



**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION**
Senator Maria Cantwell, Chair

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**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries, Climate Change, and Manufacturing**

Subcommittee Hearing:

Budget Oversight of the United States Coast Guard

Witnesses:

Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard

Master Chief Heath B. Jones, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard

July 13, 2023

[VIDEO](#)

Senator Cantwell: I thank Senators Senator Baldwin and you, [Senator Sullivan], for holding the hearing to begin with and the Subcommittee's great work. And as you and I know, the Coast Guard is a critical part of the Northwest economy, the Northwest life, and everything else. And so, we value them very, very much.

Admiral Fagan, glad to have you here, and Master Chief Jones.

You know, I feel like we took two giant steps forward with women in the Coast Guard. Giant steps forward when Coast Guard realized that 40% of its [Academy] were women, and said, we've got to have the most progressive child care, family leave policy in all branches of the military.

And then when we were able to vote out your nomination, and get you before the full Senate, and have you be the first woman as the head of an armed service, there was real celebration from my colleagues.

It is heartbreaking, maddening, frustrating, and intolerable where we are today, with this sexual abuse and assault within the Coast Guard. [We] cannot tolerate the fact that the

Coast Guard did not notify us of this. We cannot have the media be the policemen on the beat. And I'm going to ask for an IG inspection so that we can get to the bottom of all the problems that have occurred here and post the knowledge and information.

Now, I understand that you are relatively new. How many months now on the job?

Admiral Fagan: 13 months.

Senator Cantwell: 13 months. And people are saying that a lot of this took place from 2014 to 2020. But there are also reports that there are things that have happened as recently as 2022.

I need to hear from you, what do you think are the necessary steps to really give everybody a full accounting of what's transpired? And your recommendations on how we're going to fix this? And what is the reasoning why Congress wasn't notified of this situation?

Admiral Fagan: We failed the Committee when we did not disclose in 2020. I'm the Commandant now. And I am committed to that not happening again. And I am committing to moving forward in a manner that's consistent with the transparency that I strive for as Commandant and that you expect as the Oversight Committee.

I've initiated a 90-day transparency and accountability review to understand what are the aspects of the culture that have allowed this to occur. It started as legacy sexual assaults that were mishandled at the Coast Guard Academy. But it is clear to me that we've got a culture in areas that is permissive and allows sexual assaults, harassment, bullying, retaliation, that's inconsistent with our core values. It is not the workforce that I want or expect. And we have got work to do. We've made a lot of progress. We are not where we need to be. And that is the work that is in front of us. And I'm taking it up with a sense of urgency.

I commit to the Committee that we will regularly report on the progress. And we'll work with you as we work to improve the climate for every member of the workforce, so that they have a workplace and workplace experience that is safe and secure and that this ends.

Senator Cantwell: Well, Admiral, it's very frustrating to hear that you think there is a culture of assault at the Coast Guard. And this is not going to be tolerated. It's not going to be tolerated by us. It's not going to be tolerated by the American people.

And we are going to hold people accountable. And one of the reasons we were excited about your nomination is because we thought it was going to usher in a new era.

And I want to understand what you think the principles are for changing that culture now, but we are going to hold people accountable.

Admiral Fagan: We do not have a culture of assault in the Coast Guard. There are...

Senator Cantwell: I think the exact words were "legacy of cultural..." Well, we'll get the actual record.

Admiral Fagan: There was a legacy of mishandling of reports of sexual assault at the Coast Guard Academy in the 80s.

We have made an incredible amount of progress as an organization investing in policy, victim support, how we investigate and hold accountable those perpetrators. We are not the same organization today that we were in the 1980s, but we are not where we need to be.

There are just like on a ship when you have rust. We've got pockets of rust that need to be eliminated from the organization to ensure that there's no silence around it that every victim feels safe coming forward, that they're supported, and that what the end goal is that we have zero sexual assaults in the organization.

Senator Cantwell: So what are the three things that you are undertaking to make sure that happens?

Admiral Fagan: The team that I'm putting together will start with looking at everything with regard to accountability, where we are with the UCMJ, changes in law around ability to prosecute sexual harassment as well sexual assault, looking at our training system on how we are, one, educating, how we're talking about it, and the full host of levers that we've got as an organization to ensure that we're where you need to be. That the leaders understand their responsibilities. That they move to acknowledge a low-level behavior, comments, things that are not appropriate and begin to create a permissive environment for more egregious activities to go on.

And we're going to look at any and all of it and move it forward. We're not where we need to be, despite all of the great work, the establishment and the special prosecuting attorney's office that were standing up this summer to move to align with the other military services with regard to how sexual assault will be handled, taking it into a special prosecutor and outside of command lines. But we need to continue to move forward. We're not where we need to be.

