

Written Testimony of Caitlin E. Maro
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
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Chairman Blumenthal, Ranking Member Johnson, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, I thank you for your time and attention to a matter that is well overdue for action. My name is Caitlin E. Maro (nee Stopper) and I am a former member of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Class of 2008. It is my sincere prayer that this testimony will shed lasting light on a dark corner of one of our government's uniformed services.

This is not the first time that I've appeared before you and your colleagues. I first told my story to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2006 after the Coast Guard Academy charged a fellow cadet with sexual assault. He was the first-ever student court-martialed in its 147-year history. The press coverage was enraging; the Academy had the gall to claim that the charges against this cadet were proof that its existing sexual assault policies worked. But I know, as well as others on today's panel, that nothing could have been further from the truth. It was at that time that I contacted a writer at the Associated Press covering the story to share my own experience. The stories he published led to an opportunity for me to speak to your colleagues in the House of Representatives.

I entered the Academy in June of 2004. I beamed with pride the first time I put on that uniform. I had turned down numerous NCAA Division I rowing scholarships as well as an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy to serve my country in the Coast Guard. I am the great-great-granddaughter of a drummer who led Union soldiers into battle at both Antietam and Gettysburg; the great-great-granddaughter of a Navy sailor who died on the USS Maine in Havana Harbor; the great-granddaughter of Navy sailors; and the grandniece of a Women's Army Corps soldier who served on both fronts in both World Wars. I wanted that family tradition to continue through me, but what happened during my service wasn't glorious—it was dark, abusive, and humiliating. It almost left me for dead.

The moment that Swab Summer ended in the summer of 2004 was the moment I started to experience daily sexual harassment. It became routine for me to field emails, text messages, and verbal comments from fellow cadets soliciting sex, or dehumanizing comments about my body. I knew, even then at 18 years old, that serving as a woman in the U.S. Coast Guard was going to be challenging, but I did not think that the service was filled with ravenous wolves throughout the chain of command.

It was not just comments that I endured. I was groped numerous times around campus, sometimes with 20-30 witnesses. The first instance occurred in the Alpha Company Day Room, which served as a student lounge, with about 20-30 of my fellow Fourth Class (freshmen). We were crammed into a small room and fighting over space on two large couches that were set up in an "L" formation. I ended up crammed into the corner of the "L". The couches were already full when a male cadet pushed our fellow classmates aside so he could sit next to me. I turned to give him a disapproving look and he looked right back at me, licked his lips, and put his hand between my legs and groped my crotch. I pushed his hand away and he fought back, laughing. My struggle

caught the attention of the other cadets in the room and they started laughing and egging him on. We were then immediately interrupted by the upperclassmen who had called the meeting and the meeting began as if nothing happened. I kept my mouth shut.

The other instances of groping occurred mostly during swim class by the same classmate who assaulted me in the Day Room. He would swim up to me underwater and touch whatever part of my body he pleased. This happened too often to count. Being in a swimsuit in front of him was absolutely humiliating. I was a piece of meat to him. But again, I kept my mouth shut.

I couldn't escape the solicitations and the assaults at the Academy. I tried to complete my school assignments by sneaking off to various sports buildings after dark with a flashlight simply to escape the barrage and focus on my studies. I even tried to study in empty baseball dugouts in the rain! The barracks were not safe and neither was the library. My grades plummeted as a result, and the only thing scarier than the barracks was my chain of command.

When I needed to start facing my academic failings in January of 2005, I confided in a civilian professor. I broke down and told him everything despite my better judgment. I begged him for help. In a subsequent email from this professor to the Alpha Company Commander, the professor claimed that I showed "signs of instability" in the meeting. My allegations of harassment were brushed aside as evidenced in an email I discovered in August in my cadet file. Yet, I still had to answer for my allegations of assault and harassment, and the Commander reluctantly questioned me about the allegations after the Assistant Commandant of Cadets prompted him. "Is this worth investigating?" the Commander asked me in a closed-door meeting. "I don't know," I answered, desperate to be freed from the room next door to where I was assaulted three months prior. I was then dismissed from the meeting without further questioning.

My depression was crushing at this point. I wanted to die, to just disappear and be forgotten. I began hiding in my metal wardrobe locker to escape. One day soon after my meeting with the Commander, my boyfriend at the time came looking for me. He pulled me from my locker and I fell to the floor a sobbing mess, a shell of a person, a person that desperately wanted to end her life. It was then that my boyfriend called my mother directly, desperate for help, knowing he would not get it from our chain of command—the same chain of command, mind you, that is tasked with protecting and developing the young cadets on campus. It was only after my mother got involved that an investigation ensued. And here is where my nightmare truly began.

Now furious, the Commander pulled me back into another closed-door meeting to question me. "We didn't initially investigate because we figured that this happened on a date. You *do* have blonde hair and wear makeup," he stated as his rationale for not investigating my allegations in the first place. I said nothing and let them investigate. What was there to say? I was now only 19 years old. The Commander was in his 30s and he held my career in his hands.

I was then commanded to begin counseling sessions with a male civilian counselor on the Academy grounds. However, it became clear to me within the first session that this wasn't a counseling session, but rather an attempt to gather incriminating information from me. My sexual history was the main subject of discussion. In violation of a direct order, I refused to return for more sessions.

The only person who spoke up for me was my boyfriend at the time. Not the women that I helped push over the wall on the obstacle course during Swab Summer. Or the men that I carried on my back during swim tests because they couldn't swim. I had helped so many of my fellow classmates through their struggles, but when I needed them to testify to what they had witnessed, they were silent. Yet, who can blame barely-of-age cadets who were subject to the bias and whims of officers who were crafted and cured within such a broken service? I learned very quickly after arriving at the Academy that the more stripes on a person's shoulders, the bigger the threat they posed. This threat is why I hid from my superiors for months and then finally turned to a civilian professor for help once the pressure was too much to bear.

The resulting investigation was as shameful and humiliating as the assaults themselves. My fellow cadets abandoned me; they let doors slam in my face, created humiliating nicknames for me, and spread particularly ugly rumors. All of this because I dared to accuse a fellow cadet of assault. I knew then that my career in the U.S. Coast Guard was over before it even began. Unable to endure the atmosphere and fearing for my safety, I requested to be separated from the Academy before the investigation's conclusion. I was honorably discharged from the Coast Guard in February of 2005.

I found out from CNN that my case was included in Operation Fouled Anchor. Not from an Academy representative. Not from CGIS. Not from Congress. The news was broken to me by the press, over the phone, while I was wiping my child's runny nose. The reporter from the Associated Press listened to me back in 2006 and hunted the Academy's wolves as best he could. Reporters from CNN picked up the baton after a whistleblower handed them the Operation Fouled Anchor report in the late spring. Notice who the whistleblower leaked the report to—the press. Can the press now hand the baton to you, Senators? Can we, as a country, finally begin to rebuild our Coast Guard? Can we be sure that our nation's young adults will receive the training—and treatment—they need to keep our shores secure? A broken Coast Guard is a threat to our national security.

Your first step is to demand accountability. Know our names. Know our stories and hunt the wolves. Trust cannot be restored in the U.S. Coast Guard and the government at large until accountability is established.