

Fear of retaliation: The culture that prevents airmen from speaking up

By Kristin Davis Staff writer

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REPRISAL DIFFICULT TO PROVE

Retaliation isn't limited to reports of sexual misconduct. One of the most notorious Air Force cases involved mortuary

workers at Dover Air Force Base, Del., who in 2009 and 2010 were suspended, placed on indefinite leave or fired for reporting the mishandling of America's war dead. Reprisal is hard to prove under the law. The Defense Department and service inspector generals received 283 military reprisal complaints in the first half of fiscal 2013. The IGs dismissed about a third of them. They investigated 47 and substantiated three — about 1 percent of the claims. "There are millions of ways people can be retaliated against, but they are not all covered by a law," said Nilgun Tolek, director of whistle-blower reprisal investigations for the DoD inspector general. "It makes it so that even a person who has genuinely and objectively suffered some sort of retaliation still may not have a substantiated case." One indication of reprisal, Tolek said: "A person had a really good record of performance for a long time, but then engaged in some protected [communication] and suddenly started getting bad performance reviews." A substantiated claim of reprisal requires a protected communication — regarding, for example, a report of waste, abuse, fraud — and an adverse personnel action handed down by a person who knew about the communication. There has to be proof retaliation was really connected to the communication, Tolek said. Investigations can be long and arduous. Despite a statute that military reprisal investigations take no more than 180 days, they often take longer, Tolek said. That's to ensure "a proper, solid investigation." Once that's complete, the inspector general issues its findings in a report of investigation. If the IG substantiates military reprisal, it's up to the service to make the victim whole — and to take action against the perpetrator. "We can't, under the statute, administer or order anybody to do anything. We can't order the person be reinstated. But we recommend in our report ... the appropriate fix for the retaliation," Tolek said. "Then we follow up to see if any of that is done."

In her confirmation hearing last month, secretary of the Air Force nominee Deborah James said the service needs to do a better job instilling confidence in victims of military sexual assault.

"If they are victimized, we want them to come forward. We want them to report," she told lawmakers.

But many don't, James said. Victims "tell me they don't come forward for a number of reasons. They feel personally ashamed. They feel that they may be blamed for what has happened. They do fear retaliation, sometimes from chain of command, sometimes from their buddies in the unit."

Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh and other Air Force leaders say they already are hard at work to encourage victims to report assaults and harassment. Since January, the service has offered victims their own attorneys. The number of sexual assault reports was up from 790 in fiscal 2012 to nearly 1,090 in fiscal 2013, a 38 percent rise they attribute in part to an improved reporting process.

Yet lawmakers and victim advocates still hear stories from service members about retaliation.

A Defense Department report released earlier this year showed that nearly half of women among an estimated 26,000 military victims of unwanted sexual contact who remained silent did not come forward because they feared retaliation.

Protect Our Defenders, an advocacy group for victims of military sexual trauma and a staunch proponent of reforms to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, said it is contacted daily by people who say they were retaliated against for making a sexual assault report.

Retaliation is hard to prove, and often the victim's behavior is called into question, said executive director Taryn Meeks.

"They become labeled as troublemakers or singled out by their peers or command for relatively small or unsubstantiated misconduct. Sadly, they are forced out of the service they love."

That's the case for three airmen interviewed by Air Force Times. Each one reported sexual assault or harassment, and each one has faced career-ending consequences. While their stories are different, all three airmen said their careers were on track until they spoke out.

These are their stories.

Nellis airman: Perpetrators get slap on wrist; she's out

Senior Airman Ciera Bridges said she toiled for three years in a toxic workplace where at least three superiors made sexually explicit advances toward her and other women in the 99th Logistics Readiness Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

The harassment began within months of her arrival at Nellis in November 2009, she said, and eventually turned physical, despite repeated complaints to her chain of command. Instead of handling the problems, she has alleged, her superiors retaliated against her, citing Bridges for minor misconduct that culminated in January in a discharge recommendation under other-than-honorable conditions.

Ten months after the discharge notice, Bridges is still waiting to learn her fate. She has asked the 99th Air Base Wing commander, Col. Barry Cornish, who came to the post in June 2012, to reconsider the discharge. There had been no decision at press time.

Meanwhile, two of the people accused of harassment and assault remain in the service, according to Air Force documents in Bridges' case. The third was allowed to retire. All received administrative punishment. Air Force Times is not naming them because such actions are not public.

Bridges wants to serve out her six-year commitment to the Air Force, which concludes in May, or receive a separation rollback that will let her leave honorably, said her area defense counsel, Capt. Trae

Patterson.

“She still loves the Air Force. She’s trying to get a fair shake here,” said Patterson, who spoke to Air Force Times as Bridges’ attorney and not on behalf of the service.

Bridges declined an interview request but, through the advocacy group Protect Our Defenders, provided more than 60 pages of documents related to her case.

