The DoD Times (Redacted)
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WEEKLY INFORMATION FOR SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS & FEDERAL CIVILIANS
walkthetalkfoundation.org

THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

One Voice Always Matters

As the holidays approach, we want to pause and celebrate the individual voices.

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We spend a lot of time in these pages writing about what's broken: investigations that go nowhere, records that follow people for years, systems that seem built to wear people down. That work matters. But this season, we want to talk about something else. We want to talk about the people who refused to quit, and what happened when they didn't.

SOME OF THIS YEAR'S WINS

Over the past year, service members and veterans we've had the privilege to work with have won victories that once seemed out of reach:

- An Air Force Master Sergeant successfully petitioned his governor to set aside an Article 15 in its entirety. His rank was restored with its original date of rank, he received full back pay and allowances, and every related adverse document was removed from his record.
- A Navy officer finally saw public attention brought to an issue she had carried quietly for years.
- A Navy officer is finally receiving records through FOIA and Privacy Act requests that he had never been able to obtain on his own.
- An Air Force officer finally has the evidence and support to file the correction-board petition he has been working toward for years.
- An Air Force officer has had her nonjudicial punishment placed on hold while she challenges what she describes as targeting through the mental health system.
- An Army staff sergeant separated with an Honorable discharge instead of a General.
- An Air Force officer saw an unfair evaluation corrected and was selected by name for a nominative position.
- An Army warrant officer received a "Must Promote" evaluation, moved to a new assignment, and was promoted to CW4.
- A National Guard veteran is having her case heard in her senator's office for the first time.
- An Army veteran received back pay for years of medical travel.

Each of these took persistence. Many took years. Every one of them took courage.

"ONE PERSON DOESN'T MATTER"

People who push back against an unjust system often hear some version of the same message: It won't make a difference. You're just one person. Let it go.

We want to answer that with a little back-of-the-napkin math.

Picture one service member's life. Potentially, three generations are alive: two parents, a spouse or partner, two children, two siblings, and two in-laws. That's about nine people in the immediate family. Add the extended family, the aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, and that's about 20 more. Add 10 close friends and 20 teammates, coworkers, and fellow service members who have watched the fight unfold.

That's roughly 60 people in one person's inner circle: people who worried, who lost sleep, who wanted desperately for things to be okay.

Now multiply that by ten wins: about 600 people whose lives were directly touched by these victories.

Go one step further. Each of those 60 people has their own circle of about 60. One step out, a single win ripples to about 3,600 people. Across ten wins, that's roughly 36,000 people within two degrees of someone who decided to fight back.

That's one voice at a time.

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WHAT A WIN REALLY MEANS

A restored rank isn't just a line on a record. It's a father or mother who can tell his/her kids the truth was finally recognized. A corrected evaluation isn't just paperwork. It's a career that gets to keep going, and a family that gets to stop bracing for the next blow. Back pay isn't just money. It's breathing room. And, gosh darn it, it's the freaking principle of the matter.

And for many, a win means the start of healing.

The people who come to us are carrying heavy loads. Among the 236 cases we've coded:

- 61% reported mental health stress
- 47% reported financial hardship
- 43% reported damage to their reputation
- 96% reported losing trust in the system meant to protect them

Those burdens don't vanish the day a decision comes through. But a win can begin to lift them. It can mean the first full night of sleep in years, getting back to mental health care without fear, and slowly rebuilding trust: in institutions, in leaders, and maybe most of all, in yourself.

A THANK-YOU TO THE ONES WHO FOUGHT

So, this is a thank-you note: a love note to the individuals in the room.

To every(one) who looked at an unjust situation and said, No. This isn't right, and I'm not going to let it go: we see you. We know what it cost. We know about the late nights, the stacks of paperwork, the times you wanted to quit and didn't.

Your fight mattered to you. It also mattered to your mother and father, your son and daughter, your partner, your friends, and everyone who loves you and wants you to be okay. And it mattered to everyone who will come after you and find the path a little more open because you walked it first.

One voice is never just one. Humankind is better for every one of them.

LTC (Ret) Francesca Graham is the Vice President of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on LinkedIn and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on Apple, Spotify, and YouTube.

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