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Alaska National Guard members face accusations of sexual misconduct

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WASHINGTON -- A dozen members of the Alaska National Guard face charges of sexual misconduct in what members of the guard call a severe problem in the ranks.

Five were members of the guard's recruiting unit and are alleged to have committed the offenses against potential recruits, new recruits, subordinates and others.

Two of those recruiters also allegedly threatened the National Guard investigator and one was arrested last month after being accused of saying he was going to blow up a building on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage.

The investigations come as current and former members of the Alaska National Guard, including chaplains, have said there is a serious sexual assault and harassment problem that needs to be dealt with.

The Alaska guard said it has a dozen sexual misconduct investigations, most of which are now complete. The investigations are followed by internal board hearings to weigh the evidence and decide whether the soldiers should be forced out of the service.

Maj. Candis Olmstead said four are sexual assault cases, four are sexual harassment cases and four represent other misconduct, which could include inappropriate consensual relationships. The cases are administrative, not criminal.

The Alaska National Guard would give no specifics of the alleged offenses. The guard also would not release the names of the soldiers involved, although two have been identified.

Lt. Col. Jane Wawersik, a former Anchorage police officer investigating the misconduct allegations, obtained a 20-day protective order last summer against one of those soldiers, Master Sgt. John Nieves. She said in court documents that she was investigating Nieves and he told his counselor at Fort Richardson he had a plan to harm her.

Nieves, a former recruiting commander, told the court the alleged threat was an overreaction. In an interview he expressed a desire to clear his name of the misconduct allegations.

Another member of the recruiting unit, Master Sgt. Jarrett Carson, said last year that "I want to kill" the investigator, according to an internal memo by Command Sergeant Major Bradford Quigley.

"I asked MSG Carson if he really felt like he could harm himself or anyone else to which he replied 'I wouldn't harm myself, I love myself too much to do that, but I am not so sure about that investigator,'" Quigley wrote in the memo.

Anchorage police last month arrested Carson for "terroristic threats" after he allegedly threatened to blow up one of the buildings on the base over a pay issue.

Carson's commanders took the threat seriously because he was under investigation by the guard, according to the police report. The building was evacuated and searched with bomb-sniffing dogs, the report said, and police also searched Carson's vehicle. No explosives were found.

Carson said in an interview that the "terroristic threat" case was dismissed.

"Eighteen years in the military and I am being called a terrorist now," Carson said.

Carson said he did not threaten the National Guard investigator last year and has not even been told of what sexual misconduct the guard is charging him with.

Carson said he couldn't make a statement while the process is ongoing but expected to soon be cleared.

The sexual misconduct allegations could force the soldiers under investigation out of the guard, but it's questionable whether law enforcement will follow up with criminal prosecution.

The guard said four cases were turned over to local law enforcement, which did not pursue them. One of those cases, though, is being pursued further by national military investigators from the Washington, D.C.,-based Office of Complex Investigations.

In other cases, either the alleged victim did not want to pursue assistance from law enforcement or the misconduct charges didn't rise to the level of a crime.

Issues in the Alaska National Guard aren't limited to the Anchorage base. The commander of the Army National Guard's 49th Missile Defense battalion was recently relieved from command at Fort Greely in Delta Junction after complaints he condoned extramarital affairs on the base that provides America's main defense against a missile attack

Both U.S. senators from Alaska said they are troubled by problems in the guard, an organization that reports to the governor's office. Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski recently said in a speech on the Senate floor that the chain of command is lacking transparency when it comes to sexual misconduct issues.

Brigadier Gen. Catherine Jorgensen, the Alaska Army National Guard's chief of staff, said in a written statement that sexual assault, harassment and even inappropriate consensual relationships aren't tolerated.

"Although the process may seem long, it is imperative that we exercise diligence, respecting due process, privacy, and the rights of the individuals involved," she said. "As we become aware of misconduct of any kind, we address it appropriately."

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