

Hearing: Information Surrounding the Marines United Website

Date: Tuesday, March 14, 2017

Time: 10:00 AM

Location: Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building

**Vietnam Veterans of America's Statement for Record:
John Rowan, National President and CEO**

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. Like everyone in this room, we are appalled by the events that brought us together for this hearing today. It's hard to imagine how someone in uniform could have so little respect for their colleagues and for their service that they would engage in this despicable campaign of cyber bullying. Yet, as the shock wears off, we are unsurprised by this ugly news. In 2014, an investigation by *Task & Purpose* revealed many of the exact same issues. The failure of the Department of Defense to respond appropriately back then only reinforced the behavior that was exposed again by the recent reporting by *War Horse*.

While it is necessary to devote significant attention to the bad-actors in this scandal, we're calling Congress and on the Department of Defense to not only to focus on investigations of this behavior, but to make supporting victims their first priority when responding to "Marines United." Every servicemember and veteran who investigators can positively identify as a victim in this scandal should be informed of their full legal rights, provided appropriate psychological counseling and legal support, and should be guaranteed absolute protection from retaliation.

The *War Horse* and *Reveal News* recently uncovered a massive investigation into hundreds of Marines who had shared explicit photos on the "Marines United" Facebook page, which has since been shut down. Days later, *Task & Purpose*, a military and veterans news and culture website has independently confirmed that veterans involved in the original "Marines United" page have uploaded a collection of the photos and videos to the website Pornhub. Thomas Brennan, a Marine veteran, Purple Heart recipient, and founder of The War Horse has received threats after breaking the story on March 4. *The Military Times* has reported that this issue is not unique to the Marine Corps, and that other branches are initiating their own investigations.

While we welcome Secretary of Defense Mattis and General Robert Neller's condemnations of those involved in posting these photos and the tens of thousands of bystanders who condoned the behavior, we remain concerned that too little is being done to support the women who have been the victims of this outrageous behavior. Here's what these women need to know: First and foremost, we love and respect you. We in the community of Military and Veteran Service Organizations are here to support you now and forever. We'll be standing by organizations such

as Service Women's Action Network and Protect Our Defenders who have been leading from the front in this battle against sexism in the military.

The Department of Defense needs to ensure that servicemembers know that the Department of Veterans Affairs offers free counseling for survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) regardless of whether or not that incident was reported while the members were on duty. We know that many veterans who reported MST in the past have received bad-paper discharges, and Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs must do more for them too. Veterans should know that anyone on active duty, and any veteran who has experienced MST can get counseling at Vet Centers around the country, regardless of discharge. The Department of Defense needs to include this information in their statements regarding this investigation.

To the servicemembers and veterans impacted by this scandal, our message is this: You are not alone. We're with you.

Next, we'd like to encourage the military to make full use of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in accordance with the actions of each individual involved in the "Marines United" Facebook page and any like it. The military has a history of taking shortcuts by issuing administrative discharges when justice demands more. We want to ensure that punishments for those involved are tailored to match the level of severity of each individual's actions. We ask that the services utilize Courts Martial when appropriate, and that there is no discrimination by officer or enlisted status, by rank, or by time in service.

Recognizing that it is likely that some of those involved in behavior violating the code of conduct expected of servicemembers could be impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic stress disorder, and that separation for those individuals may be likely, we urge the services to consider the effect of a less-than-honorable discharge on the ability of these veterans to recover from the wounds of war. While many of those involved may be allegedly facing serious charges, we urge the services to consider forms of punishment, when necessary, that are appropriately harsh, but do not include a lifetime denial of healthcare. That is not to say that no servicemember guilty of serious misconduct deserves the harshest of discharges, but every veteran should have the right to due process by Court Martial before receiving such a punishment.