



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

What Inspectors General Never Asked (and Still Need To)

Inside the Dubious Removal of Col. Leslie Zyzda-Martin

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Four investigations launched against her. Zero substantiated findings. A retaliatory general, a commander who wanted her gone from the start, and a handful of subordinates settling old scores. The result: a 34-year Air National Guard career ended in a two-minute script she wasn't allowed to answer. DoW Inspectors General found nothing wrong with any of it.

Nearly five years later, Col. Leslie Zyzda-Martin's case remains open in the only sense that matters: nobody with the authority to explain it ever has. Not the Wisconsin National Guard. Not Gov. Tony Evers, the state militia's constitutional commander-in-chief. And not the two institutions built specifically to catch exactly this pattern — the Department of Defense Inspector General and the Air Force Inspector General — whose job is to ask who benefits when a commander is removed based on findings that don't hold up. That question was never asked. This is an attempt to ask it now.

A BASE OUT OF STANDARDS, AND A FAMILIAR FACE FROM THE PAST

Zyzda-Martin took command of Volk Field Air National Guard Base on September 12, 2020, arriving from a Title 10 tour at the Pentagon, where she'd served in the National Guard Bureau's Intelligence Directorate. She inherited what she has called "a sleepy base" that was "not within standards and ill-equipped" — this in the immediate aftermath of the 2019 scandal that forced then-Adjutant General Donald Dunbar to resign, after a federal investigation found the Wisconsin Guard had mishandled a decade of sexual assault and harassment complaints and tried to bury it.²

Her predecessor at Volk Field, since 2016, was Brig. Gen. David May.³

Before she ever arrived in Wisconsin, Zyzda-Martin had another connection worth noting: at NGB, she had worked for then-Brig. Gen. Chad Parker at the J2 directorate, and had been interviewed on at least two separate occasions by Inspector General personnel investigating allegations against him. At the time, it read as a closed chapter. It would prove to resurface later.¹

FOUR COMPLAINTS, FOUR UNSUBSTANTIATED FINDINGS — AND A FIFTH THREAD NOBODY INVESTIGATED

Over the following year, Zyzda-Martin was named in a cascade of complaints and investigations. Every one of them ultimately found nothing to substantiate the allegations against her. That fact alone should have been the end of the story. Instead, it became the raw material for her removal.

March–June 2021 — the Executive Secretary complaint. Zyzda-Martin's secretary, who had also worked for May, filed a workplace complaint alleging bullying. Investigator Brig. Gen. Robyn Blader found no one in the office had observed the



alleged conduct and closed the case unsubstantiated in June 2021.³ Zyzda-Martin says she was not notified of that outcome until November — the same day she was removed — a five-month gap she notes falls well outside the "prompt" feedback timeline Air Force instruction calls for.⁶

April 2021 — the retaliation complaint, investigated twice. A female Guard member who'd received a lowered performance rating filed an IG complaint alleging the rating was retaliation for a sexual harassment report she'd made months earlier. Zyzda-Martin notes the rating period in question predated her own arrival at Volk Field — raising the question of why the complaint was investigated against her at all. She withdrew the complaint almost immediately. Two separate investigations proceeded anyway. The first closed unsubstantiated in July 2021. The second — again run by Blader — didn't even interview Zyzda-Martin until November 9, 2021, the day after she was fired, and didn't reach May until January 2022. It, too, found the underlying allegation unsubstantiated, though it flagged a delay in issuing a related no-contact order — a delay Zyzda-Martin says was made on the advice of, and with the agreement of, May's own Judge Advocate.^{3 6}

Within a week of her removal — the disparities persist. Less than a week before Zyzda-Martin was relieved of command, she discovered that a guardsman had taken explicit photographs while on duty — images Zyzda-Martin deemed inappropriate and pornographic — removing the individual from her position. Within days, Zyzda-Martin was removed from command; shortly afterward, the guardsman was reinstated to her position.¹ The contrast is difficult to square with an institution that says it takes misconduct seriously: one case of on-duty conduct Zyzda-Martin flagged as pornographic was resolved and reversed within days, while the four investigations into Zyzda-Martin took months, went unsubstantiated, and still resulted in her removal.

