

Court Case: Widespread Sexual Abuse in the U.S. Military

The New York Times This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only.

July 20, 2012

Instructor for Air Force Is Convicted in Sex Assaults

By [JAMES DAO](#)

A military jury on Friday convicted an instructor at Lackland [Air Force](#) Base of raping one female trainee and sexually assaulting several others, the first major case in a sex scandal that has rocked the Air Force's basic training system.

The jury of two officers and five enlisted airmen found Staff Sgt. Luis Walker guilty on 28 counts, including adultery, violating regulations and committing sexual crimes against female trainees, most of whom reported to him at Lackland, in San Antonio, the Air Force's lone basic training school.

He faces up to life in prison and a dishonorable discharge when the trial moves into the sentencing phase.

At least 11 other instructors in the Air Force's basic training system, nine from the same squadron, are under investigation in the widening case, which is the focus not only of a criminal probe but also a major policy review by a two-star general. At least 31 female recruits have been identified as possible victims.

One of those instructors has pleaded guilty; four others have been charged and are facing courts-martial. All have been removed from training duties, Air Force officials said. The lieutenant colonel in charge of some training units at Lackland has also been reassigned.

The sexual abuse scandal is among the worst to hit the military in over a decade. In 1996, dozens of women at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland accused male supervisors of rape, sexual assault and other offenses in 1996. A few years earlier, more than 80 women were assaulted during several days of drunken revelry at the Tailhook Association convention in Las Vegas, a case that led to the resignation of the Navy secretary and two admirals.

Air Force officials said more instructors could be charged as a result of the current investigations, with recruits being encouraged to report episodes anonymously through a 24-hour tip line. The two-star general's review has also been expanded to include three other Air Force training bases.

"We're not satisfied that this one unit is all there is," Maj. Gen. Leonard A. Patrick, commander of the Second Air Force, which oversees basic training, said in an interview. "We want to assure ourselves through a disciplined approach that we've caught everything or everyone involved in this kind of behavior."

The scandal has been deeply painful for the Air Force. Nine years ago, a survey by the Pentagon's inspector general found that 12 percent of the women who graduated from the Air Force Academy that year said they had been victims of rape or attempted rape while at the school. The vast majority said they did not report the episodes to the authorities out of fear of being punished.

That appears to have been the situation in the current cases as well. The first assault allegations were reported by the acquaintance of a recruit and not the recruit herself. And when investigators began interviewing possible victims, almost all initially denied being assaulted.

With a staff of about 475 instructors, Lackland provides basic training to every Air Force recruit, about 35,000 a year. About one in five of those trainees are women, and about nine in ten of the instructors are men.

The rigorously hierarchical nature of the military makes it especially conducive to sexual abuse, critics say, and basic training is even more so, with instructors looming as intimidating, all-powerful figures to young recruits.

The Pentagon rejects such assertions. But amid growing criticism from advocacy groups and Congress, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta announced in April new steps to combat sexual assault, including having higher ranking officers handle sexual assault complaints, a change expected to lead to more prosecutions.

According to Pentagon data, there were 3,192 reports of sexual assault in the military in 2011, but only 240 went to trial, with 191 convictions. But the Defense Department acknowledges that the crime is vastly underreported, estimating the number of assaults may actually be closer to 19,000 a year.

During closing arguments in Sergeant Walker's trial on Friday, the lead prosecutor, Maj. Patricia Gruen, portrayed him as a predator who first intimidated, then befriended recruits before assaulting them.

"When you take off the sheep's outfit and the wolf is released on the flock, he looks for those that stand out, and pounces," she told the jury.

But the defense, which called only one witness during the five-day trial, focused on the fact that none of the female recruits complained about Sergeant Walker to the authorities.

The lead defense lawyer, Joseph Esparza, also noted that the prosecution failed to produce [DNA evidence](#) or surveillance video, even though there were cameras in parts of the barracks.

"We don't know what happened," he said. "Everyone changed their stories based on when they were asked and who was asking."

The trial was dominated by the graphic and often emotional testimony of female recruits. The New York Times does not typically identify possible victims of sexual assault.

One woman, identified as Airman 5, testified that Sergeant Walker tried to win her confidence by sympathizing with her after she had been upset by bad news from home. He later began sending suggestive texts to her cellphone before cornering her in a supply closet and forcing her to have sex with him.

The woman said she did not report the episode out of fear that Sergeant Walker would "recycle" her in punishment, meaning force her to redo basic training.

"I was scared, and miserable and hurt," the woman testified. Her version was corroborated in court by a friend.

Another witness, identified as Airman 8, said Sergeant Walker called her into his office and pressured her to show her breasts. She mentioned the episode to other recruits, and word got back to Sergeant Walker.

She testified that he then called her back into his office and warned her: "If you had a problem with it, then you should have come to me, instead of running your mouth. Remember, I'm staff sergeant, you're a trainee."

"I went numb," the woman testified. "I was scared. What if he punished me, or ruined my career?"



Published on *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

Lackland Instructor Convicted for Sex Crimes, As Pressure on Congress Mounts

Soumya Karlamangla | July 24, 2012

On Saturday, Sgt. Luis Walker was sentenced to 20 years in prison for counts including rape, adultery, and aggravated sexual assault in the first major case to be tried in military court from the sex abuse scandal that has [rocked Lackland Air Force base](#) [1] in San Antonio, Texas.

The revelations at Lackland have awoken concerns about abuses in the military that haven't made their way into the mainstream media since the 1990s. The reports of widespread abuse, coupled with the long history of crimes against women in the military, have [several lawmakers pushing for a Congressional hearing](#) [1] about the incidents at the camp. On Tuesday, a human rights group launched a [Twitter campaign that targets Buck McKeon](#) [2] — the chair of the House Armed Services committee — with the hashtag #AskBuck, in an attempt to persuade him to hold a hearing.

