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Statement of Erika Butner

CORPORAL, U.S. Marine Corps 2011-2016

My name is Erika Butner, and I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. On August 8th, 2011, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps knowing I could have potentially deployed to a combat zone. If presented the opportunity, I would have given my life for this country without hesitation. Never once did I think the war I'd fight would be among my very own brothers in arms.

During the time I spent in the Marine Corps, various clothed photos of me were taken from my personal social media accounts without my consent, and shared on sites that are like Marines United with such frequency that it became inevitable. They would post my photo, and caption it, "Smash or Pass," in other words, "would you have sex with this woman or not?", followed by extremely vulgar, degrading, and repulsive comments to include rape-talk. My so-called brothers in arms shared clothed photographs of me on Marines United, posted my contact information, and discussed all the unspeakable things they'd like to do to me. Comments I saw on other posts of the site included how female Marines aren't "real" Marines and belong in the kitchen. One post suggested friendly fire to the women who are now integrated into the infantry units. Another male veteran described how he would rip off an active duty females eyelashes, and then throw her into a tub of acid. Many veterans think because the UCMJ does not apply to them, they're immune from legal action.

This culture of sharing photographs has been going on long before Marines United, and even before Facebook. With the use of social media and other file-sharing sites, this behavior has developed into something that has led to harassment and the degradation of men and women service members. If this behavior had not come to light, I believe it would have continued as a dark secret of the military.

Marines United was just one example, and this behavior toward others, including those no longer on active duty, continues as we sit here today. Since I first spoke out publicly regarding this scandal, my so-called brothers in arms have continued their desperate search for nude photos of me. I have endured tremendous backlash and victim-blaming. These attempts to shame me into silence will not stand.

Supporters of Marines United maintain their focus on the alleged origin of the social media group - support for coping with PTSD, suicide prevention, and camaraderie. They argue that taking down Marines United will cause the rate of veteran suicide to shoot through the roof, and this well-intended group's good deeds are overshadowed by a few bad apples. You need only see their male-only membership requirement to prove that females aren't welcome in their Marine Corps, or worthy of their supposed invaluable support resources. The fact remains that

30,000 male members of this private group were complicit through inaction or actively participated in the denigration and harassment of women. The new groups that formed since Marines United was shut down, taunt the media and those investigating. T-shirts have now been made that read, "I got your 6 - and possibly your girls nudes too." Camaraderie, indeed.

Nonconsensual photo sharing, publishing of contact information, and inciting of sexual violence among service members and veterans online must be addressed with legislation. Misogyny and objectification of women in the Marine Corps has gone unchecked for far too long. Normalization of sexual harassment in the Corps will lead to sexual assault. This must be stopped.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Neller, said, "What will it take? What will it take for your sisters in arms to be accepted?" I understand that General Neller inherited this problem, but his actions will decide the way forward. We recognize and appreciate the steps that the Commandant has taken to implement new policy. However, General Neller has yet to meet with myself and others. The Marine Corps must decide whether to stand up for the women who have given their lives for our Nation, or cast them aside in spite of it. I beg of you, as a Marine, and as a woman veteran, please pledge your support.

Thank you for holding this hearing on this issue. Again, thank you for your leadership, and for the opportunity to appear before you today and to add my voice to this historic effort ahead.

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