October 2021–February 2022 — the reprisal complaint. A separate IG reprisal complaint, filed by a Guard member Zyzda-Martin had disciplined over an inflated performance report, was closed unsubstantiated roughly four months later.⁶

April–November 2021 — the correspondence nobody has explained. Running underneath all four threads, May was in communication with National Guard Bureau Inspector General Dr. Laurel Hummel about the open investigations into Zyzda-Martin — correspondence that spanned the same window in which every one of those investigations was proceeding toward an unsubstantiated finding. Hummel is married to Parker, the general Zyzda-Martin had once helped investigate. No Inspector General office — not NGB's, not the Air Force's, not the Pentagon's — appears to have ever examined what was said in that correspondence, or why the sitting IG for the entire National Guard Bureau was in contact with a subordinate command about a case connected, by marriage, to her own husband's history with the officer under investigation.

NOVEMBER 8, 2021: THE ONE-WAY CONVERSATION

May relieved Zyzda-Martin of command that morning in the Volk Field air traffic control tower conference room. "Let me start by saying this is a one-way conversation," he told her, reading from a script. "Colonel Zyzda-Martin, I am removing you from command, effective immediately. Based on information presented to me in two command directed investigations, I have lost confidence in your ability to command."³ She was not permitted to respond. She was escorted to collect her belongings and left the base.

In the same sitting, she received a Letter of Reprimand tied to the unsubstantiated ROM complaint, and a Letter of Admonishment tied to the unsubstantiated Executive Secretary complaint. That second LOA was sustained after her rebuttal — unlike the LOR, which would later be downgraded.^{1 6}



The next day — November 9, 2021 — the Guard issued a public statement, reported by the Associated Press, saying the decision followed investigations that "revealed issues concerning command climate and alleged misconduct," and that "additional investigations are ongoing." May was quoted calling it "a very difficult decision" made in "the best interest of Volk Field." That statement went out before Zyzda-Martin's window to formally rebut the Letter of Reprimand had run its course — the rebuttal that would, ten weeks later, succeed in getting that letter downgraded. The Guard had, in effect, characterized the matter as settled in public before its own internal process had finished testing it. It is also worth noting the distance between that September 2020 welcome speech, in which May told her she had "the passion, the drive, and the heart to get the job done with integrity and decisiveness. In other words, you're the right officer for the right command at the right time,"⁴ and the script he read into the record fourteen months later.

THE REBUTTAL, THE DOWNGRADE, AND THE EMAIL

On January 31, 2022, Zyzda-Martin's rebuttal succeeded in getting the Letter of Reprimand downgraded to a Letter of Admonishment.

Three and a half weeks later, on February 23, 2022, Parker emailed May. "I know this email will be out of the blue for you but I wanted to see if you had time to talk," he wrote, obtained later by Zyzda-Martin through a Freedom of Information Act request she'd had to sue the National Guard Bureau to enforce. "I feel I owe you some information on the situation regarding your former commander at Volk Field. The individual worked for me at NGB J2 prior to coming to WI to assume command. I'm hoping to clarify some things for you and how the situation unfolded for me at NGB regarding this individual's performance."¹

Eleven weeks after that, on May 11, 2022, Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp issued a further Letter of Admonishment. It was rebutted; the rebuttal decision came June 8, 2022.⁶

Zyzda-Martin filed an IG complaint against May twice. The first, filed December 10, 2021 — before she'd received any of the investigative reports underlying her own discipline — was dismissed in late January 2022 on the grounds that May had not yet made a final decision on her case, despite the fact that she had already been relieved of command. By the time she filed the second complaint, in March 2022, she had since obtained the reports from the first two investigations. The Secretary of the Air Force Inspector General did not substantiate that second complaint, closing it in September 2022.⁶

Zyzda-Martin's defense counsel's rebuttal made a documentary argument, not a speculative one: that although all four formal investigations into her were unsubstantiated, May cited evidence for her discipline anyway — evidence counsel characterized as broad, extrapolated generalizations, and in significant part, statements from the complainants themselves rather than independently corroborated findings.⁶

THREE MOTIVES, ONE OUTCOME

Zyzda-Martin does not describe a conspiracy. She describes a confluence — separate people, separate reasons, converging on the same result.⁶

Parker's motive, as she reconstructs it, is retaliation: she had been a witness against him in IG investigations years earlier, at NGB, where she had also worked directly for him. The February 2022 email — arriving unprompted, from a general with no formal role in her case, to the officer who'd just fired her — is the clearest documentary anchor for that theory.



