



*Photo courtesy of Barbara Banks Photography*

**Nancy Parrish, Amanda Stiff and Heather Dunhill**

## **Blog Post #2**

### **Protect our Defenders – “Conversation and Cocktails” Event 11-3-15**

With years of experience volunteering on domestic and sexual violence victim hotlines, even I was caught unaware when Nancy Parrish, the founder of Protect Our Defenders, said: “Sexual assault is more common in the military context. Rates are 50 percent higher among active-duty women and over 100 percent higher among men than in their civilian counterparts in the reserves.”

As a volunteer, I have heard the tension in the voices of battered women in Southwest Florida reaching out for help. Sexual assault in the military seems counterintuitive: warriors are strong; warriors can defend themselves; warriors protect their brethren; and, when captured, warriors try to escape. But, to whom do you turn when power and rank break moral rule; where do you find shelter in the military?

“Young men and women enter our service as a patriotic act. If they find themselves a victim of violent crime, less than 15 percent report it, and 62 percent of those few who report were retaliated against by either their superior officers or their peers,” according to Parrish. “. . . [It’s] shocking, and it says something’s wrong with the misogynistic culture in the military.”

Access Advisors, LLC participated as a sponsor of the Protect Our Defenders Foundation “*Conversation and Cocktails*” event Nov. 3, at The Francis, to raise awareness about the sexual assault in our military.



*Photo courtesy of Barbara Banks Photography*

**Nancy Parrish, Don Christensen, Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Paula Coughlin**

Emmy Award-winning journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault moderated the discussion at with Protect Our Defenders President Col. Don Christensen, Chief Prosecutor, USAF (Ret); Paula Coughlin, Lt., U.S. Navy (Ret); and Nancy Parrish, who founded Protect Our Defenders in 2011.

Don Christensen served as chief prosecutor for the U.S. Air Force between 2010 and 2014. He served as a trial counsel, defense counsel or military judge for every year of his 23-year career in the Air Force.

Nancy Parrish is an active leader in community and public affairs. She was a founding co-chair of Human Rights Watch's Northern California Chapter and worked with President and Mrs. Carter in support of their international humanitarian work at the Carter Center.

Paula Coughlin, was a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. She was the whistleblower who played a role in opening investigations into what was known as the "Tailhook Scandal." Coughlin attended Old Dominion University where she joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps. She joined the Navy in 1984, and became a helicopter pilot.

"From the '90s to now, there really has been no improvement," Parrish told a reporter for *The Observer*. "Part of what we do, in addition to providing support, is we work on policy reform to change the system. It's an epidemic, according to the Pentagon. They do an anonymous survey every other year. According to their surveys, 20,000 victims were sexually assaulted at least 47,000 times in 2013."

The proceeds from the “*Conversation and Cocktails*” event benefited Protect Our Defenders’ mission of support, public education, policy reform and pro bono legal representation of victims of sexual abuse in the military.

I urge you to become familiar with the epidemic of rape in the military and you can also support “the defenders” by donating at: [www.protectourdefenders.com](http://www.protectourdefenders.com).

The day after the Protect our Defenders event in Sarasota, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in Washington issued a report that the Department of Defense (DoD) is failing to meet basic tenets of its plan to prevent sexual assault in the military.

The GAO 13-month investigation found that two of 18 DoD planned prevention activities have been implemented, complaints of lack of direction from sexual assault prevention offices, and understaffing of sexual response coordinators and victim advocates at military facilities.

On Nov. 6, Christensen released the following statement: “This GAO report highlights yet again a lack of accountability by the Pentagon for dealing with the ongoing military sexual assault crisis. It is especially disturbing that the military continues to ignore leading risk factors for sexual assault.

“According to the report, the Pentagon has not identified any military-specific risk factors, such as those relating to leadership or the military community – the two areas they have greatest control over.

“In 2014, at least 20,000 service members were sexually assaulted — the same rate as in 2010. If the Pentagon is serious about ensuring the safety and well being of service members, it must develop a comprehensive and measurable sexual assault prevention program. The men and women who defend our nation deserve no less.”