

June 30, 2006

Academy Officials Testify at Hearing on Sex Assault

Military Students Also Speak Before Congress

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON – U.S. military academy officials say they have made solid progress in curbing sexual assaults on campuses, but one former cadet who says she was raped alleges that little has changed.

“The very idea that anyone in the academy family could behave in such a way that fosters sexual harassment, misconduct or even assault is of great concern to me as superintendent,” Vice Adm. Rodney P. Rempt, superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, said at a congressional hearing Tuesday.

Former Air Force Academy Cadet Elizabeth L. Davis, her voice faltering as she described being “raped and assaulted repeatedly” while at the academy, said women who report crimes are often threatened, degraded and driven out.

Davis said little has been done to change the male-dominated culture of the academies.

“We’re still hearing cases of women coming out of the academies absolutely destroyed,” she told the panel.

Brig. Gen. Robert Caslen Jr., commandant of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, praised Davis’ courage.

The country’s military academies have faced more scrutiny since 2003, when women at the Air Force Academy in Colorado alleged that they had been sexually assaulted by fellow cadets over the previous decade and were ignored or ostracized by commanders when they came forward.

Sexual assault allegations have also surfaced since then at the Naval and Coast Guard academies.

U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, a Connecticut Republican and chairman of the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, led Tuesday’s hearing into how officials are handling sexual assault cases in the military and its academies.

Military officials said they have worked hard to improve critical areas such as victim support and confidentiality while providing training for all cadets to prevent sexual harassment and assault. Congress created a task force in 2004 that recommended many such changes.

“The Air Force Academy has come a long way in addressing sexual assault and violence since the events of 2003 and before,” Brig. Gen. Susan Y. Desjardins, Air Force Academy commandant of cadets, said in prepared testimony.

But Shays suggested that more needs to be done.

“We must provide an environment in the military at large that does not condone hostile attitudes and inappropriate actions toward women,” Shays said.

Desjardins agreed that combating sexual assault and harassment would be a long-term job.

“We have a very long way to go,” she said.

Coast Guard Cadet Webster M. Smith was acquitted Tuesday of raping one female cadet, but convicted of extorting another for sexual favors. He was sentenced Wednesday to six months in prison and kicked out of the service.

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