

US Army punishes 14 senior officers at Fort Hood citing “leadership failures”

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Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy directed 14 senior officers at the Army’s violence- and murder-plagued Fort Hood base in central Texas be punished by suspension or removal from their positions. McCarthy, announcing his decision this week, claimed the issues at the base are “directly related to leadership failures.”

The action comes in the wake of the independent review ordered after the bungling of the investigation into the death of 20-year-old Specialist Vanessa Guillen.

The disciplinary actions were one of the single largest taken by the Army in history, indicating that the Pentagon is well aware of deep disillusionment and anger within the ranks and is seeking to put the blame for a wave of deaths, sexual assaults and suicides solely on the local leadership in an effort to divert blame from the military itself. The Army investigation is reportedly still underway, with the possibility of more punishments.

The Fort Hood Independent Review Committee cited issues with “ineffective implementation of the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) program that resulted in a pervasive lack of confidence, fear of retaliation, and significant underreporting of cases, particularly within the enlisted ranks.”

SHARP was implemented in 2005 and has failed to stop sexual assaults in the military. In fact, sexual assaults have risen significantly since its implementation. According to the Department of Defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response office, reported sexual assaults have almost tripled in the military since 2008, rising from 2,340 to 6,053, with a collective 64 percent of those filing reports noting a negative experience or facing retaliation.

More recently, according to a Defense Department’s fiscal year 2019 report on sexual assault, sexual assault reports in the military rose 3 percent from 2018-2019 and restricted reports, where the victim remained anonymous, saw a 17 percent increase, clearly showing that victims did not trust the chain of command to protect or investigate claims of sexual assault.

The House held a hearing with members of the

Independent Review Committee on December 9 where members testified on their findings. The inquiry by the representatives centered around sexual harassment and assault, violent crimes and the “command culture” at Fort Hood.

Democratic Representative Jackie Speier stated that Fort Hood was “the most dangerous military installation in the United States.” She continued, “28 service members have died at Fort Hood this year. At least five of them, specialist Vanessa Guillen, private first class Brendan Morales, private first class Scott Rosenkranz, sergeant Elder Fernandez and specialist Freddie de la Cruz have died under suspicious circumstances. I might also add that we just got word that there was a suicide at Fort Hood over the weekend.”

“And it is not just violent crime that is plaguing Fort Hood, but unlivable housing conditions, rising instances of sexual harassment, a failing SHARP program, increased rates of depression and a bottoming-out of morale,” Speier noted.

“The report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee confirmed what I saw with my own eyes. the base, once nicknamed ‘Great Place’ because of the quality of life it offered to its soldiers, has been transformed into the place where careers go to die.”

Speier described horrific conditions in Fort Hood’s housing, with enlisted soldiers living in rat and black-mold-infested tenements, children developing asthma from moldy mattresses, and military spouses worrying about finding their husbands or wives “hanging in the shower or dead on the floor.” Speier stated that “in my eight years on this committee, visiting military installations, I have never seen barracks and family housing and such deplorable conditions.”

She continued to describe sexual harassment being part of the culture at Fort Hood as well as leadership watching as it happens and doing nothing, describing harassment as becoming “just another hazard of being a soldier, and no one was held accountable, and not one leader stepped forward. ... The Committee survey of Fort Hood soldiers found 1,339

soldiers observed a sexual assault in the past year ... and 2,625 observed sexual harassment, but very few actually made a report.”

Within the hearing, it was revealed that Specialist Aaron Robinson, who killed Guillen and also worked in the armory, had a history of suicidal ideation. One of the House members pointed this out and pointed out that a background investigation was required by the military in order to become an armorer. When chair of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, Christopher Swecker, was questioned about this, he gave no explanation.

In his testimony Swecker explained that the inquiry had found that “Fort Hood was an outlier in all areas; suicides, AWOL, sexual assaults, on and on and on. That’s what our research project told us.”

Swecker cited a lack of experienced Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) police agents and a limited ability to track cell phones in his effort to explain why sexual assaults and 50 suicide cases were inadequately investigated or ignored at Fort Hood. Given the egregious numbers, one has to wonder if he believes these claims himself.

He also commented that out of the 50 cases he reviewed, despite most having “obvious mental health issues ... there were only a handful that had seen a mental health professional.” Another board member stated that soldiers feared they might face retaliation or consequences for their career for reporting suicidal ideation.

The abuse of soldiers, along with the ignoring of these issues by leaders and CID, is inherent to the purpose of the Army, and in fact, the military as a whole as a tool of US imperialism. The military works to break soldiers and accustom them to brutal violence so as to create killers capable of waging imperialist wars of annihilation on behalf of the US financial oligarchy. Three decades of war, in which soldiers have been repeatedly deployed to tours of duty in the unending wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere—which have resulted in the destruction of entire societies—have had a malign impact among the command and within the ranks.

As the WSWS explained in 2014 in response to sexual violence in the military, referencing the German socialist Karl Liebknecht in his 1907 pamphlet *Militarism & Anti-Militarism* (1907):

...whatever its official rules provide for, the military high command finds that ill-treatment of soldiers “is nevertheless probably the most effective of all coercive means of discipline used by militarism. There is an attempt to tame men in the

way in which beasts are tamed. Recruits are drugged, confused, flattered, bribed, pressed, locked up, disciplined and beaten. Thus grain upon grain is mixed and kneaded to serve as mortar for the great edifice of the army.”

The violent treatment inflicted on women in the military, a phenomenon unknown in Liebknecht’s day, is an extension of this internal process of “military education,” applied to the most vulnerable portion of the armed forces. In this way, the military teaches its enlistees to be impervious to human pain and suffering, readying them for criminal operations against hostile peoples abroad and the working class at home.

The massive rise in violence within the military cannot be taken out of context of the present crisis either, where President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to use the military to crush domestic dissent and establish a dictatorship. Trump speaks for sections of the financial oligarchy who see military violence as a necessity in order to suppress domestic social opposition and prepare for new imperialist wars of aggression against Russia, China, and other countries. US imperialism turns to the military in its drive to offset the decline of its economic position and violently re-divide the world.

Responding to the punishment of the officers at Fort Hood, a joint statement by the top Republican and Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee stated, “We must restore our soldiers’ faith and trust in their commanding officers, their unit and their service.” That is, at a point at which the US president has attempted to use the military to suppress domestic dissent and is plotting to overturn the results of the election, both parties’ primary concern is ensuring the readiness of the military to carry out new imperialist war.

The fight against sexual violence, suicide, and general social misery among wide sections of the military rank-and-file can only be prosecuted on the basis of a socialist perspective, rejecting national divisions and uniting the working class internationally. Only through the expropriation of the financial oligarchs that necessitate the existence of the military and the reorganization of society to meet human need and put an end to war can these issues be resolved.



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