This story is based on those records, as well as interviews with Patterson and Bridges’ parents, Janice and Johnny Bridges, a retired senior master sergeant. Her parents said they want people to know what their daughter has gone through.

Timeline of allegations

Johnny Bridges tried not to show his excitement when his only daughter said she was considering joining the Air Force. He didn’t want to persuade her one way or another.

Bridges was a junior in high school at the time. Johnny Bridges took her to see a recruiter and gave her what he thought were the pros and cons of military life.

“After she graduated [from high school], she started talking about college,” he said, and he figured she’d lost interest.

A year later, in May 2008, Janice Bridges gave her husband the news: Their daughter had decided to join after all. They both thought it was a good fit.

“I felt like the Air Force, like it did for me, would give her a good start,” Johnny Bridges said. “I told her, ‘Get back in school, get a degree as soon as you can, and get a commission. I would love to see you do that.’ We always talked about her outranking me.”

Things began well. In October 2008, Bridges went to Osan Air Base, South Korea, where she served with the 51st Logistics Readiness Squadron.

She arrived at Nellis in November 2009. She was 20 years old. Here, her troubles began, a timeline of events submitted to the Air Force in Bridges’ defense shows.

2010

In January, a staff sergeant began making sexual comments, which Bridges rebuffed. She did not make a complaint.

In September, the staff sergeant issued Bridges a letter of reprimand for speeding on base and talking on a cellphone while driving.

In November, he began sending Bridges naked photos of himself, including a picture of his genitalia. When he started talking about the photos at work, Bridges said she disclosed to him that she was a lesbian. She said the disclosure only intensified the harassment. He continued sending text messages.

In December, Bridges reported the photos to another staff sergeant in her chain of command, according to

the timeline.

At a unit holiday party, she said a master sergeant bought drinks for her and other airmen and asked for their phone numbers. The airmen declined. Bridges said he got her number from a work roster and sent late-night texts asking what she was wearing and when he could come over.

2011

In January, Bridges reported that the same staff sergeant who'd made advances toward her had harassed another woman in the unit but said both complaints languished. She said the staff sergeant to whom she'd made the report had become romantically involved with the accused.

She asked for a reassignment, but it was denied.

In February, another superior, also a staff sergeant, "pressed his body and groin against Bridges' buttocks," the timeline said.

In May, Bridges reported the text messages and sexual advances to a technical sergeant, a master sergeant and a senior master sergeant. The master sergeant told her he would deal with the problems.

At that time, "she's told to take a couple of weeks of leave by her bosses and then she's transferred to a different section inside the squadron," said Patterson, her attorney.

The move put her under the supervision of the master sergeant who she said had made advances at the December 2010 holiday party and sent the late-night messages.

The harassment continued to escalate. Bridges said she was subjected to jeers, obscene gestures and sexual remarks.

2012

Bridges described a January incident in which the staff sergeant who'd pressed himself against her walked into the office in Spandex gym shorts, "put his foot on the counter and began to stretch and thrust his groin."

In March, Bridges got a letter of counseling for being late for a shift and a letter of reprimand for being late to a meeting. Bridges maintained she was on time for the shift. She said she was summoned to the meeting after getting off of a seven-day shift. In a response, Bridges apologized for the mistake.

In April, a co-worker accused Bridges of domestic abuse in a base parking lot. The purported victim, Bridges' partner, wrote a statement denying the abuse, and the base Family Advocacy Center said the allegations were unfounded. When a letter of counseling for the alleged incident was not withdrawn, Bridges sought out the base inspector general. The IG suggested she try to work it out with her commander. Bridges made an appointment; it was canceled without explanation.

In August, Bridges said she walked into a dark office to retrieve keys. The second staff sergeant with whom she'd had trouble was there. "He picked her up with one hand and set her on his desk," according to the timeline. "He stood between Senior Airman Bridges' legs and grinded his erection against [her]"

groin [and said], 'You can have this whenever you want it.'"

Bridges said she feared for her life. Weeks later, she received another letter of reprimand, this time for disorderly conduct at an elementary school. According to the letter, Bridges disobeyed school officials' orders to wait for her partner's child in the office, instead going off in search of him. School officials called the police.

In a response, Bridges apologized for her behavior at the school and took full responsibility. But the incident got her snatched off the promotion list for staff sergeant. Her assignment change request was canceled and her supervisors began an unfavorable information file on Bridges.

2013

In January, Bridges left her place of duty to run an errand without following a security checklist. She returned without issue; days later, when another squadron member left work during a weekend shift, an investigation was launched into both incidents.

Bridges was given an Article 15. The involuntary discharge notice arrived Jan. 15.

Patterson said he thought Bridges had a solid defense for at least some of the events for which Bridges was cited. Some were misunderstandings. Some were "not warranted under the facts that they had," he said.

