

'I Did Not Expect to Have to Fight for My Very Survival'

A retired Air Force colonel and VFW Life member speaks out about the sexual harassment she endured for the first half of her 30-year career

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At 21, Lisa Carrington Firmin was the sole female officer in a squadron of fighter pilots in New Mexico. In the best of circumstances, this would be considered challenging.

Add in extreme harassment, gender discrimination, sexism and misogyny, as well as racial and ethnic discrimination, and she says that is an accurate description of the first half of her 30-year Air Force career. Firmin's experiences are not uncommon.

A graduate of Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Firmin became the first in her family to graduate from college. From the time she was a young girl, she knew she wanted to be a leader, which influenced her decision to join the Air Force.

Firmin, whose father retired from the Air Force as a master sergeant, was able to use her dad's VA benefits for her education. This also played a large part in her desire to serve.

When she retired as a colonel in 2010 after 17 moves during her 30-year career, Firmin was the highest-ranking Latina in Air Force history at that time.

But it was far from easy.

At that first assignment in New Mexico, Firmin was asked, "Are you a bitch or a whore?" That question laid the groundwork for how she would carry herself throughout her career.

"I downplayed my femininity," said Firmin, a Life member of VFW Post 8397 in San Antonio. "I wanted so badly to be seen for the leader I was. I had to carry myself a certain way. Early on, I kept my hair really tight and wore my clothes extra large."

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Firmin said she knew that a lot of those with whom she served wanted her to fail. To them, she was an “oddity.” They kept a poster that read: “Us vs. Her” and put tally marks at the end of each week.

“I didn’t know if it was the way they treated all women or I wondered if it was a test,” Firmin said. “I got a lot of strange, rude questions about my background and about the way I looked.”

Firmin was subjected to lewd comments and cat-calling, all while trying to learn her job. She found that the men she served with, and led, rarely looked her in the eyes, but always at her breasts.

“Every cliché you can imagine is what I experienced,” Firmin said. “I was always on guard.”

A particularly disturbing scenario occurred when Firmin walked by a large squadron classroom. She did a double-take because on the giant classroom screen were explicit images of female genitalia up close and personal, taken from the pages of Hustler and Penthouse magazines.

When she brought this up, she was told that the slideshows were so boring, they had to throw in those images every so often to keep the attention of the students.

“I told them I was uncomfortable,” Firmin recalled. “These men would sit in there viewing those images and then they would come out and leer at me. I did not expect to have to fight for my very survival. This never changed while I was there.”

Firmin’s time in New Mexico was so toxic, that after three years, she volunteered for four years extended overseas duty to get away.

MILITARY NEEDS BETTER TRAINING

When Army Spec. Vanessa Guillen was murdered last year at Ft. Hood, Firmin was flooded with haunting memories — memories she had repressed for the whole of her military career.

As a young trainee, Firmin was assaulted and buried it so deeply, not telling anyone, that she had forgotten about it.

“I was married at the time, and I never shared the depth of it with anyone,” Firmin said. “That was the mentality of that world at that time. Last year, Vanessa Guillen’s murder started bringing forth memories I had repressed.”

Guillen went missing from Ft. Hood in April 2020. Her remains were found on June 30. Just months before her disappearance, Guillen told her mom, Gloria, that she was being sexually harassed by a sergeant.

Gloria told ABC News that when she asked her daughter why she hadn't reported the sergeant, her daughter said no one would believe her because any women who had tried to report harassment were laughed at.

Firmin said it's clear that the military cannot police itself when it comes to military sexual assault and harassment.

"They need help," she said. "The military cannot be trusted to do this anymore."

Last September, the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act (H.R. 8270) was introduced by Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.). It called for an independent organization to investigate, report and review cases. The bill died due to inactivity in the 116th Congress.

Firmin said she believes that the military needs to institute more thorough training. She would like to see individuals who have experienced harassment speak in front of trainees or have military members in the unit act out scenarios.

In March of this year, the Army made a change in how it handles sexual harassment complaints. Army commanders must now choose an investigating officer for formal sexual harassment complaints from outside an accused soldier's brigade.

'I WILL NO LONGER STAY SILENT'

Firmin said as she increased in rank, the overt harassment dissipated somewhat, but became more covert. Then she was deployed to Balad Air Base in Iraq in 2004 as commander of the 332nd Expeditionary Mission Support Group, 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing.

"In Iraq, it was like I was stepping back 20 years," said Firmin.

"I felt like I was a piece of meat being displayed for people who were starving and had not eaten for years."

Nevertheless, Firmin went full speed ahead, building up and securing Camp Anaconda. She was awarded a Bronze Star for her work in Iraq.

"They tried to break me," Firmin said. "But I chose to prove myself and my worth through my competency."

Firmin said she found that a lot of women were like her and “took a lot of crap,” but others left the military life behind.

A RAND Corporation report released in February showed that troops who were sexually assaulted during their military service were twice as likely to leave the service earlier than those not assaulted.

“I put up with it because I’m very stubborn, and my family instilled in me loyalty and dedication,” Firmin said. “I stayed in and fought the good fight to prove the worth of women.”

Firmin noted that certainly some men she served with along the way were respectful and professional.

“They had my back, and I had theirs,” she said.

Today, Firmin is the military liaison at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), where she created the Office of Veterans and Military Affairs.

UTSA has more than 5,000 military-affiliated students, and more than 1,500 of those are vets. Firmin helps veterans transition, coaches both men and women and educates many about diversity inclusion.

“When I talk to people who currently serve or just got out of the military, it’s clear we still have a problem,” Firmin said. “I have fought all my life for the underdog and will continue to do so.”

Firmin is writing a book chronicling her experiences so that others in similar situations know they are not alone.

She said it took her many years to speak out, but encourages others to do the same when they are ready. And if they aren’t ready, she said, therapy is always good.

“It pains me to say some of these things because I love the military and the Air Force,” Firmin. “But I will no longer stay silent.”

This article is featured in the June/July 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#). It was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.