

THE TAILHOOK SCANDALS

Tailhook '91 really was a scandal—but nothing compared to the investigation that followed it.

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ON OCTOBER 15, 1993, Rear Admiral Riley Mixson, Chief of the Navy's Air Warfare Division, received a letter of censure from new Secretary of the Navy John Dalton. Dalton hit Mixson for being responsible for the arrangements of the 1991 Tailhook convention, the military's worst sex scandal in history.

The rebuke was fired like a showy missile attack, staged for the benefit of CNN. But Mixson defended himself with a letter that convincingly refuted Dalton's charges. He wrote that during most of the time plans were being made for the infamous convention in Las Vegas, he was half a world away

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directing combat operations during Desert Storm. "I can assure you," Mixson wrote, "my thoughts in the Red Sea were not on Tailhook '91."

In fact, Mixson hadn't attended Tailhook in 13 years, and was shocked to see how gross its nightlife had become. In an *immediate* report to his superiors, Mixson warned that the activities he observed must never be allowed to happen again.

Two years later, none of this would prevent the highly decorated admiral from being censured for arrangements he didn't make, and for the actions of men not under his command. He missed out on a third star and the chance to become Commander, Naval Air Forces Pacific Fleet, and is now retired from service. His case was far from unique.

The sensational accounts of Tail-

hook damaged the morale and prestige of the Navy. But the worst damage was inflicted not by a few drunken and misbehaving junior officers, but by high-level officials whose judgment was impaired by sexual politics.

Patricia Schroeder, a powerful member of the House Armed Services Committee, is a mistress of sexual politics. She rushed to define Tailhook as a "watershed event"—a revelation of the Navy's sexual harassment so shocking that it could be remedied only by lifting the prohibition against women in combat. It was a stunning non-sequitur—military women must be exposed to thugs behind enemy lines in order to protect them from drunken comrades at home—but cowed Navy officials felt compelled to embrace it as their own.

The brass allowed themselves to be bullied into a capitulation to feminists on procedural and policy issues, at the expense of legal safeguards and sound military policy. The farce came to a humiliating end on February 8 of this year, when Captain William T. Vest, a Navy judge, blasted Defense Department officials for bungled, amateurish witness interview reports that could not stand up in court, and threw out the last of three pending courts martial. In the end, after all the uproar, not a single court-martial produced a conviction.

What Really Happened?

THE MYTH of Tailhook has by now wreaked enormous damage on the Navy; but what had been the reality of Tailhook?

Named for the device that halts aircraft when they land on aircraft carriers, the Tailhook Association is an independent group of active-duty and former Navy aviators. For more than 25 years, the Navy has provided transportation and high-ranking speakers for its annual conventions, where professional symposiums are held by day, hospitality suites by night.

In Las Vegas in September 1991, many naval aviators were returning from life-or-death missions in Desert Storm. That—and the usual free-flowing alcohol—gave the nightlife its special kick. Hundreds of single women were drawn to the three-day event—some for the second or third consecutive year—and freely participated in wild party activities, ranging from

OVER →

sexual suggestiveness to gross indecency.

But in a few cases, non-consensual touching and grabbing degenerated into serious sexual assault. On Saturday night around 11:30 P.M. Navy Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, a helicopter pilot, wandered into the "gauntlet," a mob of drunken airmen arrayed along the third-floor hallway who pounded on the walls and pawed at women as they walked by.

According to Lieutenant Coughlin's oft-repeated account, a Marine Corps captain grabbed her from behind, almost lifting her off the ground by her posterior. She spun around to confront him, but another man grabbed her from behind and the first man then forced his hands down her tube-top. The story broke in October when a letter from the head of the Tailhook Association berating officers for activities "far over the line of responsible behavior" was leaked to the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. A few months later, Lieutenant Coughlin emerged as its star—the Navy's own Anita Hill.

Rush to Judgment

BY APRIL 28, 1992, the Navy Investigative Service had amassed a 2,000 page report from 2,200 interviews. But this voluminous study found only 44 instances in which there was clear evidence to justify disciplinary procedures. That was not enough for feminists like Pat Schroeder, who berated the Joint Chiefs for "not getting it." Hoping to appease them, Navy Undersecretary Dan Howard leaked an incomplete version of the NIS report; but this added fuel to the flames. When it emerged that the number of prosecutions was likely to fall below the exaggerated expectations aroused by early reports, the feminists—echoed by the media—alleged "whitewash."

