I became secretary of defense," Carter said, "but I come at this kind of question from a fundamental starting point, which is that we want to make our conditions and experience of service as attractive as possible to our best people in our country.

"And I'm very open-minded about ... what their personal lives and proclivities are, provided they can do what we need them to do for us. That's the important criteria. Are they going to be excellent service members?" Carter said.

His comments came shortly after the Pentagon launched a review that could result in lifting the ban on transgender individuals from joining the military.

Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Christensen, a Pentagon spokesman, said there is "no specific review of the department's transgender policy ongoing" but acknowledged that military health officials began in early February an official reassessment of the current medical accessions policy.

That policy prohibits military service by people who have a "current or history of psychosexual conditions, including but not limited to transsexualism, exhibitionism, transvestism, voyeurism and other paraphilias."

"We routinely review our policies to make sure they are accurate, up-to-date and reflect any necessary changes since the department's last policy review," Christensen said.

The last review of this policy was conducted in 2011. The current periodic review is expected to take 12 to 18 months, Christensen said, emphasizing that it "is not a specific review of the department's transgender policy."

This particular medical accessions policy is potentially the last piece of Pentagon policy that explicitly prohibits transgendered individuals from serving. Last year, officials quietly rewrote a policy that removed specific reference to transgenderism in the Disability Evaluation System.

Advocates for transgender individuals viewed that as a new loophole that could allow the services to let transgender troops to continue to serve instead of requiring administrative separation.

Advocates for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender service members hope that the Pentagon will change the policies soon, particularly before President Obama leaves office in January 2017. Obama was a strong advocate for the 2011 repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" law that lifted restrictions on gays and lesbians serving openly in the military.

Advocates welcomed Carter's comments and said the new secretary should follow them up with a change to the policy.

"Secretary Carter is right in that their ability to serve is the only thing that should matter," said Ashley Broadway-Mack, the president of the American Military Partners Association, a group that has lobbied for equal treatment for same-sex military spouses.

The AMPA estimates that more than 15,000 transgender individuals serve in the military today.

"Thousands of transgender service members ARE currently doing the job, and doing it well, but are forced to do so in silence — forced to lie about something as fundamental as who they are in order to continue to serve," Broadway-Mack said.

"While we applaud Secretary Carter for being 'open-minded' on this issue, we urge him to take action that will lead to ending this ban that continues to harm our transgender service members and their families."

The military's civilian leadership has been suggesting for months that the controversial policy may change. In December, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said in an interview with USA Today that the policy "is likely to come under review in the next year or so."

"Times change," James said. "From my point of view, anyone who is capable of accomplishing the job should be able to serve."

And former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said in an interview with Military Times in January that he does not see any reason why the military services could not adjust to accepting transgender individuals.

"This institution has been on the cutting edge of social change in this country since World War II," Hagel said in the Jan. 21 interview. "For all the reasons I think anybody whoever serves in the military understands, we rely on each other to do the job. If there is a weak link in the chain, the chain is weak."

"I have great confidence that we are going to continue in this institution to be able to handle these kind of things as they progress along just as we have don't ask, don't tell, gay marriage."

Regarding the issue of transgender service members specifically, Hagel said: "I would not say there is nothing unique about it. But what I am saying is that this institution has been able to handle and transition into these different situations as they are required to do to respect the rights of individuals and the desires of individuals to serve and also the standards and the rights of the institution."

"We have been able to deal with that over the years. The transgender issue is a fairly new issue, just as each of these issues were. The integration of our services after World War II. Don't ask, don't tell. Gay marriage. ... I have confidence in the process and the system that the transgender issue will be dealt with in a fair way."

<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/02/23/transgender-service-ash-carter-defense-secretary/23887287/>

Gay Rights Groups Urge Military To End Transgender Ban

(24 Feb.) Washington Post, By Sandhya Somashekhar

Gay rights groups on Monday called on the military to lift its ban on transgender service members, after new Defense Secretary Ashton Carter suggested over the weekend that being transgender should not alone preclude a person from serving.

“I don’t think anything but their suitability for service should preclude them,” Carter said Sunday during a question-and-answer session with troops in Kandahar, Afghanistan, according to a transcript posted on the Pentagon’s Web site.

While he has not closely studied the military’s policy, he told the troops, “I come at this kind of question from a fundamental starting point, which is that we want to make our conditions and experience of service as attractive as possible to our best people in our country.”

