

USS Enterprise: Do lewd videos point to deeper problem for military?



By Anna Mulrine
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Washington – The news that US Navy Capt. Owen Honors was permanently relieved of his command Tuesday for making the lewd videos for the entertainment of his ship's crew is likely to be just the beginning of an ongoing investigation. The question now is why US Navy leadership, which apparently knew about the videos – made from 2006 to 2007 and punctuated by simulated sex acts and gay slurs – didn't intervene sooner.

The news was received with some sadness by loyal subordinates who called Honors a caring leader who took part in these productions – broadcast over the ship's closed-circuit television system – in an effort to keep up morale during a time of war.

It was greeted with some satisfaction by civil rights groups, however, who argue that the military has too long tolerated sexual harassment in its ranks – behavior, they add, that creates a climate that permits sexual assault to occur with far more frequency than it should in the American military.

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Indeed, Pentagon efforts to stem the increase in sexual assault and harassment in its ranks has been the subject of mounting scrutiny. A Pentagon report released last month found that cases of sexual assault at the US military academies increased 64 percent during the 2009-10 academic year. Earlier last year, a report to Congress disclosed an 11 percent increase in reports of sexual assaults throughout the services between 2008 and 2009.

When did the Navy know? There was no shortage of introspection within the Navy this week. The Virginian-Pilot newspaper reported that Honors's superiors apparently knew about the videos, as well as crew members' complaints against them. Rather than censure him for it, they elevated Honors, then the No. 2 officer on the USS Enterprise, to be commander of the ship.

Given the Pentagon's stance that command cooperation and education are critical to reducing

sexual harassment and assault, the reports were particularly troubling to some officials. "It's a leadership issue," says Kaye Whitley, director of the Pentagon's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office.

Honors's participation in the videos on his ship raises questions, too, about whether junior enlisted sailors felt compelled to participate.

The Navy acknowledged these concerns in a statement released Tuesday. "The responsibility of the Commanding Officer for his or her command is absolute. While Capt. Honors' performance as commanding officer of USS Enterprise has been without incident, his profound lack of good judgment and professionalism while previously serving as executive officer on Enterprise calls into question his character and completely undermines his credibility to continue to serve effectively in command," said Adm. John Harvey Jr., commander of United States Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk, Va.

But some believe that it calls into question the Navy's judgment as well, and wonder why service leaders did not act sooner – particularly with evidence that cases of sexual assault in the military continue to rise.

The Pentagon's problem with sexual assaultThe 64 percent increase at US military academies last academic year was partially a product of low numbers of reported cases. There were 25 sexual assaults reported in the 2008-09 school year, versus 41 in 2009-10, according to the report. Dr. Whitley argues, too, that the increase can be viewed positively to some extent, since it represents an increased willingness among victims to come forward and report the crimes.

But Whitley acknowledges that sexual assault is vastly underreported throughout the military. According to a survey of cadets at the academies, fewer than 1 in 10 cases are actually reported. Throughout the Defense Department, the Pentagon estimates that fewer than 20 percent of assaults are ever reported.

What's more, the punishments for those found guilty are hardly severe, say some civil rights groups. "What's very clear to us is that rape in the military – let alone assault and harassment – is not treated as a legitimate crime," says Anu Baghwati, executive director of the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), an advocacy group.

She argues that the majority of those found guilty of sexual assaults get administrative punishments rather than jail time.

Pentagon critics: progress, but more neededMs. Baghwati says she is heartened by provisions in the recent defense appropriations bill that provide for a hotline to be run by the Rape Abuse

and Incest National Network (RAINN). "It's an amazing civilian nonprofit, and it's pretty radical that the DoD [Department of Defense] would partner with them," she says.

For her part, the Pentagon's Whitley says she hopes that the hotline will encourage more victims to come forward, to "help us see an increase in reporting."

The Pentagon is also launching an effort to professionalize a group known as sexual assault response coordinators. Currently, commanders can designate any one of their troops to the position and there is no mandatory training. Now, service members will have to volunteer for the job, and they will be required to receive training.

SWAN is pressing for greater changes at the Pentagon. It has also joined with the American Civil Liberties Union in a lawsuit petitioning the Pentagon to comply with Freedom of Information Act requests for the release of data documenting how military service members' complaints were handled.

Baghwati says she would like to see more civilian oversight of the military in sexual assault cases.

"The military is a culture that operates on fear and intimidation – in a good way. Your drill instructor instills that fear – if you mess up, you will face punishment. Without that punishment, you may not do the right thing. We hope you will, but you may not," she says. "In the civilian world, there are deterrents to crime. We need that in place so commanders consistently do the right thing. Fear of litigation will shut this down. It's what we need, it's what the military needs."

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