

## The DoD Times (Redacted)



(Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2024)

### ***Red Hill Whistleblower Befalls Same Fate as So Many Others in Today's Military***

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The Story of Lieutenant Commander Shannon Benes is an exceptional one, and it is also not. Exceptional is the courage Shannon has displayed in her years-long whistleblower journey standing up against a government evidently hell-bent on suppressing the truth and contorting the narrative regarding the Red Hill fuel spill. Not exceptional is our military's response thereto, employing tactics against her that have been their "go-to plays" out of a now standard playbook: to out-wait her, to out-spend her, to defame and discredit her, to attempt to gag her, and now, finally as a last resort: to appear to be acting in good faith by launching an "internal investigation."

At the root of the Red Hill scandal and Shannon's personal whistleblower story is the Department of Defense Inspector General (DoDIG) system – the organization which touts itself to carry out the mission of promoting "the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of DoD programs, and the integrity of its workforce and operations, through impactful [audits, evaluations, investigations, and reviews](#)." The DoDIG was first alerted to concerns regarding the safety of Red Hill in 2021. They summarily ignored those complaints. Now, the same organization has resurfaced, launching an investigation into the Red Hill scandal which will, based on precedent, provide neither justice, nor accountability, nor closure.

In 2022, the [Walk the Talk Foundation](#) was founded, an organization established to assist military members embroiled in uphill whistleblower fights. This past June, we completed an exhaustive analysis of the failure the DoD's Inspector General system and published an [extensive 81-page report](#) on the topic. Through dissection of over 400 cases, we determined that most members of the military have lost faith in the Department's so-called independent watchdog, seeing it more as another mechanism through which the military delivers foregone conclusions, providing a veneer of legitimacy while covering up the military's various misdeeds. We see the Department of Defense's and especially the DoDIG's conduct during the Red Hill scandal following this all-too-familiar pattern, demonstrating the common themes we've seen in our work both as a former Inspectors General and now military-advocate organization advisors; the same six themes which have contributed to our military community's lack of faith in the current construct:

- A lack of due process and transparency;

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- Conflicts of interest due to Inspectors' General and command-appointed investigating officers' subordination to commanders;
- Inadequate training of Inspectors General and command-appointed investigating officers;
- Lack of timeliness in investigations;
- A link to the military suicide and mental health crisis;
- Normalization of deviance.

Reading through Lieutenant Commander Bencs' tumultuous journey, each and every one of the above identified themes were encountered, especially, we have no doubt, the impact on her and her family's psychological and mental health. Especially ironic, we find, that a Navy, and military, so allegedly invested in mental health, can stand idly by and watch sailors and their families be [repeatedly endangered, abused and lied to by that same Service](#).

Although we were encouraged to read a recent correspondence from Representative Ed Case regarding increased engagement and oversight of the Red Hill scandal, one segment was cause for concern:

I have also joined my Hawai'i Congressional delegation colleagues in [requesting an independent investigation by DODIG](#) (which the Inspector General has undertaken). Separately, I have worked in Congress, through my Appropriations Committee and otherwise, to effect various additional reviews, including:

In a [June article](#) from "Hawaii's Civil Beat" regarding Lieutenant Commander Bencs' fight for justice and accountability, we noted that she reported her grave health and safety concerns regarding Red Hill to the DoDIG over three years ago, in early 2021. Back then, the Navy and DoDIG clearly did not take the concerns seriously, ignoring them initially, then pursuing various ways to discredit the issues and even Shannon herself. This then begs the question: if the military's Inspector General apparatus was so apt to dismiss and/or cover up her concerns then, what would make us think their approach will be any different this time around during the current "investigation"?

And as for the fate of Lieutenant Commander Bencs, that outcome is sadly yet probably all but decided: yet another member of our military who did the right thing by speaking out against wrongdoings and violations of law, despite the risks and costs, only to be systematically derailed by a Department of Defense whose priority nowadays is first and foremost to protect itself, its steadily-eroding public image, and its leadership, above protecting those individuals who serve it honorably.

If you feel that you have been a victim of these types of concerns, feel free to reach out privately at [francescagraham@walkthetalkfoundation.org](mailto:francescagraham@walkthetalkfoundation.org), or share your story in the comments.

If you would like to help us fight these issues, please consider donating to the [Walk the Talk Foundation](#) via either [Venmo](#) or [PayPal](#). We greatly appreciate your support.

Also, [SIGN THIS PETITION](#) demanding that our leaders in Congress change the DoD's unjust administrative investigatory system, and [SIGN THIS PETITION](#) demanding real anti-harassment reform in the Military and Coast Guard now!

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