Until then, Assistant Secretary for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Barbara S. Pope, herself a feminist, had appeared, during 19 briefings updating its progress, to be satisfied with the investigation. Now she demanded more "bodies." She threatened to resign unless all commanding officers who had suites at Tailhook—including some who had flown dangerous combat missions in Desert Storm—were summarily fired "for cause," no matter what their conduct. (This ultimatum

would be rejected.) And to toughen the investigation, Miss Pope demanded unconventional investigative procedures that would have involved fleet commanders and a civilian presidential appointee in the interrogation of senior officers and others in their command.

Officials in Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's office capitulated to Miss Pope's threat, but Navy Judge Advocate General John Gordon, who was responsible for the integrity of legal procedures and the protection of constitutional rights, objected. Admiral Gordon argued that it would have injected both politics and unfair "command interference" into what was supposed to be an impartial investigation. He also predicted that the interference of high officials in judicial affairs would create a problem "so severe that we will not see one successful court martial come out of this process." Two years later, Judge Vest was to prove him right.

At the time, Navy Secretary H. Lawrence Garrett III overruled Gordon. But he was soon to be devoured by the revolution he had appeased. When on June 24 and 25 the lead story on ABC's *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings featured Lieutenant Coughlin, pressure mounted to make someone walk the plank. Within days Garrett was forced to resign. In the meantime he had handed the investigation to Derek J. Vander Schaaf, Deputy Department of Defense Inspector General, and a PC rampage began that left dozens of careers in tatters.

Throughout the summer of 1992 there were persistent reports of questionable interview techniques (investigators would try to bluff airmen by falsely telling them they had been implicated by comrades), careless and sometimes dishonest interview reports, and intrusive polygraph questions about sexual histories and practices. The investigation did "so much to destroy the morale, the cohesion, the effectiveness of the units, it makes my blood boil," one Marine colonel told the *Washington Times*. Three times, senior prosecutors were removed from cases for overzealous conduct in pursuit of convictions.

Still, on September 24 Vander Schaaf issued a report highly critical of the Navy's original investigation. He chastised Inspector General George Davis and NIS Commander

Duval M. Williams for not having broadened the first investigation to encompass "cultural" problems, and he criticized Admiral Gordon for not having abandoned his neutral role for that of prosecutor.

At a hastily called news conference, Acting Navy Secretary Sean O'Keefe, playing to the feminist gallery, made scapegoats of Williams and Gordon. He announced both were retiring as a matter of "conscience," when in fact he knew that wasn't true. Williams and Gordon had strongly objected to the criticisms of them in Vander Schaaf's report, and Gordon's retirement date had been set months before. (Four weeks later, O'Keefe issued a memorandum absolving Davis, Williams, and Gordon of any wrongdoing, but by then the media weren't interested.)

Sinking Careers

WHAT DID the new, strong-arm investigation achieve? Up to the end of 1993, 120 Navy and 20 Marine cases were considered for possible disciplinary actions, and approximately half were dropped for lack of evidence. Even when the charges did stand up, most of the men "went to the mast"—an internal, non-judicial disciplinary procedure that meted out fines and severe career penalties. But almost all of these cases involved unseemly behavior rather than sexual assault.

In cases that went to courts martial, where stricter judicial procedures apply, the Navy's prosecutorial methods have been harshly criticized. In particular, the practice of granting immunity to a number of junior officers—Barbara Pope's idea—allowed some guilty junior officers to escape prosecution. In one case, several junior officers were given immunity to testify against the Commander of the Navy's elite Blue Angel demonstration team, who was allegedly present in one Tailhook suite while a couple engaged in a public sex act. The Gulf War hero had been removed from his squadron and subjected to months of humiliation, but when the time came for testimony and cross-examination under oath, none of the immunized witnesses could place him in the room in question.

While navy men saw careers sunk over being at the wrong party at the wrong time, some Navy women



walked away from more serious offenses without a scratch.

Take, in particular, Ensign Elizabeth Warnick, who accused Lieutenant Cole Cowden of attempting, with two other men, to gang-rape her. Under oath, Ensign Warnick admitted she had concocted the entire story to keep her fiancé from learning she had willingly engaged in sex with Cowden, and had allowed men to drink "belly shots" from her navel. Despite the Navy's stated policy forbidding false accusations, Ensign Warnick received nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

Disciplinary authorities failed to pursue other Navy women known to have participated in some of Tailhook's more outlandish party traditions. Lieutenant Rolando Diaz, who shaved women's legs in public, was prosecuted for "conduct unbecoming an officer," but three female officers whose legs he shaved were not disciplined on an equal basis. Indeed, one of those three customers, according to Diaz, was none other than Paula Coughlin, who showed her appreciation by signing a banner with "You made me see God. The Paulster." (This is the same media-savvy assault victim who had been invited to the White House to be consoled by George Bush.)