He added, “And I’m very open-minded about — otherwise about what their personal lives and proclivities are, provided they can do what we need them to do for us. That’s the important criteria. Are they going to be excellent service members?”

The response caused ripples among gender rights advocates, not only because it came just days after Carter was sworn in but also because it was viewed as just the latest sign that there is renewed momentum to lift the ban, which remained in place even after the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding openly gay troops was lifted in 2011.

More than 15,000 transgender men and women serve in the military, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank that studies sexual orientation. While “don’t ask, don’t tell” was lifted by Congress, the transgender ban is a policy that could be lifted administratively by the Obama administration.

Supporters of the transgender ban have said lifting it could hurt unit cohesion and combat readiness. But rights advocates have said it could be lifted without incident, just as “don’t ask, don’t tell” was, and have cited studies that have found there would be no harm in letting transgender members serve openly and that lifting the policy would be not be administratively complicated.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest said Monday that President Obama agreed with Carter’s sentiment that all Americans who are qualified to serve should be able to serve, but he declined to discuss next steps.

“We here at the White House welcome the comments from the secretary of defense,” he told reporters during a briefing. “But in terms of — of additional steps the Department of Defense will take to address the matter, I’d refer you to the secretary’s office.”

A spokesman for the Pentagon said a review began this month of the military’s health policies, including the transgender policy. The routine review will be completed in 12 to 18 months, he said. The last time a review like this took place was in 2011.

Advocates played down the significance of the review, saying the military has conducted this same exercise repeatedly, and time and again officials have left the transgender ban in place.

“It’s just not enough,” said Allyson Robinson, policy director of SPARTA, a group that advocates for transgender service members. “This is a very specific problem, and it needs to be properly addressed by a process that’s proven effective, and this one has proven exactly the opposite.”

Carter’s remarks on Sunday came in response to a question by Jesse M. Ehrenfeld, a Navy lieutenant commander and physician based in Kandahar, about transgender service in austere environments. In an e-mail, Ehrenfeld said he asked the question because he has treated a transgender service member and interacted with others.

“I am continually struck by how these individuals, who risk their lives every day to support our mission, live not in fear of the enemy, but rather in fear of being discovered for who they are,” wrote Ehrenfeld, an officer for nearly seven years who lives in Nashville with his partner.

Among those present for Carter's remarks was a transgender service member, according to SPARTA, which did not disclose the service member's name because coming out could be grounds for dismissal.

"I wanted to tell him I'm one of those people serving in silence," the service member, who holds an enlisted rank, said in a statement issued by the group. "I love my job, I'm supported and respected by the people I serve with, and I want to make the military a career. But until the regs are updated, just speaking up for myself could end it all."

The exchange came after a period in which many thought that efforts to lift the ban had stalled at the Pentagon. Many advocates worried that time could be running out as the end of Obama's term approached. Dismissal proceedings continued for service members discovered to be transgender.

Then in December, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James suggested that the ban may eventually be lifted. Earlier this month, the military announced it would provide hormone treatment to Chelsea Manning, the former Army private in prison for leaking classified documents. And immediately after being sworn in, Carter appointed as his chief of staff Air Force Undersecretary Eric Fanning, who is openly gay.

Gay rights advocates have taken these developments to be a positive sign for their cause and urged the military to go further.

"We urge Secretary Carter to put action to his comments by ordering an immediate review of the outdated regulations that prevent transgender service members from serving our nation openly and honestly," David Stacy, government affairs director at the Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement. "Our nation's transgender service members bravely and heroically serve our nation, and they certainly deserve to be able to be honest about who they are." http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gay-rights-groups-urge-military-to-lift-ban-on-transgender-service-members/2015/02/23/c056e5b6-bb73-11e4-8668-4e7ba8439ca6_story.html

Military Divorce Rate Hits Lowest Level in 10 Years

(25 Feb.) Military.com, By Amy Bushatz

The military's divorce rate dropped again last year reaching its lowest point since 2005, according to statistics released today by the Defense Department.

The divorce rate among both officer and enlisted men and women over 2014 was 3.1 percent, Pentagon officials said, only slightly higher than the 2005 rate of 3 percent. The newly released statistics show how the rate has steadily declined since 2011, when it reached a high water mark of 3.7 percent. The rate in 2001, at the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was 2.6 percent.