May's motive, in her own account, is less a settled grievance than an accumulating one. She describes him repeatedly attempting to direct her in ways that ran counter to existing guidance; when she pushed back and asked for clarification, she believes it "annoyed him," and that he expected the kind of deference he was used to from subordinates he found more agreeable. This is her characterization of his psychology, not an established fact, and should be read as such. What is documented, rather than inferred, is the defense counsel's finding: that he built his case for discipline from generalized and complainant-sourced material despite investigation after investigation coming back clean.

The third leg of the confluence is simpler: several of the people who filed complaints against her were people she had held accountable — for an underqualified hire's performance, for improper paperwork, for an inflated rating — in her first months on the job. Their motive, on this reading, required no coordination with Parker or May at all.

May, sitting at the center of it as the actual decision-maker, had a motive of his own, by Zyzda-Martin's account, and multiple independently motivated people feeding him material — whether or not any of them ever spoke to one another about it.⁶

DEAD ENDS IN EVERY DIRECTION

Wisconsin's Code of Military Justice gives service members exactly one statutory path to challenge a commander's wrong: Article 138, codified at Wis. Stat. § 322.138, which the governor — as constitutional commander-in-chief of the state militia — is positioned to resolve. The statute reads, in full:

*"Any member of the state military forces who believes himself or herself wronged by a commanding officer, and who, upon due application to that commanding officer, is refused redress, may complain to any superior commissioned officer, who shall forward the complaint to the officer exercising general court-martial jurisdiction over the officer against whom it is made. The officer exercising general court-martial jurisdiction shall examine into the complaint and take proper measures for redressing the wrong complained of; and shall, as soon as possible, send to the adjutant general a true statement of that complaint, with the proceedings."*⁵

Both instances of "shall" leave little room to treat the review as optional. Attorney Toni O'Neill filed exactly that complaint on Zyzda-Martin's behalf in November 2023, arguing the discipline had "effectively railroad[ed]" an honorable career.³

The first response, in January 2024, came not from Evers but from his chief legal counsel, Mel Barnes — who mischaracterized the complaint as a request for Knapp's court-martial, an entirely different legal process, and said Evers would defer any decision pending "the completion of an inquiry by the Governor's Office."³ Eight months later, a letter signed by Leslie A. Freehill of the governor's office delivered the final word: the governor "declines to take further action on the complaint."¹ Neither the governor's office nor the Guard has ever produced a record of the inquiry Barnes said was underway, or of any proceedings satisfying the statute's own terms.³

In February 2025, she filed a reprisal complaint against Hummel and May directly, alleging the two conspired to retaliate against her — status also unresolved.⁶ The Secretary of the Air Force Office of the Inspector General (SAF/IG) did not substantiate the complaint. Based on its dealings with that office, the Walk the Talk Foundation asserts, beyond a preponderance of the evidence, that the key facts of the case as enumerated above were either not evaluated, and/or not given adequate weight in the office's investigation.⁶

Adding one more data point to the timeline: in January 2025, May invited Hummel to speak at a leadership conference in Wisconsin, where, according to witnesses, he thanked her for her guidance on a difficult investigation three years earlier — placing that guidance squarely in the window of the case against Zyzda-Martin.⁶



Unable to clear her record and blocked from promotion with the discipline still on file, Zyzda-Martin retired in October 2024, ending a 34-year career.³ May retired in the fall of 2025, having secured his second star before separating.¹

Five current and former Guard members told Wisconsin Watch that Zyzda-Martin's firing, and the secrecy surrounding it, created a climate of fear among personnel who worried they too could be dismissed without due process.³

WHAT IT COST HER

Asked what the ordeal cost her, Zyzda-Martin's own words carry it better than any paraphrase could.

"My belief in this country and what it stands for is severely impacted," she said.

"I feel like I wasted over 30 years of my life serving a false belief."⁶

Of the year that followed her removal, she asks simply: "Have you ever been punished and have no idea why? And the punishments continued for almost a year with no understanding why?"

