

The DoD Times (Redacted)

# NEWSLETTER

SATURDAY, 13TH SEPTEMBER 2025

ISSUE 88.

## DID WE MISS THE POINT OF SECDEF'S MEMO?





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### *Did We Miss the Point of SECDEF's Memo?*

On April 23, 2025, the Secretary of Defense issued guidance that was clear and unequivocal. Restore discipline through balanced accountability. Dismiss complaints that cannot be substantiated with credible evidence. Protect favorable actions when accusations collapse. Hold accountable those who knowingly submit false allegations. The intent was straightforward: restore fairness to a system that has drifted away from truth and toward optics.

The question today is whether that mandate is being honored. Recent cases suggest the opposite.

#### **A Familiar Pattern**

Earlier this year, a command team and several noncommissioned officers faced relief and sanctions after accusations from a handful of junior officers. The allegations did not withstand scrutiny. Dozens of Soldiers, across multiple ranks, testified that the alleged misconduct never occurred. Their voices were discounted, while a few contradictory statements proved decisive.

The decisive factor was that one of the allegations was framed as a SHARP complaint. Once that label was applied, the presumption of innocence all but disappeared. Leaders were punished, reputations destroyed, and a unit fractured.

This case is not an outlier. It reflects a recurring cultural tendency to overcorrect in order to protect appearances. When SHARP is involved, complaints are often treated as true by default, regardless of evidence. The outcome is predictable. Investigations expand without basis, contradictory testimony is disregarded, and careers are ended on the strength of allegations alone.

#### **The Problem with Optics Over Truth**

This is exactly the pattern the Secretary of Defense warned against. Balanced



accountability requires impartial investigations anchored in facts. It requires dismissal when allegations cannot be substantiated. It requires protection of leaders when accusations collapse. Instead, what often occurs is a doubling down on flawed decisions to preserve the appearance of aggressiveness.

The calculus is understandable but flawed. Leaders at higher echelons believe it is safer to impose harsh measures on accused personnel than to risk criticism for being perceived as lenient on SHARP. But what feels safe in the moment is corrosive over time.

When truth is subordinated to optics, Soldiers see that credibility is no longer rooted in evidence. They learn that fairness is conditional, and that accountability is negotiable. The erosion of trust is not theoretical. It is visible in every formation where Soldiers conclude the system cannot be trusted to separate fact from fiction.

### **The Stakes for SHARP**

The irony is that this culture damages the very program it is meant to protect. SHARP exists to address sexual harassment and assault with seriousness and urgency. Its credibility rests on trust. When unsubstantiated allegations are treated as proven, that trust is undermined.

If Soldiers believe the system rewards false or exaggerated claims, they will doubt that it can protect them when they bring forward legitimate ones. Every time leaders are punished despite exculpatory evidence, the credibility of SHARP declines. And when trust declines, real victims are less likely to come forward.

Balanced accountability is not softness. It is toughness applied with precision. Real misconduct demands decisive action. False or unsubstantiated complaints demand dismissal and, when knowingly false, accountability. Confusing the two is not only unjust to individuals. It is corrosive to the institution.



## What SECDEF Ordered vs. What We See

The Secretary of Defense directed impartial investigations, accountability for false complaints, and protection of leaders when allegations collapse. That was the standard.

What we see instead looks very different:

- ▶ Leaders relieved on the basis of shifting allegations from underperforming subordinates.
- ▶ NCOs punished with reprimands and Article 15s unsupported by evidence.
- ▶ Dozens of consistent eyewitness accounts discounted in favor of a few contradictory statements.
- ▶ Command teams branded toxic or negligent despite documented improvements in climate and discipline.

The result is a system that damages good careers, weakens units, and convinces Soldiers that evidence no longer matters.

## Strategic Consequences

This problem is not limited to individual cases. It is strategic in nature. When fairness collapses, trust collapses with it. Soldiers come to see the system not as a safeguard but as a weapon. Capable leaders choose to leave rather than risk careers on unsubstantiated accusations.

That is not simply a personnel issue. It is a readiness issue. Units stripped of capable leaders are weaker. Soldiers who distrust the system are less likely to report genuine misconduct. And the Army's credibility, both internally and externally, suffers.

The Secretary of Defense recognized this when he issued his April memo. It was intended as a corrective to restore trust and balance. Ignoring it does not only undermine fairness. It undermines the operational effectiveness of the force.

## The Way Forward



must be willing to dismiss unsupported complaints, even when criticism follows. Those who knowingly weaponize the system must face consequences. And leaders must be protected when allegations collapse under the weight of evidence.

Most of all, SHARP must be preserved for its intended purpose: protecting Soldiers from real harassment and assault. The program's credibility cannot survive being diluted by cases that collapse under scrutiny. Trust in SHARP depends on fairness every bit as much as it depends on toughness.

### Final Word

The Secretary of Defense provided a clear standard: balance, fairness, and truth. Meeting that standard is not optional. Protecting appearances instead of evidence is not discipline. It is a failure of leadership. Until balanced accountability is enforced across the force, good leaders will continue to be lost, trust will continue to erode, and the Army will continue to miss the point.



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