"The widespread sex abuse scandal at Lackland demands a Congressional investigation. We need to know how this behavior was permitted at Lackland for so long and by so many," said California Congresswoman Jackie Speier in a statement Saturday.

Twelve instructors at Lackland, including Walker, are under investigation and at least 31 women have been identified as victims of crimes that apparently began in 2009. The probe began when a woman accused Walker of sexual abuse last fall. The charges against Walker were the most severe, and reveal he had inappropriate sexual contact with 10 female recruits between October 2010 and January 2011.

For Speier, Walker's sentence was not enough. "The military jury confirmed what we already knew, Walker is a sexual predator who used his position in the military to rape and sexually assault young recruits at Lackland. But a sentence of 20 years in confinement is inadequate for a man who abused 10 victims - 2 years jail time per victim is not justice for the women betrayed by a military leader," Speier said in the statement.

Both a criminal investigation within the military justice system as well as a policy review by a general are underway, but Speier wants action from the Hill, and started a petition asking for a Congressional hearing. As of Tuesday, her petition had garnered 77 signatures from members of Congress, and a petition started by [Protect Our Defenders](#) [3], the group that created the Twitter campaign, had more than 7,000 signatures as of Tuesday.

Speier has said that since scandals like Lackland keep reoccurring every decade — Tailhook in 1991 and then Aberdeen in 1996 — the military investigations that follow are obviously not fixing the problem.

So, she wants Congress to launch its own investigation to answer the questions she thinks will otherwise not be addressed in a system that favors the perpetrator. So far, the House Armed Services committee has made no move to organize a hearing.

"Walker's court martial conviction is still the exception and not the rule," she said in her statement.

She posed these questions when she spoke for the third time about Lackland on the House floor on July 19, the day that Walker's court martial began: "In the last three years since Luis Walker started working at Lackland, roughly 21,000 female Airmen have cycled through basic training. Have they been interviewed by investigators to determine if they, too, had been raped and sexually assaulted at Lackland? How widespread is this epidemic? At Lackland out of the 31 identified victims, only one has reported the crime. Why are victims scared to come forward?," she said on the floor. "Internal investigations will not get to the bottom of this."

Much blame has fallen on the strict power structure that military recruits are forced to adhere to, and are indoctrinated with starting on their first day of training.

Aaron Belkin, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University and director of the Palm Center, which studies gender and military issues, at the UCLA law school, told the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) [4] that the unlimited authority instructors have over recruits becomes similar to a "master-slave dynamic," and that often results in rape.

It's this corrupt system that allows these sweeping crimes to go unreported that Speier wants to take the hearing out of; in her statement, she cited that last year, out of 19,000 military rapes and sexual assaults, only 3,200 victims reported the attacks and only 191 cases resulted in court martial conviction.

The women who spoke against Walker in court all testified to the same thing; they were afraid to come out and say what had happened — afraid they'd be punished, forced to redo their training, or kicked out of the military. They were recruits and Walker was an instructor. And for many, he was the instructor they reported to directly.

[The New York Times reported](#) [5] that a witness said Walker called her into his office and forced her to show him her breasts. She told other recruits about the incident, and Walker found out and called her back into his office.

"If you had a problem with it, then you should have come to me, instead of running your mouth," Walker told the witness, according to her court testimony. "Remember, I'm staff sergeant, you're a trainee."

It's exactly that power dynamic that makes Speier want to reform the military's crime reporting system with the STOP Act, H.R. 3435, a piece of legislation she introduced last fall that would create an independent entity outside of the Department of Defense chain of command that would review cases of sexual assault and rape.

Lackland Air Force base is where all American airmen go to get basic training, and where they get their first taste of that chain of command. The base sees 35,000 recruits a year, who undergo eight weeks of basic training. While one in five of recruits are female, only one in 10 of the 475 instructors are.

The women who testified Saturday against Walker said what he did to them made it difficult for them to trust authority, and has haunted them since, [according to the Los Angeles Times](#). [6]

"It's made it extremely hard to interact with authority figures," a witness said. "During my tour in Afghanistan, I was a little bit more scared of everything. I can't work with certain individuals just since they remind me of Staff Sgt. Walker."

Walker could have faced life in prison, and the defense asked for a lenient sentence so that he could have a life with his wife and two young sons, who were all at the trial. On the stand, [his wife pleaded](#) [7], "Spare at least some of his time in the sentence. I don't want my boys to grow up without a father."

But the jury, composed of two officers and five enlisted airmen, also heard women who claim they were abused by Walker and say they can't sleep at night, and have advised their female relatives not to join.

"I don't enjoy the military anymore," an [alleged victim said](#) [7]. "I don't want to be in it. I'm scared to open my door to anyone."

[TAKE ACTION: Investigate Sex Abuse at Lackland](#) [8]

Source URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/169040/lackland-instructor-convicted-sex-crimes-pressure-congress-mounts>

Links:

[1] <http://www.thenation.com/article/168918/why-wont-congress-investigate-sex-abuse-scandal-lackland-air-force-base>

[2] <https://twitter.com/#!/search/realtime/%23askbuck>

[3] <http://www.protectourdefenders.com/>

[4] <http://blog.sfgate.com/opinionshop/2012/07/19/can-the-military-solve-its-rape-problem/>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/21/us/lackland-air-force-base-instructor-guilty-of-sex-assaults.html>

[6] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-sex-scandal-20120722,0,1209634.story>

[7] <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/07/21/women-testify-at-air-force-instructor-sentencing-in-sexual-assault-case/>

[8] http://www.thenation.com/sites/default/files/user/20/TakeActionFinal_15px.jpg
