



Bureaucratic Obstruction, Broken Promises, and the Price of Justice: The Case of Air Force Colonel (Ret) Thomas “Buzz” Rempfer

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For service members, the promise of justice, accountability, and due process is a fundamental principle upon which the military claims to operate. It is the reassurance given to those who wear the uniform—that if wronged, if faced with injustice, the system will correct itself.

But what happens when that promise is a lie?

What happens when the very institutions meant to uphold justice—Inspector General (IG) offices, military correction boards, and even the Secretary of Defense—have to fight against their own bureaucracy to implement the relief they themselves ordered? What happens when service members are forced to exhaust their financial, emotional, and mental resources just to receive the promotion and rank they were denied—not by merit, but by corruption and reprisal?

The answer is clear: the individual pays the price, while the system ensures its own survival.

This is the story of Colonel (Ret) Thomas “Buzz” Rempfer, a decorated Air Force officer who uncovered wrongdoing, suffered retaliation, fought for justice—and still found himself locked in a battle against bureaucratic obstruction that spanned over a decade.

An Unprecedented Case of Retaliation and Obstruction



Colonel Rempfer's case is unique—not because he was targeted for reprisal, but because he actually prevailed against the system, multiple times.

His ordeal began in 2011, when he was passed over for command of the 214th Reconnaissance Squadron (214 RS) despite scoring at least 10% higher than the other candidates. Evidence showed that his scores were manipulated so that a different officer could be selected. When he filed complaints with the Inspector General (IG) regarding the fraudulent hiring process, his command responded—not with justice, but with retaliation.

Shortly after his non-selection, he was fired from his Arizona Air National Guard (AZANG) unit, forcing him to transfer to the Air Force Reserves. He met several promotion boards for Colonel but was never selected. Eventually, in 2015, he was forced into retirement—not for performance, but because his path to advancement had been systematically blocked.

The IG Findings and DoD Acknowledgment

Despite the military's resistance to acknowledging the truth, the Inspector General eventually substantiated his claims of reprisal. The IG found:

- His firing was an act of reprisal for filing complaints.
- The selection board had violated hiring rules, manipulating scores to ensure he was not selected.
- A commander-directed investigation (CDI) had attempted to override these findings, but its conclusions were unreliable and contradicted by evidence.

Yet, despite these findings, the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records (AFBCMR) refused to provide full relief, rejecting his requests for a command credit, a special selection board (SSB), and a promotion to Colonel.

The Secretary of Defense Steps In—Twice

What makes Colonel Rempfer's case extraordinary is that the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) had to overrule the Air Force's own correction board twice—an unprecedented occurrence in Air Force history.

In 2014, the Secretary of Defense ordered the AFBCMR to reconsider its decision and determine whether an SSB and command credit were warranted.

The AFBCMR rejected the command credit but granted the SSB.

When the SSB met in 2016, Colonel Rempfer was not selected for promotion. He then submitted additional evidence, and once again, in 2017, the Secretary of Defense had to order the Air Force to reconsider his case.

This time, the Secretary of Defense, Gen (Ret) James N. Mattis, was direct:

"I find the evidence is clear and compelling that [Colonel Rempfer] was improperly denied command after filing IG complaints about that hiring process. The failure of the AFBCMR to discuss and acknowledge the critical rules or the substantiated violations was arbitrary and capricious."

In response to this second intervention, the AFBCMR was forced to grant him command credit and additional SSBs.



He was eventually meritoriously promoted to full Colonel.

But the Air Force wasn't done obstructing his meritorious promotion.

A Promotion in Name Only: How the Air Force Blocked Senate Confirmation

Under 10 U.S.C. § 14502, when a service member is selected for promotion through a Special Selection Board (SSB) due to an error, their date of rank (DOR) must reflect when they originally should have been promoted.

For Colonel Rempfer, that meant a backdated promotion to June 2012.

But instead of allowing that, the Air Force manipulated the process again, denying him full and fitting relief.

How They Did It: Bureaucratic Manipulation

1. President Trump nominated him for Senate confirmation.
2. The Air Force stalled the nomination package in the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) for nearly a year.
3. They refused to provide the necessary documentation to the Senate, forcing the nomination to be returned to the Pentagon.
4. The Secretary of the Air Force (SecAF) then unilaterally promoted him without Senate confirmation, labeling it an "advancement in rank."

By doing this, they denied him the proper backdated DOR and kept him at an O-5 pay grade, despite his promotion to O-6.

- Instead of receiving a June 2012 DOR, he was given a June 2021 DOR—nine years late.
- Because he had already retired in 2015, he was now a Colonel (O-6) in retirement, but with an O-5 pay scale.
- If the Senate had confirmed him, he would have had three years' time in grade as a Colonel before retirement.

Justice Delayed is Justice Denied—And the Fight Continues

Colonel Rempfer has taken his case to federal district court in Tucson, seeking to correct this injustice.

Previously, he attempted to file in the Court of Federal Claims, but the case was procedurally dismissed. Now, the fight continues in federal court, where he hopes to secure his rightful backdated promotion and benefits.

If the courts fail to correct this, his last hope is that President Trump—if reelected—will renominate him for Senate confirmation, nearly 15 years after the original injustice occurred.

What This Means for Military Whistleblowers

Colonel Rempfer's case is a cautionary tale for every service member who dares to expose wrongdoing.

- If someone with the patience, resilience, and legal knowledge to fight for over a decade still struggles to receive justice, what chance do younger, lower-ranking service members have?



The DoD Times (Redacted)



- If the Secretary of Defense has to overrule the Air Force correction board twice—yet the Air Force still finds ways to deny relief—what does that say about the institutional culture of obstruction and retaliation?

The cost of this injustice is borne not by the bureaucrats, not by the IG, not by the military's legal teams—but by the individual service members.

The system exists to protect itself, not those who serve it.

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