"The health and well-being of service members and their families is a priority," said Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen, a Pentagon spokesman. "Strong relationships are important to our readiness."

The declining rate is largely due to a major drop in the divorce rate among married female troops. The divorce rate among male service members dropped only .3 percent over last year and only .5 percent since 2011.

But the rate among females has seen a major, steady decline over that period. Since 2011 the female divorce rate has moved steadily downward from 8 percent among both officer and enlisted to 6.5 percent last year.

"The latest data confirm and continue some general trends that we have been seeing for some time. Across all branches, divorce rates for males have been relatively flat," said Benjamin Karney, a researcher with the RAND Corp. who has studied military divorce. "Something else is going on for females, however. Across all branches, divorce rates for female service members have been declining substantially ... We see it among enlisted and officers. That's a real trend, but I am not sure how to account for it."

The biggest rate decline has been among married female Marines. In 2011, 9.5 percent of female enlisted and officer Marines got divorced, compared to 6.2 percent last year.

The civilian divorce rate stands at about 3.6 percent as of 2011, according to the most recent data. Military and civilian divorce rates cannot be accurately compared because of differences in tracking methodology.

While the divorce rate in the military is based on personnel data used to distribute benefits, the civilian rate is calculated on a per-1,000 person basis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC's calculation, however, only accounts for 44 states and the District of Columbia because several states, including California, do not track or report their rates.

<http://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/02/25/military-divorce-rate-hits-lowest-level-in-10-years.html?comp=700001075741&rank=2>

Top enlisted personnel: Protect family programs

(25 Feb.) Military Times, By Patricia Kime

Service families are well cared for in today's military but face increasing stress amid discussions on altering benefits like health care and family programs, the services' top enlisted members told Congress on Wednesday.

With the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission proposing sweeping reforms to military pay and benefits packages and the White House's proposed 2016 budget pitching cost-savings measures like health care fee hikes and commissary cutbacks, the men implored Congress to protect family benefits.

Saying that service budgets have been "cut to the bone" by limits imposed by sequestration, the enlisted leaders said family quality-of-life programs are vital to retention and operational readiness.

"In my four deployments ... never once did a soldier say, 'I'm worried about my family.' I'm concerned that someday, that will be an issue," Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey told members of the House Appropriations Committee's military construction and veterans affairs panel.

"The families want to know, with the Marine's departure, they are being cared for — health care, child care," Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Ronald Green said.

The four did not give any opinions specifically on the reforms proposed by the compensation commission. But they stressed that the quality of family programs — especially health care — can sway a service member's decision to stay in or leave the military.

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (AW/NAW) Mike Stevens asked the committee to be "cautious and deliberate" in moving forward on any reforms.

"We can never take for granted the sacrifices that both our sailors and families make, and health care is an area that must be valued and protected," Stevens said.

Of the quality-of-life programs singled out by the congressional panel, lawmakers asked about mental health services, commissaries, transition programs and credentialing requirements that would allow troops to transfer their military-acquired technical skills to civilian jobs.

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Cody asked Congress to repeal the automatic, across-the-board budget cuts known as sequestration in order to preserve programs he considers vital to preserving morale among airmen and their families.

"We believe [quality-of-life] initiatives to be an overwhelming factor in the decision airmen and their families make to continue serving our nation," Cody said. <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/benefits/pay/2015/02/25/military-family-programs/23994671/>

GI's life spiraled into darkness after Iraq

(26 Feb.) *San Antonio Express News*, By Sig Christenson

Iraq veteran Amanda Weyrick was buried Thursday at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, her once-promising life ruined by the effects of war, PTSD and a fatal infection likely driven by methamphetamine abuse, her family said.

<http://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/GI-s-life-spiraled-into-darkness-after-Iraq-6104311.php#/0>

Navy Ship Named For Gabby Giffords Hits Water In Alabama

(26 Feb.) *New York Daily News*, By Rachelle Blidner

Gabby Gifford's ship has come in.

A Navy warship named for the former Arizona congresswoman hit the water for the first time Thursday, Giffords announced on Twitter.

The U.S.S. Gabrielle Giffords entered the river outside Austal Shipbuilding in Mobile, Ala., as workers placed finishing touches before its August launch, a picture showed.

U.S. Navy officials announced they were building the ship to be named for Giffords in 2012, a year after she was shot in the head in an assassination attempt.