But "when somebody gives you a letter of counseling, there is no appellate authority," he said.

Air Force response

Nellis spokeswoman Airman 1st Class Monet Villacorte said in an email officials cannot comment on ongoing investigations. But "leadership at Nellis takes all claims of sexual harassment and any other allegations seriously and investigates these and any derivative allegations," she wrote.

In addition to defense counsel, the Air Force provides special victims counsel to airmen who say they were sexually assaulted, Villacorte said.

Bridges has moved into a new squadron while she awaits word on her future in the Air Force.

In a letter to the Nellis commander, Bridges says she was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress and major depression as a result of the trauma. She writes of feeling on edge, losing her temper easily and making bad choices.

"I was an outstanding airman with a promising career and wanted to retire from the service after a long career like my father," Bridges said, "until the sexual assault occurred."

A changed daughter

Bridges confided in her mother nearly as soon as the harassment began, Janice Bridges said.

"She called me very upset, very emotional," she said. It was harder for the senior airman to tell her dad

what was going on.

“She was embarrassed,” Janice Bridges said. “Sometimes, as a woman, it’s not easy to divulge this to a male figure. With some coaxing from me, she confided in her dad. As a family unit, we have been working together ever since.”

Johnny Bridges said he started thinking like a first sergeant, a role he had served in for years. “I told her, ‘No. 1, report it to your immediate supervisor. Hopefully, that person will take it on up the chain, and let the system handle it.’ I know what the process is and how long it can take and everything that goes into it.”

He also had words of caution. “When you report these things, the climate changes in your workplace,” he said. He told her not to expect everything to go her way. “Make sure that you are on time, that you do your job, that you go to lunch and come back when you’re supposed to. Do everything you are supposed to do according to [Air Force Instruction]. You don’t want to give anybody anything to use against you,” he advised.

Both Janice and Johnny Bridges said they believe many of the misconduct allegations against their daughter would not have occurred prior to reporting the harassment.

They have watched their daughter transform from upbeat and outgoing to quiet and withdrawn.

“She was an engaging kid. She was such a delight. Everybody loved her,” Janice Bridges said. “[Now] she just looks like someone who is carrying the weight of the world on her shoulder.”

“These are some of the things I tried to warn her about,” Johnny Bridges said. “These people are trying to protect themselves as much as she’s trying to protect herself. She’s kind of young and thinking everyone is going to be honest. But everybody is trying to save their own life.”

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Discharge dropped for airman who claimed retaliation

By Kristin Davis Staff writer

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The Air Force has dropped a recommendation to discharge a senior airman at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., who had accused three superiors of sexual harassment and assault.

Senior Airman Ciera Bridges, who had been facing discharge under other than honorable conditions, was featured in [an Oct. 7 recent Air Force Times report](#) on three airmen who claim they were retaliated against after accusing superiors of assault and harassment. Bridges was cited repeatedly for minor misconduct after

she began making complaints against superiors for the harassment, which she said began soon after she arrived at Nellis in November 2009 and persisted for nearly three years.

Bridges alleged her chain of command retaliated against her by issuing letters of counseling and reprimands instead of handling the problems. In January, she learned she had been recommended for the discharge, which she appealed.

Bridges sought the help of advocacy organization Protect Our Defenders, which learned Wednesday the discharge has been dropped.

Bridges “is thankful for the resolution on the discharge and elated to have the opportunity to remain in the Air Force,” her defense counsel, Capt. Trae Patterson, said in a statement. “But the emotional scars from years of harassment and assault, as well as nearly 10 months of stress and fearing for her Air Force career, along with being subjugated as an outcast, remain.”

Patterson said his client still wants to see her three alleged perpetrators held accountable. Two of the airmen remain in the Air Force, including a staff sergeant Bridges accused of grabbing her in a dark office, forcing her onto a desk and pressing his groin against her. The third was allowed to retire.

Bridges’ parents, Johnny and Janice Bridges, spoke to Air Force Times at length last week about their daughter’s case. Johnny Bridges is a retired senior master sergeant who said he encouraged his daughter to report the alleged crimes, but warned her to avoid giving supervisors even the smallest reason to reprimand her.

“When you report these things, the climate changes in your workplace,” he said.

Bridges’ parents released a statement through Protect Our Defenders today: “We are delighted that finally some attention is being brought to our daughter’s case (and many others like her). ... This has been a long time coming and, in our opinion, long overdue.”

Protect Our Defenders also lauded the Air Force's decision but called on the service to investigate the alleged retaliation.

"Unfortunately, what happened to [Bridges] is something we see far too often in the military — the victim of sexual harassment and assault is punished for coming forward," Protect Our Defenders president Nancy Parrish said in a statement. "Our brave sons and daughters, brothers and sisters that risk their lives for us deserve to receive justice equal to the civilians they protect."



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