"I lost weight, struggled to sleep, and had severe anxiety." There were significant cognitive and emotional effects that prompted her to seek counseling resources available to service members and Veterans.

She was also, at the time, in the middle of a serious eye injury from assisting elderly Afghan evacuees off aircraft during the 2021 airlift. "I had to get my eyelids derided, and corneas scraped 3 times to save my vision," she said. "I'd choose waterboarding over that torture. I was in the middle of this infection when I was relieved of command. I could barely see, and I had dark sunglasses on when May removed me. He had no interest in my well-being. His pompous attitude made it all worse."⁶

The strain reached her marriage. "My husband was beyond pissed," she said. "He would not travel back to the state of Wisconsin for over 2 years" — despite the couple having close friends still living in the state.⁶

And beyond the symptoms themselves, she frames the deeper injury as one of faith. "I joined the military to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," she has said. "It wasn't a job or a career, it was a calling. I understood, when I raised my right hand, that I would make sacrifices for the safety and security of this country and I would serve next to a like-minded team who became my family. The institution we served was the foundation.

"When the institution betrays you, when it excommunicates you, it attacks the core of your being. It tore at the very fabric of my soul. A rippling of the foundation, like this, affects the entire team, and I feel responsible for that."

Ryan Sweazey, President of the Walk the Talk Foundation, says her account is not an outlier. "We at the Foundation see this fundamentally-jarring type of moral injury constantly from victims of betrayal at the hands of the profession they've devoted the majority of their adult lives to," he said — among service members who did their jobs honestly and paid for it anyway.⁶

"I still don't know what I did to be removed from command," Zyzda-Martin has said.³ This is the fundamental question the DoW Inspector General investigations should have answered, but didn't.

THE QUESTION NO ONE IN THE CHAIN WAS BUILT TO ASK



Every individual failure in this case — an investigator who didn't interview the subject of a complaint until the day after she was fired, a press release issued before a rebuttal window closed, a governor's office that cannot produce records of a review its own letters claimed to be conducting — might be explained away on its own. Institutions make mistakes. What the Inspectors General exist to do is look at the pattern across all of them, and ask the one question nobody in this case appears to have asked on the record: who benefited, and why did the officer with oversight of the process have a personal relationship with someone that officer had reason to retaliate against?

The Department of War Inspector General and the Air Force Inspector General have jurisdiction that reaches beyond any single state Guard's internal politics. Neither has, to date, adequately examined this case as a pattern rather than a series of disconnected, unsubstantiated complaints. Absent action from Pentagon officials — Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, Air Force Secretary Troy Meink, and Air Force Under Secretary Matt Lohmeier among those with the standing to order it — that remains the open question at the center of Col. Leslie Zyzda-Martin's case: not whether the system worked exactly as designed, but whether anyone with the authority to check it ever actually looked.

And for that blatant denial of redress and due process, one person paid the price: the one who was doing the right thing.

Sources

1. J.M. Phelps, "Allegations, Secrecy, and the Fight for Justice in the Wisconsin Air National Guard," The Gateway Pundit, Aug. 1, 2026.
2. Federal investigation into Wisconsin National Guard sexual assault/harassment complaint handling, 2019 (as reported by Wisconsin Watch and The Gateway Pundit).
3. Katelyn Ferral, "A Wisconsin Air National Guard officer cleared in complaints wants to know why she was removed from command," Wisconsin Watch / PBS Wisconsin, June 20, 2024.
4. "Volk Field commander relieved of duties after investigation," Associated Press, Nov. 9, 2021.
5. Wis. Stat. § 322.138 (Wisconsin Code of Military Justice, Article 138 — Complaints of Wrongs).
6. Col. Leslie Zyzda-Martin's own account and personal documents, provided directly, including her complaint/relationship summary and her written response describing the personal cost of her removal; also the Walk the Talk Foundation's assessment of the SAF/IG reprisal-complaint outcome.

Claims characterizing the motivations or state of mind of Gen. May, Gen. Parker, or Dr. Hummel are attributed to Zyzda-Martin's own assessment and have not been independently verified; the Guard and the governor's office have previously declined to comment on the specifics of the case.

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