When her own case—one of just *two* assault cases brought to court martial—was finally brought to court, it crumbled. After first identifying the photograph of a man who had not even attended Tailhook as her assailant, Lieutenant Coughlin picked a Marine captain out of a line-up. But she said she remembered the captain wore an orange shirt, whereas a picture from Saturday night showed him in a green "Raging Rhino" T-shirt (the rhino is his squadron's mascot). That, plus alibi witnesses, doomed Tailhook's most celebrated case.

Even before Vest's ruling, judges had been laying into the Navy's prosecution. The U.S. Court of Military Appeals in Washington criticized an "assembly-line technique in this case that merged and blurred investigative and justice procedures." "At best," the court continued, "it reflects a most curiously careless and amateurish approach to a very high-profile case . . . At worst, it raises the possibility of a shadiness in respecting the rights of military members."

But even though the Tailhook prose-

cution produced no court-martial convictions, Paula Coughlin and supporters seized a victory. Just weeks before Tailhook, despite strict prohibitions against lobbying by uniformed personnel, Lieutenant Coughlin was one of several women allowed to lobby for Representative Schroeder's bill to repeal laws exempting women from combat aviation. Tailhook gave a boost to Mrs. Schroeder's effort that no amount of lobbying could.

With Defense Secretary Cheney keeping his head below the parapet, Senator Bob Dole and other GOP leaders went along with Ted Kennedy in 1991 and voted to repeal that law. Two years later, Cheney's successor, Les Aspin, followed the release of a second report on Tailhook with the announcement that women would immediately be assigned to combat-aviation training. Repeal of the law exempting women from combat ships came next, and the Pentagon is currently moving ahead to force women into more dangerous positions in or near land combat positions.

Never mind that the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces recommended in November 1992 that women *not* be assigned to combat aviation, much less ground combat. Testimony before the commission overwhelmingly indicated that differences in physical capabilities between men and women would detract from unit cohesion, and inappropriate interpersonal relationships would likely hurt morale. The conclusions were based on evidence from Desert Storm, when an average pregnancy rate among enlisted women of about 8 to 10 per cent, combined with family/child-care problems, meant the non-deployability rate among military women was three to four times that for men.

Yet the Navy, described by Chief of Navy Operations Admiral Kelso himself as on the "ragged edge of readiness," is rushing to spend millions to alter combat ships for the accommodation of women. Why? In a *Navy Times* interview, Kelso said he started to change his mind about women in combat when the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings caused him to realize that "there really is a jungle in the workplace." Kelso also now suggests

that the answer to any "execution problems" with women in combat—e.g., the "love boat" phenomenon—is "the right kind of training to understand how not to get pregnant."

Perhaps there should be courts martial for fatuity. Kelso's apparent naïveté masks the real reason for his change of heart. This is the new Navy: a man's career depends on having the "correct" view on women, as defined by feminists who know how to exploit sexual politics to get their way. When Navy Secretary Dalton tried to fire Kelso for his lack of "leadership" at Tailhook, Defense Secretary Les Aspin intervened to save him, at least in part because he had changed his mind about women in combat.

Kelso should have gone—if for different reasons than Dalton's. Vest implicates him as one of the chief forces sending the Tailhook investigation out of control. Vest charges that Kelso had not only been "in error" in denying that he had not witnessed indecent conduct at Tailhook, but "had manipulated the initial investigative process . . . in a manner designed to shield his personal involvement in Tailhook '91."

Admiral Kelso's disgrace is shared by political appointees serving in the Bush and Clinton Administrations who have condoned a new policy of discrimination that is both demoralizing to men and demeaning to women: in future incidents of sexual misconduct, men will be disciplined, but women may not. Surveys already show that the problem of sexual harassment is aggravated by the men's resentment over double standards favoring women, such as the gender-norming of test scores. It is hard to imagine a better prescription for future conflict between military men and women.

In reality, there were two Tailhook scandals. One took place in the halls of Las Vegas; the other, more serious and far reaching, under the watchful eye of Pat Schroeder. The same rotten procedures that prompted Judge Vest to throw out the final courts martial applied in dozens of cases we'll never hear about that went to the mast. Where do those men go to get their careers back? And, more importantly, where does the Navy go to get its honor back? Not only did it betray men who had served it for decades, it capitulated on issues that will affect its combat readiness for decades to come. A scandal indeed. □