Giffords is the only living female namesake of a U.S. Navy ship.

The ship was ceremonially sponsored by Roxanna Green, whose daughter Christina Taylor-Green was one of six people killed during Giffords' appearance outside Tucson. Thirteen others were wounded in the massacre by Jared Lee Loughner.

Construction on the variant littoral combat ship began in April, when Giffords laid the first keel during a ceremony.

The ship is scheduled to be delivered to the Navy in August.

When completed, the U.S.S. Gabrielle Giffords will be 419 feet long and will be able to travel faster than 40 knots, Navy officials said in a statement.

Some people criticized the Navy for honoring a civilian politician. But Giffords is a "Navy spouse," Mark Prentice, her press secretary, told the Daily News. Her husband, retired Capt. Mark Kelly, served in the Navy for 25 years.

Giffords served on the House Armed Services Committee during her three terms in the House of Representatives.

She has been at the center of the fight for gun regulations and has tried to counter lobbying efforts by the National Rifle Association. Still, the NRA grew more financially powerful thanks to a swell in donations — \$96.4 million — two years after her attack.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/navy-ship-named-gabby-giffords-hits-water-ala-article-1.2130332>

Army Shift On Transgender Troops Is Latest Sign Of Forcewide Review

Service Makes It Harder To Be Dismissed

(NAVY TIMES 2 MAR 15) ... Andrew Tilghman

The Army plans to change the way it treats transgender soldiers, the latest in a series of signs that the Pentagon is conducting a highlevel review of the current policy that bars from military service people who undergo medical procedures to change their sex.

Across the force, the policy remains in effect that transgender troops can be automatically dismissed from service on medical grounds once they are identified.

Yet the Army is planning to remove that decision from the traditional chain of command and elevate it to a top senior civilian, according to a plan outlined in a draft document obtained by USA Today.

The decision to discharge transgender soldiers would be made by the assistant secretary of the Army for personnel, in effect making it harder to remove those soldiers from the service.

The Defense Department's civilian leadership has been suggesting for months that the controversial policy may be under review, more than three years after the prohibition on gay, lesbian and bisexual troops was repealed.

In December, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said in an interview with USA Today that the transgender policy "is likely to come under review in the next year or so."

"Times change," James said. "From my point of view, anyone who is capable of accomplishing the job should be able to serve."

And former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said in an interview with Military Times in January that he does not see any reason why the services could not adjust to accepting transgender individuals.

"This institution has been on the cutting edge of social change in this country since World War II," Hagel said. "For all the reasons, I think anybody whoever serves in the military understands. We rely on each other to do the job. If there is a weak link in the chain, the chain is weak."

Hagel called it a question of respecting "the rights of individuals."

"I have great confidence that we are going to continue in this institution to be able to handle these kind of things as they progress along, just as we have 'don't ask, don't tell' [and] gay marriage," Hagel said.

Regarding the specific transgender issue, Hagel said, "I would not say there is nothing unique about it. But what I am saying is that this institution has been able to handle and transition into these different situations as they are required to do to respect the rights of individuals and the desires of individuals to serve and also the standards and the rights of the institution.

"We have been able to deal with that over the years. The transgender issue is a fairly new issue, just as each of these issues were. I have confidence in the process and the system that the transgender issue will be dealt with in a fair way." Views inside the services are shifting, even if the policy remains unchanged, said retired Navy Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL) Kristin Beck, who became a woman after ending a 20-year career in the Navy as Christopher Beck in 2011.

She welcomes the Army policy change and added that she has lobbied the services and the Defense Department since 2013 to make such changes.

She said that the Army has been "leading from the front," allowing transgender soldiers to serve.

"The Army ... has been giving latitude to more transgender soldiers within its ranks than anyone would imagine," Beck said. "There are dozens of stories similar to this where individual work coupled with meetings at all levels of the military are enabling our freedom to serve openly."

Officially, Pentagon officials say there is no specific review of the current transgender policy.

However, Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen, a Defense Department spokesman, confirmed that "a routine, periodic review of the department's medical accession policy" — and "not a specific review of the department's transgender policy" — was launched in early February.

"We routinely review our policies to make sure they are accurate, up to-date and reflect any necessary changes since the department's last policy review," Christensen said. "The last review of this ... was conducted in 2011."

The periodic review is expected to take 12 to 18 months, he said.