Senator Cantwell: What do we need to do at the very beginning of the Academy to make sure that we're rooting out this kind of behavior?

Admiral Fagan: The Academy will be part of the review. And there will be specific tools and levers that we're going to need to use with regard to the Academy. I'm going to ask the new superintendent to embark on some of those efforts so we can understand exactly where we are with the Academy and how do we ensure that behavior does not continue to occur at the Academy.

And this is a very different Coast Guard Academy today than it was in the 1980s. The experience that I and many of us had in the 80s, compared to the experience that more recently, as you know, my daughter is a graduate, as she had in the new class that's there now. We're lightyears ahead of where we were, but we're not where we need to be.

Senator Cantwell: So, what is your understanding of the lack of disclosure to Congress?

Admiral Fagan: I don't understand why we did not disclose. When I found out about the totality of the Fouled Anchor investigation, I directed that we moved to begin notifying.

Senator Cantwell: And when was that?

Admiral Fagan: That was when the CNN investigation started asking questions. That was when I first became aware of the totality of the Fouled Anchor.

Senator Cantwell: Did you know about it before, or you just thought it was one or two cases, or what triggered this awareness for you?

Admiral Fagan: So, I knew generally of Fouled Anchor. I needed to move to temporarily relieve a commanding officer, while I was the Pacific Area Commander. It was one instance. And I knew it was part of a greater body of work. But I did not know the full extent.

So, when the team said we've got these Freedom of Information Act requests and it became apparent to me the deliberation, the effort, the victim advocacy and support that went on as part of that. When I found out the total extent, we moved to disclose.

Senator Cantwell: Well, I just want to be clear, if I could pass one bill in the entire Congress, it would be the Cantwell-Bozeman bill that supports journalism because I think journalism gets us competition, perfect information, and is a watchdog.

But that is no excuse for the Coast Guard not having a handle on this. And it's not the way you should receive information.

So, what is it about your structure that you think you need to change, now that you know that all this was below you, and you didn't have full visibility to it?

Admiral Fagan: So, this is part of the work that we need to do is understand what was known and how do we ensure this does not happen. I'm committed to transparency. I'm committed to the Committee. I'm going to provide regular updates, reports as we delve in to the body of work that's needed to ensure that we don't have this happen again.

Senator Cantwell: And would that include relieving people of positions?

Admiral Fagan: I need to understand who, whether we've got jurisdiction to hold accountability and...

Senator Cantwell: Why wouldn't you have the ability to hold somebody accountable if they didn't inform you or kept information from reaching the highest ranks.

Admiral Fagan: Though, I may not have jurisdiction over those that would have been in a position to make those decisions. They may have moved out of the service. That's all part of what we're working through.

Senator Cantwell: Okay, well, I'm still asking for an IG investigation.

We had a similar incident, not an incident on sexual assault, but an incident where four young firefighters lost their lives. And we very much appreciated the Forest Service looking at what went wrong. But we could see that the previous fire, the same things went wrong, and then no one culturally implemented them.

We're going to get third party involved here to make sure that we have the oversight, the evaluation, and that Congress has transparency into the situation and what we need to do.

I could go on to ask you other questions, but I don't think so. I don't think I have the stomach to ask you other questions about the Coast Guard budget. This is such a serious matter. We have to fix it. I think those two giant steps forward need to be real steps forward. I don't know if my number was correct on 40% of your workforce being women today, is that correct?

Admiral Fagan: It's 40% at the Coast Guard Academy. The overall number in the force is probably closer to, it varies by rank, anywhere from 10% to 25%.

Senator Cantwell: Okay, so what does that mean? We're taking in 40% and not graduating them or...

Admiral Fagan: So, at the Coast Guard Academy, the intake and graduation percentage, this is a great news story, and it's a very different Coast Guard Academy than what it was in the in the 80s. The class we just onboarded I think was 43% women, the largest number of underrepresented minority males. It's an incredible Academy. These are great young Americans. And in policy and access to reporting care has improved dramatically, but we have work to do.

Senator Cantwell: Master Chief Jones, do you agree this is an intolerable situation?

Master Chief Jones: Absolutely, Senator.

Senator Cantwell: Okay. Do you have any further comments about what you think the Coast Guard should be doing here?

Master Chief Jones: In line with what the Commandant said, our goal is to get up every single day, we strive for perfection. We are better, but better is not good enough. And we won't accept until we make our Coast Guard the best it can absolutely be. Every sentinel has the right to feel safe, trusted, valued, included and empowered in their workplace. And that's what we strive for every single day.

Senator Cantwell: Well, this needs to be a cultural change. And so I hope that you are going to put your full effort into this as well.

Master Chief Jones: Yes, ma'am.